Graduate Students Association: Strategic Plan

2013-2018

 Developed from January-April, 2013
 Led by the Executive of the Graduate Students Association
 In partnership with 2WA Consulting Inc.
 Report submitted April 30, 2013
# Table of Contents

- Executive Summary .................................................................................................................. 3
- Why a Strategic Plan? .................................................................................................................. 4
- Methodology Utilized to Create Strategic Plan ........................................................................ 4
- Mission of the Graduate Students Association ......................................................................... 5
- The Values that guide the GSA .................................................................................................. 8
- The Vision for the Graduate Students Association ................................................................. 9
- 2018 Picture of the Future ......................................................................................................... 9
- Strategies to Ensure Picture of the Future Achieved ............................................................... 10
  1. Develop an advocacy plan – including who and how GSA will be well represented at key forums on campus and off campus .......................................................... 10
  2. Create staff roles that help to facilitate more supports and services for graduate students .......................................................................................................................... 10
  3. Enhance role as resource for graduate students ..................................................................... 11
  4. Establish a more dynamic, comprehensive and effective communication strategy for connecting with graduate students ............................................................................... 11
- What are the Priorities between Now and April 2014? .......................................................... 12
- How will we measure our progress regarding this Strategic Plan? ........................................ 13
- APPENDIX A: Interview and Focus Group Questions regarding Strategic Plan for Graduate Students Association ....................................................................................................... 15
- APPENDIX B: Summary of Interviews ..................................................................................... 17
- APPENDIX C: Questions Used in Online Survey ...................................................................... 20
- APPENDIX D: Survey Results .................................................................................................. 22
- APPENDIX E: Proposed Staff Role Delineation – A Starting Point ........................................ 26
Executive Summary

Mission Statement:
Advocate for the needs of the collective, act as a resource, and provide support and services that improve the graduate student experience at McMaster.

Values:
Inclusive – work to engage all graduate students and represent the collective
Supportive – in both how we interact as well as in the types of events and services offered
Relevant – staying current by regularly taking the pulse of what graduate students want and refining services and supports to reflect those needs
Connected – to the various university partners as well as the graduate student population. Includes connecting graduate students to one another as well as reaching out to those students not on campus.
Integrity – be honest, true and accurate when representing the graduate students.

Vision Statement:
The GSA fosters and enables vibrant, engaged graduate students at McMaster University.

2018 Picture of the Future:
0 Awareness of GSA and its role on campus has increased significantly
0 Well-structured and organized approach to advocacy has been developed
0 More individuals involved with GSA
0 Advanced the supports and services available to graduate students

Strategic Directions:
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. Enhance role as resource for graduate students
4. Establish a more dynamic, comprehensive and effective communication strategy for connecting with graduate students
Why a Strategic Plan?

The Executive of the McMaster University Graduate Students Association (GSA), in conjunction with the council as a whole, decided that the time was ripe to develop a strategic plan. They wanted a plan that would give direction to the ever-changing council on the focus for the GSA and where the organization should put its energies in the coming years.

It was important that this plan answer what is the mission of the GSA. There are many different entities on campus that touch graduate students. This strategic plan was aimed at answering what is the unique role that the GSA should be playing in support of graduate students.

This strategic plan also provides a vision or overall direction for the organization. It articulates in words what it is striving to achieve in five years' time. It provides a set of values to guide how the organization and its elected officials and staff should be operating. It also sets out four strategic directions – each with tactics – that give specific activities to be pursued in the next three years.

Simply put, a strategic plan helps to formalize in what ways the organization is striving to change and what is the road map that it is going to use to get there. That is precisely the purpose that this plan hopes to serve – giving direction to the organization for the next three years.

Methodology Utilized to Create Strategic Plan

The Strategic Plan was created under the direction and guidance of the Executive of the Graduate Students Association. The process began in January 2013 and concluded at the end of April, 2013.

The process started with the engagement of 2WA Consulting Inc. (www.2waconsulting.com) who helped the Executive to facilitate, coordinate and develop the strategic plan. The principals of the firm, Michael H. Howes and Anne Bermingham interviewed many individuals to gain their perspectives of the Graduate Student Association.

