



Graduate Student Assembly

Welcome Document 2026-2027

Authors: GSA Executive Committee

President Swarnima kain

Letter from the President

August 2026

Graduate and professional students, I am thrilled to welcome you to the 24-25 Graduate Student Assembly! Thank you for stepping up to represent your departments, programs, and fellow graduate and professional students.

This document will introduce you to GSA, covering how we conduct meetings and the responsibilities you'll have as a member. It also outlines the roles of each officer and committee and provides basic guidelines on submitting bills and the processes we follow.

Much of GSA's work happens outside our meetings, and your leadership extends beyond them. We represent graduate and professional students on various university-wide committees, influencing areas like academic freedom, compensation, course offerings, healthcare, student fees, access to technology, and campus facilities. GSA executives actively communicate with UNL administration, graduate studies, and the ASUN Senate to ensure that our voices are heard, and our experiences are considered.

GSA also leads initiatives to enhance the experience of graduate and professional students. Our GTAP program, for instance, awards thousands of dollars in grants each year for conference travel and professional development. Additionally, we organize and support numerous events throughout the year, offering opportunities for networking, professional growth, advocacy, and socializing.

I hope this inspires you to take on more leadership roles or encourages you to spread the word to others who might be interested. GSA is here to advocate for you, so please do not hesitate to reach out with any questions or concerns. I am excited to work with you all this year.

Sincerely,

Swarnima kain

Graduate Student Assembly President 2026/2027

gsa@unl.edu

What is GSA?

The University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL) is an institution that practices [shared governance](#), that is the belief that governing board members, administrators, faculty, students, and other stake holders share responsibility and cooperate in the decision-making and actions at the institution. At UNL, the Association of Students of the University of Nebraska at Lincoln ([ASUN](#)) administrates student governance. The Graduate Student Assembly ([GSA](#)) is a branch of ASUN created to exercise student governance of affairs specific to graduate students. ASUN's [Bylaws](#) (Section 9.A) states:

“As a unique population with roles as students, teachers, researchers, and/or staff, graduate students at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln require a special representative body that is tailored to their needs. The Graduate Student Assembly (GSA) will exercise the student governance of affairs solely involving graduate students at the University, as well as collaborate with the ASUN Senate, executives, and committees on issues affecting the entirety of the University’s student body.”

Why does GSA exist?

Graduate students are a vulnerable academic population in higher education. Issues such as: being overworked and underpaid, experiencing mistreatment and abuse, and even having their livelihood threatened are common for graduate students in institutions of higher education, and these issues are exacerbated for international graduate students and graduate students from minoritized backgrounds. In 2016, GSA originated as a group of students seeking avenues to serve and advocate for graduate students at UNL. GSA partnered with ASUN and became a legitimate branch of student government in the Spring of 2016. Since then, GSA has been the voice of graduate students on issues including:

Student Health Insurance. In the summer of 2017, the student health insurance policy was changed abruptly and without student input. GSA hosted a town hall, gathered concerns and complaints from graduate students, and were promised that any future changes to our health insurance would be discussed in a committee which would include GSA representation.

However, such a committee was never formed and did not meet. In the summer of 2019, another abrupt change was made to student health insurance without forewarning. GSA and graduate students at UNL responded strongly, and UNL negotiated a better insurance rate as a result of this backlash. Also, this time a committee was formed and included the GSA president.

Academic Freedom. In 2017, Courtney Lawton, a graduate student at UNL, made a political protest at the Union Plaza. As a result of this protest, Lawton was notoriously reprimanded by the University, removed from her teaching duties, and ultimately had her funding cut off. The fact that these decisions were made unilaterally and without following due process led to UNL being censured by the American Association of University Professors from 2018-2021. GSA wrote a letter to the administration condemning these acts against a graduate student, and held informing sessions for graduate students on their academic freedom protections.

