This project, a collaboration between the Graduate Student Society (GSS), the VP-Students Office and Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies (G+PS), has two main goals: (1) explore the feasibility of creating a vibrant Graduate Life Centre at UBC, and (2) pilot a program to encourage and support enhanced intellectual community within (and/or between) graduate programs. These goals are related, and address 3 areas of key focus of the university’s strategic plan: student experience; community; and wellbeing, in addition to those of the UBC Wellbeing and the G+PS plans. In particular, UBC’s strategic plan commits to ‘work[ing] closely with student government [to] create opportunities for students to feel more engaged and better supported,’ and to ‘continue to develop and improve student hubs, such as the AMS Nest.’

While undergraduate-oriented student spaces, such as the Nest and Collegia, serve those students well, graduate students have little dedicated space and programming aimed at developing social connection and intellectual community. A room in the Nest is rented by the GSS, but has limited potential to function as a vibrant ‘home’ for graduate activity. The Graduate Research Commons being created in the Koerner Library will be an important space for academic work and collaboration, but is not designed or able to function as a multi-purpose community venue. The Thea Koerner House Graduate Student Centre, on the other hand, was expressly donated by Leon Koerner to provide “a home away from home for graduate students,” “an environment where graduate students can gather for social, cultural and intellectual activities.” Unfortunately, for a number of reasons, it has been decreasingly used for these purposes over the years, and much of the space remains empty and in need of a ‘refresh’ for the needs of today’s student population. Although the building is not centrally located, it has many advantages: it is...
already used for most G+PS professional development programming and some GSS activities; there is significant graduate student traffic through the building and its annex (including the G+PS office and dissertation defense rooms) and the adjacent Koerner’s Pub; and it is in a stunning location with significant property around it that could be used for social events, children’s play areas, etc. Many, if not most research universities have a dedicated space for the graduate student community and related programming, and it is felt that UBC is disappointingly deficient in that regard. Examples include Yale University’s McDougall Graduate Student Center, McGill’s Thomson House, U of T’s Grad Room, and the Graduate Life Center at Virginia Tech.

In a related vein, UBC heard in the Graduate Studies strategic plan consultations that students frequently feel little to no connection with the faculty and students in their own departments or grad programs. Given the critical importance of intellectual community in students’ scholarly development and wellbeing, this is highly problematic. While there is no easy fix to this problem, a collaborative team from UBC Wellbeing and G+PS have been piloting strategies to enhance community in select departments, and a suggestion was raised in our consultations to further this work by offering small, competitive grants to UBC programs/departments more broadly (tentatively called Student & Program Intellectual Community Enhancement funds or SPICE). These could be used to establish regular lunch-time journal clubs or seminar series, for example, or to renovate spaces to allow them to function as an inviting, communal area. UBC would assess the initiative after a one-year pilot to determine whether the funding was useful, and whether the resultant activities led to a deepened connection and engagement between departmental/program members.

This proposal is asking for the salary of one individual dedicated to completing the groundwork for the Graduate Life Centre and to develop and oversee the intellectual community pilot, as well as the initial funding for the pilot. There is also no shortage of related, ongoing work the individual could assist with if they have time. The Graduate Life Centre research and groundwork would entail:

- Engaging Facilities Planning at UBC to review the space and possible renovations, feasibility and budget;
- With the GSS, consult with the graduate student community to determine interest in and the aspects of a Graduate Life Centre that would be most valued;
- Travelling to exemplary graduate life centers elsewhere to gather advice and ideas; and
- If time permits, piloting a particular program or service in the building to gauge feasibility/interest.

The SPICE pilot work would involve consultations with students and programs to determine interest and ideas, the creation of resources to promote the project and provide potential examples, and management of the competition and funding. Assessment of the pilot would also be essential.

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| IMPLEMENTATION AREA | All Vancouver | All Okanagan |
**How Does This Project Support the Themes?**

**Collaboration:** The project itself is ‘purposeful, coordinated action across the university,’ and seeks to further (multidisciplinary) interactions between students, and between students and faculty.

**Inclusion:** This project promotes fuller engagement of all students with each other and with faculty, and thus supports the theme of ‘integration of diverse perspectives and approaches’ in student research, education and experience. A Graduate Life Centre would also likely offer specific programming to enhance inclusion — including, for example, intercultural events, programs to support students who often feel marginalized within the university system (e.g., those with children, who are older, etc.), and thematic support sessions jointly offered through Counselling Services, Wellbeing and G+PS, among others.

**Innovation:** A more robust and more diverse intellectual community would enhance open-mindedness, creativity and lateral thinking, all essential for innovation in the academy.

**What Will Be Different as a Result of This Project?**

Isolation and loneliness among graduate students are recurring themes in every survey and consultation conducted at UBC. UBC student comments in the 2016 Canadian Graduate and Professional Student Survey (CGPSS) include, for example: ‘Overall, my experience was isolating/lonely’; ‘I was not able to finish my program because of my mental health issues that were in part brought on by the isolating experience of graduate work’; ‘Four years is too much valuable time and energy [to spend in a department that has a terrible and/or lack of community…I was told that all departments have these kinds of problems’.) These issues are not unique to UBC, which is why concerted efforts are being made by most universities to enhance a sense of community and belonging among the graduate student body. While all three of our offices have accomplished significant work in this area, there is clearly still much to be done.

A vibrant Graduate Life Centre would have a large impact on the student experience. It is heartening to hear and read of the impact that other such centres have had, and we look forward to the day that we, too, have a more thriving community of graduate students and a space they can call home. Success in creating the Centre and enhancing intra- and inter-departmental community would result in less loneliness and isolation among students, enhanced and broadened intellectual development, and a greater sense of belonging and regard for the university (which is a known key factor in student success). Community is clearly also important for faculty and postdocs, and we believe that a more engaging and lively sense of community within departments would be beneficial to all members.

**What Are Our Key Metrics? How Will We Know If We Are Successful?**

The most direct measure would be a survey of students using the Centre and participating in the pilot SPICE program. A broader, but less direct measure would be the responses to the CGPSS and GSS surveys relating to student life experience. In the 2016 CGPSS survey, 27.2 per cent of graduate students rated their student life experience ‘fair’ or ‘poor’ relative to 22.9 per cent nationally. We want to see reductions in these numbers. There are many factors that contribute to the student experience, however, so it would be impossible to causally relate any change to these initiatives, and any global effects may be longer term.
The SPICE project is a pilot. If unsuccessful or less than fully successful, we would need to understand why, and to subsequently re-think our approaches to enhancing community. If successful, we would proceed along a few different paths, including advocating for continued funding, and ‘spreading the word’ broadly about the results to encourage departments to undertake and/or continue their own efforts more deliberately. The lessons learned would also be communicated to graduate programs through the resources and regular professional development opportunities we provide grad directors and staff. We anticipate that the conversation and competition itself will help raise awareness of the issue and encourage programs to consider possibilities for their units.