STRATEGIC PLAN 2019-2023

McMaster Graduate Students' Association

GSA
GRADUATE STUDENTS ASSOCIATION
OF MCMASTER UNIVERSITY

2019-2023 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY PLAN AND PILLARS

In 2013, the GSA embarked on a mission to gather feedback from various partners on how to improve the GSA. The research gathered identified the strengths, weaknesses and necessary improvements the GSA can implement to fulfil its end vision. The data gathered during this time serves as a basis for the 2019-2023 Strategic Plan.

The 2019-2023 Strategic Plan seeks to utilize this data to bridge outstanding gaps, and improve partnerships on and off campus for the years to come. The four pillars have remained as the foundation upon which the GSA structures it's goals.

The Four Pillars are: Advocacy; Operations and Resources; Student Connections and Resources and Communications. Within these pillars are strategies:

1. Develop an advocacy plan – including who and how GSA will be well represented at key forums on campus and off campus.
2. Create staff roles that help to facilitate more supports and services for graduate students.
3. To become a source of information and referral for graduate students.
4. Establish a more dynamic, comprehensive and effective communication strategy for connecting with graduate students.

The following is an overview of the goals that fall within the pillars of the GSA:
1. Develop an advocacy plan.
2. Create staff roles that help to facilitate more supports and services for graduate students.
3. Enhance role as resource for graduate students.
4. Establish a dynamic, comprehensive and effective communication strategy for connecting with students.
5. Establish an engagement strategy to create more meaningful contact with graduate students from all departments and stages of study.
   a. Improve our ability to directly contact all our members (e.g., obtain own access to emails of graduate students).
   b. Find ways to help graduate students more directly to gather the information they need.
   c. Develop more multi-media communications (e.g., use TVs; posters, word of mouth; Phoenix).
6. Determine if we can create customized communications to align message with interests of various graduate student members

METHODOLOGY

The 2019-2023 Strategic plan draws on both qualitative and quantitative research methods along with data from the previous Strategic Plan generated by the GSA. The outcomes of the previous research remain highly relevant and timeless in that they support the long term goals, and vision of the GSA.

The methods used were surveys, interviews and focus groups, which included questions about the mandate and the unique role that the GSA plays on campus. There were also questions about the future vision and the potential strategic directions to be pondered.

1. Individual Interviews (approx. 45 mins)
    ❖ Executive team
2. Two Focus Groups
    ❖ Representatives from the GSA Council.
    ❖ Peter Self, Assistant Dean, Graduate Student Life and Research Training.
3. Survey
    ❖ Within each pillar, a set of questions were identified and operationalized in the form of focus groups and surveys that targeted University Administrators, Students and the Surrounding Community.
    ❖ Results of the surveys and interviews aided in the re-adjustment, development and establishment of the 2019-2023 goals. Insight from the executives and graduate students, and various stakeholders further contributed to the development of our Mandate, Vision and Values.

OUR MANDATE

1 To promote the welfare and interests of members.

2 To represent the members.

3 To promote communication and participation.

OUR VISION

A vision statement is the ideal end point an organization aspires to achieve. It is idealistic in nature and not intended to be a measurable goal, rather a light house that guides the organization as it moves forward. The GSA's vision statement is as follows:

*"The GSA fosters and enables vibrant, engaged graduate students at McMaster University."*

The discussions surrounding the vision statement emphasize enhancement of the graduate student experience.

The Graduate Students' Association (GSA) at McMaster University (1970) is a registered not-for-profit student governing organization located in the city of Hamilton, Ontario.

The GSA alone is not responsible for the graduate student experience. There are many factors that result in a vibrant and engaged student body that require partnership from various stakeholders.

The vision statement speaks to some other idealistic hopes – namely that the GSA will be much better known and highly effective in involving graduate students in its services and supports. An indicator of engagement is an increase in graduate student volunteerism to aid in the organization's growth and presence on campus.

