Dear GSA Council Colleagues,

18 January 2019

As many of you will remember, my team and I began the development of the 2018-2019 Board Strategic Work Plan (SWP) in May and we presented the finalized Plan to GSA Council in July. The complete SWP is available on the GSA website.

As outlined at the July 2018 meeting of GSA Council when this plan was presented, we divided our SWP into two documents. The first is an outward facing document that is crisp and visually engaging. The main audiences for this document include University administration, the U of A Board of Governors, the Government of Alberta, other partners, and graduate students.

The second document is an internal task list, which was shared in-person at the July meeting of GSA Council. This task list is a living document that evolves as my team strategizes issues and approaches and it is the document where we outline the specific actions we will be taking to work towards our goals and identify those responsible for each task. Content from this internal document has been used to develop the second update on our progress to GSA Council. The first update was presented at the October 2018 meeting of GSA Council.

Highlights from my portfolio include:

- I have continued advocating for the establishment of minimum funding packages at the U of A, which is a major component of our 2018-2019 GSA Board Strategic Work Plan, and a project that has been ongoing for a number of years. While attending this year’s Canadian Association for Graduate Studies (CAGS) conference, I connected with individuals from universities that have already implemented minimum funding packages, to learn about any potential challenges. I have continued to discuss the importance of establishing minimum funding packages during various Board of Governors meetings, and individually with Board of Governors members. The Interim Dean of the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research (FGSR) and the Provost continue to examine the logistics of establishing minimum funding packages at our institution.

- I invited the Provost and Vice-President (Academic) and the Vice-President (Finance and Administration) to attend GSA Council on 19 November 2018 to discuss the important topics of the University budget and graduate student tuition, and to answer questions from GSA Council members. Before the end of the year, along with Masoud (Vice-President Academic), I also participated in meetings of the Tuition Budget Advisory Committee to review the University’s preliminary proposal for international graduate tuition rates for 2019-2020. In early December, I also met individually with the University of Alberta Vice-President (Finance and Administration) to further discuss the University’s budget with respect to how funds are allocated under the new budget model.

- Two years ago, the U of A GSA was an active participant in the Government of Alberta’s review of tuition and funding. On 29 October, I was able to attend the introduction of Bill 19 to the Alberta Legislature. Following the announcement of this Bill, the Alberta Graduate Provincial Advocacy Council (ab-GPAC) issued a statement. Bill 19 has now passed through all required readings in the Alberta Legislature, and it is anticipated that the Bill will receive Royal Assent in February 2019. Following the passing of Bill 19, I have had continued conversations with the Minister of Advanced Education, through my role as the Chair of ab-GPAC, as well as with various stakeholders, about what Bill 19’s accompanying regulations will be. Specifically, we are discussing the issue of how to define the length of graduate students’ programs, given that Bill 19 will require that international students are informed of the total cost of their program at its outset, starting in Fall 2020.

- I continue to work closely with ab-GPAC on spearheading the three main advocacy priorities identified at the beginning of our term (tuition and fees, post-graduate employment, and the indigenization of graduate education). Recently, ab-GPAC released a policy statement on post-graduation employment, which supports the provision of funding for ongoing professional development opportunities for graduate students to increase their post-graduation employability, advocates for policies to increase the retention of highly-skilled workers in the province, and endorses the promotion of entrepreneurial mindsets and ecosystems.

- I continue to meet monthly with representatives from the Indigenous Graduate Students’ Association, and, in pursuit of supporting “initiatives and programs that specifically support Indigenous [...] graduate students” (2018-2019 GSA Board Strategic Work Plan), I am hopeful that GSA Council will approve the creation of a seat on GSA Council for an Indigenous graduate student. Along with the rest of my team, I will continue to emphasize the importance of establishing this seat at the January 2019 meeting of GSA Council.
With the support of the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research (FGSR), Masoud and I were able to attend this year’s Canadian Association for Graduate Studies conference in Winnipeg. I was able to present a poster at the conference on the topic of graduate student mental health and financial supports, and we’re very pleased that the GSA was able to participate in conversations about several important topics, such as experiential learning and the future of the PhD dissertation.

In advance of the upcoming 2019 provincial election, ab-GPAC continued to meet with MLAs from all political parties in the province to discuss graduate student issues.

Recent team goals that spanned across different Directly-Elected Officers’ portfolios included:

- In furtherance of our work to advocate, on behalf of graduate students, for the prompt resolution of ongoing and systemic issues associated with the Collective Agreement, in November, Beth (Vice-President Labour) and I delivered a presentation to the Board Human Resources and Compensation Committee on the topics of minimum funding packages and graduate student supervision.

- In the fall, Masoud, Fahed (Vice-President Student Services), and I, along with representatives from the Students’ Union, participated in a meeting of the Joint Oversight Committee on Mandatory Non-Instructional Fees (MINFs), where we received a report on the University’s use of revenue generated through MNIFs. Though the Government of Alberta has recently announced that they will be freezing MNIFs for all students for fall 2019 (both domestic and international students), we raised concerns about the student health and wellness fee, given that the government has now mandated that the funding the U of A receives through the mental health grant cannot be used for treatment, and is emphasizing that students utilize Alberta Health Services’ resources, which are located off-campus. Both student associations continue to raise issues with this shift, and the Dean of Students will be sharing these concerns with the government.

- In early 2019, along with Masoud, I will be scheduling a meeting with the FGSR to review and discuss the importance of clear and transparent letters of offer associated with admissions.

- At the beginning of November, we hosted a dedicated coffee break for graduate student group executives, in order to support and connect with departmental graduate student groups and networks.

Sincerely,

Sasha van der Klein
2018-2019 GSA President