



Annual Review

2019/20



**GRADUATE
STUDENT SOCIETY**
UBC VANCOUVER



We acknowledge the land on which the UBC Graduate Student Society operates is the unceded and occupied traditional territories of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and səlilwətał (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations.

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Message from the President

"We represent a uniquely diverse community of graduate students, and that diversity means that the support and advocacy needs are similarly broad. Our research showed that affordability is a primary concern of graduate students, across many demographics, including students with dependents and those who face additional barriers such as being differently abled. This is why affordability was brought to the forefront of our advocacy efforts, culminating in the President's Academic Excellence Initiative Award, which effectively reduced tuition for all PhD Students. Additionally, we increased our supports for student wellness, mental health, and specific needs during the COVID-19 outbreak. I'm pleased to see that the next executive team have chosen to continue working on many of these projects to ensure they result in concrete improvements in the lives of all graduate students and a more inclusive and equitable experience for all the members of the UBC community."

Nicolas Romualdi, GSS President 2019-20



GSS MISSION STATEMENT

The Graduate Student Society of UBC Vancouver represents and advocates on behalf of all UBC Graduate Students to the University, the Government, and the public. We provide academic, professional, social, and recreational services to our members, and act as stewards of the Thea Koerner House Graduate Student Centre.



The Graduate Student Society

The Organization

The roots of the UBC Graduate Student Society (GSS) start with the formation of the UBC Graduate Students' Association in 1960. This student body was created largely as a social club for the graduate students. The foundational philanthropist, Leon Koerner, generously supported the building of a designated Graduate Student Centre for this new student organization, which we now know as Thea Koerner House.

As the university continued to grow, so did UBC's graduate student body. In 1982, the decision was made to restructure the Graduate Students' Association to create a more unified society. All graduate students would be members of this new society simply by being enrolled in a Masters or PhD program, easily allowing all graduate students access to society-run events and resources. This new society was, and still is, known as UBC's Graduate Student Society.

Since the 80's, the GSS has grown to represent the 10,000 graduate students at UBC Vancouver. We continue to run a wide variety of events for the graduate student population, including language classes, organizing hikes, and running dance lessons, but the GSS has also taken on a larger role in graduate student life: **student support and advocacy**. By providing peer support services, advocating to the University, and lobbying the government, this work aims to empower graduate students and to help them succeed in all areas.

Graduate student education has significantly changed over the last 60 years. Master's and Doctoral degrees are more competitive, more expensive, and in more demand than ever before. Our students need different supports and resources to face this increased workload, responsibilities, and stress. We also recognize that the UBC graduate student population is incredibly diverse in their academic, social, and cultural needs, and we work on multiple fronts to ensure they are met. Using data-based research, the GSS advocates on behalf of all UBC graduate students to the University, Canadian government, and the public to ensure the needs and interests of all our members are being met.

Therefore, we are excited to highlight our advocacy work in our first ever year-end report. We are the voice of graduate students at UBC, and we want to share what we have been saying.

A photograph of three young women standing in a modern, wood-paneled interior. The woman in the center is smiling broadly at the camera, wearing a white short-sleeved top. The woman to her left is looking towards her, and the woman to her right is looking towards the center woman, holding a smartphone. The background features vertical wooden slats and a warm, ambient light.

Student Executives

The GSS is run by graduate students for graduate students. We are comprised of an executive team of five elected graduate students, the GSS council and committees (also comprised of graduate students), GSS staff, and all graduate students at UBC Vancouver. The day-to-day advocacy work takes place at our offices in Thea Koerner House, where the GSS executives and staff pursue research, reports, and other projects. GSS council and GSS committees meet several times a month to collaborate and provide feedback on this work.

Our 2019/20 Executive Team



Nicolas Romualdi

President

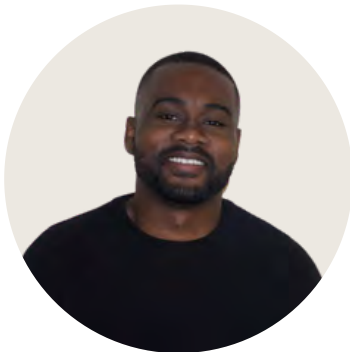
Nicolas, a PhD Candidate in Materials Engineering, was the public face of the GSS as President. He advocated for key graduate student issues while carefully coordinating the work of the Society as a whole. Nicolas led the team to improve the infrastructure and services available to graduate students, as well as collaborating with the AMS on key student issues.



Seyedrazieh Bayati

Vice President Academic

Seyedrazieh, a Masters student in Electrical & Computer Engineering, with Tarique, a PhD candidate in Pharmaceutical Sciences, connected graduate students with UBC Administration and the Faculty of Graduate & Postdoctoral Studies, consulting and advocating for graduate student concerns. Their joint advocacy efforts led to successes in increased funding opportunities for graduate students and raised awareness of the needs of marginalized graduate student groups, specifically students with disabilities, LGBTQ2SIA+ grad students, and students with dependents.



Tarique Benbow



Sara Hosseinirad

Vice President External

A PhD candidate in Electrical Engineering, Sara advocated on behalf of graduate students to the university, the provincial and federal government, and in the local community. She made great strides in lobbying for affordable housing, increased government financial aid (especially for international students), and improved access to wellbeing resources for graduate students.



Pouya Rezaeinia

Vice President Students

In his second term as VP Students, Pouya, a PhD student in Business Administration, developed programs to meet the academic, social, cultural and recreational needs of Society members. In addition to this, he also coordinated Orientation Week for incoming graduate students. His work focused on advocating for the mental health of graduate students and organizing more events that supported the academic needs of our members.



Kimani (Philip) Karangu

Finance & Executive Oversight Officer

As Financial and Executive Oversight Officer, Kimani oversaw the executive team and society finances to ensure everything ran smoothly. Kimani is a PhD candidate in the Faculty of Education.



Strategic Plan 2017-2021

The Strategic Plan establishes the priorities and direction of the Society and outlines the goals needed to direct the GSS in this work. The 2017-2021 Strategic Plan identified these three key themes to support the success and wellbeing of UBC graduate students: Graduate Student Academics, the Graduate Student Community, and our Graduate Student Society.

Core Areas 2019/2020

Our advocacy is informed by data and research on UBC graduate students. The annual GSS Student Satisfaction Survey (SSS), in partnership with the annual AMS Student Survey, provides valuable information on the changing needs of our student population. The results of these surveys direct our advocacy and form the core areas we work on. This past year, our core areas included:

Equity & Diversity

Re-affirming our commitment to represent and champion students from diverse and marginalized backgrounds with active, equitable actions and policies.

Wellness

Engaging with multiple partners across and beyond campus to tackle the spectrum of problems that impact graduate student mental health.

Funding & Finance

Voicing the ongoing financial crises graduate students face, on multiple platforms and actively providing data-backed solutions to University administration and government officials.



Equity & Diversity

The GSS represents all graduate students of UBC, which resides on the ancestral, traditional, and unceded territories of the hən̓q̓əmi̓n̓əḥ̓-speaking Musqueam people. We strive to effectively support and advocate for all our graduate students. To do this, we must ensure our actions are performed in an equitable, just, and accountable framework so we can fully serve all in their UBC graduate experience. Commitments and accountability within a large, colonial institution like UBC can be daunting to enforce, but the GSS has a key role to play at UBC in actively addressing and undoing historical and unconscious biases in our work.