OUR MISSION
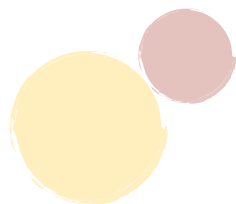
"Advocate for the needs of the collective, act as a resource, and provide support and services that improve the graduate student experience at McMaster"

❖ **To represent** all McMaster graduate students.
❖ **To advocate** for the needs of the collective – both on campus as well as (to a lesser extent) to government and other external bodies.
❖ **To provide** input from graduate students to key initiatives taking place on campus such as the academic plan; policies; etc.
❖ **To help** graduate students connect with other graduate students across departments.
❖ **To be** a resource for graduate students – helping the whole graduate student find the supports, services and information they need to excel while at McMaster.

Graduate Students

McMaster University, Stakeholders & Other External Bodies

McMaster GSA
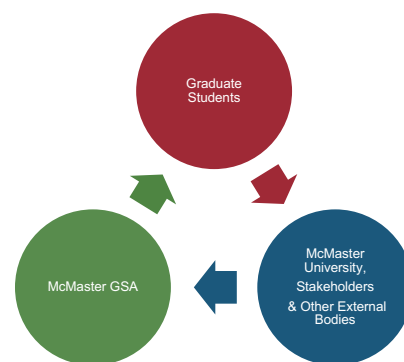
A mission statement is intended to describe the purpose or reason that the organization exists. While advocating has always been a small part of the focus of the GSA – the adoption of this mission statement requires advocacy

to be a much larger part of the day to day functioning of the organization. It also requires the GSA to increase the quality and quantity of information it has access to, in order to be an effective resource for graduate students. These themes are reflected within the four pillars, accompanied by detailed goals, strategies and measures.

It is important to note that the mission statement is intended to communicate that the GSA advocates for the collective and not the individual. It is not a body that can defend or champion the needs of a particular graduate student who feels unheard or unfairly treated.

OUR VALUES

| RELEVANCY | INTEGRITY | INCLUSIVITY | SUPPORTIVE | CONNECTED |

STAYING CURRENT BY REGULARLY REVIEWING STUDENT NEEDS AND REFINING SERVICES TO REFLECT THOSE NEEDS.

**TO BE HONEST, TRUE AND ACCURATE WHEN REPRESENTING THE GRADUATE STUDENTS.**

WORK TO ENGAGE ALL GRADUATE STUDENTS AND REPRESENT THE COLLECTIVE.

SUPPORTIVE IN HOW WE INTERACT, AND THE SERVICES AND EVENTS WE PROVIDE.

CONNECT TO VARIOUS UNIVERSITY PARTNERS AND THE GRADUATE STUDENT POPULATION ON AND OFF CAMPUS.

Value statements are important as they guide how the individuals associated with an organization should go about delivering on the mission. They are important and lasting beliefs or ideals that should be modeled and shared by all involved in the GSA.

In creating the values, individuals interviewed reflected on the beliefs and principles that are already associated with McMaster University. They also considered the specific work of the GSA and what are important guiding principles that should be there to influence those engaged in the work. The ideas considered were: integrity; team work; cooperation; inclusive; transparent; connecting; spirit of inquiry; open; easy to talk to and supportive.
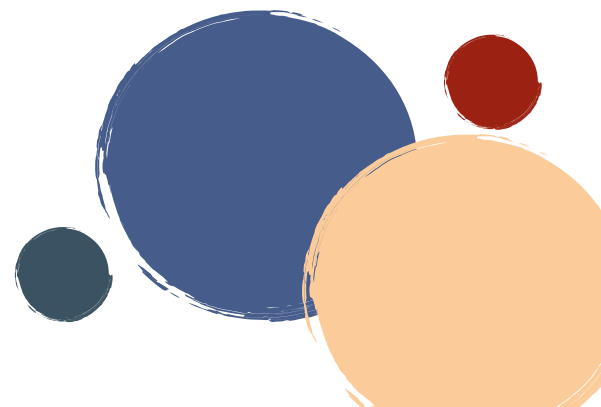
MOVING FORWARD: IDENTIFYING THE FOUR PILLARS

The GSA is rooted in **Four Focus Pillars** that help to outline its goals and strategies for achievement.

