Dear GSA Council Colleagues,

5 April 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.

Below is the final update concerning the GSA’s progress in pursuing the strategic goals outlined in the 2018-2019 SWP. Updates were also provided to GSA Council in October and January. 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. At the February 2019 GSA Council meeting, I was pleased that GSA Council was able to review and discuss background briefing note and draft proposal associated with this prepared by the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research (FGSR). While there are a number of details that need to be worked out and questions that remain, I am proud that this draft proposal now exists, following extensive advocacy efforts on this project this year. I’m also very grateful for past GSA teams who started the conversations.

- At the 15 March 2019 meeting of the Board of Governors (BoG), the proposal to increase international graduate tuition by 2.77% for 2019-2020, and which I voted against, was passed. As a reminder, for 2019-2020, the Government of Alberta had mandated that post-secondary institution freeze domestic tuition, and mandatory non-instructional feels for both domestic and international students. In 2019, important conversations will continue between the GSA, the Alberta government, and the University of Alberta regarding the implementation of the provisions of Bill 19, which requires post-secondary institutions in Alberta to communicate to international graduate students, at the outset of their program, the maximum amount of tuition they will pay each year, for the duration of the standard length of their graduate program. Specific issues to address will include: how the standard length of programs is defined and communicated to international graduate students, what will happen during the transition period, and whether current international graduate students will be grand-parented into the new model, as Bill 19 encourages predictability for current international graduate students as well.

- The BoG is currently revising its standing committee structure and membership, a project that started in 2017. It is anticipated that in the spring many of the recommendations, including revisions to the Terms of Reference of various BoG committees, will be implemented. I have been engaged in ongoing conversations with the current ad hoc BoG Governance Committee to advocate for graduate student representation on BoG committees, in order to ensure robust and effective GSA representation at the highest levels of University Governance.

- I continue to meet monthly with representatives from the Indigenous Graduate Students’ Association (IGSA), and, in pursuit of supporting “initiatives and programs that specifically support Indigenous [...] graduate students” (2018-2019 GSA Board Strategic Work Plan), I am proud to report that GSA Council approved the creation of a seat on GSA Council for an Indigenous graduate student, and that GSA Council was able celebrate this new seat at GSA Council in February. I thank the members of the IGSA for all of their efforts in planning and implementing this celebratory event.

- In March, I developed a joint presentation for the 2019 Student Advisors’ Conference at the University of Alberta with Kristine Wray, President of the IGSA. The theme of the conference was “Connecting Our Voices: Sharing and Understanding Our Stories,” and our presentation focused on how the IGSA, as a newly established group, works to support, mentor, and increase the visibility of a growing group on campus, and how the GSA has worked to amplify their voice within the University structure this year.

- One of the three priorities for the Alberta Graduate Provincial Advocacy Council (ab-GPAC) for 2018-2019 was to look at the alleviation of barriers to post-secondary (graduate) education for Indigenous students. In furtherance of developing this priority, ab-GPAC continues to develop research procedures and to consult with the IGSA, along with other Indigenous student stakeholders.
As outlined in the 2018-2019 SWP, the GSA would continue to evaluate possible memberships with national advocacy groups. In furtherance of this goal, I met with the Member Relations Officers for the Canadian Alliance of Student Associations (CASA) in early February, and also attended a CASA conference in March to learn more about this organization and how their advocacy efforts relate to graduate students.

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

- To align with our goal of maintaining the GSA’s presence in Pride Week programming, my team and I were honoured to participate in the U of A Pride Week Parade on 13 March.

- In early March, the Directly-Elected Officers and GSA Board members participated in a focus group with an FGSR intern regarding their perspectives on graduate student mental health and wellness. The GSA looks forward to continuing exploring ways that the FGSR can support and collaborate with graduate students on this complex issue.

- Along with Masoud, I raised the issue of international graduate students not being able to complete co-op programs with the Interim Dean of the FGSR, and was happy to hear that the Interim Dean will be further exploring this issue, along with potential solutions. In the past few months, we have also been discussing with the Interim Dean the importance of ensuring that clear and transparent letters of offer associated with admissions are provided to incoming graduate students, and I anticipate these conversations will continue as Bill 19’s requirement for communicating the total cost for the standard length of programs to international graduate students is implemented for 2020 onwards.

- In alignment with the broad goal of the 2018-2019 SWP to “foster a welcoming environment and an equitable, sustainable, safe, and healthy campus,” Fahed and I attended the inaugural event of the Black Graduate Students’ Association, on 28 February. At this event, we were also able to connect with current MLA, David Sheppard, and discuss graduate student experiences and issues.

Sincerely,

Sasha van der Klein, President