Family Housing. Family housing has been available for married students or students with children for at least 20 years, but probably even longer. In February of 2022, UNL informed residents that they must vacate by June 30th. When GSA became aware of the issue the officer team worked with residents, who were mostly graduate students, to help put a hold on the closing of family housing. This discussion is still ongoing, and the GSA is working with ASUN to represent student's interests.

Student Health Insurance. Every few years, the University of Nebraska puts out a request for proposal to health insurance companies to determine what plan students will have. During the 2021-2022 school year, the GSA started asking questions about how this decision was going to be made with the goal of having student input. Within a few weeks and without us asking him, the Director of Risk Management for the entire University of Nebraska System reached out to us and asked if he could meet to answer our questions. During the meeting, the GSA executives present learned a lot about how healthcare was chosen. The Dean of Graduate Studies asked if anyone had ever surveyed the students regarding health insurance. As a result of the ASUN GSA's work there will be a survey this year regarding student health insurance for the entire NU System (UNL, UNO, UNMC, and UNK).

Living Stipends. Graduate student stipends at UNL have been as low as \$10,000 per year, which is well below the poverty line in Lincoln, NE. In 2018, GSA hosted listening sessions and advocated for a living stipend for all students. Unfortunately, this effort was interrupted because the Executive Vice Chancellor left the University. In 2022, the GSA took up this issue with administrators again. In response to the GSA's efforts, Executive Vice Chancellor Ankerson made a surprise announcement in February 2023 that the minimum stipend would be raised to \$14,000 in the Fall of 2023.

Executive Officers

GSA is led by an Executive Committee that comprises the President, Executive Vice President, Vice President of Student Affairs, Vice President of Representation, Vice President of Finance, and the chairs of every committee. A brief description of the President and Vice Presidents positions is given here. Note that any of these five officers cannot concurrently serve as department representatives and cannot vote with the assembly.

President: Swarnima kain, gsa@unl.edu

- Represents GSA to wider university community
- Coordinates meetings of entire assembly and executives
- Meets with Chancellor and [Dean of Graduate Studies](#) monthly, every semester.
- Serves on the [Academic Planning Committee](#), [Graduate Council](#), Faculty Senate, and [ASUN Executive Committee](#)
- Elected by entire graduate student body in April ASUN elections

Executive Vice President: Christina Fragel, vicepresidentgsa@unl.edu

- Appoints representatives to standing committees
- Serves on [Graduate Council](#)
- Elected by entire graduate student body in April ASUN elections
- Supports the president in their duties.

The VPs of Student Affairs, Representation, and Finances are each elected by the GSA at the first meeting after the installation of new President and Executive Vice President. They may lead GSA meetings or take minutes in the absence or request of the President and Executive Vice President. They must all have served at least one semester in GSA and cannot serve concurrently as department representatives.

Vice President of Student Affairs: vpstdaffairsgsa@unl.edu

- Records minutes at every GSA meeting

- Nominates graduate or professional students to university-wide committees
- Serves on the [Executive Vice Chancellor's Student Advisory Board](#)

Vice President of Representation: vprepresentationgsa@unl.edu

- Maintains list of members and ensure attendance of representatives
- Nominates all at-large GSA representatives

Vice President of Finance: vpfinancegsa@unl.edu

- Maintains current ledger of GSA finances and balances budget within allotted ASUN budget
- Provide monthly financial reports at assembly meetings
- Coordinates with ASUN Treasurer and all budgetary committees and officers

Meet the Committees

Every GSA representative is required to serve on an internal or external committee. After the first assembly meeting of the academic year, once the Executive Committee has solicited your preferences on where you'll do your committee service, you'll be assigned to a committee. Once assigned to a committee, you are required to attend meetings of that committee, and to help the committee fulfill its mission. Each internal committee will have one chair or two co-chairs, and these chairs serve on the GSA Executive Committee. Committee chairs are typically elected in the first meeting after the election of the GSA President and Executive Vice President but are occasionally elected at later meetings. Committee chairs will choose when and how often their committees meet and will coordinate with committee members to ensure that the committee accomplishes its mission for the academic year.