These pillars represent key facets that are relevant to the GSA, and within each pillar the GSA has identified factors that contribute to the success of the GSA. These factors are described as goals, that are to be pursued and adjusted accordingly throughout the process.

THE FOUR PILLARS: GOALS FOR 2019-2023

Using both input from the graduate students online survey, interviews and focus groups, the Executive discussed the goals, strategies and measures to implement. It was decided that the four pillars would be the focus of this plan. Each strategy is detailed in the space below and accompanied by detailed goals that would be taken to ensure each strategy is implemented.

Advocacy – What is it? Awareness and Promotion

Goals

1. Shed more awareness on the root causes of mental health challenges. This includes identifying key stressors among graduate students and advocating for accessible resources that target resolution and healing.

2. The GSA is committed to strengthening approaches towards engaging, and strengthening partnerships between Indigenous groups on-and off-campus. The GSA hopes to shed light on accessibility and successes in higher education for Indigenous peoples.
3. Focus on food security with respect to international students who have financial challenges.
4. Generate an advocacy plan that increases awareness of GSA role on campus.
5. Determine where and how the GSA will advocate off-campus to government and non-government agencies.
6. Consult regularly with other graduate student associations on issues and actions being taken on their campuses (e.g. attend or host the GSA summit).
7. Develop effective and efficient ways for GSA representatives to poll graduate students' needs and ideas.
8. Adjust council meeting so it is a proactive forum for sharing and defining the collective needs of students.

Strategy

❖ Providing workshops and events hosted by guest professionals in order share methods/resources on conflict resolution, food security, time management, and self-care.

Suggested Measure

❖ Create a year-end survey that asks graduate students about their overall experience, and awareness of the GSA. A yearly comparison should be made in order to determine if progress is made within this arena.

Operations and Resources – What is it? Organizational Methods and Administration

Goals

1. Implement a tracking system that categorizes student concerns based on the type of inquiry (financial, academic etc.), the date the inquiry was raised and resolved, and by whom the question/concern was answered. This includes confidentially maintaining the demographics of student inquiries so that year-end reviews may determine key priority needs of graduate students.
2. Improving accountability.
3. Create an event scheduling system and an assigned staff that manages it.
4. Further define or refine governance role for executive and GSA in general.
5. Create more defined duties and opportunities for faculty representatives.
6. Develop staff roles that can effectively manage or partner GSA services provided.
7. Develop a strategy to improve the ability to field questions from various graduate students who are calling or emailing the office.
8. Explore ways to make social and other types of events more welcoming and easier for graduate students to integrate (e.g., greeter or hostess function at events to help make introductions).
9. Identify the services that the GSA is able to offer versus services external sources can provide.

10. Create more defined duties and opportunities for faculty representatives.

Strategy
- ❖ Schedule key meetings that contribute to the development of each goal; assigning a group or individual and progress dates to each goal.

Suggested Measures
- ❖ Provide bi-annual executive reports to the board as a form of tracking the stages and outcomes of each goal.
- ❖ Staff self-evaluations, review of each pillar within the GSA by all involved should be taken yearly.
- ❖ Meetings should also focus on re-evaluating staff roles and their responsibilities on a yearly-basis to ensure its effectiveness and relevancy.

Student Connection and Student Resources – What is it? Services and Referral

Goals
1. To implement an Information and Referral system whereby graduate students can be directed to resources within the community that address legal, housing, immigration, food security and personal needs.
2. Have activities or workshops designed to help graduate students learn how to enhance their experience (e.g., mix and mingle; workshops). Career services, writing/presentation workshops and professional development is key for the GSA.
3. Embrace funding opportunities for non-traditional needs as opposed to merit based – seek emergency funding and greater endowment funding towards travel needs for students. Student life fund- SGS and GSA would either take applications each from students; propose their own ideas of certain initiatives that would help students. Workshops on tenancy, more comprehensive seminars.
4. Seek ways to make graduate orientations more creative; have a handbook to help graduate students with all aspects of the graduate experience.
5. Offer various languages for translation of important physical and online resources/documents to improve accessibility and sharing among students within their communities.

