My team and I are elated by the continued trust and the opportunity to keep serving our graduate student community at the University of Waterloo. The past year was that of transition for the GSA as we adopted a new policy manual to govern our organization. As part of the transition, I ensured that our organization had a stable management team comprising the vice-president, the general manager, a support staff and an administrative assistant to assist with daily execution of services and our Ends. I established a Workplan to provide strategic direction in improving the efforts of the GSA in the areas of internal operations and communications, advocacy and representation, and engagement and wellness.

We’ve made a number of changes to our operations that we hope have improved your experience. Some of the most visible changes are at the Graduate House, where graduate students now enjoy preferential pricing and receive a $5 discount once per month. In Fall 2018 alone, we gave out $6,700 in discounts to graduate students. Another visible change is the redesign of our e-news and website and our features in the UW Imprint, which now make it easier for you to keep up to date and stay engaged with the GSA.

Thanks to our presence on over 60 University committees, we have been able to influence the development of various policies and practices. Building on the work of previous GSA leaders, my team and I played a key role in the review and update of Policy 42 (Sexual Violence Prevention and Response, Protocol and Procedures) where we provided feedback through extensive consultation with council and general membership. We participated in drafting the new Guide for Graduate Research and Supervision, which outlines key roles and responsibilities for students and supervisors and clarifies expectations at each state of the graduate program. In light of the difficult transition to UW’s new Workday system, we achieved a commitment from the University’s Human Resources department to provide dedicated Workday support to graduate students from the Spring term. Working with Columbia Lake Village residences, we arranged for improved snow clearing service, to improve safety and mobility. We also advocated to have clear expectations set out in the academic calendar for teaching assistantships and research assistantships during the reading week in the Fall term. And in collaboration with the Writing and Communication Centre, we provided funding support for the WaterlooWrites project which helped over 600 grad students with enhancing productivity and motivation towards degree completion goals.

Our engagement efforts in the past year have been focused on hearing from you and finding avenues to build the grad student community. We initiated town hall gatherings beginning with the School of Pharmacy and Faculty of Science. In collaboration with the Office of
the President and the Federation of Students, we recognized graduate students who have demonstrated exemplary leadership skills in various ways at the University of Waterloo and/or in the surrounding community. In addition, we provided more than $20,000 in funding support to over two-dozen departmental student associations and groups. Some of the events we financially supported include: the Electrical and Computer Engineering GSA Holiday Banquet; the Political Science US midterm election viewing session; the School of Public Health and Health Systems Qualitative Research Community of Practice (QRCoP) workshop; weekly Board game night for grad students in Biochemistry and Chemistry; the Applied Math holiday event; and Waterloo Ecology Network Seminar Series for grad students in the School of Environment, Resources, and Sustainability.

Mental wellness has become one of the GSA’s top priorities. We recognize that mental illness has many deep drivers, including material conditions (i.e. financial insecurity) and environmental factors (e.g. social isolation). While we continue to press the University to increase the minimum funding for graduate students, our efforts this year have focused primarily on providing enhanced coping and crisis support. First and foremost, we set up a working group on mental wellness, consisting of representatives from the GSA, the University of Waterloo’s Counselling Services, and the Region of Waterloo’s Crisis Services. This group has been working to develop tools to help graduate students cope with stressful situations, such as navigating student-supervisor relationships. In addition, we’ve made efforts to reduce social isolation through organizing and supporting a wide variety of events. For example: we organized off-campus recreational trips; hosted social events at the Grad House; provided free massage; and participated in the Thrive week.

Although we have seen some progress on a number of areas, some key challenges remain. The University’s Policy 30, which covers the rights and responsibilities of teaching and research assistants, has been in draft mode for several years, and has gone through multiple revisions. We hope to work with the University to get a student-centered version of this policy off the drafting table and into practice as soon as possible. In addition, the affordability of graduate studies remains a burning issue which we are diligently working to address. My team and I will continue to build on our efforts from the past year, and I look forward to implementing further improvements in the coming year to GSA services to better serve you.

Yours faithfully,

Naima N. Samuel
President & CEO
Graduate Student Association-University of Waterloo

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