

## **BISC graduate student caucus meeting**

June 16, 2022, 2:00 pm

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

### **1. Welcome & Intro**

#### **Attendance:**

Brett Hodinka (Chair)

Steven Brownlee (TSSU Steward, DGSC, EDI Committee)

Allison Dennert (GSS)

Hanna Roodenrijs (Webmaster)

Emmanuel Hung (Treasurer, Secretary)

Mason King (member)

Sam Meraj (member)

Kaitlin Bruzzini (member)

#### *Motion to approve the May meeting minutes*

- Proposed by Brett Hodinka
- Seconded by Allison Dennert
- Motion passes unanimously

### **2. Representative updates**

#### i) Treasurer's update (Emmanuel Hung)

- Account updates:
  - o Core account: \$1,405.52
  - o Trust account: \$2,181.27
- **Using core account funds**
  - o At the end of August, 50% of the annual total we were allotted ( $0.5 * \$2,150 = \$1,075$ ) to our core account will go to our trust account and the remainder will go back to the GSS if we leave it unused. That means we should spend at least \$330.52 before the end of the fiscal year.
  - o For reference, the previous BISC Grad Caucus Halloween BBQ cost \$370.48.

#### ii) GSS (Allison Dennert)

- There is a planned expansion to the Burnaby campus library which includes a new grad student space. Some beautiful renderings were shown but this is something only expected in the far future.
- Bargaining with SFU as employees continues.

- GSS coffee budget money (\$40,000) is being reallocated. Funds will be put into events and cheaper alternatives are being looked for. Money was previously being put into grants during peak Covid – rolled into travel grants, grocery cards for grad students and professional development opportunities.
- **FYI:** Graduate students can receive up to one \$50 grocery card per semester (for up to 5 semesters for a Master’s and 7 for a PhD) via the GSS Emergency Grocery Card program ([link](#)).

iii) DSC (Amelinda Firdauzy – via email)

- GF rankings have been finalized; results will be announced soon.
- Donor awards were due on the 16<sup>th</sup> and will be ranked soon.

### 3. Committee updates

i) Events (Brett Hodinka)

- We are aiming to host a summer event (e.g., BBQ) in either July or August – we will send out a poll to gauge grad student availability.

### 4. Discussion of the Graduate Student Stipend Problem

i) Stipend Problem

- The Department of Biological Sciences (BISC) at SFU underwent an external review from 30 March to 1 April. The goals of the external review committee were to (1) assess the department on its strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities for improvement and (2) provide recommendations that address major challenges and opportunities within the department. Upon review, the committee identified “unsustainably low stipends for graduate students” as one of the major concerns for the BISC Department. The external review committee recommended that graduate student stipends be increased from the current \$24,000/year to at least \$30,000/year and noted that this is an urgent and necessary change to maintain success.

ii) Proposed Motions and Faculty Vote

- In response to external review subsection 2.3.3 Graduate Funding (section 2.0 Graduate Programs) the BISC Department proposed two distinct motions to address the graduate student stipend issue:

- **Motion 1:** To offer a grant approximately equal to the cost of tuition to all qualified graduate students in the MSc, MPM, and PhD programs each semester, with a start date to be determined (but no earlier than September 2023) and to increase the minimum stipend of \$24,000 each year starting in September 2022 by a proportion based on a relevant measure of the inflation rate in BC in the previous year.
  - i) This option takes advantage of special permission received by the department to modify how we use the pot of award money we receive each year. Under the current system, a variety of awards including GFs, President's PhD scholarships and TARA (travel and professional development) awards are handed out during yearly or twice yearly competitions by the departmental scholarship committee (DSC). Under this model, most awards other than TARAs will no longer be offered, and instead each eligible student (MScs/MPMs with less than 2 years in the program, PhDs with less than 4 years) will receive a 'tuition waiver' award that will be evaluated against your tuition directly. This award is designed to negate the cost of tuition entirely, and in effect allow us to actually make the guaranteed minimum stipend of \$24 000, rather than a 'take home' pay of \$17 600 as it currently stands (i.e., \$24 000 minus the cost of tuition). This income would therefore not count towards the guaranteed minimum stipend amount. No increases to the guaranteed minimum beyond an inflation adjustment are planned. NSERC/CIHR major award holders will be able to receive these 'tuition waiver' awards, except for Vanier award holders and CGS-PhD awards (the \$35 000 a year tier of awards).
  - ii) This is a 5-year "pilot program" and is thus retractable. This uncertainty does not provide graduate students concrete, guaranteed stipend increases beyond the 5-year pilot. It also has potentially unpredictable consequences for supervisors' funding, as many professors currently rely on GFs to pay their students for 1 out of every 3 terms, and that money would then have to be found elsewhere as GFs and other awards would not be offered anymore. This 'tuition waiver' award also has different eligibility criteria than the GF, as the GF is available to students later in their degree programs (up to 3 years for MSc/MPM, up to 5 for PhDs), meaning that gaps may emerge in peoples' ability to fund themselves beyond the guaranteed minimum period, as the

tuition award ceases at the end of the guaranteed minimum funding period (2 years MSc, 4 years PhD).

- **Motion 2:** To increase the minimum annual graduate student stipend by \$2000 in each year starting in September 2022 to a value of \$30,000 by September 2024 (without specific support for tuition). And to increase the minimum stipend of \$30,000 each year starting in September 2025 by a proportion based on a relevant measure of the inflation rate in BC in the previous year.
  - i) In this model, the existing awards system will remain as it is now, with GFs and other scholarships playing an important role in how students are funded. The increase in stipends will primarily be felt in the amount that our PIs have to 'top up' our TAs and our scholarship awards, and in the amount of money we receive in RAs (i.e., terms where we're funded off of our PI's grant, and don't have to TA or receive an award). These 'top ups' exist now, as individual TAs and awards are not usually enough to cover our guaranteed minimum for a given term, so PIs will usually add a small RA on top of those TAs/awards to get us to that minimum. In this model, the amount the PIs must 'top up' students (or pay us in those RA terms) will increase stepwise until 2025. Most major award holders will be able to benefit from this, as your supervisor still 'tops up' your NSERC award money with an RA each term unless you hold a Vanier or CGS-PhD award, in which case your income is above the guaranteed minimum.
- A faculty vote between these two motions was inconclusive: 17 votes in favor of Motion 1, 7 votes in favor of Motion 2, and 11 abstentions.
- The department chair, Tony Williams, has proposed a new 'compromise' option following the inconclusive vote between the two original motions:
  - **Motion '1.5':** This option broadly attempts to find a middle ground between Motion 1 and 2. In this compromise, the minimum stipend would be raised to \$26 000 starting in September 2022. In the 2023 awards cycle, a new 'tuition waiver' award worth \$2000 will be provided to each graduate student who has been in the program less than a minimum cutoff period (2 years for MSc/MPM, 4 years for PhD). The remaining money in the awards fund for the department will be handed out as normal, leading to higher competition for GFs as there will be fewer available. NSERC/CIHR major award holders will be able to receive these 'tuition waiver' awards, except for Vanier award holders and CGS-PhD awards (the \$35 000 a year tier of awards). No further changes to the stipend or the awards scheme are planned in this motion, as a review of the graduate program and how it's run is planned for Fall 2022, and planned expansion of the stipend increase will be developed during that review.
- The overwhelming consensus among caucus meeting attendees is that, of the now three proposed motions, Motion 2 is more beneficial for both graduate students and PIs.

*Motion to create a petition for graduate students endorsing one of the proposed motions, leading up to the upcoming faculty vote on July 4<sup>th</sup>.*

- Proposed by Allison Dennert
- Seconded by Brett Hodinka
- Motion passes unanimously

*Motion to adjourn the meeting*

- Proposed by Brett Hodinka
- Seconded by Steven Brownlee
- Motion passes unanimously