Social Events Co-Chairs: socialgsa@unl.edu

The Committee for Social Events plans, coordinates, and executes social events for all graduate students, including those for Graduate-Professional Student Appreciation Week (GSAW), and organizes and staffs all GSA activities during new graduate student welcome. The committee helps increase graduate and professional student work-life balance, as well as increases engagement and networking opportunities.

Graduate Travel Award Program (GTAP) Co-Chairs: Meryl Ohireka Sahouet, gtap@unl.edu

The Committee for GTAP oversees the promotion and process of awarding travel grants to undergraduate and graduate students of good academic standing who are presenting original work at an academic conference or performance. Grant applications are reviewed by faculty members and graduate students, and the process is competitive; about 10% of applicants win GTAP awards each cycle.

Quality of Life Chair: qualityoflifegsa@unl.edu

The Committee for Quality of Life seeks to improve and draw attention to graduate and professional students' quality of life. In the past, the Quality-of-Life committee has organized campaigns against legislation that would negatively impact graduate students, such as the taxation of graduate students' tuition waivers.

Academic Affairs Co-Chairs: academicaffairsgsa@unl.edu

The Committee for Academic Affairs seeks to ensure fair academic practices for graduate students. In previous years, the committee successfully circulated a survey to graduate students to gain better insight on graduate students' roles, experiences, support and compensation. Furthermore, the committee has collaborated with ASUN's Academic Affairs committee on both events and created the first version of this welcome informational packet for new GSA members.

Diversity and Inclusion Co-Chairs: diversityinclusionsgsa@unl.edu

The Committee for Diversity and Inclusion encourages and promotes the participation of graduate and professional students of all racial and ethnic backgrounds, nationalities, gender identities, sexual orientations, abilities, income levels and geographic locations in the university community. It ensures that GSA is accessible and relevant to the diverse graduate student community. In previous years, committee members were involved and organized events to celebrate Women and LGBTQA+ people, as well as to raise awareness of sexual violence in higher education. This committee collaborates closely with the office of the Executive Vice Chancellor of Diversity and Inclusion and with the ASUN Diversity and Inclusion committee.

Communications Co-Chairs: Communicationsgsa@unl.edu

The Committee for Communication works to provide information to graduate and professional students at UNL. This is done by email and the use of GSA social media. The committee is also in charge of updating the GSA website.

GSA Representatives

GSA representatives are the most important part of GSA. Without the representatives' input and commitment, GSA would not be effective in our job of representing and serving graduate and professional students at UNL. The following are some relevant information about GSA representatives, more details can be found in the [GSA Bylaws](#).

Serving Term

All representatives serve a renewable term of one year, starting the first day of September and finishing the last week of August.

If a department or program has not elected a representative by the first GSA meeting of the academic year, the previous year's representative or their alternate must attend this meeting.

Eligibility

1. Full-time graduate or professional student of represented department or program.
2. Cumulative grade point average greater than or equal to 3.0.
3. Not on academic or disciplinary probation.

Duties

Duties of representatives include, but are not limited to:

1. Attending all GSA meetings, unless excused by the VP of Representation.
2. Attending all meetings of your assigned GSA committee or external committee, unless excused by committee chair(s).
3. Assisting your committee in fulfilling its mission.
4. Disseminating information about GSA meetings, events, and other opportunities.
5. Meeting with your department's GSA and graduate chair.

Neglecting assembly and committee duties or committing any action unbecoming of an officer or representative of GSA may result in removal of the representative and vacancy of their department, subject to a disciplinary hearing and assembly vote.

Absences and Alternates

1. Two excused and one unexcused absence allowed per academic year
2. Refer to [Attendance Policy](#)

When a department's primary and alternative representatives miss two assembly meetings without an approved excuse, the department is declared vacant.