Strategies
- ❖ Reach out to services and resources within the community that have pamphlets to be shared to graduate students through the GSA office and website.
- ❖ Provide an online directory on the GSA website with specific point of contacts in partnership with organizations that address the needs of graduate students.
- ❖ Online modules/tutorials on where to find particular services and resources within the Hamilton region.

❖ Show graduate students *PYTHON*; reaching out to *Toast Masters* to see what workshops they are holding and advertise it. Seeking a representative from *CareerWorx!* to speak on Career development (job-seeking, resume building and interview skills).

Suggested Measure

❖ Develop an online survey, discussion forum, and digital suggestions box that allows hands-on feedback from graduate students. These outlets should be clearly advertised on the GSA website for easy-access.

Communications – What is it? Information Sharing, Language and Networks

Goals

1. To create a GSA hub of knowledge for graduate students that consolidates information pertaining to practices, processes and events whilst promoting transparency.
2. To minimize/diminish formal language that may serve as a barrier to those with English as a second language, and utilize informal communication (less verbose) so that students may feel comfortable to engage.
3. To improve GSA transparency with respect to Council Meetings pertaining graduate student representation. In the future; do these Facebook live for council meetings; if people want to tune in, they can sign in, publishing dates of committee meetings,
4. To improve GSA relevance and engagement by increasing social media presence.
5. Enhance website to better collect views of graduate students and communicate real-time messages to gain access to student feedback.
6. Embrace stronger partnerships with other organizations on campus (SGS, MSU etc.).
7. Recruit more people to help the GSA connect with graduate students (e.g., greeters at events).

Strategies

❖ Appoint an individual or group that can schedule frequent online updates via Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and the GSA website.
❖ Provide monthly reports on student feedback from the suggested outlets and bring to meetings for discussion.

Suggested Measure

❖ A minimum of two updates per day on each social media platform concerning news on campus and within the Hamilton region.

ACCOUNTABILITY AND MEASURES

ACCOUNTABILITY MECHANISMS

MEASURING PROGRESS

Publish bi-annual reports documenting progress on the intended goals. A mid-term review that ensures each action is headed in the right direction or if amendment is needed.

To ensure accountability on behalf of the board, it is suggested that staff responsible for the development of the goals participate in self-evaluations, reflections and reports are to be submitted to the Board based on a dated schedule. These tactics ensure strategies are in place and the progress of assigned goals are underway.

How does the GSA intend to measure progress?

The GSA recognizes that measuring progress is the key to identifying successes and weaknesses. Performance measures such as annual surveys; inter-organizational and all-encompassing surveys that include graduate students are one method of tracking progress. "Member/ Graduate reviews" determine the level of GSA effectiveness and satisfaction.

Benchmarks must be set for each goal by providing an estimated deadline. Progress can be quantified by implementing deadlines on the stages of development for each task. Following up on these benchmarks requires scheduled meetings, staff and organizational reflections on steps taken towards achieving or actualizing the assigned task. Each task should be assigned to a specific group or individual that will be responsible for ensuring the stages of development for a particular goal.

- ❖ If an action item is not complete in Year 1 of the Strategic Plan, it should be flagged in advance that it was in jeopardy and require acknowledged by the Executive that it has been removed from the original year one list of strategic actions.
- ❖ A list of completed action items should be completed by Year 2, discussed and ultimately approved by the GSA Council. The budget is passed with a clear understanding of what funding priorities in Year 2 directly align with the strategic plan and therefore help to ensure the plan is achieved.
- ❖ The GSA should keep track of the number of graduate students that attend events, workshops or receive particular services that are categorized.
- ❖ The GSA should demonstrate how it is gathering input from graduate students regarding their needs. The GSA may gain insight on student feedback from forums, surveys and digital suggestion boxes on the GSA website whereby processes, and student engagement is transparent.

