

Strategic Plan

2024 – 2027



**GRADUATE
STUDENT
ASSOCIATION**
UNIVERSITY OF WATERLOO

**Leading With
Intention:**

**The Graduate Student
Association – University of
Waterloo Strategic Plan
for 2024–2027**

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MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT

The Graduate Student Association (GSA) at the University of Waterloo is built to serve graduate students and ensure their well-being through targeted services and initiatives that are responsive to their evolving needs. As the official representative of graduate students, primarily led by graduate students, the GSA is committed to creating an environment where students have access to all the services and supports that they need to succeed in their grad journey.



Neela Hassan

President & CEO 2023 – 2025

We are launching this strategic plan during a period of rapid social, economic, and political change, which requires student associations and leaders to adopt new, innovative, and effective approaches for advocacy and service delivery. At the GSA, we recognize the imperative need for change and the importance of embracing new and creative approaches. Our programs, services, and efforts in recent years, particularly in the post-COVID era, serve as a testament to this commitment.

This strategic plan has been meticulously developed, considering the challenges faced by graduate students, existing gaps in student services, and the specific needs of our student community.

This strategic plan builds on the findings of a Vital Sign Survey launched by the GSA in November 2023, three focus group consultations conducted with graduate students in Winter 2024, and consultations with several on-campus partners during 2023–2024. We are especially excited to share that we developed this strategic plan with guidance and insights from the Indigenous Office, Waterloo Indigenous Student Centre (WISC), and Elder Myeengun Henry, the Indigenous Knowledge Keeper at the Faculty of Health, ensuring it reflects and integrates Indigenous perspectives and priorities.

We consider this an important step that will enable the GSA to contribute to the crucial initiatives of reconciliation, indigenization, and decolonization at the University of Waterloo and across the country. By integrating these priorities into our strategic goals, we aim to support the broader efforts towards inclusivity and justice, ensuring our organization plays a meaningful role in these vital processes.

Creating a plan that will shape the GSA's direction and priorities for the next four years was both a significant responsibility and a great honor for me, Neeela Hassan, the President of the GSA, and for Murtoza Manzur, the Vice-President of Advocacy. We extend our thanks to the GSA membership, the GSA Board of Directors, the GSA Council, and all our partners for their engagement and valuable insights that informed the foundation of our multi-year Strategic Plan.

LEADING WITH INTENTION:

The GSA–UW Strategic Plan 2024 – 2027

This strategic plan represents the priorities of the Graduate Student Association at the University of Waterloo (GSA–UW) for 2024–2027. It builds on four intersecting strategic priorities that will guide our efforts in enhancing graduate students' experience and wellbeing at the University of Waterloo:

- Enhancing Advocacy & Representation Efforts
- Fostering Community Building and Membership Engagement
- Affirming our commitment to Indigenous Heritage
- Building partnerships with campus and community partners

VISION

A community where everyone has equitable access to the necessary resources required to succeed in their graduate journey.

MISSION

Cultivate a supportive and inclusive community for graduate students, advocate for their diverse needs, and foster excellence, well-being, and meaningful connections.

CORE VALUES

1. TRANSPARENCY

We are committed to fostering a culture of openness and honesty in all our actions and communications.

At the GSA, transparency is a fundamental value and guiding principle that shape and influence our work. We actively foster a culture of openness and honesty. This commitment encompasses all aspects of our operations, interactions, and communications, ensuring that every decision and action is transparent and understandable to our members and partners.

At the heart of our transparency efforts is the belief that informed students are empowered students. We will continue to ensure that information about the GSA governance processes, financial status, and decision-making pathways is readily accessible and easily interpretable. We will provide regular updates through the GSA Council and various channels such as newsletters, the official GSA website, and social media platforms. Our aim is to keep the graduate student community well-informed about ongoing initiatives, changes, and opportunities for engagement.

By maintaining high standards of transparency, we aim to ensure accountability and create an environment where students feel confident that their voices are heard and valued.

Moreover, we hold Annual General Meetings and maintain an open-door policy at the GSA Office for open dialogue between GSA representatives and the membership. These practices provide a platform for discussing critical concerns and gathering feedback directly from students that will influence our future actions and policies.

Transparency also extends to our collaborative efforts with the university administration and external partners. We strive to publicly disclose the outcomes of these collaborations, including any agreements or plans that impact the graduate student experience.

2. INCLUSIVITY

We value unique experiences, varied backgrounds, diverse perspectives, and implement initiatives that ensure everyone is meaningfully included regardless of their background or identity.

At the GSA, inclusivity is a core value that embodies our commitment to creating an environment where all members feel valued and included regardless of their background or identity. Our commitment to inclusivity influences every aspect of our operations, from the events we organize to the policies we advocate, the services we provide, and how we manage our communication channels.