Vacancies

A department's failure to appoint and maintain a GSA representative during the previous and current academic years will render **all** graduate student members of the department ineligible for:

- ASUN-GSA Graduate Travel Awards.

Attendance Policy

Notifying GSA of Absences

Direct all of your absence requests the VP of Representation, at vprepresentationgsa@unl.edu no later than 24 hours prior to the scheduled GSA meeting.

- The VP of Representation will let you know they've received your question and whether your absence is excused.
 - If you request an excused absence less than 24 hours before the scheduled GSA meeting, the VP of Representation will consider the request on a case-by-case basis.
- If the VP of Representation doesn't grant you an excused absence, you may appeal to the Executive Committee. The Executive Committee's decision is final.

Maximum Absences Allowed

- GSA representatives are only entitled to two excused absences per academic year.
- GSA representatives (both principal and alternate) will be informed of their first unexcused absence no later than 48 hours after the absence takes place.

- A second unexcused absence will be reported to both the representatives (principal and alternate) and the Graduate Chair or Program Director. The VP of Representation will then request the appointment of a new individual to serve as that department's representative. The graduate chair may choose to re-appoint the current representative.
- If a department or program fails to appoint a representative, the Graduate Chair or Program Director will be notified of their department's lack of representative after two assembly meetings during which their department lacks representation.
- If a department or program accrues two unexcused absences (either by actual absence of the representative, or failure to appoint one), and does not rectify this situation by appointment or re-appointment of a representative, the department or program seat shall be considered vacated. Vacated department seats will be replaced by at-large representatives.
- Departments or programs that vacate their seats are ineligible for SPGP and GTAP funding in the following academic year.

Parliamentary Procedure (i.e. how to speak during a meeting)

As with most large institutional governing bodies, GSA follows parliamentary procedure as outlines in the [Robert's Rules of Order](#). In general, ***we request the floor during a meeting by raising our placards***, and once given the floor we speak during meetings through ***motions***. These motions are calls for the Assembly to do something. At GSA there are two types of instances in which we use motions differently:

1. When directing the flow of the meeting
2. When discussing the approval of a document, such as meeting minutes or bills.

Meeting Flow

The meeting agenda is set by the president and distributed to representatives with reasonably enough anticipation, typically the week before the meeting. In general, a meeting will be structures as follows:

- Call to Order.
- Approval of the Minutes.
- Open Forum.
- Executive Reports.
- Committee Reports.
- Old Business.
- New Business.
- Announcements.
- Adjournment.

Representatives may speak freely during Open Forum and Announcements, provided they have raised their placards and given the floor by the president. Representatives may also use the following motions during a meeting:

- ***Motion to Add Item to the Agenda***. When the president announces moving to New Business, a representative may request the floor, and make a motion to add an item to

the agenda. This is typically used to add emergency bills. The representative must justify why this item must be added and cannot wait until the following meeting.

- ***Motion to Table Item.*** At any point during the meeting a representative may request the floor and make a motion to table an agenda item, such as approving the minutes or a particular bill. This may be used when the meeting is running unnecessarily long, a discussion on an item is not being productive, or representatives believe they did not have enough time to review documentation.

Approval of Documents and Legislation

When approving documents, such as the meeting minutes, or legislation (i.e. Bills), the structure is the following:

- The president moves to consider approval of the document.
- If legislation is being considered, it will be presented by the member(s) who introduced it.
- The president will move to ***questions***. At this time any Assembly member may request the floor and ask a question.
- The president will move to ***discussion***. At this time any Assembly member may request the floor to make amendments.
- The president will move to ***vote***. At this time, representatives vote Yes, No, or Abstain on the item considered and the tally is counted.

Specific motions to consider during the introduction and approval of bills are given in [How to Pass a Bill](#).