This past year we returned to reflect on what equity and diversity means in our advocacy. We began by looking at our research, which provides valuable information on the demographics of UBC's graduate student population. Our 2018/2019 student survey showed that there is still considerable work to be done to make this campus a welcoming place, where students do not feel discrimination, as well as ensuring all student groups have access to the unique resources they need to excel at UBC. If our work in diversity is to be equitable, the first step is to ensure all students have access to the supports and funding they need, which includes providing a safe and accessible environment.



New Equity & Diversity Statement for the Society

To support our mission of representing the diversity of the graduate student community, the GSS developed the Society's first official position statement on Equality and Diversity in February 2020. It commits the GSS to *"represent and champion minority and marginalized groups by ensuring their access to resources and serving them in the ways they need"* and asserts that *"future actions must be performed in an equitable, just, and accountable framework so we can fully serve all in their UBC graduate experience."*



Rainbow Social

Our student surveys highlighted the extensive work still needed to make campus a comfortable and safe place for our graduate students, specifically with students from the LGBTQ2SIA+ community reporting that finding a sense of community on campus is challenging, and that making meaningful connections can be particularly difficult. In response to this, the GSS organized the Rainbow Social¹, the first dedicated social event for LGBTQ2SIA+ graduate students. This event aimed to foster connection through Drag Bingo, conversation and fun.

¹ Rainbow Social was postponed to 2020/2021 due to COVID-19



Representing Students with Dependants

Around 9% of all UBC graduate students support dependants during their studies. These students have different needs than the general student population and we have realized our prior research has been inadequate in fully assessing the scope of their student experience. Over the last year, the Society worked with this group, having one-on-one conversations with students to better understand what policy changes would best support them, and bringing these policy recommendations to the University.

Graduate Communities on Campus

52%

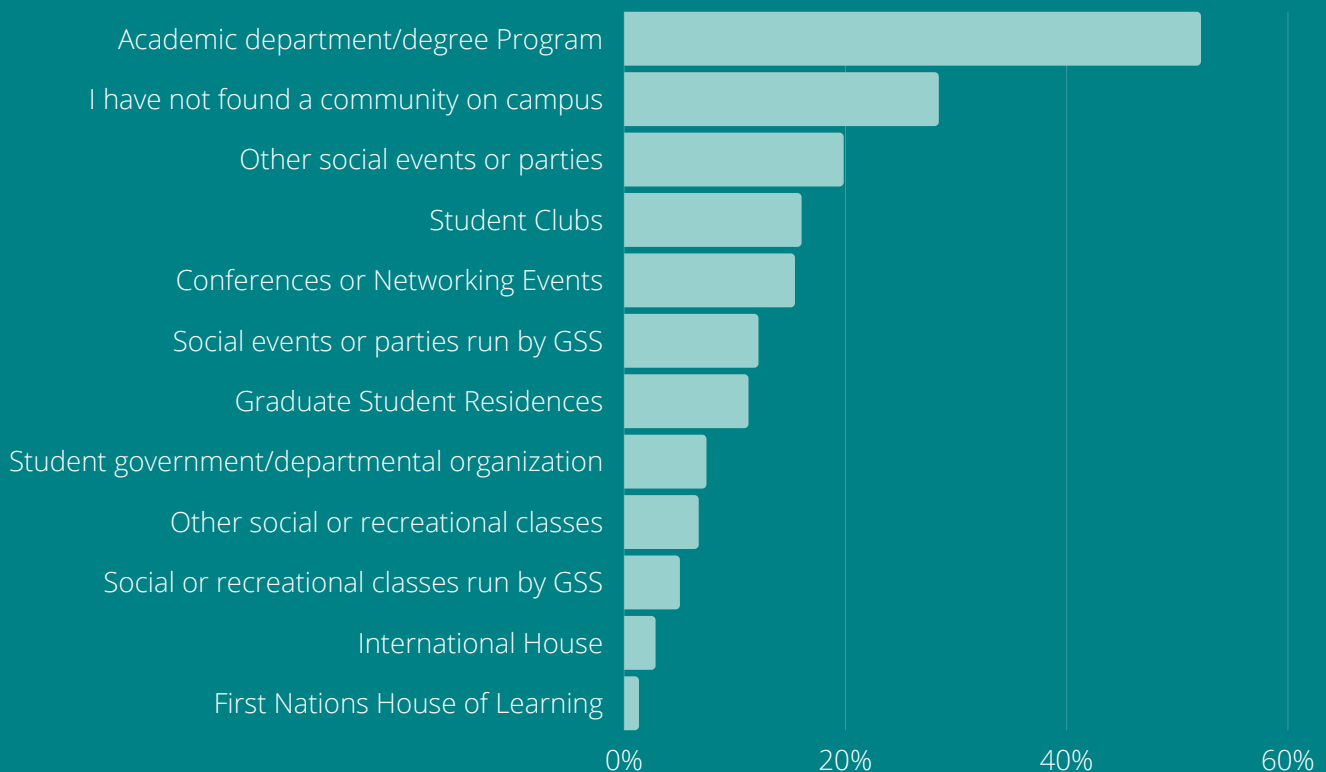
of Graduate Students have found communities at UBC within their academic department or their degree program.

28%

of Graduate Students have not found any community on the UBC Campus.

It is unsurprising that most UBC graduate students find communities and bond over shared research and academic interests. However, the high number of students that report being unable to find communities on campus highlights the need to create safe spaces and inclusive opportunities for graduate students to connect and grow together.

Where have graduate students found communities on campus?