SUMMARY
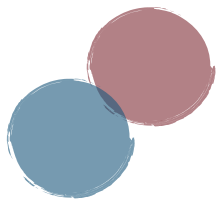
An overview of the priorities for the 2013-2018 GSA Strategic Plan:

There were two focus groups conducted during this time frame. One was with Peter Self, Assistant Dean, Graduate Student Life and Research Training and this team. The other was with representatives from the Graduate Student Council. The potential future direction for the GSA was then tested using an online survey that was sent to 400 randomly selected graduate students. There was a 22% response rate (87 graduate students). Themes and responses were reviewed by the Executive and applied to the development of the key goals below:

- ❖ Improve GSA presence on campus;
- ❖ Improve notice of events and communicating events in timely-manner;
- ❖ Offer more resources online;
- ❖ 41.4% gave the GSA either an A or B grade with respect to its effectiveness;
- ❖ Improve transparency with regard to communication and decision-making;
- ❖ Improve overall organization function;
- ❖ Be more proactive in determining needs of graduate students, provide more representations for programs such as the MBA; and
- ❖ Find ways to reach out to more graduate students via social media.

WHAT IS NEXT?

The progress of this plan will be monitored by the Executive or Council as a whole three times a year. Like a to-do list, the Strategic Plan is meant to outline key and relevant tasks for achievement in the GSA. These goals are guided by the Association's values, and are prioritized in a manner that aid in the organization of the GSA. The plan addresses the what? why? and how? of each priority goal, however the when? must be realistic as many of the aforementioned tasks are developed and strengthened over time. Thus, the strategic plan is to serve as a reminder, and evaluation of past, current and future practices of the GSA.

The success, and achievement of these goals over time require collaboration and partnership between the GSA, graduate students and other University representatives and organizations.

The following are the recommended actions that should be tackled between now and the next GSA executives:

- ☐ Refine the role of Graduate Student Representative – making the expectations more explicit; more focused on being a liaison between students and GSA.

- ☐ Educate and better define role of Executive of GSA – in terms of responsibilities associated with each position and in terms of driving this strategic plan forward. Explore what it might mean to move from being less operational to more strategic in focus.

- ☐ Determine the 5-7 priority tables where GSA wants to be well-represented in coming year. Ensure appropriate stakeholders know of interest. Assign 1-2 people to cover each forum to ensure consistent and effective representation.

- ☐ Create one other mechanism to poll graduate students – beyond utilizing graduate student representatives. Explore if it is a blog, poll on website, use of online survey or some other way to hear the voices of more graduate students.

- ☐ Develop with two staff persons a strategy to improve the ability of the GSA to field the many questions received.

- ☐ Create a plan of how to expand or strengthen portfolio of supports and services offered to graduate students. Have plan ready to be implemented in year 2 of this plan.

- ☐ Establish more greeter, hostess or other such roles so that GSA events are more welcoming and less intimidating to graduate students who know few others from other departments.

- ☐ Work with School of Graduate Studies to develop more of a presence during orientation. Develop a brochure that can be handed out during this orientation.

- ☐ Encourage staff to improve the ability of the GSA to be a resource to graduate students by increasing their knowledge as well as the number of resources available in the office and online to which students can access.

- ☐ Work to gain access to all graduate students thereby creating opportunity for GSA to communicate directly with those you represent.

- ☐ Enhance web-site making it more relevant, informative and of benefit to graduate students who are not living or even studying in Hamilton.

- ☐ Develop more multi-media communications (e.g, use TVs & Phoneix to get message out about services or supports available through GSA).

- ☐ Develop a plan that can be implemented in year 2 of how 2-way communications could be further improved between graduate students and the GSA.