Guidelines and Standard Procedures for Bills

Purpose of GSA Bills

Bills are crucial to carrying out GSA's mission. Practically everything that GSA does is accomplished through bills. The GSA passes three kinds of bills:

1. Appropriation Bills / Internal Affairs:

These bills approve the appropriation of funds from the GSA budget. Spending bills are also often related to particular events organized and run by the GSA. Internal affairs bills might not concern the allocation of funds, but might create an ad hoc committee, or an event with no funding. Both appropriations and internal affairs bills pass with a simple majority.

2. Resolutions

Resolutions are bills which declare a policy position. They may concern external affairs, such as a resolution in support of hurricane victims or national tax policy. More often, they will concern internal university affairs, such as graduate students' academic freedom. These bills often set the stage for further GSA advocacy on an issue. They pass with a simple majority.

3. Bylaw amendments

Bylaw amendments change the GSA bylaws. They must be submitted in writing to the GSA Executive Committee, which votes on whether to bring the proposed amendment to the assembly as a whole. If the Executive Committee votes to bring the proposed amendment to the assembly, they will electronically disseminate the proposed amendment and the accompanying bill at least one week before the assembly meeting. Passing a bylaw amendment requires the approval of three quarters of the assembly members. Once passed by the GSA assembly, a GSA bylaw amendment must be presented to the ASUN Senate, which can approve or kill the bylaw amendment, but cannot introduce any modifications. A two-thirds vote of ASUN Senators is needed to kill a GSA bylaw amendment.

Bringing a Bill to the Assembly

Most bills originate in a committee. If you want to bring a bill to the assembly, we recommend you first propose the bill to the relevant committee, and the committee chairs can help you

draft the bill. If that committee does not want to sponsor the bill, you can still bring it to the floor as an individual. For help drafting bills, please reach out to the president at gsa@unl.edu for formatting help.

Timeline for Introduction

In order to honor and respect representatives' time and make sure the parliamentary process runs as it should, you must submit a near-final copy of a bill to the president at least seven days before the GSA meeting. If you do not submit a copy of the bill at least seven days before the GSA meeting, it will not be included on the agenda.

If a bill could not have been submitted seven days prior to the GSA meeting—for instance, if it is a resolution on an event that happened five days before the scheduled GSA meeting—you may submit a bill to be introduced under emergency status. To do this, e-mail a copy of the bill to the president, and they can circulate it to the assembly, although it will not appear on the meeting agenda. Then, at the assembly meeting, a representative can introduce a motion to bring the legislation to the floor through emergency status. If the assembly approves this motion through a simple majority vote, the assembly can then question, discuss and vote on your bill.

Debate on Bills

Once at the assembly, bills are submitted to debate following [Robert's Rules of Order](#):

- First, the sponsor of the bill will provide a short introduction outlining the rationale and goal of the bill.
- Next, the sponsor will hold the floor and take questions from the assembly.
- Finally, the assembly will debate the bill and perhaps introduce amendments. Amendments are made by saying, "I move to amend..." and outlining the change or addition precisely. This requires a second, and then debate and a vote on the amendment before returning to the bill as a whole. One of the executives will make changes to a projected draft of the bill in real time.
 - Please bear in mind that stylistic (non-substantive) changes to wording are not the point here. To accommodate a variety of views and use our time together

well, we aim for language that's acceptable, but perhaps not ideal, to all. Assume the bill has been carefully written and has been reviewed by many eyes.

Once passed, the bill is signed by the President, goes into immediate effect, and is posted on the GSA website.