The questions asked about the current strengths and opportunities for the GSA to consider embracing as it planned its future. There were questions about mandate and the unique role that the GSA plays on campus. There were questions about the future vision and the potential strategic directions to be pondered. The questions utilized are included in Appendix A. The individuals interviewed included:

• Alison Sekuler, Dean of Graduate Studies,
• Phil Wood, AVP, Student Affairs and Dean of Students,
• Gina Robinson, Assistant Dean, Student Affairs/Director, Student Success Centre,
• Nancy MacBain, CUPE 3906 Representative,
• Patrick Deane, President & Vice-Chancellor,
• Carolyn Brendon, Ombudsperson,
• Heather Sheardown, Associate Dean of Graduate Studies, Engineering,
• Tony Porter, Associate Dean of Research and Graduate Studies, Social Sciences.

There were also two focus groups conducted at this time. 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 themes that emerged from these focus groups and interviews is captured in a PowerPoint presentation and found in Appendix B.

The interview themes were reviewed by the Executive at a retreat held on March 5, 2013. At that meeting, a draft mandate, vision as well as value statements were crafted. Also a series of strategic directions were developed.

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). In Appendix C, the questions used in the survey can be found. In Appendix D are the key findings that emerged from the GSA online survey.

This feedback from the graduate students was thoroughly reviewed and, using the input received, this final strategic plan was created at a second retreat of the executive held April 16, 2013.

It is the hope of all involved in this project that this strategic plan will now shape the work plans and direction of the GSA in the next five years.

**Mission of the Graduate Students Association**

These interviews and focus groups provided a lot of insight about the Graduate Students Association today.

There were some clear themes that emerged about the strengths of the organization – namely that the leadership team was well respected; the Phoenix Pub move was very positive and that the securing of dental and health benefits for graduate students was a significant achievement that provided a tangible and appreciated benefit for graduate students. Individuals could see the need for a strategic plan including a clear statement about the mandate or mission of the GSA.

When these same individuals were asked their views about the mandate of the GSA, they recommended that it should:

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

It was noted by almost all who provided their views in the interview / focus group phase of this project that the above mission would require the GSA to change. It would require the representatives as well as executive of the GSA to reach out to more graduate students to hear their needs and inputs. This will require the GSA to be creative and to work through the apathy or indifference some graduate students have shown when it comes to getting engaged with the GSA. It will require the GSA to develop positions and push for services or actions that help fill gaps identified by the collective. It might also involve the GSA partnering, collaborating and finding others to help it administer and manage some of its services so that those involved have the time that it takes to advocate well.

During this same interview process, questions were asked about how the GSA might be different or distinct from some other groups that work with graduate students. The following table emerged:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GSA</th>
<th>Office of Graduate Studies</th>
<th>CUPE</th>
<th>Ombudsmen</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Whole Student – best positioned to advocate</td>
<td>Academic first and some social based on needs identified</td>
<td>Help only with employment issues</td>
<td>Deal with individual issues that are UNFAIR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Must be actively taking the pulse</td>
<td>Can be the resources to provide many services that needs identified</td>
<td>Only represent 60% of graduate students who get paid by university</td>
<td>Cannot advocate for policy or needs of collective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help connect to graduate students across departments</td>
<td>Can help push other areas to offer services we can’t (student services)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The graduate students were asked, in the online survey, about the GSA and its purpose. The first question was “to what extent would you say that you are aware of the GSA and its role on campus today?” The results indicate that many students report not being very aware of the GSA and its role today.
However, when asked to describe in their own words the function of the GSA – almost half of the respondents spoke of advocacy. The second most popular response was that the GSA provided support to graduate students with services, grants, activities and socials.

All of the feedback received was discussed at the two retreats with the Executive of the GSA. In the end, the following was selected as the mission of the GSA.

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

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 available at its fingertips to be an effective resource for graduate students. These themes are reflected in the strategic directions and accompanying tactics included in this plan.

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.
The Values that guide the GSA

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.

At the March 5 retreat, the Executive discussed these ideas and suggested the following potential values be tested in the online survey of graduates: supportive; inclusive; considerate; partnership; current. The three values that resonated most positively with the graduate students who answered the survey were supportive, inclusive and partnership.

As a result of the input received, the following were selected as the values that would guide the GSA and its volunteers and staff:

- **Inclusive** – work to engage all graduate students and represent the collective
- **Supportive** – in both how we interact as well as in the types of events and services offered.
- **Relevant** – staying current by regularly taking the pulse of what graduate students want and refining services and supports to reflect those needs
- **Connected** – to the various university partners as well as the graduate student population. Includes connecting graduate students to one another as well as reaching out to those students not on campus.
- **Integrity** – be honest, true and accurate when representing the graduate students.
The Vision for the Graduate Students Association

A vision state is the ideal end point you would like to someday aspire to achieve. It is idealistic in nature and not intended to be a measurable goal – rather a lighthouse that guides the organization as it moves forward. The vision statement that was selected for the GSA is as follows:

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

As the discussions surrounding the vision statement emphasized, the GSA fosters the graduate student experience. However, the GSA alone is not responsible for the graduate student experience. There are many factors that result in vibrant and engaged student body. The GSA will do its part to help achieve this end.

