UTGSU By-Elections: Division Three
Candidate Statements

Candidates
Sina Davari:
Petra Mary Duff:
Fateme Eskandary:
Amir Hossein Mohammad Zadeh:
Julian August Dylan Nickel:
Griffin Edward Schwartz:
Grisha Taroyan:
Joselyn van der Veen:
Kevin Gin Sing Xie:

Sina Davari:
Shaping the Future: A Journey Towards an Inclusive and Empowered Graduate Community

As a dedicated PhD student in Management of Construction at the University of Toronto, I am honored to nominate myself for the UTGSU Board of Directors. My journey as an international graduate student has been enlightening yet challenging, and it has inspired me to seek this esteemed position to advocate for meaningful change and enhancement in our academic and social environment.

The University of Toronto stands proudly as one of the world’s leading institutions, a beacon of excellence in higher education. However, in its grandeur, there are nuances and challenges particularly pronounced in the lives of international graduate students. From my conversations with peers and through personal experience, I have identified areas where our university can evolve and become even more inclusive and supportive.

The cornerstone of my candidacy is active listening and problem-solving. Graduate students navigate a complex landscape of challenges, including administrative hurdles, academic pressures, and social integration barriers. These range from establishing effective relationships with supervisors, professors, and TAs, to overcoming technical obstacles, securing sufficient funding, ensuring high-quality graduate office environments, maintaining robust academic
standards in coursework, finding suitable accommodation, and addressing transportation needs. These concerns, though diverse, share a common thread – they significantly impact our ability to thrive in this crucial phase of our academic lives.

My commitment is to be a bridge between the student body and the UTGSU. By raising these issues in our meetings and working collaboratively towards practical solutions, I aim to foster an environment where every student’s voice is heard and valued. This is not just a role for me; it’s a mission to enhance our collective experience during these transformative years of our lives.

We, as graduate students, have embarked on a journey marked by sacrifice and ambition. Departing from the familiarity of our home countries and forgoing the typical leisure activities enjoyed by our peers, we steadfastly chase our dreams, armed with unwavering diligence and resilience. It’s imperative that our pursuit of academic excellence is supported by an infrastructure that not only recognizes but actively addresses our specific needs.

Your concerns are my concerns. I encourage you to connect with me via my LinkedIn account, provided below, to share your experiences and challenges. Your input is invaluable in shaping the agenda I will relentlessly advocate for in the UTGSU meetings. I pledge to not only voice your concerns but to persistently seek actionable solutions.

My background in management and active participation in departmental student associations, coupled with my experience in organizing significant events like the 2023 Graduate Students Orientation Event by GECoS, has equipped me with the skills and insights necessary for this role. I understand the intricacies of effective management and am prepared to apply these principles to enhance our graduate student community.

This role is more than a position; it’s a platform to effect change, to make our time here at the University of Toronto not just memorable but also more comfortable and rewarding. I envision a graduate community where each one of us feels heard, supported, and empowered to reach our highest potential.

In conclusion, my candidacy is driven by a sincere desire to serve and improve the graduate student experience at our esteemed university. With your support, I believe we can make significant strides in addressing the challenges we face and in enriching our academic and social journey. Let’s work together to make this era of higher education not just about achieving academic excellence but also about enjoying a well-rounded, fulfilling student life.

Thank you for considering my nomination. I am eager to listen, act, and make a difference.

With best wishes,
Petra Mary Duff:

My name is Petra Duff, and I’m a first-year PhD student in the Department of Physics. I’m new to the University, but not new to advocacy and organization. In my undergraduate career, I spent a good majority of my time outside of academics on climate activism on university campus, and so have extensive experience working closely with University administration for the benefit of its students. In 2021, I sat on the University of Waterloo’s Responsible Investment Advisory Group and advised the Board of Governors on a (successfully implemented) sustainable investment policy, effectively putting the University’s money where their mouth is on climate action and protecting student futures. This position came as a result of years of meeting with and negotiating with the University President and Board of Governors, as well as performing public- and student body-facing activism to make the concerns of students and the community regarding the University’s sustainability practices a priority. Aside from climate activism, I also sat on my faculty’s endowment fund council for my entire undergraduate career, and have some insight into behind-the-scenes funding decisions.

As a candidate, I’m concerned about the well-being of our graduate student body. With the cost of living consistently rising, especially in Toronto, it’s clear that our funding packages don’t cut it, more so for some departments than others. I’m interested in reinvigorating the UTGSU and ensuring that it fully utilizes its role in the interest of graduate students. Specifically, I would like to push, within the capacity I am given, for a universal base funding package that is based in a livable wage, and healthcare coverage that is fair and equitable for all of us. The UTGSU represents all graduate students and our wellbeing: let’s make it work for us.

