

GSA Academic Plan Submission, 2009-2010: Moving Towards Quality of Graduate Education

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In the upcoming four year cycle of the University's academic plan, graduate students desire and need the University to do following to create an environment conducive to graduate student education, development, research:

- Increase Affordable and Equitable Access of Graduate Education
- Foster the Community of Graduate Students and Quality of Education
- Reform the Graduate Student Supervisory Structure and Feedback on Graduate Supervision
- Provide Pioneering Professional Development
- Increase and Improve Ethics Training
- Develop New Graduate Student Support Services and Support Mechanisms
- Enhance Interinstitutional and Internationalization Nature of Graduate Education

It is only through providing this community that the University can begin to expect that its graduate students will become a part of the "Knowledge Energy" movement. At the institutional level, the University has issued two fundamental documents that serve to further guide this Submission: *Dare to Discover* and *Dare to Deliver*.

Dare to Discover serves to identify the Four Cornerstones of the University:

- Talented People;
- Learning, Discovery, and Citizenship;
- Connecting Communities;
- Transformative Organization and Support.¹

¹ *Dare to Discover*, 8.

Dare to Discover also expands on the University's values of excellence in teaching, the centrality of students, integrity, fairness and ethics, and the power of diversity.²

Dare to Deliver serves as the University's Academic Plan from 2007 to 2011, and seeks to establish the *means* in which the University as a whole can strive to achieve the goals and uphold the values as stated in *Dare to Discover*. As such, the University recognized that there were four objectives necessary to allow the University to progress and work towards its worthy goal of "Top 20 by 2020." They are:

- Discovery Learning;
- Incubating Scholarship;
- Community Engagement Near and Far;
- Building the Transformative Organization.³

Indeed, the complimentary relationship that *Dare to Discover* and *Dare to Deliver* share has to be highlighted. In the course of preparing this academic plan for the next four years, this Submission will reference and build upon the broad principles and specific objectives first established in these documents.

The University of Alberta boasts a vibrant graduate student community of nearly 7000 students,⁴ in 72 different departments,⁵ and in 15 different faculties. These students are engaged in numerous and diverse endeavours as students registered in one of 110 master's degree programs, or one of 60 doctorate programs.⁶ In total, graduate students are engaged in over 300 research areas.⁷

² *Ibid.*, 5

³ *Dare to Deliver*, 7.

⁴ University of Alberta Facts, "Students at a Glance," University of Alberta, <http://www.uofaweb.ualberta.ca/facts/nav01.cfm?nav01=94745>, (accessed January 13, 2010)

⁵ University of Alberta Calendar 202.1

⁶ Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research, "Programs," Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research, <http://www.gradstudies.ualberta.ca/program/listing.jsp> (accessed January 21, 2010)

⁷ *Ibid.*

Another important quality of the graduate student community at the University is that approximately 25% of the students are visa students,⁸ highlighting the increasingly international component of the University and the entire world of graduate education. With such diversity and collective strength, graduate students comprise the largest contingent of researchers at the University of Alberta,⁹ and are a powerful but still untapped resource of the “Knowledge Energy” movement.

Increase Affordable and Equitable Access of Graduate Education

Affordability is a prerequisite for engagement.¹⁰ Particular attention has to be paid towards the practical limitations that many graduate students face. Application fees, compulsory fees, base tuition, and market modifiers are institutionally created financial barriers that present undue hardships on graduate students. Indeed, this does not take into account the associated costs of graduate education, such as textbook costs, and further does not take into account the onerous International Student Differential, which presents yet another barrier for engaging international students. Without due support of the University to mitigate these barriers in meaningful ways, the University is at a competitive disadvantage at attracting and retaining quality graduate students, especially when the value of charging such exorbitant rates are not apparent. As such, specific objectives to increase access and affordability are:

- Maintain the competitive advantage of UofA offering quality programs with lower cost
- Recruit brightest students from all around the world enhancing more competitive recruitment scheme and eliminating the International Differential and program differential fees
- Equitable funding opportunities all across the campus.
- Create and foster more intra-institutional funding opportunities and financial aid geared specifically to graduate students
- Take concrete measures to raise awareness on current and existing funding opportunities and financial aid

⁸ Statistics about the UofA, “Graduate Student Citizenship Status at the UofA,” Strategic Analysis Office, <http://www.uofaweb.ualberta.ca/uastatistics/nav02.cfm?nav02=84884&nav01=82852> (accessed January 13, 2010)

⁹ Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research, “Graduate Student Research,” Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research, <http://www.gradstudies.ualberta.ca/studentresearch.htm> (accessed January 21, 2010)

¹⁰ *Senate Task Force on Student Engagement*, 25.