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. Another sign of engagement will be many more people volunteering to help the organization during their time on campus.

2018 Picture of the Future

In addition to creating a vision statement, a more descriptive and measurable “picture of the future” was also developed. It has four key elements to it – and each element needs a measure that will be used as a “dashboard” to measure the overall effectiveness of this strategic plan.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2018 Picture of the Future</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Goal</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awareness of GSA and its role on campus has increased significantly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Well-structured and organized approach to advocacy has been developed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More individuals involved with GSA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advanced the supports and services available to graduate students</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Strategies to Ensure Picture of the Future Achieved

Using both input from the graduate students online survey, interviews and focus groups, the Executive discussed how best to move from today to this 2018 Picture of the Future. It was decided that there would be four key strategies that would be the focus of this plan. Each strategy is detailed in the space below and accompanied by tactics or more detailed steps that would be taken to ensure strategy implemented.

1. Develop an advocacy plan – including who and how GSA will be well represented at key forums on campus and off campus

   ◦ Develop ways that GSA representatives can poll other graduate students for needs and ideas
   ◦ Adjust council meeting so it is proactive forum for sharing and defining collective needs of graduate students
   ◦ Identify who will be the representatives at the various university forums and tables where graduate student input is being sought
   ◦ Develop other mechanisms for polling graduate students (beyond using GSA representatives)
   ◦ Create a way to let graduate students know input you are receiving regarding their needs and actions being taken by GSA as you advocate on their behalf
   ◦ Ensure university stakeholders know of your interest and willingness to engage on providing input to issues relevant to graduate students
   ◦ Determine where and how GSA will advocate off-campus to government and other agencies
   ◦ Consult regularly with other graduate student associations on issues and actions being taken on their campuses (e.g. attend or host GSA summit)
   ◦ Have regular dialogue with MSU on common issues as it relates to students
   ◦ Utilize resources that are available to help us with advocacy (e.g. University government relations person)

2. Create staff roles that help to facilitate more supports and services for graduate students

   A theme that emerged from the interviews is that the GSA should examine what are the roles of staff versus volunteers. Also they should explore if there are ways to partner or engage others to administer the service (e.g., dental and health plan) or organize the event. In particular, some tactics that were agreed upon include:

   ◦ Further define or refine governance role for executive and GSA in general
   ◦ Create more defined duties and opportunities for faculty representatives
   ◦ Develop staff roles that can effectively manage or partner GSA services provided
0 Develop strategy to improve ability to field questions from various graduate students who are calling or emailing the office
0 Expand or strengthen portfolio of supports and services for graduate students
0 Better define what services others can provide versus what GSA needs to offer
0 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)

During the creation of this strategy, the executive discussed in more detail the tactic of “develop staff roles that can effectively manage or partner GSA services provided”. They asked 2WA Consulting to provide some ideas of what the various staff roles might look like. These thoughts are provided in Appendix E.

3. Enhance role as resource for graduate students

There were a series of tactics that were developed to support this strategy. Many of these tactics were suggested by graduate students through the online survey.

0 Develop more of a presence during orientation
0 Enhance resources that help graduate students connect one to another (e.g., discussion board; alumni network)
0 Have a handbook to help graduate students with all aspects of graduate student life
0 Increase the number of online resources and services available for graduate students
0 Have activities or workshops designed to help graduate students learn how to enhance their experience (e.g., mix and mingle; workshops)

4. Establish a more dynamic, comprehensive and effective communication strategy for connecting with graduate students

Finally, this last strategy is part of the engagement strategy. It is about creating more meaningful contact with graduate students from all departments and stages of study. Below are some of the suggested tactics to be pursued:

0 Improve our ability to directly contact all our members (e.g., obtain own access to emails of graduate students)
0 Find ways to help graduate students more directly gather the information they need
0 Develop more multi-media communications (e.g., use TVs; posters, word of mouth; Phoenix)
0 Determine if we can create customized communications to align message with interests of various graduate student members
0 Enhance website to better collect views of graduate students and communicate real-time messages
0 Recruit more people to help us communicate and connect with graduate students (e.g., greeters at events)

What are the Priorities between Now and April 2014?