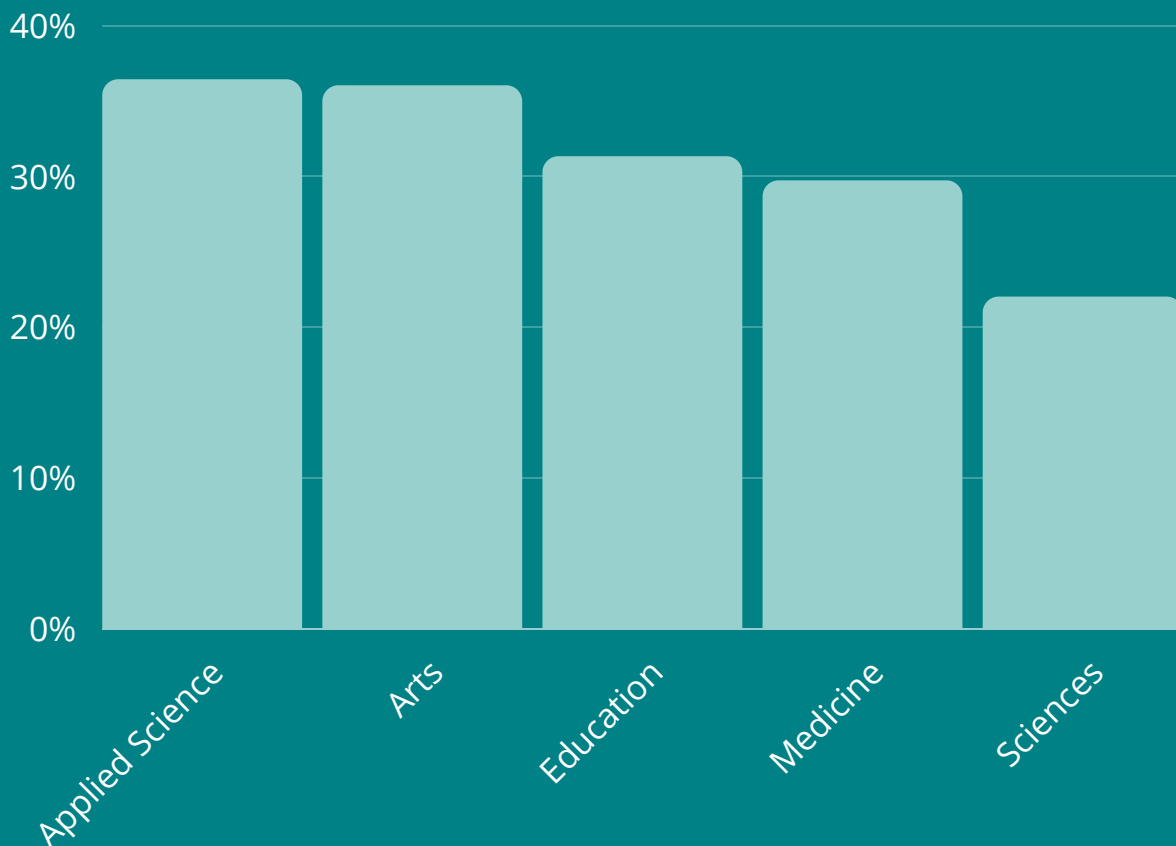
Graduate Students of Colour

30.7%

of the UBC Graduate Student body identify as being a person of colour (POC) or a racialized person.

These graduate students that identify as being POC or racialized are not uniformly distributed among disciplines. Amongst the five largest faculties, Applied Science and Arts have the most graduate students of colour at 36% each, with Sciences having substantially fewer racialized or POC students with only 24% of students identifying as such.

Racialized/POC-identifying respondents per faculty





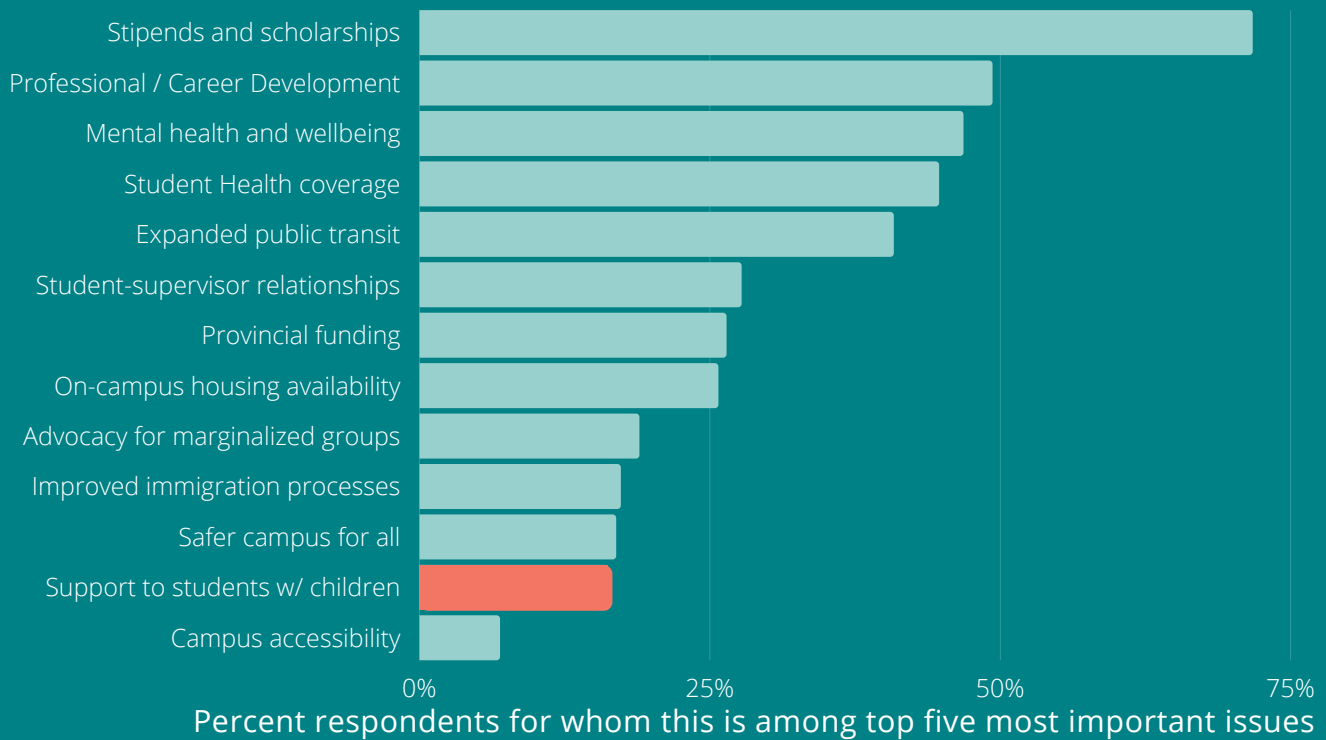
Students with Dependents

"Increased support for graduate students with children."