- Continue to support initiatives to lower living costs
- Affordable and equitable access of graduate students in leadership role and provide more rewards for extracurricular and student engagement activities.
- Develop new and innovative means to recruit graduate students, for instance, establishing recruitment offices in leading scholarship zones;

Foster the Community of Graduate Students and Quality of Education

The impressive diversity of graduate students at the University is undermined by the prevailing attitude of “clusterization” within the population. In other words, graduate students lack the opportunities necessary to reach out, communicate, and form beneficial relationships with their peers outside of their specific programs and departments. Indeed, it can be stated that this clusterization seeks to not only undermine the sense of community among graduate students as a whole, but also seeks to undermine the worthy goals of fostering interdisciplinary, inter-institutional, and international approaches to research at the University. In light of the notion that such research is commonly seen as the way of the twenty-first century,¹¹ not fostering the fundamental sense of community and camaraderie amongst graduate students at the University leaves it at a competitive disadvantage. As such, specific objectives to help foster the community of graduate students are:

- Improve the quality of graduate faculty recruitment and research initiatives
- Open more innovative research centers such as National Institute for Nanotechnology, to meet the challenges of cutting edge research quality and inventions
- Increase and foster opportunities for undergraduate-graduate, and graduate-post-doctoral mentorship and social exchange
- Uphold the values of new inventions by graduate students
- Support and promote graduate student scholarship and communication, such as encouraging the active use of the University’s institutional repository to gather graduate theses, papers, dissertations, and presentation materials
- Increase the size, number, and quality of graduate student common and office spaces on campus

¹¹ *Dare to Deliver*, 13

- Increase and foster opportunities for graduate students and faculty to meet and collaborate socially outside of the classroom or laboratory
- Increase and foster expanded opportunities for graduate students to work together in the broader community context, through partnerships such as Community Service Learning, or the FGSR Community Outreach initiatives
- Design the university governance process open, transparent, and accountable

Reform of the Graduate Student Supervisory Structure

In the course of deliberations for this Submission, students throughout the graduate student population identified that the lack of a common model for master's (course and thesis-based) and doctorate degree supervision presented significant and undue personal and professional challenges. Indeed, students also cited that the lack of common supervisory models, and the lack of accessible, effective and fair means to check the potentially subversive power of supervisors, presented institutional and bureaucratic challenges including: i) different administrators in the same department giving different answers to the same question, ii) frustration, confusion, and lack of knowledge regarding appeal mechanisms, iii) frustration, confusion, and lack of knowledge regarding the roles of different bodies at the University, iv) perception that the FGSR is ineffectual and powerless, v) perception that the departments are autocratic and unaccountable. These perceptions, whether founded or not, nonetheless seek to undermine overall graduate student confidence in the University. This further leads to an undermining of community awareness, engagement, and quality scholarship. As such, specific objectives to reform the graduate student supervisory structure are:

- Create a novel graduate supervision evaluation mechanism from the graduate students.
- Provide an adequate mentorship for the new graduate supervisors
- Provide adequate recognitions for the high-quality supervisions and research
- Develop flexible policies and procedures to allow for unique circumstances, such as the switching supervisors, and emergency leave.
- Standardize and make transparent the academic appeal mechanisms available to graduate students throughout programs, departments, and faculties;
- Raise awareness and provide information on the roles, duties, and responsibilities of different bodies involved in graduate student administration;

- Raise awareness and provide information on the rights and responsibilities of graduate students;
- Bolster and enhance the authority and accessibility of mediating services such as the Office of Safe Disclosure and Human Rights, the Office of the Dean of Students, and the Student Ombudservice.

Provide for Professional Development

Research is indeed one of the primary reasons that students consider a graduate education. However, graduate students also view that their graduate experience should and must be an overall holistic one that contributes to the development of their individual selves beyond the confines of the campus. Graduate students have indicated that there is a need and demand for graduate professional development opportunities to better prepare themselves for the demands of professional life. As such, specific objectives to provide for professional development are:

- Provide adequate funding opportunities for graduate students to attend professional development workshops, courses, conferences and services
- Foster the interdisciplinary: interinstitutional:internationalization approach
- Develop opportunities for interaction and mentorship in industry, the laboratory, etc
- Provide opportunities for graduate students to earn adequate real class teaching experience
- Support and promote initiatives for improving graduate student writing skills, such as the Centre for Writers and Academic Support Centers
- Support and promote initiatives for providing formal and concrete teaching skills, such as the UTS Teaching Certificate and teaching practica;
- Support and create initiatives for the training of graduate student presentation skills;
- Promote and increase the use of the FGSR Professional Development Modules, and make it a more dynamic and engaging tool.
- Develop innovative means for instruction teaching such as podcasting, webcasting, and video broadcasting.