This is a five year plan. There is much to do but it needs to be paced in order to ensure success is achieved. The following are the recommended actions that should be tackled between now and the next GSA election:

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

2. Re-shape council meetings to create more time for representatives to report feedback from the graduate students on needs, gaps or points that GSA would consider representing to the various university bodies.

3. 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.

4. 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.

5. 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.

6. Establish a more regular communication with the MSU (perhaps quarterly in first year) to discuss common issues to all students and develop a plan of how to work together to advocate for identified priorities.

7. Create a part-time general manager position and refine the part-time administrative staff role within the GSA. Includes developing job descriptions and clarifying decision-making authorities.

8. Recruit and fill the two positions – taking time to fully orient both individuals to their roles.

9. Develop with two staff persons a strategy to improve the ability of the GSA to field the many questions received.
10. 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.

11. 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.

12. 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.

13. 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.

14. Better define what services others can provide on behalf of the GSA. For example, could someone else administer health and dental plan?

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

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

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

18. 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.

**How will we measure our progress regarding this Strategic Plan?**

By April 2014, the following are the benchmarks that should be used to evaluate if the plan is on track and producing the desired outcomes:

1. All 18 action items are complete. If an action item is not complete, it was flagged in advance that it was in jeopardy and the executive knew it had been removed from the original year one list of strategic actions.

2. A Year 2 list of action items has been developed, 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 ensure plan is achieved.
3. The number of people attending GSA events and using GSA services has increased from April 2013 to April 2014.
4. The GSA can demonstrate how it is gathering more input from graduate students regarding their needs and can communicate to graduate students forums and other ways the GSA has advocated the common needs to university stakeholders on their behalf.

The progress of the strategic plan will be monitored by the Executive or Council as a whole three times a year.
APPENDIX A: Interview and Focus Group Questions regarding Strategic Plan for Graduate Students Association

Thank you for agreeing to participate in an upcoming interview or focus group as it relates to the McMaster University Graduate Students Association. You are one of a select number of stakeholders who is participating in this data gathering process. We know your time is valuable and we also appreciate these types of questions often require some time for reflection. To that end, here are the main questions that we plan to focus on during our time together.

1. The interview will begin by us learning about the perspective from which you come as you comment on the GSA of today and tomorrow. What is your relationship with the GSA? What hat(s) do you wear as you comment on the organization?

2. One of the objectives of this strategic planning process is to develop a mission statement for the GSA. Mission is about the organization’s reason for being or main purpose. At McMaster University, the stated mission is “…the discovery, communication and preservation of knowledge”. What do you think should be the mandate of the GSA?

3. To what extent does your proposed mandate align with what the GSA is about today? Please share your rationale for your response.

4. A vision statement is something that the organization is striving to become. It is typically almost unreachable – very idealistic – but something that is worth striving for and inspires those to drive forward. At McMaster University – the vision is “to achieve international distinction for creativity, innovation and excellence”. What do you think GSA should be striving to achieve?

5. There are some other organizations at the university that also serve the graduate student population. What is the unique role that the GSA should be playing in the future? How does this role differ from other campus organizations or departments (e.g., graduate studies; student affairs)?

6. The following is a list of services that the GSA does or could provide in the future.
   - Dental plan
   - Health insurance
   - Legal aid
   - Tax advice
   - Social events
   - Trips – ski trip and otherwise
   - Find travel grants and conference awards
   - Phoenix bar
   - Advocate for graduate students
• Liaison between students and university bodies

In your opinion, which are the most important services that the GSA should be providing in the future?

7. In order to excel in providing the services you mentioned, what sorts of changes should the GSA consider making – either in how it provides the service or what it provides?

8. McMaster University makes reference to a variety of principles and values in its mission and vision statements (see yellow highlights below). Which of these values and principles should the GSA consider adopting in its values statement? Are there other values that the GSA should consider including?

**OUR MISSION**
At McMaster our purpose is the discovery, communication and preservation of knowledge. In our teaching, research, and scholarship, we are committed to creativity, innovation and excellence. We value integrity, quality, inclusiveness and teamwork in everything we do. We inspire critical thinking, personal growth, and a passion for lifelong learning. We serve the social, cultural, and economic needs of our community and our society.

**OUR VISION**
To achieve international distinction for creativity, innovation, and excellence. The University’s Mission and Vision statements were adopted in this form in Refining Directions (2003, reaffirmed 2008). They position McMaster as a student-centred, research intensive university with a clear purpose: the discovery, communication and preservation of knowledge. They also establish the University’s commitment to excellence, and to integrity, quality, inclusiveness and teamwork.