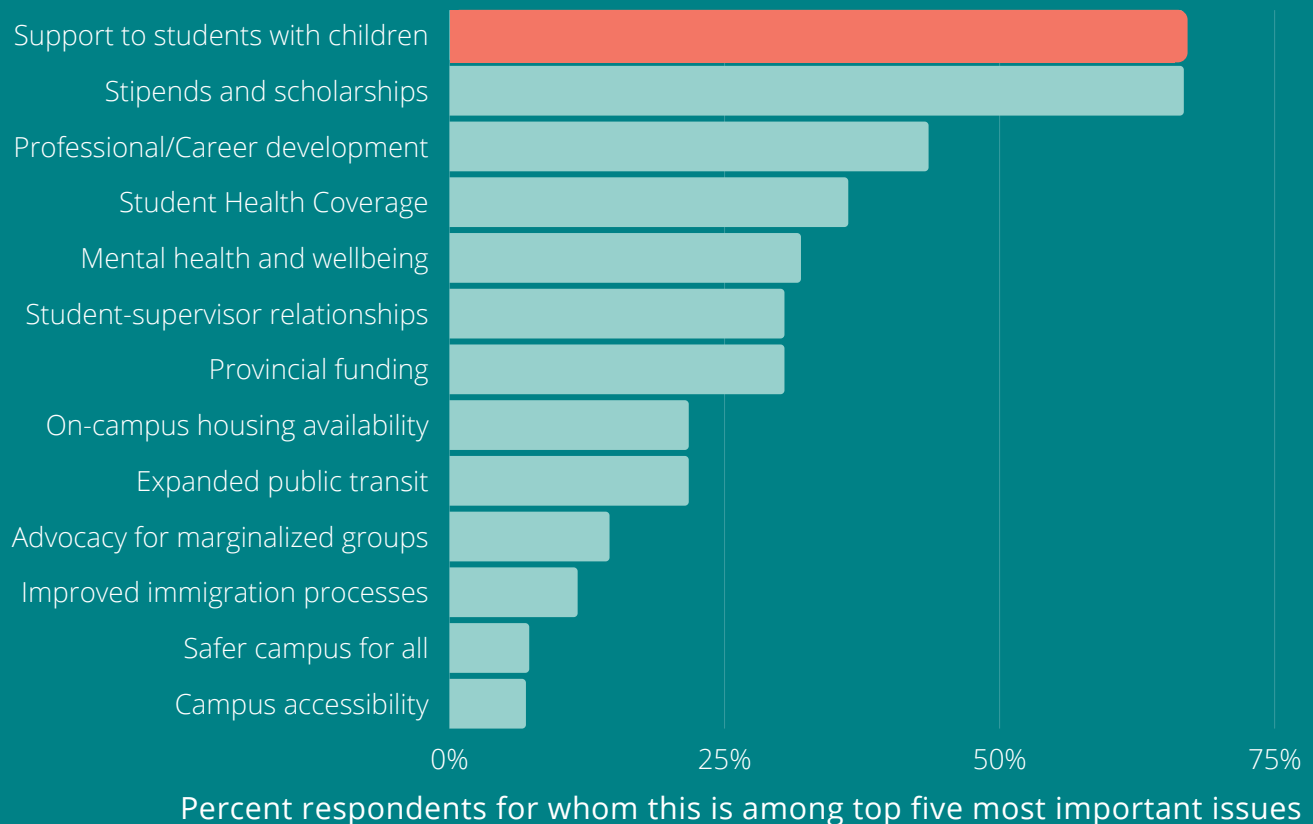
The number 1 advocacy priority for respondents with dependents.

Our Student Satisfaction Survey asks students to rank what they would like to see as GSS advocacy priorities. Instead of the typical top response of "Stipends and Scholarships", among respondents with children, "Increased Support for Graduate Students with Children" leaps from being in second-to-last place at 16%, to first place, tying with "Stipends and Scholarships" at 66.7%.

Advocacy Priorities



Advocacy Priorities (Among respondents with dependent children)



Safety on Campus

When students of certain groups were asked if they have been made to feel uncomfortable on campus due to discrimination, the following student groups responded as follows:

30% of Students who identify as having a disability, health condition, or mental disorder have been made to feel uncomfortable on campus due to ableism / lack of accessibility.

36% of Students who identify as LGBTQ2SIA+ have been made to feel uncomfortable on campus due to homophobia/biphobia.

32% of Students who identify as POC or racialized people have been made to feel uncomfortable on campus due to racism.

34% of Students who identify as female or prefer to self describe have been made to feel uncomfortable on campus due to sexism.

67% of Students who identify as Transgender have been made to feel uncomfortable on campus due to transphobia.

UBC strives to provide a safe, inclusive, and accessible environment. Although the University and GSS continually work to support our students, it is clear our graduate students – especially our transgender students – need much more support.



Wellness

Being a graduate student in the 21st century entails much more than just attending classes and doing research. Grad students are expected to be full-time students and full-time researchers, as well as part-time workers, caretakers, mentors, and friends. Balancing these responsibilities can be challenging, and when deadlines approach it is no surprise that personal health and self-care often takes a back seat. Maintaining a healthy lifestyle requires individuals to not only take care of themselves physically, but also to take care of their mental, emotional, social, and spiritual wellbeing.

While the GSS regularly offers fitness classes, to truly support graduate student wellness, the Society has turned our advocacy efforts to focus on providing students with the other aspects of wellbeing. Last year, we published our *"Creating Healthier Campuses"* report, which highlighted our Student Satisfaction Survey statistics on graduate student mental health. This report included recommendations for UBC to establish a campus-wide mental health strategy to support all aspects of student life. Embracing a holistic framework would go some way to tackle the spectrum of problems that graduate students report with their mental wellness. This year, the GSS has prioritized offering events geared to graduate student well-being and building new partnerships to begin building a culture of wellness.



Lunch & Learns

Building in time to learn about personal wellness can be incredibly challenging for students. This past year, the GSS has worked to educate students on wellbeing while being mindful of graduate students' schedules by launching the Lunch & Learn series. Every month, the GSS hosts a free, healthy lunch for graduate students and partners with a different organization to deliver educational presentations on wellbeing. By combining the lunch hour and presentation, we start educating our graduate student body in an accessible and mindful way. Some of the presentations included Sleep Hygiene, Planning Healthy Meals on a Budget, and Experiences of Minorities in Graduate School.



Open Letter on MSP fees

The monthly fee changes of the BC Medical Services Plan (MSP) by the BC provincial government in January 2020 may have eliminated the fee entirely for registered Canadians and Permanent Residents, but this new policy has doubled the monthly MSP fees for International Residents from \$37.50 per month to \$75. This change in healthcare costs raised serious concerns about the wellbeing of UBC's international students, and the financial burden this new policy unfairly places on them. The GSS has taken an active role in raising awareness of the impact of the new policy by collaborating with other Student Unions to pen an open letter to the BC government outlining the serious harm the policy introduces and recommendations for alternative fee solutions.



Mental Health Lobbying

Over the past few years, we have been collecting and critically analyzing mental health data on UBC graduate students. Following the publication of our 2018 *"Creating Healthy Campuses Report"*, which outlined a holistic mental health and wellbeing policy for UBC, the GSS has worked to advocate for student mental health at the government level. Through advocacy campaigns run with partner student organizations, such as the Alliance of BC Students (ABCS), the GSS has raised the issue of mental health and wellbeing of graduate students as one of the most important asks at the BC Parliament. In an Advocacy Campaign in the fall of 2019, our GSS VP External emphasized the need for the province to create a stronger strategy regarding mental health and well-being for students. In conversations with the BC Premier and the Minister of Education, our VP External also discussed the importance of the implementation of these policies by universities.

