



## **Graduate Student Senate President**

### **Oral Report to the Board of Trustees**

February 6, 2026

University of Vermont

Members of the Board, thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. I appreciate the chance to provide an oral update on the work and priorities of the Graduate Student Senate.

Since joining GSS leadership, I set five guiding goals: increasing transparency, strengthening collaboration and engagement, raising the visibility and accessibility of GSS, centering graduate student voices, and improving the quality of graduate student community life.

I would like to organize my remarks around those five areas and highlight the concrete progress we have made this year.

### **Transparency**

Our full budget reports and spending are now publicly accessible online to senators and graduate students. This was a significant concern raised by students, and it was important to us that they could clearly see how GSS funds are being used.

We also publish weekly newsletters explaining what GSS is working on, how students can contact us, and what resources we can connect them to.

In addition, the Senate passed a resolution establishing a public comment period before any resolution is adopted, ensuring graduate students across campus can weigh in before votes occur.

In mid-January, we partnered with the Graduate College to host a workshop on graduation processes, helping demystify requirements and timelines for students preparing to complete their degrees.

## **Collaboration and Engagement**

Within GSS, we advanced a resolution focused on member retention and empowerment, aimed at increasing individual engagement, strengthening committee participation, broadening involvement among senators, and reinforcing a collaborative, team-oriented culture within the Senate. This work continues to be refined to ensure it is as productive and effective as possible.

Externally, we are actively collaborating with offices including the Graduate College, CAPS, the Vice Provost and Dean of Students Office, Transportation Services, the Office of International Education, and Enterprise Technology Services.

We are also well represented on Faculty Senate committees across academic and student-life areas, ensuring graduate perspectives remain part of shared-governance conversations.

## **Student Voice**

We are currently finalizing a survey that asks students how they would like GSS funds allocated across programming and services. Once released, that feedback will directly shape upcoming initiatives and event planning.

This semester, we are launching structured listening sessions, particularly with international student organizations, to better understand academic, financial, and wellbeing pressures students are experiencing. These conversations will inform future advocacy and collaborations with support offices such as CAPS.

Our approach has been to build decisions around student input from the outset.

## **Visibility and Accessibility**

Last semester, we hosted a Graduate Student Resource Fair designed to introduce students, especially those new to Vermont or graduate study, to campus offices, services, and opportunities available to support them.

This semester, we are expanding tabling and outreach across campus, along with advertising our work more broadly, so students know who represents them and where to turn for resources.

We continue to participate in institutional initiatives such as LEAP and to strengthen GSS's presence in campus-wide conversations.

## **Community and Wellbeing**

We transformed our traditional coffee hours into bi-weekly, open-space breakfast gatherings, which have been extremely well attended and positively received.

We host pizza nights twice a semester, and during exam week organized a pizza-and-games event to give students a space to decompress and connect.

Additional social programming is currently being planned and will be guided directly by upcoming survey responses.

Through our Elevate Conference Grant program, GSS supported twenty-three graduate students in attending academic conferences last semester, and we will soon be opening applications for the next funding cycle.

## **Safety and Transportation**

In collaboration with CAPS, the Vice Provost and Dean of Students Office, and the Equal Opportunity Office, we are developing a new initiative that will begin with an educational workshop focused on gender-based, sexual, and relationship violence and assault. Our goal is for this effort to grow into a sustained safe-space community for graduate students and, potentially through collaboration with SGA, into a fully supported student organization.

We also continue to support international student associations and worked with the Office of International Education to promote tax-preparation webinars through Sprintax.

Listening sessions planned for this semester will further guide how we support students facing stress, isolation, or academic pressures.

We recently held an extended working session with GMT Transportation to explore options for improving graduate student access. An ongoing survey will assess the feasibility of student-focused shuttle service and improved late-night transportation options.

Taken together, these efforts reflect how we view the role of GSS: as a transparent governing body, a collaborative partner, and a strong advocate for graduate student well-being and success.

Looking ahead, we will continue focusing on visibility, data-driven advocacy, safety and mental health initiatives, and strengthening graduate student community life.

I am grateful for the Board's attention to graduate student perspectives and for your continued support of shared governance at the University.

Thank you for your attention.

*Respectfully submitted to the Members  
of the Board,*

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**Saba Rafiei**  
President, Graduate Student Senate