9. A) In your opinion, what are the strengths of the GSA today? B) What are the weaknesses?

10. If there was one weakness that the GSA could work to overcome through the next strategic plan – what would it be?

11. What political, economic, social or technological factors exist that the GSA needs to be mindful of, as it sets its future directions?

12. Are there some bold new directions or opportunities that the GSA should consider pursuing – as it considers its future during this strategic planning opportunity?
APPENDIX B: Summary of Interviews

Methodology

- Used interview questions created with input from Executive Team
- Conducted interviews and focus groups throughout month of February 2013
- Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes
- Summarized the key messages in developing this presentation

Who Provided Input?

- Allan Sekuler, Dean of Graduate Studies
- Peter Jeff, Assistant Dean, Graduate Student Life and Research Training and the Team
- Phil Wood, AVP, Student Affairs and Dean of Students
- Gina Robinson, Assistant Dean, Student Affairs/Director, Student Success Centre
- Nancy MacAskill, GURE 3606 Representative
- Patrick Deane, President & Vice-Chancellor
- Carolyn Brandon, Dean of Commerce
- Heather Sheppard, Associate Dean of Graduate Studies in Engineering
- Tony Peller, Associate Dean of Research and Graduate Studies in Social Sciences
- focus Group of Faculty Representatives
- Regrets = David Wilkinson, Provost and Vice-President (Academic)

Strengths of GSA Today

- This leadership team has the respect and admiration of all contacted
- GSA seen as more stake – very much support the undertaking a strategic planning process to see need for change
- Great bar – perhaps best in country for atmosphere
- People love the soft ball league
- Good move to ensure graduate students had dental and health plan

On Mandate

- Represent all graduate students
- Advocate for the needs of the collective within the university – push others to provide services / support needed
- Advocate for the needs of the collective to government and other external bodies
- Provide input on academic plan and many other issues on campus as well as policies
- Help graduate students connect across departments through social events
- Support the whole graduate student – help find who does what – be a connector

Message of Change

- Be more proactive in determining needs of graduate students
- Reach out to more graduate students – work through the apathy formally and informally
- Offer more ideas about needs and gaps, be at the key meetings; be active meeting key individuals
- Push own representatives as well as appointed graduate students to find out views of many
- Develop positions and plans for advocating
- Provide some services but try to contract out; partner, collaborate or delegate to staff much of the work
Role of GSA versus Other Bodies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GSA</th>
<th>Office of Graduate Studies</th>
<th>CUPE</th>
<th>Ombudsmen</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Whole student – best positioned to advocate</td>
<td>Academic first and some social based on needs identified</td>
<td>Employment</td>
<td>Deal with individual issues that are UNPAK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Must be actively taking the pulse</td>
<td>Can be the resource to provide many services that needs identified</td>
<td>Only represent 50% of graduate students who get paid by university</td>
<td>Can not advocate for policy or needs of collective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help connect graduate students across departments</td>
<td>Can help push other areas to offer services we can’t (student services)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Vision
- Graduate students are engaged and involved
- See GSA as their voice
- Offer extensive network and place to connect
- Advocate effectively inside and outside campus
- Ensure graduate students feel supported
- Support graduate student in meeting their goals
- Community building
- Ensure best academic and personal student experience – even support transition post-graduate

Values
- Inclusive
- Team work; cooperation
- Integrity
- Transparency
- Provide fabric
- Connecting
- Spirit of inquiry
- Open; easy to talk to
- Supportive

Services
1. Advocate (take pulse; identify needs; liaison)
2. Phoenix is great show place and way to connect with graduate students
3. Travel Grants and Awards are offered
4. Ensuring Health and Dental is available
5. Ensuring there are social activities that connect graduate students (e.g., soft ball league; ski trip)
6. Be there to help graduate students find what they need – legal aid; who does what

Changes regarding Services
- Don’t duplicate (e.g., some student awards; administration of health and dental)
- Work in greater partnership – (ask Office of Graduate Studies to do more; work much closer with MSU staff; get payroll to do health plan)
- Sell more about what you do – every time you touch a graduate student (soft ball game; Phoenix; have reps sell more of the message of the GSA)

More Changes re Services
- Make sure Phoenix is profitable and use these funds to strengthen GSA; make sure Phoenix is for graduate students
- Find ways to reach out more to graduate students – e.g., when they are at Phoenix; Twitter; Facebook; on-line chats with President of University
Role of Staff and Volunteers

- Important to focus on the key roles of governance (connect with stakeholders, advocate, strategic plan, policy setting and adherence; fiscal and other goal achievement). These roles should be focus of GSA meetings.
- Volunteers need to be connecting with stakeholders and spending their time advocating as this is the unique role graduate students can play.
- Staff roles should incorporate skills that not all graduate students have: also take on higher administrative roles; GSA develop ideas and staff implement.