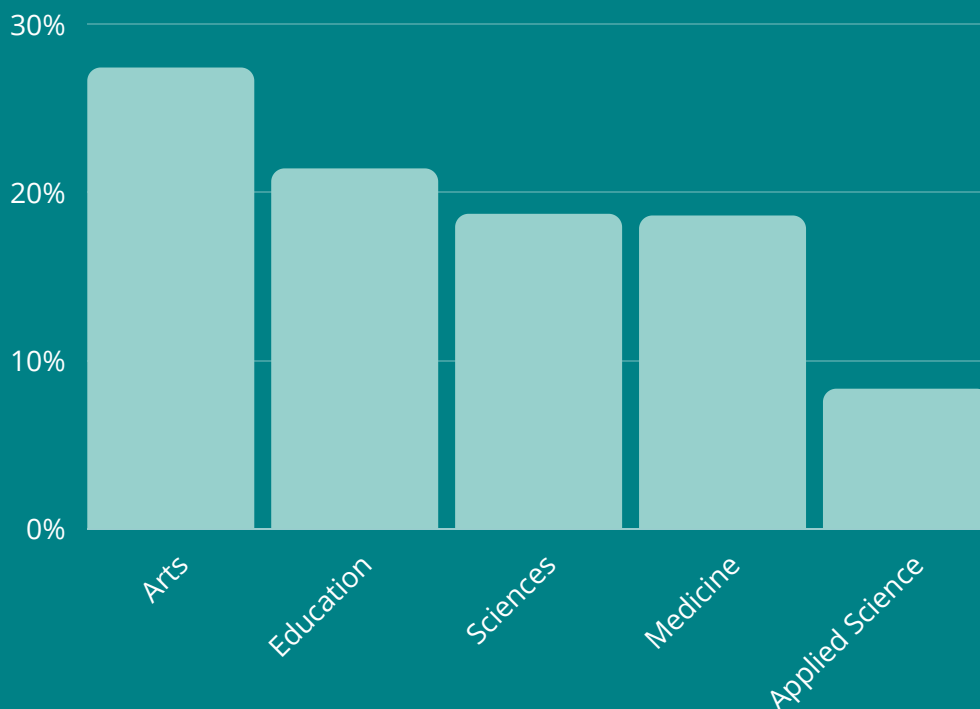
Mental Health Across Faculties

18.5%

of Graduate Students identified as having a long-term mental health disorder, such as depression or anxiety.

Graduate programs are rigorous, and students face a number of financial, social, and academic responsibilities, which can take a toll on both their physical and mental health. Although the average number of respondents who identified as having a long-term mental health disorder was 18.5%, this number varies greatly between faculties. Sciences (18.7%) and Medicine (18.6%) were right on the average, while students in Arts (27.4%) and Education (21.4%) reported high rates of long-term mental health disorders, with Applied Sciences reporting far below the average (8.3%).

Self-reported mental health disorders per faculty



Satisfaction with Wellbeing

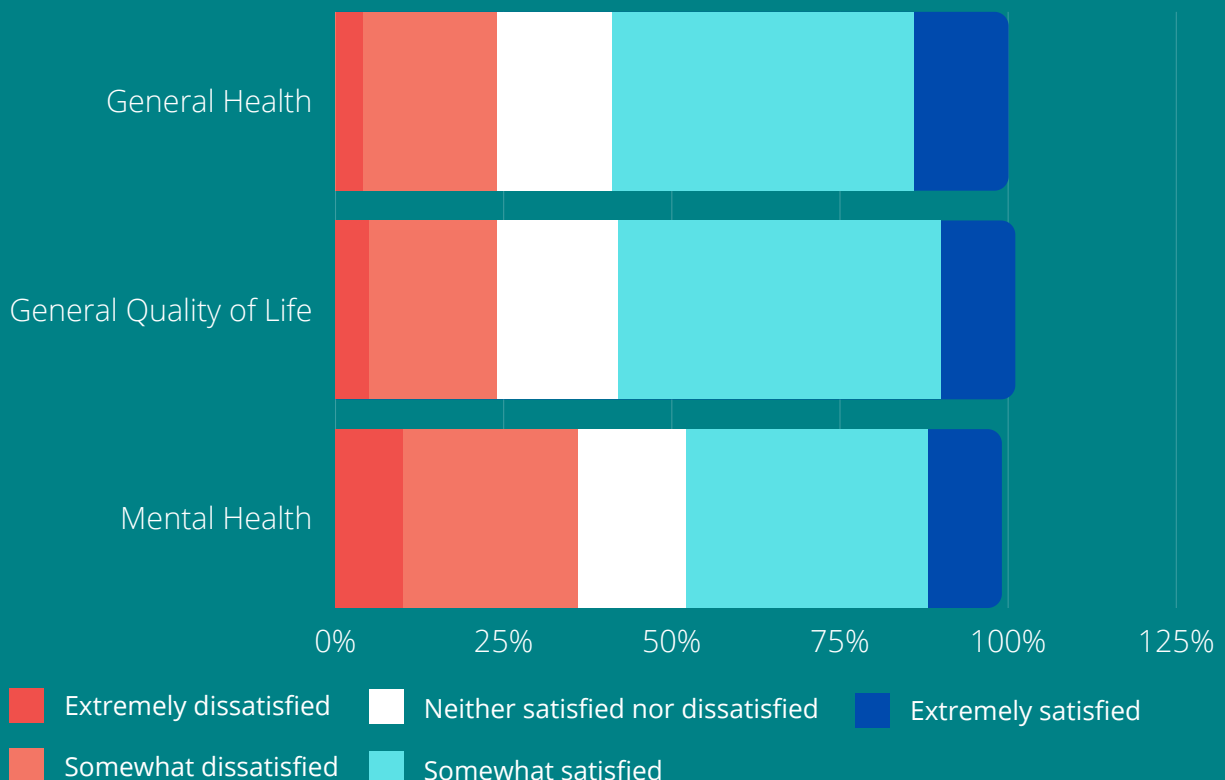
59%

of Graduate Students are satisfied with their General Health and Quality of Life.

47%

of Graduate Students are satisfied with their Mental Health.

Overall, UBC's graduate students are generally satisfied with their lives. Student satisfaction with their mental health still leaves room for improvement; this is an opportunity for the GSS to continue to develop better supports and accommodations for our student community.