Understanding that diversity enriches and strengthens our community, we actively seek to incorporate a wide range of perspectives in all our initiatives. We implement programs and activities designed to engage diverse student groups, ensuring that each individual has the opportunity to contribute and participate meaningfully. This involves organizing cultural events, promoting meaningful dialogues on equity and inclusivity, and conducting workshops that educate and enhance awareness about diversity and inclusion.

By fostering an inclusive culture, we strive to support our members and contribute to the broader University of Waterloo community that respects and celebrates diversity.

Furthermore, the GSA strives to maintain an accessible and welcoming environment for everyone. We continuously review and adapt our practices to meet the varied needs of our members. Our goal is to eliminate any barriers to participation, and empower every student to thrive in their academic and social life.

3. BELONGINGNESS & COMMUNITY CONNECTION

At the heart of our mission is the commitment to fostering a strong sense of belonging and community connection. We are dedicated to creating an inclusive environment where every member feels valued and integrated into community, both at the University of Waterloo and beyond. By actively promoting diversity and ensuring that all voices are heard, we aim to enhance collaboration and strengthen our collective unity. Through our programs and services, we aim to ensure that graduate students are not only welcomed but also empowered to make meaningful contributions to the UW community and build lasting relationships throughout their graduate journey.

We believe that each student has unique needs and challenges that require tailored and thoughtful responses. Understanding that no two students are the same, we are committed to offering support and services that address individual needs. To truly embrace each member as a valuable part of our community, we prioritize remaining open to listening, learning, and evolving. By taking practical steps towards meaningful action, we ensure that our priorities adapt to meet the changing needs and aspirations of our members.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

1. Enhancing Advocacy & Representation Efforts

Our commitment to enhancing advocacy and representation aims to amplify the voices of the graduate student community at the University of Waterloo. The GSA will advocate to ensure that university policies, practices, and systems align with the needs and wants of our diverse student body through open communication channels and collaboration with stakeholders and partners. We strive to create an environment where graduate student's interests are at the forefront of decision-making processes at the university.

Goal #1: Implement an Annual Advocacy Impact Report

Produce and publish an annual report that comprehensively details the Graduate Student Association's advocacy efforts, highlighting its role in influencing policy changes, shaping new practices and systems, and evaluating its overall impact on the graduate community. This report will include data-driven insights, testimonials, and a roadmap for future advocacy initiatives. It will be shared widely with the membership and University stakeholders to enhance transparency and accountability.

Goal #2: Establish Regular Policy Review Sessions with Graduate Student Councillors

Establish regular sessions where graduate student councillors can meet with the GSA executives and university administrators to review and discuss existing policies and propose necessary revisions. These sessions will ensure that policies remain relevant and responsive to the evolving needs of the graduate student community.

Goal #3: Develop and Implement a Comprehensive Communication Strategy

Develop a comprehensive communication strategy that uses multiple platforms, (i.e. social media, newsletters, and a dedicated website section) to keep the membership informed about ongoing advocacy efforts, policy changes, and opportunities for involvement. This strategy will also include mechanisms for students to provide feedback and engage directly with their representatives, ensuring their voices are heard and acted upon.

Goal #4: Addressing the Needs of Members

The Graduate Student Association will work to identify and address the specific concerns of the diverse graduate student community at the University of Waterloo. We will conduct regular need assessments through surveys, focus groups, and town hall meetings to gather input from our members.

By analyzing this data, the GSA will develop targeted support programs in mental health, academic support, financial assistance, and career development. These initiatives will enhance accessibility and inclusivity, ensuring resources cater to our members' diverse backgrounds and evolving needs.

2. Fostering Community Building and Membership Engagement

The GSA acknowledges community building and membership engagement as fundamental to the prosperity and welfare of graduate students and the effectiveness of its programs and services. Our objective is to cultivate a community that celebrates and respects diversity, ensuring that every graduate student is welcomed and empowered with fair chances for academic and personal advancement.

We aim to enrich graduate student's social and academic journey by creating and maintaining a connected and engaged community that actively participates in both the GSA and the university decision-making processes.

Goal #1: Creating an Inclusive, Safe, and Equitable Space for Students

The GSA aims to establish an inclusive, safe, and equitable graduate student community through various services and events designed to address the needs and desires of all participants. To achieve this goal, the GSA will develop an annual operational plan based on survey insights and focus group discussions with its members. Given today's shifting economic, social, and political landscapes, the annual operational plan will ensure that the GSA services and programs can respond to the evolving needs of graduate students.

By doing so, the GSA aims to foster a community where every participant feels acknowledged, heard, encouraged, and feels a profound sense of belonging.