More Factors to Consider

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Political</th>
<th>Economic</th>
<th>Social</th>
<th>Technological</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sensitivity regarding governance and student associations</td>
<td>Tuition can be going up each year without increase in services for graduate students</td>
<td>More grad students with families</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research dollars drying up</td>
<td>Push for graduate students to be economically self-sufficient</td>
<td>More international students</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hard to find housing that works for graduate students</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Factors to Consider

- More undergraduate courses could go online – reduce role of graduate student for teaching
- Need for more work experience to ensure grad students are employed
- Fees for student unions being optional (PC position paper)
- Push to get graduate students connected with community outside of campus
- Declining demographics – less students coming to campus room
- Middle/lower budget tight – push to reduce duplication
- Promote importance of voting – being involved
- Can be used to connect people and create community

Ideas re: Strategic Goals

- Develop a strategy for connecting to more graduate students to find out needs
- Shift role of volunteers and meetings to more advocating / align with governance role
- Develop general manager role to ensure services are contracted out, provided in partnership or overseen by professional manager
- Create an awareness campaign on GSA
- Develop activities and actions to ensure connecting with all parts of university
- Create more of a support network – database to help graduate students find like minded people and services they need

Bolder Thoughts

- Push to represent MBAs and other groups not currently represented
- Do more succession planning for volunteers
- Connect with other GSAs in Canada and abroad
- Partner with MSU for non-core services; develop much stronger relationship with them
- Push others to provide services – don’t tie up your time providing services
- Use Phoenix to be your way of building community – create things and times for just graduate students

Final Advice

- Focus
- Set goals
- Include communication as part of plan
1. To what extent would you say that you are aware of the Graduate Student Association and its role on campus today? – on a scale from 1 (not at all aware) to 6 (very much aware).

2. From your perspective, how would you describe the GSA and its function?

3. If you were to give the Graduate Students Association a grade in terms of its effectiveness, from your perspective, what grade would you award? (A, B, C, D, F, Can't Comment).

4. a)Listed below are a series of roles and services that the GSA provides. If we only had 100 minutes to spend, where should the GSA as an organization, be spending their time?
Inputting whole numbers only, please "spend" your time, ensuring you total to 100 minutes.

   i. Advocating for the needs of the collective graduate student on campus
   ii. Providing input to various university bodies on issues such as academic, research, housing, etc.
   iii. Operating the Phoenix Pub as a place for graduate students and others to gather
   iv. Running soft ball and soccer leagues
   v. Providing other social events such as ski trips
   vi. Communicating to all members of the GSA on issues that are relevant to them
   vii. Providing travel grants and other awards for graduate students
   viii. Providing health, dental and other services for the graduate students (e.g. bus pass)
   ix. Offering direction to graduate students on all university activities (e.g. where to go to get...)

4. b)Listed below are a series of roles and services that the GSA provides. If we only had 100 dollars to spend, where should the GSA as an organization, be spending their money?
Inputting whole numbers only, please "spend" your money, ensuring you total to 100 dollars.

   i. Advocating for the needs of the collective graduate student on campus
   ii. Providing input to various university bodies on issues such as academic, research, housing, etc.
   iii. Operating the Phoenix Pub as a place for graduate students and others to gather
   iv. Running soft ball and soccer leagues
   v. Providing other social events such as ski trips
   vi. Communicating to all members of the GSA on issues that are relevant to them
   vii. Providing travel grants and other awards for graduate students
   viii. Providing health, dental and other services for the graduate students (e.g. bus pass)
ix. Offering direction to graduate students on all university activities (e.g. where to go to get...)

