



University
of Vermont

Graduate
Student Senate

MINUTES OF MEETING

Date: April 1, 2026

Mode: In person and online on Teams

Meeting called to order by: Vice President Parmida Amngostar

In Attendance

Executive Council: Seide Saba Rafiei (President), Parmida Amngostar (Vice President), Muyiwa Davis (Treasurer), Zane Zupan (Secretary), Sevda Alvirdizadeh (Communications Director)

Senators (in person): Chhayank Srivastava, Collin Andrew Coil, Elise Miller, Kush Sharma, Neil Michael Traft, Trisha Melton, Will Broseman, Frances Starn, Natalie Cote, Leah Isayev.

Senators (online): Frederick Doxsey Pesek, Mandy Nix, Muhammad Adil, Fitzwilliam Keenan-Koch, , Modupe Omoniyi , Daniel Mach, Brailey Buntin, Jeremy Elliott , Molly Fahey, Olaoluwa Makinde , Rebecca Hill-Larsen, Abby McArthur Keith, Libby Murphy

Guest: Cara M. Simone (former GSS Vice President and President)

Agenda Item 1 — Call to Order

The meeting was called to order by Parmida Amngostar, Vice President of the Graduate Student Senate (GSS). Amngostar welcomed attendees and asked all participants to introduce themselves when speaking, noting that the Secretary would be recording minutes.

Agenda Item 2 — Approval of Previous Meeting Minutes

Amngostar presented the minutes from the two previous meetings: the February 10th meeting and the March 4th meeting. Amngostar noted that the minutes had been shared late with senators and apologized, explaining that the new Secretary required additional time to finalize both sets of minutes.

Amngostar summarized the key agenda items from each set of minutes for the benefit of attendees before calling votes.

A vote was conducted on the February 10th minutes.

The February 10th minutes were **approved** with 19 votes in favor.

A vote was conducted on the March 4th minutes.

The March 4th minutes were **approved** with 14 votes in favor.

Agenda Item 3 — Resolution to Restore Executive Council Election and Transition Timeline

Amngostar introduced a proposed resolution to restore the executive council election and transition timeline, noting that the vote on the resolution itself would be held approximately two weeks later and that this agenda item was for presentation and discussion only.

Presentation by President Seide Saba Rafiei

Rafiei opened by taking full responsibility on behalf of the executive council for missing an election advertisement deadline established by a resolution passed the previous year. Rafiei apologized sincerely to the Senate and framed the discussion as a matter of finding the best path forward together.

Rafiei outlined two options for proceeding:

- Option A (Status Quo): Proceed under the current constitution. Nominations would close April 6th, candidate info shared April 7th, voting conducted April 13th–15th (a 48-hour window as required by the constitution), and the new council assuming office on April 15th.
- Option B (Proposed Resolution): Extend the nomination period by one week. Nominations would close April 13th, candidate info shared April 14th, elections would be conducted beginning April 20th, and the new council would assume office after commencement rather than on April 15th. This would require waiving the standard two-week prior notice to the senate to one week but still comply with the one-week public comment period for resolutions.

Rafiei argued that Option B would support a smoother transition by allowing the current Executive Council to remain in office and accountable through its remaining institutional commitments, including mentoring of newly elected officers into their roles, Board of Trustees representation and report on May 15th, and Commencement on May 16. It would also provide additional time to recruit candidates during Graduate and Professional Student Appreciation Week, when the Executive Council has planned several events. Rafiei noted that the Graduate Dean had estimated over 200 attendees at the upcoming Graduate Student Appreciation Week lunch, which would offer a significant outreach opportunity.

Discussion

Neil Traft asked clarifying questions about the two timelines. Rafiei confirmed the key dates and clarified that, under the Constitution, the election window must remain open for 48 hours, from Monday through Wednesday.

Fitzwilliam Keenan-Koch asked what the transition experience had been like for the current executive council, to better understand the practical implications of each option. Amngostar explained that the previous council had not fully followed their own resolution's timeline, which had contributed to confusion. It was also noted that two elected members of the previous council had resigned in the first month, further complicating the transition, and that the current council did not feel fully settled until October. Traft added, as someone who was present at the time, that the transition had been especially difficult, as some outgoing Executive Council members stepped away

immediately at the end of their terms, making continuity, mentoring, and onboarding particularly challenging for the incoming council.