Fateme Eskandary:

Dear UTGSU members,

Teamwork, effective communication, and championing equality are values that are at the heart of Fateme Eskandary

Sincerely,

represent and act on the interests of my fellow students.

genuinely enthusiastic about the opportunity to contribute to our academic community and I would like to express my appreciation for considering my application for the role. I am
place.
and the decision-making processes, ensuring that their ideas and concerns occupy a central enthusiastic about gathering input from my peers and serving as a bridge between students am resolute in ensuring that every student's voice is not merely heard but also valued. I am transparency, and accountability. The value of equality is deeply ingrained in my ethos, and I of my commitment. These principles drive my dedication to fostering open communication, within it.
I am writing to convey my sincere interest in the role of the division 3 director position within of Toronto has established to facilitate such involvement, and I am eager to play an active role genuinely excited to be a part of the structured, university-wide association that the University students allowed me to effectively articulate our collective concerns and demands. I am responsibility I wholeheartedly embraced. My ability to connect with both professors and fellow voice for the students of the School of Chemical Engineering regarding various matters, a
During my tenure at the University of Tehran, I had the privilege of serving as a prominent profound fascination for me.
aspirations. The concept of students collectively shaping campus life has always held a inclusive academic environment. This position resonates strongly with my core values and
As a first-year Ph.D. student, I am deeply passionate about fostering a welcoming and the University of Toronto's Graduate Students' Union (UTGSU).

Amir Hossein Mohammad Zadeh:

Introduction

I am Amir Hossein Mohammad Zadeh, a first-year Ph.D. student in Chemical Engineering, specializing in sustainable urban mining. As a candidate for the UTGSU Board of Directors, I bring my passion for student advocacy and a deep commitment to addressing the unique challenges faced by our graduate student community.

Background

My journey in student activism, marked by significant involvement in the "Culture and Politic" student organization during my undergraduate years, has been foundational in shaping my approach to leadership. Leading initiatives like the creation of an audio handbook for visually impaired students, I've learned the importance of inclusivity and accessibility in education. This experience has fueled my determination to contribute effectively to the UTGSU board, ensuring we cater to the diverse needs of our student body.
Core Issues and Goals

1. Empowering International Students: Acknowledging the specific challenges faced by international students, from cultural adaptation to administrative complexities, I am dedicated to enhancing their support system. This involves providing specialized resources and advocating for policies that cater to their unique needs.

2. Advancing Equitable Funding: A primary focus of my candidacy is to advocate and negotiate with the university for improved funding models. I understand the criticality of equitable funding and am committed to pursuing transparent, fair, and timely financial support systems for all students.

3. Responsive Governance and Communication: As a member of the Governance Committee, I will strive to improve UTGSU’s operational efficiency and transparency. My goal is to ensure that decision-making is inclusive and that the governance process is openly communicated to the student body. I commit to being approachable, with open lines of communication through email or dedicated office hours, ensuring every student's voice is heard and their concerns are promptly addressed.

4. Support for Academic and Financial Concerns: Recognizing the apprehension that can accompany academic and funding issues, I pledge to be a steadfast supporter and advocate for our students. My aim is to establish a responsive and supportive environment where students can freely discuss their concerns, seek guidance, and find collaborative solutions.

5. Inclusivity and Engagement: Inclusivity is not just a principle but a practice I intend to actively uphold within UTGSU. My goal is to create a union where every student, irrespective of their background or discipline, feels included, supported, and empowered. This commitment extends to ensuring that our actions and policies are reflective of the diverse experiences within our community.

Conclusion

My candidacy for the UTGSU Board is driven by a commitment to serve the graduate student community through responsive governance, enhanced support systems, equitable funding, and a focus on the specific needs of international students. Voting for me, Amir Hossein Mohammad Zadeh means choosing a representative who values your experiences, advocates for your rights, and is dedicated to building a more inclusive, supportive, and responsive graduate student union. Together, let's work towards a UTGSU that is as diverse and dynamic as our student body, a union where each member's journey is respected and supported. Vote for a
change that upholds equity, inclusivity, and transparency at the heart of our academic community.

Julian August Dylan Nickel:

I believe in a UTGSU that actively advocates for grad student interests.

When I saw that the UTGSU was struggling to function, with over 23 open positions, I began organizing with fellow UTGSU members to increase participation. We created a widely circulated open letter asking the UTGSU, among other things, to pause large scale bylaw changes until a by-election was held. In doing this I used my experience as a physics steward in CUPE 3902, where I learned how to advocate for grad student interests. The result of that organizing is this by-election.

