

BISC graduate student caucus meeting

March 17, 2022, 2:00 pm

Hybrid Meeting (In-person at 7000-level Grad Lounge and on Zoom)

1. Welcome
 - a. Attendance
 - Allison Dennert (Associate Chair, TSSU Steward, GSS Rep)
 - Emmanuel Hung (Treasure)
 - Steven Brownlee (TSSU Rep)
 - Hannah Watkins (Faculty Mole, DGSC Rep)
 - Sherry Young (TSSU Rep)
 - Elana Varner (EDI Committee)
 - Amelinda Firdauzy (DSC Rep)
 - Hannah Hall (Member)
 - Cole Rankin (Member)
 - b. Territorial acknowledgement delivered by Allison Dennert
 - c. Motion to approve January and February meeting minutes
 - i. Motioned by Allison Dennert
 - ii. Seconded by Sherry Young
 - iii. Motion passes unanimously
 - d. Announcement: We will be holding **elections for BISC Grad Caucus positions at our next meeting (April 14th at 2:00 pm)**. Brett Hodinka has been appointed the administrator for the upcoming election.
 - i. March 31st – Call for nominations
 - ii. April 14th – Election day (held during caucus meeting)
2. Representative's updates
 - a. Treasurer's update (Emmanuel Hung)
 - i. Core account: \$744.48
 - ii. Trust account: \$2,181.27
 - b. DGSC update (Steven Brownlee)
 - i. Pushing for more aggressive increases to graduate stipend amount – aiming for a 30k minimum stipend (at the very least to get faculty thinking about increases more seriously).
 - ii. Graduate stipend survey results: 70 responses (bringing us above the minimum 50% response rate required for Mike Hart to bring concerns raised by the results forward to faculty). Thank you to the BISC grad student community for responding!
 - i. Almost every respondent confirmed that they were getting their minimum stipend. Those who responded “no” to obtaining their minimum stipend were individuals the DGSC was already aware of OR were past the cut-off points for

standard degree completion time (and thus no longer guaranteed that funding amount). Continued support for students past the cut-off point is a concern and is being brought up with faculty.

- ii. Average financial stress rating (on a scale of 1 to 5, where 5 is the highest degree of stress) was 3.2. This was lower than expected by the DGSC but surprisingly higher than expected by faculty.
 - iii. 40% of students have part-time or full-time work outside of their studies. Additionally, many rely on student loans, family contributions or personal savings. An unexpected number of students have needed to TA two or more semesters.
 - iv. There is a common conception, shared by the committee, that tuition costs should not come out of the minimum graduate stipend. One way to raise the stipend to meet the 30k goal would be to eliminate tuition fees for graduate students – this has not been an issue in other universities.
- c. DSC update (Amelinda Firdauzy)
- i. USRAs have been awarded.
 - ii. President's PhD award rankings have been completed.
 - iii. BC Grad Scholarships have been reviewed.
 - iv. TARA awards have just been announced by Laurie to be ranked and will be finalized by the committee by March 28th.
- d. GSS update (Allison Dennert)
- i. Director elections: director of graduate services, director of external relations and director of internal relations positions are up for election. Full candidate profiles are available at: <https://sfugradsociety.ca/elections/>.
 - ii. New pilot program for coverage of graduate counseling is launching. \$20,000 of surplus GSS funding has been allocated and the aim is for the program to provide 80% coverage per claim (dependent on program usage)
 - iii. GSS is raising the issue around the lack of consultation between university admin and its societies regarding budget changes and fee increases. SFU is violating its own policies by not providing statements for any proposed changes and neglecting to provide consultations.
 - iv. Demand your rights campaign is officially being launched (sfugrads.demandyourrights)
- e. TSSU update (Steven Brownlee)
- i. TSSU has put out a new survey (<https://www.surveymonkey.ca/r/92JQGBL>) to get feedback from members regarding SFU's transition to in-person teaching and

(relatively sudden) transition to a new masking policy across the university. If you have any concerns regarding work safety or return to (in-person) work or learning, you can email Steven or any other TSSU stewards.

- ii. TSSU has provided stewards with “PPE goodie bags” – contact Steven or any other TSSU stewards to arrange a pick-up.
- iii. RA bargaining continues, now with a new negotiator with a “get-it-done” reputation. We remain cautiously optimistic.

f. Faculty Mole update (Hannah Watkins)

- i. Candidate interviews half-way to almost fully done
- ii. Everything concerning the \$2-4 million budget shortfall issue has been put on pause.
- iii. External review – students should be getting emails March 31st-April 2nd to air grievances or talk about their experiences to external
- iv. Stipend survey results mostly led to support from faculty who were surprised at student (financial) situations.

3. Meeting with BISC Department Chair, Dr. Tony Williams (TW)

- a. Discussion with TW centered mainly around **graduate funding concerns** (items i-vi):
 - i. Persisting concern is that some students are not being funded to the department minimum. The main issue is the question of how do we police this issue? I.e., who is responsible for checking that minimum stipends are being met and how would they then be approaching the policing of faculty members who may have various reasons for not providing funds.
 - ii. There is the added issue that when faculty sign on students, there is typically discussion of funding for the first four years (for PhDs) but it becomes ambiguous what is expected/provided by year five, six or beyond.
 - iii. To get all students above the “red line” we would need a stipend of at least 30k per year. This would require TAs and GFs to increase in value but its unclear how we would leverage these increases. Increases in funding for individuals may lead to faculty choosing to hire on fewer students; fewer students in a program may actually lead to a decrease in TAs and GF money and funding sources (less research progress). HOWEVER, faculty continuing to hire a larger number of students means that the financial stress is passed onto graduate students. E.g., inflation pressure is placed solely onto graduate students in this case. TW recommends that students, working through GSS or in direct conversation with the dean of graduate studies, talk with senior management about the issues of funding sources falling behind in this regard.

- iv. The advantages of tuition waivers were raised but it seems neither upper admin nor faculty would be inclined to alleviate this cost from the shoulders of grad students. There was agreement that faculty should be very up front with incoming students that, at the start, ~6k of their stipend will be lost to tuition fees.
- v. Additional clarity regarding funding expectation can be provided via improvements to the website. It was raised that (examples of) official offer letter documents and funding information should be upfront and available on the website for incoming students to see everything clearly. The website has previously undergone iterative rounds for more clarity and is much improved thanks to past efforts of Melissa, Elana and Brett reviewing the site working with Laurie and other staff. Improvements to the site are great but required an inordinate amount of effort from graduate students having to push and contribute in order for these changes to occur.
- vi. Graduate stipend survey showed that part-time work and the need to TA directly delays graduation for many students.
- vii. TW discussed how **low departmental morale** could be raised by increasing engagement within the department, namely, bringing back more meetings and seminars/events in in-person settings (Covid-permitting). The continuation of remote learning, teaching and social events may potentially incentivize people to stay at home BUT people are diverse (i.e., have varied reasons for needing remote accommodations) and hybrid events are likely how the department will continue organizing itself moving forwards.
- b. Statement from TW: “If anything is not being taken care of, bring it up to me, this is my role as chair. Some things can be done fairly quickly... if progress is slow or if there’s an obstacle, I would like to know about it.”

4. Committee updates

- a. EDI Committee update (Steven Brownlee)
 - i. Steven and Blake are working on a course for indigenizing research.
 - ii. Looking for more members to the committee! Interested in advertising committee – looking for ideas from anyone.

5. Motion to adjourn March meeting (3:22 pm)

- i. Motioned by Allison Dennert
- ii. Seconded by Elana Varner
- iii. Motion passes unanimously