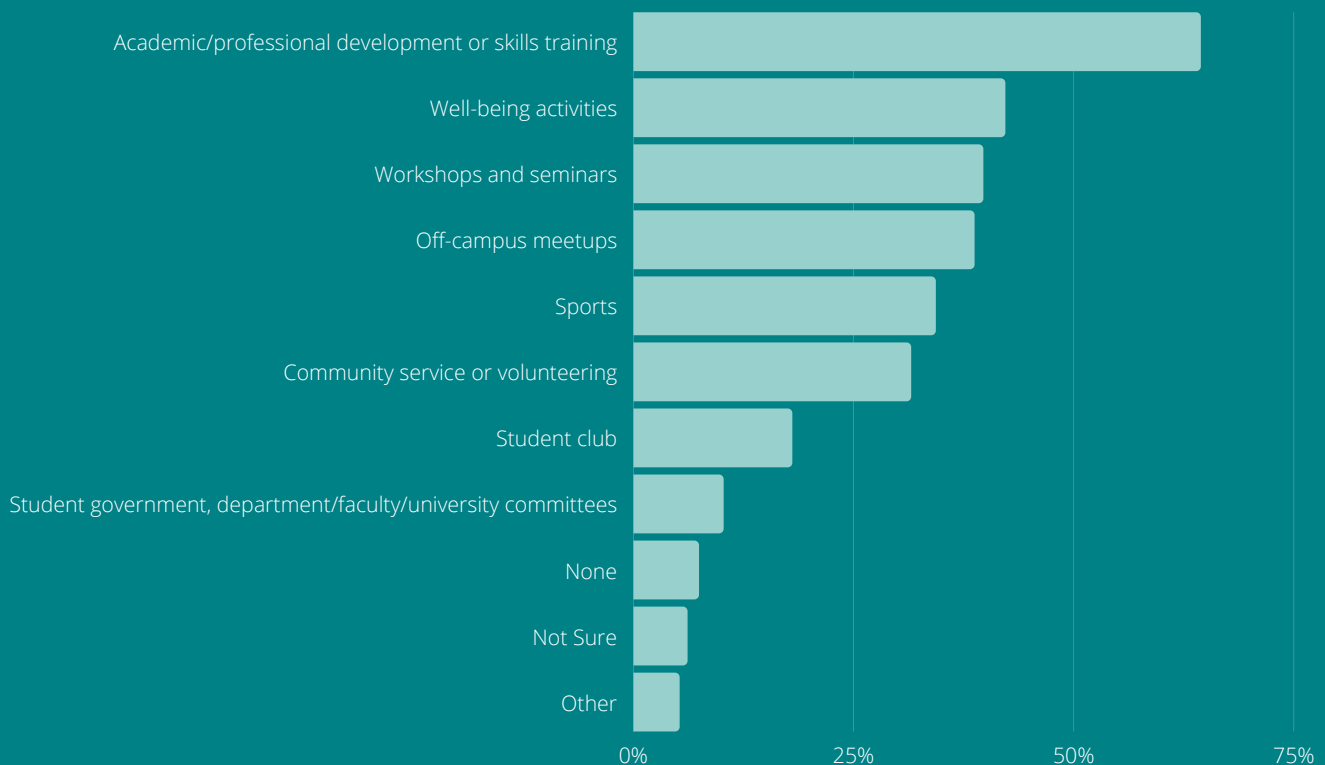
Extracurriculars Outside the Classroom

42%

of Graduate Students are interested in extracurricular Well-Being Activities.

With busy schedules, graduate students have limited time for extracurriculars. The top reported extracurricular of interest was “Academic/Professional Development or Skills Training” at 46%, followed closely by “Well-Being Activities” in second at 42%.

What extracurriculars are graduate students most interested in?





Funding & Finance

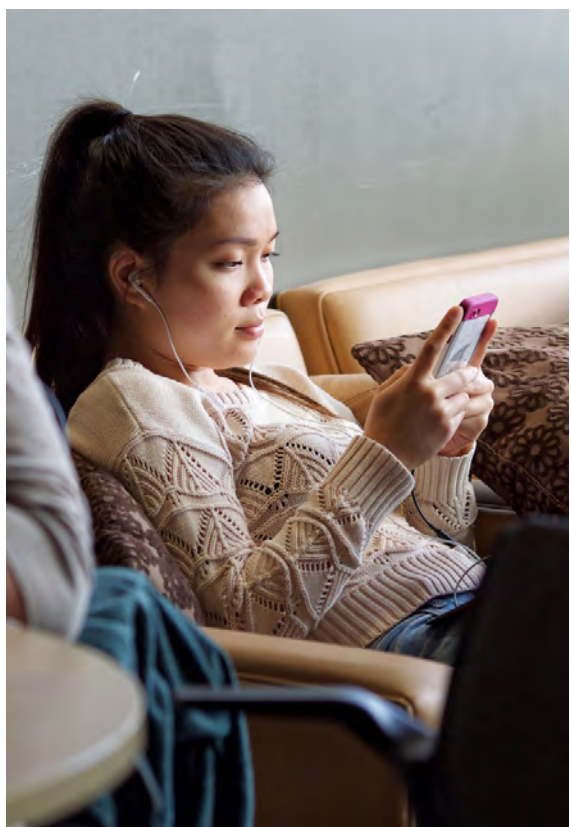
Funding and finances have long been a key priority for graduate students. With graduate programs becoming increasingly expensive, combined with the high cost of living in Vancouver, it is no surprise that stipends and scholarships continue to be the number one advocacy priority for UBC graduate students. In the past year, the GSS worked on multiple platforms, advocating for increases in graduate funding to both the government and university. We attended government conferences to voice funding concerns, participated in university fee and tuition consultations, and formed new partnerships with the AMS and other student groups across BC.

Ensuring adequate funding is available is only part the work. We must also address the financial barriers certain student groups face. Our research continues to highlight the gender wage gap in research funding, uneven funding opportunities across faculties, and inadequate financial resources for students with dependants. This year, we worked on furthering our understanding of these financial disparities to better advocate for those disadvantaged student groups.



GSS Funding Survey & Focus Groups

Given the importance of funding for graduate students, it is vital that the GSS has the latest information on the finances of this demographic to advocate effectively. This year, we conducted in-depth research on the funding and incomes of both research-stream and course-based graduate students. Due to the distinct differences between research versus taught graduate programs, the GSS took two approaches in the research. For research-stream students, a detailed survey on stipends, scholarships, and other funding was created and distributed via email. Course-based graduate students were offered the chance to participate in focus groups, which covered their funding, income, and financial concerns. The results of this research have been invaluable in directing GSS advocacy during the COVID-19 pandemic.



Knockout Interest! Campaign

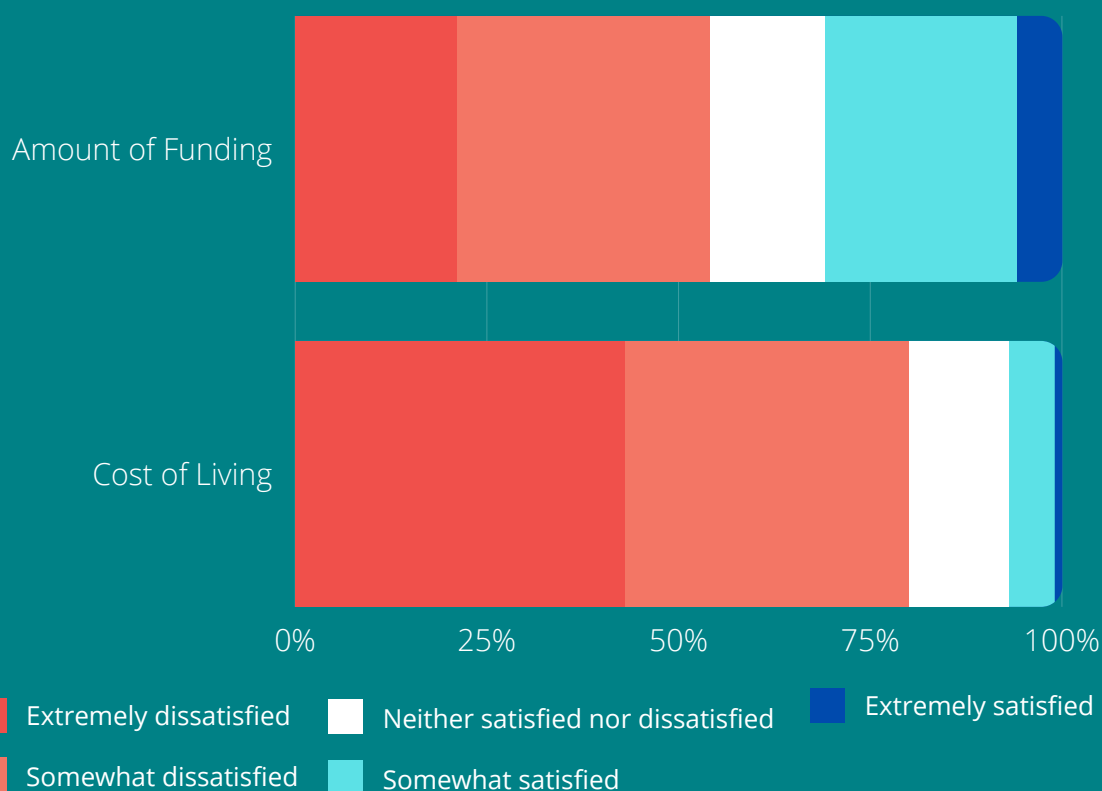
The GSS was excited to endorse the 'Knock Out Interest on Student Loans!' campaign that was run by the British Columbia Federation of Students (BCFS) in early 2020. Interest on federal student loans has been shown to unfairly penalize low and middle-income students, making this a system that unfairly punishes those who cannot pay upfront. Domestic graduate students often come to UBC with student loan debt from their undergraduate degree, and even though interest rates stall when individuals re-enter school, they still face this accumulating expense when they complete their graduate program. Eliminating interest on these federal loans will help graduates focus less on debt and more on their career and lives. BCFS has already successfully worked to eliminate interest on BC Student Loans, and the GSS supported this new federal campaign by hosting local activities and publicly joining their campaign.