Goal #2: Raising Membership Awareness About the Graduate Student Association and the Services, Resources, and Support it Offers

The GSA understands the crucial role of membership awareness in building a connected and engaged community where members are not only beneficiaries but also active contributors to the GSA's mission. The GSA is dedicated to actively promoting its extensive services, resources, events, and opportunities, utilizing various communication channels and strategies to achieve this objective. The GSA will continue to hold and improve its awareness campaign through social media platforms, targeted tabling, social events, banners, orientation events, and collaboration with existing partners to disseminate information.

Goal #3: Provide Tangible Benefits to Members for their Engagement and Contribution to the Graduate Student Association and its Initiatives

We will offer tangible benefits to encourage and appreciate those members who contribute to the GSA through their active and meaningful engagement. These benefits will include monetary appreciation, such as stipends or financial rewards, in recognition of their valuable contributions.

Additionally, discernible benefits may involve recognition through awards, certificates, or other forms of acknowledgment.

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3. Affirming our Commitment to Indigenous Heritage

The Graduate Student Association at the University of Waterloo commits to promoting awareness and respect for Indigenous cultures through educational programs, events, and collaboration with Indigenous communities in Waterloo. By creating a space that honors and values Indigenous perspectives, the GSA strives to contribute to the broader goal of reconciliation and ensure that Indigenous graduate students feel acknowledged and embraced within our academic community.

Goal #1: Enhance Indigenous Representation in the GSA Leadership and Decision-Making

The goal of enhancing Indigenous representation within the GSA at the University of Waterloo focuses on ensuring that Indigenous voices are included and influential in the GSA's leadership and decision-making processes. To achieve this, the GSA will implement targeted recruitment strategies to encourage Indigenous students to run for positions, supported by outreach initiatives and mentorship programs.

Additionally, the GSA will establish support structures offering leadership training tailored to Indigenous cultural perspectives.

A policy mandating minimum Indigenous representation within the GSA will be introduced to guarantee their influence in shaping policies and programs. We will also organize regular consultations with the Office of Indigenous Relations and Waterloo Indigenous Student Centre (WISC) to ensure that the GSA activities align with the needs and aspirations of Indigenous graduate students.

This initiative aims not only to increase the participation of Indigenous students in university governance but also to foster a broader cultural integration and awareness across the campus.

Goal #2: Develop and Implement an Indigenous Cultural Education Program

Create a comprehensive educational program that includes workshops, seminars, and guest lectures to promote understanding and respect for Indigenous cultures among graduate students at the University of Waterloo. This program aims to educate the student body and faculty about Indigenous histories, contemporary issues, and contributions, fostering a university-wide culture of inclusivity and respect.

Goal #3: Incorporate Indigenous Art and Cultural Elements in Graduate Student Association Spaces

The GSA aims to create a more inclusive and welcoming environment for Indigenous students by incorporating Indigenous artwork and cultural elements into the GSA spaces at the University of Waterloo. This initiative involves partnering with Indigenous artists to commission artworks that reflect the richness of Indigenous cultures, such as murals and sculptures. These pieces will be complemented by educational signage explaining each artwork's significance and cultural stories.

Additionally, the GSA will consult with local Indigenous communities to ensure respectful and accurate representation. Specific areas within GSA spaces will mimic traditional Indigenous gathering spaces, such as meeting circles, fostering a sense of belonging and cultural exchange. This approach celebrates Indigenous presence and educates the broader student body, contributing to a culturally informed and respectful academic environment.

4. Building Partnerships with Campus and Community Partners

Strong and collegial partnerships across campus and the Kitchener–Waterloo Community are paramount for the Graduate Student Association’s success and ability to positively influence student’s lives. We aim to enhance the membership’s resources, support, and opportunities through strategic partnerships with existing and new partners. Working closely with like-minded partners will enable the GSA to develop and deploy new initiatives that improve the well-being of members as students, individuals, and community.

Goal #1: Improve Ties with Key Campus Partners

The Graduate Student Association is dedicated to strengthening relationships with campus partners, including the Graduate Studies and Postdoctoral Affairs (GSPA), the Office of Equity, Diversity, Inclusion & Anti-racism (EDI-R), the Office of Indigenous Relations, and the Waterloo Undergraduate Student Association (WUSA).

Our aim in fostering close collaboration with these key stakeholders is to enrich the breadth and quality of the GSA’s services and programs. By aligning with partners who share our priorities and objectives, we seek to influence and contribute to initiatives that directly benefit the graduate student community.

Goal #2: Evaluate Partnership Impacts

Recognizing the significance of strategic, intentional, and collaborative partnerships, the GSA is committed to ensuring that its partnerships are guided by an official agreement or Memorandum of Understanding. These agreements will serve as a guiding document that outlines shared priorities and expectations and delineates clear pathways for collaboration. By establishing these structured frameworks, the GSA aims to forge robust partnerships that yield significant impact and meaningful results for the organizations involved and graduate students at the University of Waterloo.



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