

The following is being sent on behalf of GSA Deputy Speaker Amirah Nazir:

Dear GSA Council Colleagues,

Below please find a summary of the GSA Council meeting of November 18 2024, ordered according to the circulated agenda, we recommend for this to be shared with other graduate students in your department. You are encouraged to make this summary your own and include any comments or other features that you think would help to clarify the information or make it more attractive for your fellow graduate students to read and engage with.

Summary of the GSA Council Meeting – November 18 2024

GSA Audit Report

The financial presentation, given by RSM Auditors, for the year ending March 31, 2024, highlighted a smooth audit process with a clean opinion, a decrease in total assets from \$7.7 million to \$5.8 million, primarily due to a reduction in cash following the settlement of health and dental plan payables. Despite a slight drop in revenues and expenses, the organization achieved a surplus of \$179,000, an improvement from the previous year's surplus of \$119,000. Investment income rose significantly, and unrealized gains on restricted investments contributed positively. However, the health and dental plan continued to run at a loss, reflecting the use of reserves to subsidize student costs. Cash flow from operations was negative due to the payment of two years' worth of health plan expenses but is expected to normalize in the upcoming year. The organization's liquidity improved with a current ratio of 2:1, and total net assets grew slightly to \$4.6 million. Overall, the auditors stated that the GSA has managed its finances prudently, achieving a surplus and maintaining healthy liquidity despite some challenges with health and dental plan costs.

Tuition Presentation and Discussion

M. Padfield, Deputy Provost Students & Enrollment, outlined key information about tuition rates, revenue sources, and proposals for the upcoming academic years. There will be a Town Hall in the second week of January, where additional questions can be addressed, but emails to the Enrollment office were encouraged. Tuition covers various expenses, including instructor salaries, maintenance, and research support, with about 5.5% of tuition revenue allocated to student financial aid. The university faces financial challenges due to stagnant government funding, increasing costs, and inflationary pressures, leading to proposed tuition increases. For domestic students, a 2% increase is proposed, with the existing financial aid offset remaining unchanged. For international students, tuition would rise by 10%, with 8.55% of revenue directed to financial supports. Graduate course-based programs would see a 10% increase, and a new tuition deposit system is being considered. Discussions are ongoing regarding international thesis-based programs, with an advisory working group aiming to make recommendations for future tuition proposals.

In response to concerns about the financial burden on students, including the impact on food insecurity and mental health, Padfield emphasized the university's commitment to ensuring the

affordability of education through a minimum funding review for graduate students. Other questions raised included the university's investment strategy and the impact of the proposed tuition increases on student welfare. The meeting concluded with an invitation for further inquiries to be directed to Padfield via email at melissa.padfield@ualberta.ca

EDI Action Plan Presentation

The presentation, led by Carrie Smith, Vice-Provost EDI, and Tim Ira, Portfolio Initiatives Manager, EDI, outlined a draft action plan aimed at fostering a vibrant, interconnected university community focused on equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI). Developed from consultations beginning in winter 2023, the plan shifts focus from identity-specific actions to addressing shared barriers and encourages cross-unit collaborations. Central to the plan are seven "values and active practices," designed to guide EDI actions, alongside a multi-dimensional model that views EDI as a collective responsibility across all levels of the institution. The plan includes four key trajectories: supporting uncomfortable encounters, enhancing excellence, ensuring access, and nurturing collaborations. It outlines actions that address structural, cultural, and knowledge-sharing shifts, and commits to ongoing evaluation, feedback, and individual work plans for all members of the university. Smith and Ira emphasized the importance of student feedback as they move into the implementation phase and invited further input via direct contact. Students can contact them at vpedi@ualberta.ca

Michael Janz, City Councillor, Presentation

Michael Janz, City Councillor for Ward Papastew (which includes the University of Alberta area) and former Students' Union president, highlighted his commitment to social justice and affordable housing. He emphasized the importance of improving transportation and increasing housing density, particularly around the university, to alleviate financial pressures for students and residents. Janz acknowledged the city's challenges due to limited revenue sources and reduced provincial funding, but noted significant strides in urban planning, such as expanded transit funding and zoning bylaw changes that allow for more housing options, including multi-story buildings and duplexes near campus.