Increase and Improve Ethics Training

Research is not the core of the University; quality and responsible research is its core. While FGSR currently mandates ethics training for all graduate students, it fails to uphold a standard

level of ethical training and devolves nearly all the responsibility to the department level.¹² On occasion, students have cited that this devolution of responsibility of providing ethics training to the department level has led to inconsistent, ineffective, and unclear ethics training. As future scholars and brokers of knowledge and information, students are clearly frustrated and feel that they lack the proper ethics training necessary to be a responsible professional, researcher, and scholar. As such, specific objectives to increase and improve ethics training are:

- Create a Research and Teaching Ethics day for graduate students community
- Design a comprehensive Research Ethics for graduate supervisors
- Mandate the inclusion of a balanced and comprehensive general introduction to ethics for all graduate students, similar to the current FGSR Graduate Ethics Training module available through E-Class
- Create opportunities for graduate student to attend the ethics training and conferences

Develop New Graduate Student-Oriented Services and Support Mechanisms

There are several University services, yet few students know about them because of a lack of promotion. The University should strive to be a leader and pioneer in providing services that directly meet the needs of the unique students it hosts. Graduate students identified several tangible services that would be of considerable benefit to graduate students in orienting themselves to a new institution, a new city, and a new community. Indeed, the University has stated that “prioritizing the first year at university as a critical opportunity for student engagement and revitalize the undergraduate experience for all new comers” is a noteworthy and important goal.¹³ Even though the Report specifically refers to undergraduate students, it is reasonable and appropriate that this statement can be extrapolated to include first year *graduate* students. As such, specific objectives develop new graduate student-oriented services and support mechanisms are:

- Increase awareness of existing graduate student services
- Create effective and fast communication and transit system for the graduate students

¹² Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research, “Ethics Training Requirement,” Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research, <http://www.gradstudies.ualberta.ca/degreesuperv/ethics/index.htm> (accessed January 21, 2010)

¹³ *Senate Task Force on Student Engagement*, 41.

- Encourage existing University services to form a comprehensive and cooperative agency network, and foster a willingness to refer clients and students to these partner agencies;
- Introduce a more graduate student-focussed component to CAPS, or create a version of CAPS specifically geared towards graduate students;
- Introduce a more graduate student-focussed component to Student Financial Aid Information Centre, or create a version of Student Financial Aid Information Centre specifically geared towards graduate students;
- Create a Graduate Housing Office to better assist out-of-town students in finding accommodation while living in Edmonton. Such an office should be sensitive to the fact that many students who attend the University will have little or no knowledge of Edmonton, and as such, should have a more personalized approach in providing services;
- Create and distribute a more comprehensive and personalized information and orientation package on the University of Alberta and Edmonton to out-of-town students.

Enhance Interinstitutional and Internationalization Nature of Graduate Education

The European Union's Bologna Process, aimed at recognizing student credentials across nations and breaking down bureaucratic barriers that only serve to impede the flow of knowledge and research,¹⁴ is one of the most exciting and sophisticated developments in higher education in many decades. As the nations of Europe work together to create a common zone of knowledge flow and exchange, where graduate students can cross both physical and metaphorical borders of academia with much greater ease, the competition and opportunity that this development presents to the University of Alberta cannot be understated. The need and the opportunity for the University to address the Bologna Process are only further bolstered by the increasingly interdisciplinary, inter-institutional, and international nature of graduate research. As such, specific objectives to monitor and meet continuing developments in international graduate education are:

- Provide for joint degree and double degree initiatives at foreign universities
- Create a matrix that allows for instant comparison of Bologna process degrees and University of Alberta degrees

¹⁴ Adelman, 7.

- Facilitate the two-way international student exchange by ensuring that Bologna Process degrees are compatible with University of Alberta programs, and vice-versa
- Monitor developments that non-Bologna Process countries are taking in response to the Bologna Process

Conclusions

Through embarking upon the suggestions made in the aforementioned seven points, it is believed that the University of Alberta will make great strides in becoming a top-calibre institution that will support the individual and collective endeavours of graduate students. It is further believed that with these measures taken, the University will be an international pioneer in graduate education. We have to move forward with a holistic approach to graduate student education in the 21st century to uphold the spirit of *Quality of Graduate Education*.

Acknowledgements

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