Letter from the Executive/Annual Report 2013-14
January 15, 2015

Dear comrades, colleagues, critics, and curious onlookers;

-- indeed, to our members, the graduate student body at SFU, first and foremost, and to our university community more generally --

It has been an absolute pleasure to have served together, through most of the 2014 year, as your Graduate Student Society (GSS) elected student leaders. We came into our roles at a really exciting, even critical time; when the organization was “coming of age,” so to quip, and attention was veering from learning to walk to strategic planning and visioning for the future.

We inherited the legacy of the first ever three-year GSS Strategic Plan and came to summit in an old 1930’s schoolhouse, flanked by the magical surroundings of the Pemberton Valley, with Mount Currie dominating overhead and the Lillooet River streaming nearby. It smelt like cow dung but we ate the best homemade whole-grain granola bars, got hula lessons on breaks, and tried to escape the mosquitoes at night with a raging bonfire under the greatest blanket of twinkles and glow. Our summer weekend retreat saw the setting of priorities and the development of milestones toward the goals of our immediate predecessors, as endorsed by Council and, eventually, the whole at the Special General Meeting on 31 July 2014.

“In the world of student organizations,” we read in the introduction of the GSS Strategic Plan 2014-2017 (available for download on our new fancy website), “where the people filling leadership roles are often only around for a year, it is very easy to approach work in ad hoc and piecemeal ways. This can result in a really cool, interesting, vibrant quilt of projects, but it is unlikely to add up to the kinds of comprehensive benefits that can be sustained and carried forward throughout the years.” It has been a serious group effort to streamline the portfolios and responsibilities, expectations and regulations, within the GSS, especially where they interact with members directly. What sounds like a mere eight-to-nine months ago has us now in full sprint! So much has happened (and changed) over this short while, and we find ourselves today at the door-front of so much more, nay, in an environment that keeps on giving, with an engaged Council, a dynamic ring of volunteers, a new Executive Director (focused on relationship-building and revenue-generating), a happier, more welcoming Burnaby space (thanks in large part to the creation, and filing, of an awesome Administrative Assistant position, dedicated space at Harbour Centre

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on Thursdays, and that ongoing weekday kick of free caffeine! Lest we forget, an (increasing) dose of free massages, fitness classes, trivia nights, international graduate student socials, pumpkin carving contests, like festive frolickings! The GSS is even trending! Yep. And be sure to check us out online, “like” us on Facebook, “follow” us on Flickr, and “connect” with us on LinkedIn.

Only 6-years young, and with a membership of about 4,400, the GSS has been lobbying for accessible quality higher public education and greater supports for... us... ALL! As a member-driven organization, from Executive Committee through Board of Directors to your overarching vote today, our initiatives seek to respond to our needs and demands as graduate students at SFU, while also holding us directly accountable to each other. We have been primarily addressing Simon Fraser University around issues of graduate student representation on university committees and boards, ethical investments, living wage, more graduate space and services; but our voice is growing at the governmental level. We have heard our demands for a BC Graduate Scholarship being echoed for a second year in a row at the Select Standing Committee of Finance. We have successfully established a new Graduate Student Emergency Bursary Fund with SFU Financial Aid, and have moved towards more socially responsible investing with the local credit union, Vancity. We continue to draw attention to the unsafe, frankly, toxic working conditions at SFU from massive deferred maintenance backlog, as well as the need for better supports for curiosity-based and non-commercial research. We have been collaborating with the post-secondary institutions across the Metro Vancouver Area on transit advocacy and the ongoing importance of the province-wide subsidized student U-Pass. And, most recently, we received official intervener status for upcoming discussions on the proposed Kinder Morgan pipeline through the conservation area of Burnaby Mountain. This puts us at the forefront of the action, which we hope will bolster the recognition and respect of the GSS at SFU as an integral stakeholder, not only in SFU’s decision-making processes but also among our organizational peers and community at large.

Just as much has occurred internally within our own by-laws and regulations as indicative by the “New Business” items enclosed within this docket. We are in the process of equalizing the six student stipend appointments in true spirit of a non-hierarchical organization. We have eliminated the Professional Development Coordinator as it was nearly duplicated with the launch of the professional development program under the Office of Graduate Studies. We have re-housed the adjudication of grants, bursaries, and other financial resources fittingly within Graduate Services; and split advocacy work into a second position for University Relations to maximize impact. In a similar vein, we have prioritized the strengthening of networks and the coordination of projects, where appropriate, to minimize overlap or fragmentation. This has meant ongoing dialogue with student organizations across the country through more active participation in gatherings, workshops, conferences, and an online community of what’s being called the GU15. We are also hoping to organize (and maybe play host) to a meeting of all the graduate student societies in BC in the coming year, as we found success in our first Community Mixer for campus partners and allies.

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This has been a most rewarding 2014 for each of us and we look forward to all that awaits the GSS behind the door! Thank you for your times and consideration… yesterday… today… and, of course, tomorrow!

Yours truly,

Devon Cass
ERO, May 14-Apr 15

(Emma) Ting Liu
AIRO, May 14-Apr 15

Melissa MacAskill
MCRO, May 14-Apr 15

Katelyn McDougall
PDC, Jan 14-Dec 15

Essya M. Nabbali
GSC, Jan 14-Dec 15

Louis Wang
FC, Mar 14-Dec 15