Transportation was a key focus of Janz's presentation, where he advocated for safer streets, expanded bike and bus lanes, and more frequent bus services. He stressed the need for alternative modes of transport and sustainable infrastructure to address the city's growing population and reduce reliance on costly car infrastructure. Janz also discussed transit as a social justice issue, essential for equitable access to city services, particularly for lower-income individuals and students. He acknowledged the city's financial constraints and rising austerity but expressed his ongoing commitment to improving Edmonton's infrastructure and fostering an inclusive community.

Addressing concerns raised by attendees, Janz responded to questions about electric vehicle (EV) infrastructure, noting that recent zoning changes now require EV charging stations. He mentioned that while provincial opposition has hindered some climate-related efforts, such as energy efficiency standards for new homes, the city is working to move forward. Janz also addressed questions about

car-sharing, noting that while Communauto, a private company, operates in Edmonton, the city supports efforts to expand car-share options. Regarding transit safety, Janz shared that significant improvements have been made, including the addition of safety officers and outreach teams, but acknowledged that the city is still working on solutions. Other concerns raised included the lack of Communauto service to South Campus, overcrowding on buses, and the affordability challenges students face, particularly with rising rents and living costs. Janz agreed that creative solutions for affordability should be explored, especially through partnerships with local housing providers. While he recognized the challenges of addressing these issues, particularly in a city with limited control over the rental market and internet pricing, Janz expressed a willingness to explore opportunities to improve affordability for students.

Janz concluded by encouraging students to stay engaged in local initiatives and to reach out for collaboration on projects. He can be contacted at michael.janz@edmonton.ca

Tuition Town Hall Online Feedback Summary

Ahead of the town hall, a survey was distributed to gather feedback from students regarding a proposed tuition fee increase and potential financial aid changes. Key concerns raised included opposition to any further tuition hikes due to existing financial stress and a perceived lack of transparency about how tuition dollars are being allocated. Students expressed particular interest in a more detailed breakdown of where their fees go, such as salaries and utilities. The impact on international students was also a major concern, in light of the 10% tuition increase proposal for international students, even though it currently does not affect graduate students. In terms of financial support, students advocated for increased funding, particularly hybrid awards, which currently exclude international graduate students. Additionally, they called for more job opportunities, with many fearing post-graduation employment challenges. Another common complaint was the increasing tuition without corresponding improvements in services, with students questioning why tuition is rising while service standards appear to be stagnant or declining. There was also a noted discrepancy between the proposed fee increases and the Consumer Price Index (CPI), as well as a reduction in financial aid for domestic students. The proposal for the upcoming year includes a 2% cap for domestic students (consistent with the previous year), but a 10% increase for international students, while financial aid for domestic students has decreased from 15% to 8.5%. These figures highlight the growing financial pressures on students, and the need for continued advocacy and transparency from the university.

Approval of Bylaw & Policy Changes Recommended by the Governance Committee

H. Arshad presented the items. The changes to GSA Bylaw, as noted in the proposals, has been approved and is effective after following two readings by GSA Council. Policy changes are effective from October 22, 2024 and Bylaw changes are effective from November 19, 2024.

U-Pass Referendum Question Approved

The U-PASS program, initially launched in 2006 by the GSA, UASU, and other institutions such as McEwen, NorQuest, and NAIT, provides students with unlimited access to public transportation across multiple municipalities in the Edmonton area. Over the years, the program has undergone several referendums, with the most recent one planned for 2025 alongside the student elections. The current contract, negotiated after several rounds of discussions with transit providers, will last through 2028, with incremental fee increases over the next few years. Starting in 2025, the fee will remain at \$180 per term, rising to \$182.50 in 2026 and \$185 in 2027. In addition to these changes, several permanent adjustments were made from the 2021 pilot program, including expanded exceptions for students, such as seniors over 65, those receiving assured income, and students in the AIS program. A key focus of the negotiations was transit safety, with all participating institutions stressing the need for improvements to ensure the sustainability of the U-PASS program. Another point of discussion was the radius policy, which currently allows students living outside a certain distance to opt out, with some institutions advocating for a widening of this radius. A referendum will ask students to approve the continuation of the U-PASS program with these updated terms, including the mandatory fee structure and various exemptions.