Detailed Parliamentary Procedure for Bills

- When a Bill is introduced, the Chair will recognize the individual who submitted the Bill. This individual will then explain the rationale behind the Bill and state what it is intended to accomplish.
- Following the introduction of the Bill, the Floor will then be open for questions. Anyone who wishes to ask a question will indicate they wish to obtain the Floor. The Chair will recognize each speaker in turn.
- When there are no further questions, the Floor will then be open for discussion and debate. This is an opportunity for individuals to state their opinions of the Bill, such as why they think the Assembly should or should not vote in favor of it. This is also an opportunity to make Motions regarding the Bill. Most Motions require another member to second them, after which the Motion will be considered officially declared, and the Assembly will then take the appropriate action. Normally, each member may only speak twice during discussion of a specific Bill, unless someone else yields their time to them.
 - A **Motion to Amend a Bill** is made when one wishes to change the wording of the Bill in some way such that it adds to, removes, or modifies the content of the Bill. Following a Motion to Amend, the Floor will then be open to questions over the amendment, followed by discussion and debate. Following discussion and debate of the amendment, a vote will be held. Should the vote pass, the amendment will then be incorporated into the Bill. The Floor will then move back into discussion and debate of the amended Bill as a whole.
 - A **Motion for a Friendly Amendment** does not require a second. This is a motion made when there is an error present in the drafted Bill that the person making the Motion wishes to correct, but which does not make any substantive changes to the

content or meaning of the Bill. Following the Motion, the correction will be automatically incorporated into the Bill. No vote of approval is required.

- A ***Motion to Call the Question*** is made when discussion has gone on for some time and the person making the Motion wishes to suppress further discussion and vote on the Bill itself. Following a Motion to Call the Question, the Assembly will then immediately move to a vote on whether or not to suppress further discussion. If the vote fails, discussion will proceed as normal. If the vote passes, discussion is immediately ended and the Assembly then moves to a vote over the adoption of the Bill itself.
- A ***Motion to Table*** is made when the person making the Motion wishes to postpone voting on the Bill until a future meeting. This can be because of several reasons, usually that additional information not currently available is needed regarding some aspect of the Bill in order for the Assembly to make an informed vote, or that the meeting has already gone on significantly longer than expected, and it is deemed best to postpone the vote until a later time when the Assembly can reconsider the Bill with a fresh perspective. Following the Motion, the Assembly will immediately vote on postponing the Bill. If the vote fails, discussion will proceed as normal. If the vote passes, discussion is immediately ended and the Bill is postponed to a future meeting.
- A ***Motion to Pass by Acclamation*** is made when the person making the Motion wishes to pass the Bill by Acclamation, rather than a formal vote. This means that the entire Assembly is considered to be in unanimous agreement that the Bill should be adopted, and no vote will otherwise be taken. However, any member of the Assembly may raise an Objection to overrule such a Motion if they wish to go on record as voting against the Bill or Abstaining.
- A ***Motion to Vote by Ballot*** is made when the person making the Motion wishes the vote to be by secret ballot, as opposed to a voice vote or show of hands. This preserves the anonymity of each voter, if they do not want their position on a Bill's adoption to be known to the Assembly at large. Occasionally Bills of a sensitive or

divisive nature may come before the Assembly, and voting by ballot enables each Assembly member to vote their conscience anonymously.

- A ***Motion for a Roll Call Vote*** is made when the person making the Motion wishes for each member to be called on in turn to state their vote. This is usually only done in cases where the member making the Motion suspects the Assembly to be more or less evenly divided on the Bill, and is not recommended to be routinely called for, as this effectively slows the meeting down for the Roll Call. This also has the effect of advertising each member's position on the Bill.
- When there is no further discussion or debate, the Assembly will move to a vote on the Bill. Unless it is otherwise moved, this is usually done by a voice vote or show of hands. Most Bills pass by a simple majority vote, but occasionally a Bill will require a greater majority, usually 2/3 or 3/4, to pass. Each member may vote Yes, No, or Abstain for a Bill's adoption. A vote of Abstain means that the member does not wish to vote one way or another and instead is withholding their vote. This is occasionally done in cases where an individual feels too conflicted over whether or not to support a Bill, or if they are not personally in support of it, but believes that the Bill will still be adopted regardless. This may also be done in cases where a member does not wish to go on record as openly voting against the Bill.
- Upon voting, the Bill is either adopted or rejected. Adopted Bills go into immediate effect upon approval.