5. Are there certain activities that you would like the GSA to provide that are not listed above?

6. The following are some potential values that describe how the GSA should go about doing its role. Please choose the three that are most appropriate for the GSA to model – in your opinion?
   1. Supportive
   2. Inclusive
   3. Considerate
   4. Partnership
   5. Current

7. In this strategic plan, the following are some goals that the GSA might strive to achieve in the next 3-5 years. With each goal, please rate its importance on a scale of 1 to 6 with 1=NOT AT ALL IMPORTANT, to 6=EXTREMELY IMPORTANT.
   a. Increase the profile of the GSA so that more graduate students are aware of its role and mandate
   b. Build stronger partnerships and connections with other McMaster entities like School of Graduate Studies, Student Services, MSU
   c. Use Phoenix more often as the place for organized events that enable graduate students from across campus to meet and connect
   d. Advocate more for the collective needs of graduate students on campus
   e. Advocate more for the collective needs of graduate students off campus (e.g. to government officials)
   f. Engage more graduate students in getting involved in campus life beyond the laboratory or academic studies
   g. Develop resources so GSA can be more of a trusted advisor to graduate students about all aspects of graduate student life (e.g. where do you find x?; what are alumni in my field employed doing post degree?, etc.)

8. What other suggestions or advice would you like to offer the GSA as it completes this strategic planning option?
APPENDIX D: Survey Results

McMaster University
Student Senate Affairs (SSA)

2. CONTINUED... From your perspective, how would you describe the GSA and its function?

There were some comments more negative in tone (less than 5%):
- "Ineffective to me, however I feel the task of organization inhibits the full potential of the GSA and its function".
- "Disagree with unlimited emails and delays reimbursement on health care plans".
- "Seems unclear";
- "Does not have prioritized, efficient and transparent communication".

And a few misconceptions of GSA (less than 5%):
- "Acts as a mediator between students and the university for non TA issues"
- "GSA works with only of graduate students...don't know what the two bodies do differently from one to another".
- "Handles grievances".

Methodology

Q2. If you were to give the GSA a grade in terms of its effectiveness, from your perspective, what grade would you award?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A+</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B+</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C+</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D+</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Range: A-F plus can't comment
Mode: Can't comment
Mean: B-

Positive Comments associated with Good Grades

- 63 / 67 opted to offer a comment to explain their grade.
- Why people gave positive grades:
  - "I don't know all of its activities but from what I know about it, it does a good job!
  - "The move to the Phoenix was successful and good job on that.
  - "There are great information sessions hosted by GSA but I feel like people don't really know about these (need more effective advertising)."
  - "GSA works with only of graduate students... It provides a great opportunity for students to interact with others.
  - "The award application process went smoothly.
  - "The new Phoenix is great.
  - "I think the events they organize are great, although they are not regular dates which makes it hard to attend.
  - "Grad Dental and Health still exists.

Some more "negative" comments

- "I have not been in contact with the GSA or any representatives from it. I met an introductory meeting in September during orientation week. Have not found many resources online either."
- "Since I came for my graduate program, I haven't come in contact with the student association for help to write your report."
- "I take issue with the fact that I don't hear about events in time to actually attend them!"
- "I find them not very helpful!"
- "It takes months to get the results of funding competitions."
- "I.PI call and leave a message, I am lucky to get it returned!"
- "Health plan is lacking — when it comes to prescription coverage"
- " Fee services (even information sessions) are available for me as a remote learner!"
- "Lack of presence on campus!"

One off... Suggestions

- Provide services that would be nice (such as a piano for graduate student use) and provide forum to connect with others with similar interests.
- Offer more materials, events, sessions on line.
- Have GSA individuals acting as greeters at more events. "I don't know anyone at the events and I feel it awkward to come and circulate without someone helping me meet others."
- "I would like to receive more emails and see more publicity about initiatives and opportunities that GSA is providing."
- "Perhaps be more of a resource for graduate students - post more journal call for submissions; Information about conferences; tips for getting teaching positions."

If we only had 100 minutes to spend, where should the GSA be spending its time?

TOP THREE RESULTS
- Advocating for the needs of the graduate student on campus
- Providing research fellowships for graduate students
- Providing travel grants and other awards for graduate students

5% of time to be spent on these activities

0.18
0.04
0.04
0.18
0.06
0.06
On Spending Time...

- Advocating (collective action plus providing support for university codes)
- Providing Travel Grants
- Providing Services (medical, health) plus Phoenix
- Communicating to grad students

If we only had 100 dollars to spend, where should the GSA be spending its time?

- TOP THREE RESULTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Dollars</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Providing health, dental, and other services for graduate students</td>
<td>$110.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providing travel grants for graduate students</td>
<td>$100.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advocating for the collective needs of graduate student</td>
<td>$27.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$250.00 / $320 should be spent on these activities

On Spending Money...

- Advocating (collective action plus providing support for university codes)
- Providing Travel Grants
- Providing Services (medical, health) plus Phoenix
- Communicating to grad students

$100 dollars

- $18
- $17
- $14
- $12
- $10
- $9
- $8
- $7
- $6
- $5
- $4
- $3
- $2
- $1
- $0

Are there certain activities that you would like the GSA to provide that are not listed above?