If I was elected to the UTGSU I would use this organizing experience to advocate for better healthcare and higher funding. In particular, there is no base level of funding across the university. This means that smaller departments often fall behind in funding to larger ones. Furthermore, as the cost of living has skyrocketed across the GTA, even larger departments have been falling behind a living wage. A base level of funding would make sure that every grad student would be fairly compensated for their work, while still allowing for some students to be paid more.

My main goal is therefore to negotiate a livable base level of funding for grad students across the university.

I do not believe this to be easy, but I believe it to be necessary. In order to achieve this the UTGSU would have to take an active stance organizing students across the university. Cross-departmental events, coordination with other grad student organizations, and direct engagement with UofT administration. An example of such an action, which I have already taken, is to submit a motion to the UTGSU AGM calling for the formation of a base-funding caucus which could coordinate future actions. These future actions could include university wide letter campaigns and meetings with UofT admin.

If elected I will work tirelessly to advocate for the funding you deserve.

Griffin Edward Schwartz:

I think it is well past time that we put the Union back in Graduate Student Union and fulfill the promise of an organized student body that advocates for the needs of the entire graduate
student population. The fact that we see consistent raises for our work as teaching assistants while our research stipend stagnates proves that the university will only give us a living wage if it is forced to by collective action from the student body.

I want to help restore functional, transparent, democratic governance to this organization so that we may all see the fair compensation we deserve. Given the historic levels of inflation we are seeing in this city, I think this consists of nothing less than $35k/year after tuition, for all graduate students.

I have worked as a volunteer in science outreach with organizations like Girls SySTEM and with the Kahnawake Education Center. In my experience as a graduate student I have realized that, in order for such outreach efforts to be fruitful, science needs to be truly welcoming for everyone. I think that the first step towards achieving this is to ensure that we can all be fairly compensated for our labour.

Grisha Taroyan:

Hi!

I'm Grisha, a Ph.D. student in the Department of Mathematics. I believe it's time to change the way we see UTGSU. Now more than ever, we need a strong union to fight for our rights as students and academics.

This term, I spent almost 300 hours on my TA duties, not because I particularly like TAing but because I need money. I could have spent this time researching, attending seminars, or collaborating and networking with my colleagues. I know many of you work much more than I do, and I can't imagine how you do it.

We need to fight for change. We need increased base funding, health benefits, flexible TAing schedules, and the administration's recognition of our work. The only way we can achieve these goals is by standing together. One step in this direction is electing a new UTGSU board and revitalizing the union to make it a catalyst for change instead of what it is today.

I ask you to vote for me because I want to bring this change and know why we need it.

Grisha Taroian, Ph.D. Student Departement of Mathematics
Joscelyn van der Veen:

Salutations! I am a 3rd year physics PhD student and I have been an executive member of my department’s graduate student association (PGSA) for all three years. As a member of the PGSA exec, I have received a lot of feedback from other graduate students asking us to advocate for funding and healthcare. The UTGSU is the body with the potential to actually do this.

I want to help the UTGSU become a group that can achieve real improvements for graduate students as researchers, specifically with regards to funding and healthcare. As one of your Division 3 Directors, I would bring my experience advocating for grad students within my own department to try and benefit all the grad students in our division.

Kevin Gin Sing Xie:

“How can the UTGSU champion student interests if there are barely any students in it?” This is a question that has been on many people’s minds recently, mine included. “But I’m just a normal graduate student anyway,” I said to myself. “How does the UTGSU concern me?”

It turns out that it concerns me — concerns us — greatly. It is the largest organized body of graduate students at the University. It is our principal negotiator of funding and healthcare. And it is precisely because it sorely lacks engagement with the student body that I believe it to be so important for regular, everyday graduate students to participate in this process.

So as a regular, everyday graduate student, please allow me to introduce myself. My name is Kevin Xie. I am a 4th-year PhD. student in the Department of Physics, running to be one of your Division 3 Directors.

The cost-of-living crisis and its impact on the student community is my principal concern. It is both fundamental to, and deeply intertwined with, graduate student wellbeing and productivity. Graduate student wages have not meaningfully increased in years, and track well below inflation in an era of unprecedented economic hardship. As a Director, I will advocate for higher funding of all types.

Healthcare is also of great importance to me. Recently, efforts from the University to reduce insurance across the Department of Physics were vehemently opposed and ultimately stopped by a united movement from the student body and Department leaders. I found the cuts to be as
alarming as the unity was inspiring. I endeavor to be a part of organizing and negotiating with the University to push for more healthcare benefits, not just maintain the ones we have now.

Lastly, the issue of housing is impossible to avoid in Toronto. Additional funding and financial support is one thing, but the causes of the housing crisis are complex and long in the making. In the short term, I will lend my support to housing and rental assistance programs. In the long term, I hope to encourage the University to add new affordable housing units for graduate students.

Thank you for reading this far, and thank you for your support.