



Graduate Student Senate (GSS) President's Report

Board of Trustees

Meeting Date: May 15, 2026

Prepared By

Saba Rafiei, President of the Graduate Student Senate

At the beginning of AY2025–26, GSS identified five priority areas requiring specific attention: transparency, continuity and engagement, student voice, visibility, and graduate student well-being. -We launched targeted initiatives to advance each priority, and by year's end, nearly all have been completed.

Transparency, Budgeting, and Student Voice: GSS made detailed budget and spending reports publicly available for the first time, established a public comment period for resolutions, and expanded weekly communications and newsletters, with 81% survey-reported use. We also initiated a survey-informed budgeting process, aligning spending with student priorities, including, at the top, conference funding, professional development, social programming, and well-being initiatives. This helped ensure that student fees directly support the priorities students identified.

Guided by our goal of “No voices unheard,” we asked students directly what GSS should communicate to University leadership and the Board, and how we can better serve them. Responses highlighted concerns around affordability, including housing and the broader cost of living in Burlington, health insurance, parking access and safety, the Graduate Student Union contract, and recognition of graduate students' work. Students also appreciated GSS and the University's ongoing support. Results from this multi-section survey continuously informed our advocacy and programming and will continue to guide future initiatives.

Community, Safety, and Support: GSS strengthened community and professional development through bi-weekly full breakfasts, social and exam-period wellness programming, support for graduate student clubs and associations, international student events, and workshops, co-hosted with the Graduate College. Following the

January workshop on graduation processes, GSS is exploring a webinar on work and internship confidence and readiness. We also continued investment in the Elevate Grant, which supported 46 students in attending conferences this year.

In response to graduate student concerns, GSS launched a new initiative on preventing emotional, physical, and sexual violence, with a focus on boundaries, safety, and healthy relationships in academic, professional, and personal settings. In partnership with the Office of Equal Opportunity, Counseling and Psychiatry Services, HopeWorks, and the Graduate College, we hosted a workshop and resource event with counselors and a live Q&A to make these resources more visible and accessible, and the topic more approachable for graduate students.

Engagement, Visibility, and Approachability: GSS expanded connections across the University with organizations such as the Student Government Association, Office of International Education, and UVM Innovations, while maintaining active representation in important groups including the Faculty Senate, AI Strategy Group, Graduate College strategic alignment planning, and the Board's standing committees. To support long-term continuity, we initiated a structural constitutional review, which remains a key priority for the Senate's future.

We began the year facing significant engagement and continuity challenges, including officer and leadership resignations and recruitment difficulties amid graduate students' demanding schedules. In response, we prioritized member empowerment, retention, and visibility through a proposed resolution, town halls, outreach and tabling events to stabilize and strengthen the Senate. These efforts increased participation and helped fuel a highly competitive GSS election this spring, with voter participation more than tripling from the previous year and candidates stepping forward in the spirit of continuity and collaborative leadership.

Incoming Leadership: The new team, led by Collin Coil and Kush Sharma, has outlined plans to empower GSS in supporting the University's new Strategic Plan. Their plans reflect Pillar 1's focus on community, belonging, and well-being through a robust programming calendar and deeper collaboration with SGA and GSU; Pillar 3's focus on opportunity and affordability through community partnerships addressing food insecurity and affordability; and Pillar 4's focus on modern systems and shared governance and transparency through a constitutional convention this summer, standardized workflows, and metric-driven website updates.

Together, these priorities, carried forward by the incoming team's plans, energy, and vision, will help GSS continue serving as a genuine partner to the Board in advancing UVM's bold and hopeful future.

Thank you for your continued support and partnership in advancing the graduate student experience at UVM.