- More intramural or recreational clubs and better promotions of these
- Craft things we could do on campus between classes to get to know one another in shorter chunks of time (knitting, skincare products)
- Career counseling and support focused on graduate students – how to get jobs while in grad school and after grad school
- Interagency social events
- Running child care centre
- Workshops for graduate students (e.g., sexism, post-graduation advice)
CONTINUED... Are there certain activities that you would like the GSA to provide that are not listed above?

- More meetings informing students of the funding available to them through scholarships and bursaries
- Conduct GSA social day – meet and mingle (cultural; fashion show; food)
- Multi-disciplinary journal, conference and employment online board
- Helping us find where to go on or off campus for what seems there are a 100 different offices and 500 different services
- Mentorships with graduate students and alumni
- Be much more involved in campus orientation – help us understand role of GSA versus role of Graduate Studies and others
- More mental health support and services

Q6. The following are some potential values that describe how the GSA should go about doing its role. Please choose the three that are most important for the GSA to model, in your opinion.

![Bar graph showing supportive, inclusive, partnership values]

Q7. In this strategic plan, the following are some goals that the GSA might strive to achieve in the next 3-5 years. With each goal, please rate its importance on a scale of 1-6

1. Not at all important; 6 = Extremely important

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Mode</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. Increase the profile of the GSA so that more graduate students are aware of its role &amp; mandate</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Build stronger partnerships and connections with other McAuley entities like School of Graduate Studies, Student Services, MSU</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Use Phoenix more often as the place for organized events that enable graduate students from across campus to meet and connect</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. Advocate more for the collective needs of graduate students on campus</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4.81</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The range for all answers is 1-6

Additional Comments or Suggestions

On Advocating
- Advocating to improve library services for graduate students
- Advocate for us to have a place to study that is exclusive to graduate students
- Advocate or provide more career counseling for graduate students – how to secure employment in academia

On Phoenix
- Preferential seating for graduate students
- Lower prices for graduate students
- Make sure you are not operating at a loss

Additional Comments continued...

On Involvement
- Like to see more opportunities for graduate students to get involved
- Make it easier for people to get involved – buddies
- More services and resources that can be accessed by students studying remotely
- More events and activities and more advertising about them
- More help connecting us to alumni to network (e.g., information interviews)
More Comments...

- More time to communicate and help (e.g., applied for travel grant and received no communication one way or the other)
- Answer phone more often
- More office hours
- Work harder to develop and house useful resources in one place
- Be focused less on being a friend to graduate students and more on being an invaluable resource
- More time explaining role and how role differs from others like Graduate Studies and Union

More Comments...

- Engage us by offering resources and assistance — social is important but secondary
- Ensure reimbursement of health plan is done within 1 month of end of opt out period
- Allow us to opt in or opt out of certain types of communications (e.g., I want to hear about resources but not social events)
- Revamp health plan so it covers prescriptions and therapies that help graduate students with mental health issues — give us access to EAP services
- Engage us by asking us our concerns and advocating for us — that is the best way to build the relationship

In Summary

- Engaged many individuals through survey
- Directions in strategic plan are in line with opinions of graduate students
- Lots of ideas to consider
APPENDIX E: Proposed Staff Role Delineation – A Starting Point

As noted in the strategic direction number two, the staff roles likely need to change in order to realize this strategic plan. 2WA Consulting was asked to help start the discussion by drafting who the staff role delineation might work and how it might differ from the roles that the Board / Council will play. Here is that starting point:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>General Manager</th>
<th>Administrative Assistant</th>
<th>Board / Council</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Help execute large parts of strategic plan – especially as it comes to programs and services offered</td>
<td>Be the central person who helps manage the resources and information GSA has to help graduate students</td>
<td>Set and drive strategic plan – especially advocacy strategy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Find best ways to deliver services and programs – working to contract out if feasible some or work to more actively manage others (e.g., Phoenix)</td>
<td>Develop and update the website – making</td>
<td>Focus on advocacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develop communications as well as marketing strategy to help GSA build awareness and connection with graduate students</td>
<td>Help administer the communications and gather up the input received</td>
<td>Determine questions and key messages for connecting with graduate students (2-way conversations)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Set operational policies</td>
<td></td>
<td>Set governance policies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manage GSA to the budget</td>
<td>Do book keeping</td>
<td>Monitor performance against stated goals for General Manager, Council, budget, etc...</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>