Graduate Student Senate (GSS) President's Report

Board of Trustees
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Guided by our 2026 annual survey, the Graduate Student Senate (GSS) has set four strategic priorities for this academic year: supporting graduate student workers, strengthening basic needs support, expanding external advocacy, and building coalitions with UVM's other student governments. These priorities build on an active start to the year. Since June, approximately 320 graduate students have attended GSS events, including a luncheon that welcomed about 200 new graduate students, and our Elevate Grant reimbursed approximately $7,200 for research and conference travel over the summer alone. This report highlights the four priorities and strategic initiatives of the GSS, which we believe are critical to achieve as part of the University's Green, Gold, and Bold Strategic Plan.

Supporting Graduate Student Workers: About 550 graduate students are also University employees, and compensation and the cost of living in Burlington were among the concerns raised most often in our survey. Students repeatedly cited the unresolved contract negotiations with the Graduate Student Union (GSU), describing it as central to their sense of stability. The pressure is greater for international student workers, whose visas typically limit them to on-campus employment. The GSS respects the bargaining process and does not represent the GSU in it, but we encourage a timely and fair agreement. Furthermore, we ask the University to extend key contract benefits to graduate students outside of the bargaining unit. Notably, comprehensive dental and vision insurance is a high priority for all students, regardless of union membership, with only 29.7% of survey respondents saying their current health insurance is affordable. Pillar 3 of our Green, Gold, and Bold Strategic Plan prioritizes access to resources, and other benefits under negotiation, such as childcare support, should be expanded to all graduate students to achieve goals under that pillar.

Strengthening Basic Needs Support: Our survey shows that financial fragility is widespread: Two in three respondents said an unexpected expense would cause serious hardship, 64.2% of graduate students worry about finances regularly, and 25.4% respondents did not have secure access to three meals a day. Housing is the largest pressure point. Among students reporting a housing challenge, 88.1% cited cost as the biggest issue with median rent reported at $1,132 per month. Students recognized the University's efforts on housing through Catamount Run but pointed out that rent is too expensive and leases are inflexible. The GSS is working to develop resolutions targeted at proposing solutions to improve housing offerings such as Catamount Run. Additionally, we are partnering with the Center for Health and Wellbeing to help students achieve basic needs. We welcome further opportunities to work with the University on meeting the basic needs of its students, in keeping with the focus on opportunity and affordability in Pillar 3 of our Green, Gold, and Bold Strategic Plan.

Expanding External Advocacy: Article II, Section B of the GSS Constitution requires that we "represent graduate student interests to the University community, the State of Vermont, and national organizations." External advocacy is a central goal for the GSS this year since many of the challenges facing graduate students, such as housing affordability and immigration policies, cannot be fixed solely by the University. In September, the GSS created the External Affairs Committee to engage lawmakers at each level, and we are working with the Office of University Relations to ensure this advocacy aligns with University policy. We have also worked to build partnerships with graduate student organizations at other institutions. Notably, we partnered with the MIT Graduate Student Council to distribute a survey on federal immigration and funding policies. This survey closed at the end of September, and we will share these results with both UVM's leadership and Vermont's congressional delegation. We look forward to partnering with the University in its government relations work.

Building Student Government Coalitions: Graduate, medical, and undergraduate students share many of the same pressures. Building on last year's connections with the Student Government Association (SGA) and on new conversations with the Medical Student Council, the GSS will coordinate both bodies on joint advocacy and initiatives targeting issues such as housing, transportation, and food access. We aim to strengthen student voices, and we have developed a legislative agenda and streamlined Senate processes to facilitate joint advocacy. These partnerships advance Pillar 1 of our Green, Gold, and Bold Strategic Plan by connecting graduate students with the campus community, deepening the sense of belonging.