Satisfaction with Finances

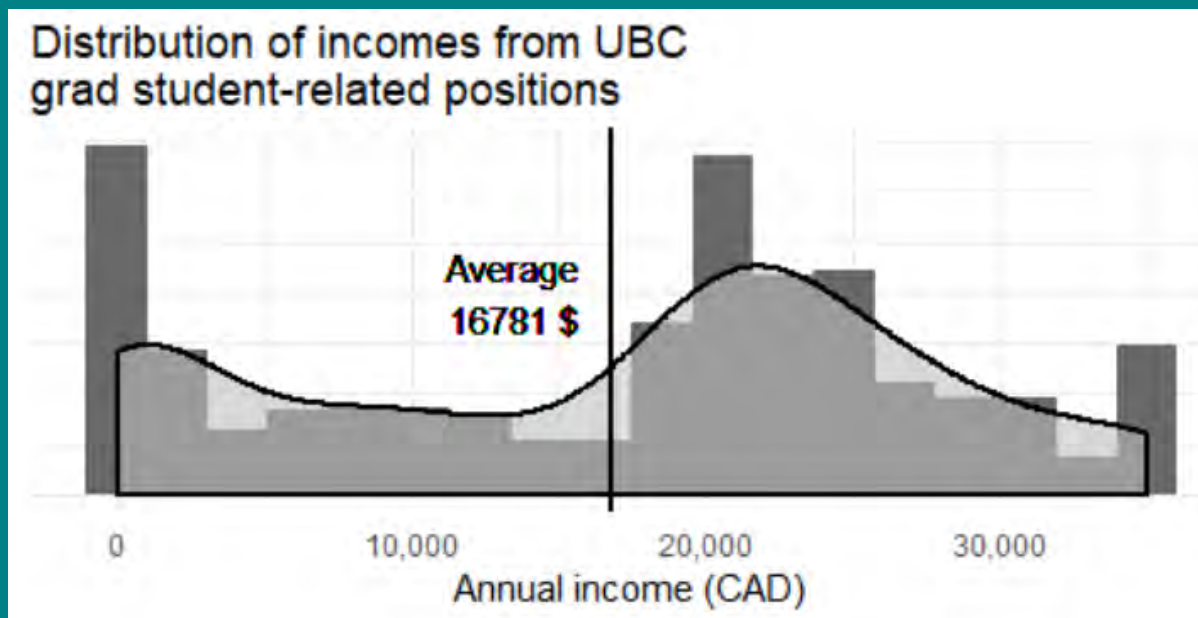
>50%

of Graduate Students are dissatisfied with their financial experience.

Graduate degrees can be expensive, and funding is competitive. Combined with the high cost of living in Vancouver, it is unsurprising that most graduate students are dissatisfied with their financial experience at UBC. Only 31% of student respondents were satisfied with their amount of funding, and only 7% were satisfied with their cost of living, compared with an overwhelming 80% of students who were dissatisfied.



Average Income

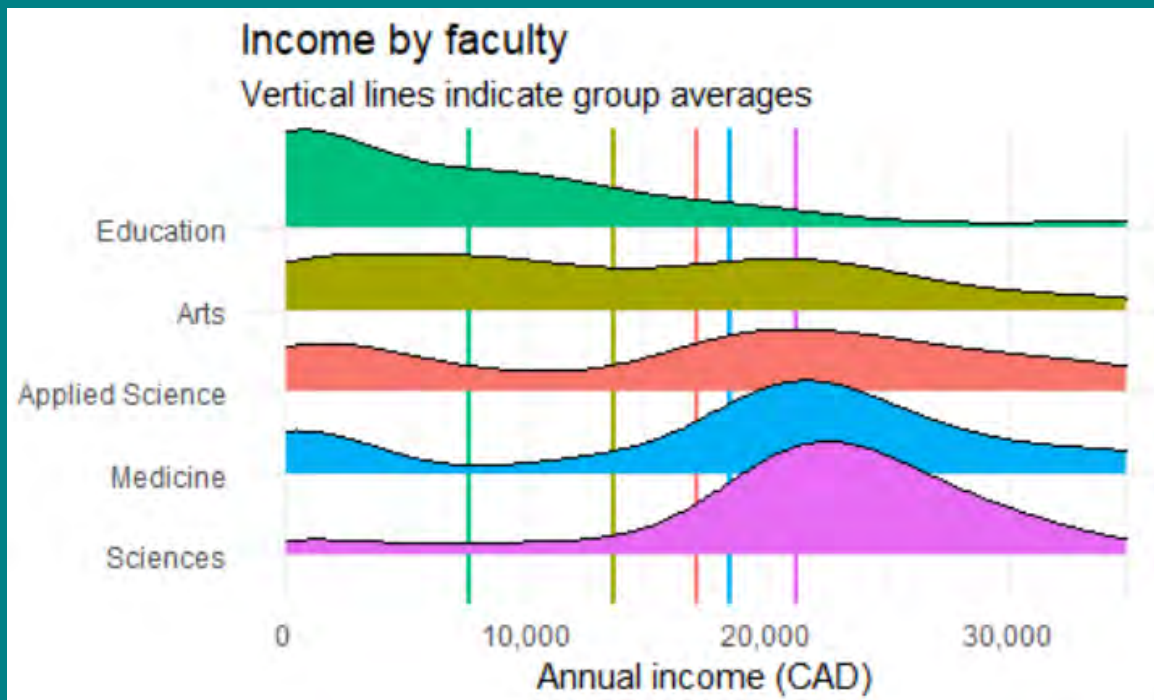


The reported average income of UBC graduate students in 2019 was

\$16,781

There exists great variation among funding for graduate students, and this reported average hides the fact that 12.9% of respondents reported *zero earnings*. However, even when those zero-earning respondents were excluded from the average income calculation, the mean income (\$19,261) is still below the BC Poverty Line of \$20,000 a year. This information clearly explains why stipends and scholarships are the highest advocacy priority for graduate students.