Cara Simone, former GSS Vice President and President, joined the discussion. Simone acknowledged the structural challenges facing GSS, noting that, unlike the Student Government Association, GSS has no dedicated university staff support. Simone reflected on her own experience, noting that commencement had historically been the day of transition, leaving little time for handover. She expressed support for the idea of creating overlap between outgoing and incoming councils and encouraged the Operations Committee to document constitutional ambiguities for future revision. Simone also suggested the possibility of staggered two-year terms to improve institutional continuity.

Chhayank Srivastava, Collin Coil, and Kush Sharma collectively advocated for a one-time exception rather than passing a new resolution. Coil noted that adopting a full resolution would itself require violating the two-week notice requirement and that the constitution's provisions on electronic voting outside Senate sessions were ambiguous. Coil suggested that suspending the rules under Robert's Rules of Order—which is permitted by the constitution—would allow the Senate to adopt Timeline B without triggering additional constitutional complications. Sharma supported this approach, characterizing it as a targeted fix for the current cycle rather than a permanent structural change.

Sevda Alvirdizadeh expressed support for the original resolution's intent of electing the new council earlier, but agreed that the transition date itself should remain tied to commencement so that the outgoing council retains accountability through their commitments.

Srivastava asked when the current executive council's last formal obligations would conclude. Rafiei confirmed that the final institutional commitment is Commencement on May 16 and expressed concern that the Board of Trustees had indicated it would invite the newly elected President, rather than the outgoing one, to present. Rafiei flagged this as a practical concern if the transition occurs before those presentations, as it would leave the newly elected officer with little time to gain sufficient background on the report.

Motion and Vote

Collin Coil moved to suspend the rules to adopt Timeline B for the current election cycle only. Chhayank Srivastava seconded the motion. A two-thirds vote was required to suspend the rules.

The motion to suspend the rules and adopt Timeline B **passed** with 17 votes in favor.

Under Timeline B, nominations will close April 13th, elections will be held April 20th, and the new executive council will be introduced at the April 29th Senate meeting.

Agenda Item 4 — Semester Initiatives and Program Follow-Up

Rafiei provided an update on several active initiatives.

Workshop on Sexual Violence Prevention

The workshop is scheduled for April 8th. Another meeting with the organizers is pending to confirm logistics. Promotional materials have been distributed. Srivastava suggested

that the workshop advertisement clarify that attendees may attend individual sections of the event rather than the full program, so that scheduling conflicts do not deter participation.

Graduate Student Survey Results

Rafiei shared preliminary results from the graduate student survey, which had received 181 responses as of that date. Key findings included:

- Financial concerns, particularly cost of living and rent in Burlington, were the most commonly cited issues (approximately 43% of respondents expressed strong dissatisfaction).
- Transportation was another area of significant dissatisfaction. GSS has been in contact with Green Mountain Transit (GMT) and will continue that collaboration. A proposed late-night bus route from downtown to campus generated limited interest in the survey.
- Regarding budget priorities, respondents assigned the highest average priority to the Conference Grant, followed by GSS academic and professional events and workshops, social events, and well-being events and workshops. Lower average priority was assigned to collaborators/student awards, supporting clubs and communities, Senate worker appreciation, and outreach and visibility.

Rafiei noted that the current GSS budget is broadly aligned with the priorities expressed in the survey.

Tabling and Town Hall

Tabling is scheduled for April 8th in conjunction with the Graduate College lunch, where an estimated 200 students are expected. GSS will use the occasion to advertise for GSS, the executive council election, and distribute outreach materials. Brochures and materials are prepared; branded promotional items (e.g., pens) are still pending.

The Town Hall is scheduled for April 9th at the Alumni House from 12:00–1:00 PM. The format will include a 15-minute presentation followed by a 45-minute open question and listening session, with additional time for election advertisement.

GSS Website

The GSS website has been updated and is in good condition, thanks to the new secretary. Rafiei noted long overdue interest in adding a public comment section to the website and indicated plans to coordinate with the new Secretary on that.

Constitutional Review

Rafiei noted that a structural review of the GSS constitution had been a priority for the semester, but had not advanced as hoped due to the busy schedules of the operations committee. The discussion during the election timeline item brought renewed attention to this need, and Rafiei expressed hope that the incoming council would prioritize it.

Agenda Item 5 — Committee Updates

Elevate Grant Committee

Muyiwa Davis and Chhayank Srivastava reported on the Elevate Grant Committee. The fall grant cycle has been completed, with all awards distributed. One outstanding award remains pending receipt submission; if not resolved, the award will pass to the next candidate on the waitlist.

The spring cycle application closed the previous day with approximately 51 applications received. After reviewing for completeness, approximately 45 are expected to be considered. Awardees will be announced on April 15th. A committee meeting is scheduled for the coming week to review applications and establish selection criteria.