Elections Results

A. GSA Speaker:

- a. One GSA Member Position: Two Nominations Received & NoC-Approved
- b. Successful candidate: Zain Patel

GSA Executive Updates

H. Arshad, the GSA President, updated the Council regarding course-based scholarships opening next week; he will be finalizing the Graduate Peer Support Program with Carrie Smith and Ravina Sanghera soon with their funding contribution; and at the last GFC meeting, the GSA raised the motion to ask the university to uphold its commitment to EDI, which passed with an overwhelming majority. The Council session adjourned early due to a loss of quorum, to which H. Arshad clarified that informal discussion can continue, as by university bylaw, quorum is only needed to begin Council sessions. The President wanted to discuss the tuition fee proposal, but the speaker took a vote and consensus was in favour of closing the meeting.

B. Kucher, VP Student Life, detailed his ongoing work with the UA Sexual Assault Centre: he has been working closely with the new Assistant Dean for Community Wellness and Sexual Violence Supports to bring about stability and bring the centre back to full operations in alignment with the centre's ongoing community engagement and action plan for 2024-2025. This has led to the creation of a community advisory group and steering committee - any interested students are encouraged to reach out to Benjamin, who can forward the application form, which is due by November 25th. Additionally, the Dean of Students Office is in the early stages of exploring and rebranding its name to distance itself from disciplinary connotations and create a perception of inclusivity and support that they provide, including its resources and services. B. Kucher encouraged students to reach out to him with any name suggestions to bring forward to the Dean's Advisory Council and to R. Sanghera. The current names include Student Experience, Success, Student Affairs, among others.

S. Iqbal, VP Student Services, read a personal note to GSA Council: he detailed the importance of celebrating individual and collective achievements, particularly in the context of the demanding graduate student experience. Graduate students balance numerous responsibilities, including academic progress, research, family commitments, and often jobs or volunteer work. It is easy to focus on what remains undone, but it's essential to pause and recognize our successes. The first half of the fiscal year has seen significant progress in advocacy, expanding support networks, and enhancing services for our graduate community. These accomplishments are a testament to the collaborative efforts of the GSA Board, staff, and Council members. The dedication of our staff, the diversity of perspectives within the Council, and our shared commitment to improving the graduate experience are key to these successes. Moving forward, it is vital that we continue to support each other's well-being, collaborate effectively, and ensure that the GSA's work aligns with the best interests of our graduate students. This reflection serves as a reminder of the value of the work we do, both individually and collectively, and the importance of uplifting one another as we continue our advocacy efforts.

P. Mojir Shaibani, VP External, and H. Arshad met with provincial stakeholders, MLAs, the NDP and UCP caucuses, including the Minister of Advanced Education, in order to advocate for graduate students with some main asks. One of them was a 10% targeted funding for graduate students through scholarships and bursaries. They discussed improvements to the graduate student experience, making transparent guidelines for mandatory non-instructional fees, Bill 18 implications for post secondary institutions and the subject of student loan forgiveness in order to retain students within Alberta. Finally, they discussed amendments to the labor relations code in order to allow academically employed graduate students to choose their own bargaining agents (removing the specific wording of 'GSA' to any bargaining organization). They are optimistic regarding the targeted funding and they seemed open to the LRC amendments mentioned. Additionally, the Post Secondary Education Task Force is running a campaign in order to raise awareness and to make student life more affordable by sustaining quality post-secondary education in Alberta and increasing accessibility. They are running a survey through a new website, where students are encouraged to participate and can directly send messages to their MLAs. The link will be shared through the GSA newsletter.

M. Raja, AVP Labour, updated GSA Council on the ongoing situation with the Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC), with whom the GSA has a service agreement for professional support in bargaining and union-related matters. Recently, the GSA's primary contact at PSAC was let go, and while a new representative has been assigned, there are concerns about the level of support PSAC will provide moving forward. M. Raja expressed some skepticism regarding the future of the service agreement, particularly in light of Bill 17, which restricts other unions from representing graduate students in bargaining. Despite these uncertainties, PSAC has assured the GSA that no major changes to the service agreement will occur until the collective agreements are renegotiated. M. Raja also noted some challenges in interpreting the language of the service agreement and highlighted efforts to clarify these issues. Additional updates will be provided as the situation unfolds, and M. Raja is available to meet for further discussions if needed.