Average Income Across Faculties



\$21,217 Faculty of Science

\$18,473 Faculty of Medicine

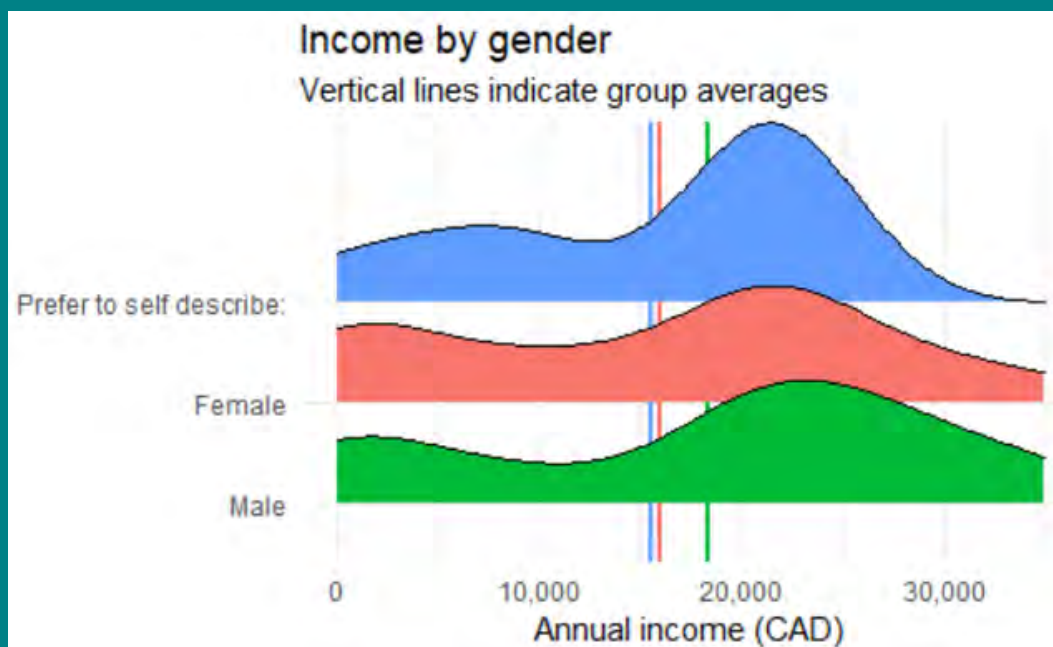
\$17,171 Faculty of Applied Science

\$13,643 Faculty of Arts

\$7,680 Faculty of Education

The average income varies greatly between faculties, with Education far under-earning compared to all the other graduate faculties. This is partially due to the differences in stipends and funding availability between faculties, but it is also impacted by Teaching Assistant and Research Assistant earnings. A very high proportion of the respondents from the Faculty of Education reported earning nothing at all from UBC-related work positions. Understanding the specific funding and work regulations that impact graduate students is an ongoing undertaking at the GSS, and this income data has been important in directing our advocacy.

The Gender Wage Gap



\$18,3247 Average Income of Male Graduate Students

\$15,908 Average Income of Female Graduate Students

\$15,539 Average Income of Graduate Students who prefer to Self-Describe

Graduate students who identify as women or prefer to self-describe earn less than men by a considerable amount². Importantly, this gender wage gap cannot be accounted for by the different gender ratios in each faculty. Among the faculties with a representative number of respondents³ - Sciences, Applied Sciences, Medicine, Education, and Arts - women earned less than men in all faculties except Education (where they earned double compared to men). The Faculty of Science had the most similar earnings, with women earning 0.95 to their men colleague's dollar, however Applied Science showed women earning 0.81 of what their men colleagues earned, with a similar number of 0.90 in Medicine, and dropping to 0.74 in the Faculty of Arts. It is clear that much still needs to be done to bring true equity to UBC grad studies.

² In the 2019 GSS SSS questions on gender used the terms female & women to refer to those who identify as women, male & men to refer to those who identify as men, and prefer to self-describe to refer to those who identify outside the gender options provided.

³ There were low numbers of individuals who preferred to self-describe that responded to these questions.



Thank You

Special thanks to our student executives, council, committees, partners, staff and volunteers for their hard work and support during the past year.

GSS Loft Re-Opening

Thank you to the UBC's President's Office, G+PS, and the AMS.

In summer 2019, the GSS began renovations to provide major updates to the Loft in the AMS Student Nest to make it a more pleasant and functional space for graduate students. This included reworking the three main rooms into a new Boardroom, Social Lounge, and Conference Room to give grad students better facilities to meet, socialise and work. With support from the President's Office, G+PS, and the AMS, the GSS unveiled the new space in February 2020.

"We're hugely grateful for the financial support of the UBC President's office and to the Faculty Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies, for making this project possible. The Loft is an ideal central location for graduate student events, and these updates will allow students to get the most from the space."

- Nicolas Romualdi, GSS President 2019-20



GSS Committees

GSS committees and caucuses work directly in specific areas of interest to enhance graduate student life at UBC. We'd like to thank all our student volunteers who have contributed their time and skills to our committees, which form the heart of the GSS and support its successes big and small.

Academic & External Affairs Committee

Chairpersons:

Teilhard Paradela, Larissa Peck, Sara Hosseinirad, Julia Burnham

Code & Policy Committee Chairpersons:

Kate Sedivy-Haley, Jordan Hamden

Elections Committee Chairpersons:

Jun Sian Lee, Sarah Park, Nicolas Najy

Executive Oversight Committee

Chairpersons:

Kimani Karangu

Governance & Accountability Committee

Chairpersons:

Tarique Benbow, Victoria Gomez, Kate Sedivy-Haley, Jin Wen

House Finance Committee Chairperson:

Christina Wiesmann

Human Resources Committee

Chairpersons:

Rory Long, Arezoo Alemzadeh Mehrizi

Services Committee Chairperson:

John DuPuis

Strategic Planning ad-hoc Committee

Chairpersons:

Alireza Kamyabi, Timothy Luk



We encourage all graduate students at UBC Vancouver to get involved, contribute to the Society, and gain valuable skills and connections. For more information on how to join a committee, please visit gss.ubc.ca/committees

Credits

Graphs & Infographs

ALL GSS Satisfaction Survey 2019

Photography

Cover	Students along University Boulevard (<i>Paul H. Joseph</i>)
2	s7i:4qəy qeqən - Double-Headed Serpent Post (<i>Brent Sparrow Jr.</i>)
4	Students along University Boulevard (<i>Paul H. Joseph</i>)
6	Students at the Forest Sciences Centre (<i>Paul Joseph</i>)
11	Students on UBC Vancouver campus in 2020 (<i>Paul H. Joseph</i>)
12	Holi 2015 (<i>Justin Lee</i>)
12	UBC students, staff, and faculty celebrate Pride (<i>Paul Joseph</i>)
13	UBC Museum of Anthropology (<i>Paul H. Joseph</i>)
16	UBC FarmWonders Camp (<i>Martin Dee</i>)
19	The UBC Farm (<i>Martin Dee</i>)
26	Life Sciences Lab on Vancouver Campus (<i>Paul H. Joseph</i>)
26	Studying UBC student (<i>Darren Hull</i>)



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