Amngostar raised a concern about the complexity of the reimbursement process for Elevate Grant recipients, noting that departmental rules vary and the pathway for reimbursement is not always clear to students. Davis explained that awards are now processed as scholarships deposited directly to student accounts, which simplifies the process and avoids complications with departmental charter strings. Davis noted this is the simplest available structure given university constraints. Srivastava suggested that documentation of the process be prepared for the incoming committee chair.

Events Committee

Neil Traft reported on behalf of the Events Committee. A pizza night held approximately one week prior was well attended, with an estimated 60 attendees. A trampoline park event is planned for the end of April, expected to be a smaller group activity. The committee is also considering an additional pizza night or celebration event during the second week of May, timed around the end of the exam period.

Coffee Hours

Amngostar noted that two additional coffee hours are scheduled: one on April 2nd and one on April 16th, both moved to Thursdays due to scheduling conflicts. The committee is also considering a lower-cost extended coffee event during exam week—offering coffee and light snacks over a four-to-six-hour window—as an alternative to a full coffee hour given remaining budget constraints.

Communications Committee

Sevda Alvirdizadeh reported that the Communications Committee has secured an annual Canva subscription, which will carry over for use by the next council. The subscription has been used to produce promotional materials for the workshop and the listening session.

Student Affairs Committee

Rafiei reported that the Student Affairs Committee held a meeting and discussed active initiatives. No formal grievances were received during the past month, though the committee noted uncertainty about whether students are sufficiently aware of GSS channels for raising concerns and discussed improvements in that regard.

Agenda Item 6 — External Committee Updates

Curricular Affairs Committee (Faculty Senate)

Chhayank Srivastava reported that the Curricular Affairs Committee is actively debating artificial intelligence policy on two fronts: the use of AI in grading by faculty and teaching

assistants, and permissible AI use by students in coursework. Subcommittees are being formed to address each area separately. Srivastava noted that a committee meeting is scheduled for the following day and committed to providing further updates.

Graduate College Strategic Planning Committee

Collin Coil reported that the Graduate College will hold listening sessions for its strategic planning process on April 7th and April 16th, open to all graduate students. Coil also provided an update on the university-wide strategic plan, noting that it has been finalized and adopted at the most recent Board of Trustees meeting. Individual units, including the Graduate College and academic departments, are now in the process of aligning their own strategic plans with the university's, with unit plans expected to be completed by the fall semester.

Educational Policy and Institutional Resources Committee (Board of Trustees)

Kush Sharma reported that he has been attempting to obtain access to this committee since February, but has not received a response from the contact provided. Rafiei acknowledged the issue and committed to following up to ensure Sharma is connected to the correct liaison.

Agenda Item 7 — Presidential and Institutional Updates

Graduate Student Lounge and GSS Office Reservations

Rafiei reported that efforts to secure a dedicated graduate student lounge space have not been successful at this time, as the university has indicated it is not able to provide one at the moment due to space limitations. As an interim measure, Rafiei is coordinating with university IT to establish an online booking system that would allow graduate students to reserve the GSS office during times it is not in use by the executive council.

Rafiei also suggested compiling and publishing on the GSS website a list of bookable spaces available to graduate students across campus, noting that many students are unaware of these options.

Graduate College Dean and Commencement

Rafiei noted that the Graduate College Dean is departing, and that the strategic planning alignment committee—which includes Collin Coil and Muiyiwa Davis—is continuing its work. Commencement is scheduled and planned to happen on May 16th.

Faculty Mentoring Course

Rafiei highlighted a new online course on faculty mentoring and advising relationships, developed by the Graduate College and led by Dr. Hamid Ossareh, a professor in Electrical Engineering. The course is publicly accessible through the university's course search portal and is intended to improve and educate on student-faculty relationships and responsibilities.

Student Trustee Selection

Rafiei noted that a selection process for a new student trustee is underway following the departure of the previous trustee. Rafiei participated in the selection committee and submitted rankings, with results expected to be shared with the Senate via email.

Agenda Item 8 — Provost Search Committee Update

Natalie Cote, Senator and member of the Provost Search Committee, noted that she is available to discuss the role of the Provost and the committee's work with any interested senators. Cote can be reached by email or in person at her office in Student Life.

Agenda Item 9 — Adjournment

Amngostar thanked all attendees for joining, and the meeting was adjourned.

Next Meeting

April 29, 2026 — Time and location to be confirmed.