



**Navigating your Path:  
Exploring and Supporting Teaching Assistant and  
Graduate Student Development**

**Conference held at the University of Toronto  
and hosted by their Centre for Teaching Support  
and Innovation**

**May 6 - 7, 2011**

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The conference brought together education researchers, educational developers, faculty members, administrators, independent scholars, graduate students, librarians, learning support specialists and student life professionals from Canada and the United States to share strategies and emerging research around TA training and graduate student support. It was the first of its kind in Canada and came about as a result of the establishment of TAGSA (Teaching Assistant and Graduate Student Advancement), a special interest group of STLHE (Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education).

Attendance statistics indicated a strong graduate student presence and contribution to the generation of ideas on the conference theme:

- 41.5% of attendees were graduate students
- 27% were faculty members
- 21.5% were others (non-faculty librarians, educational developers, student life personnel, learning specialists, and independent researchers)
- 10% were administrators.

The program's keynote address, "The Pitfalls of a Self-Replicating Culture," by Dr. Douglas Peers, Dean of Graduate Studies and Associate Vice President, Graduate, at York University, addressed the professoriate and emphasized the need to move beyond the ways graduate supervisors were trained and supervised as graduate students:

- To begin with, the practice of research itself has changed: it is more global and collaborative in nature, crosses boundaries between universities, and crosses boundaries between other universities and other kinds of civil and economic institutions.
- Only a small fraction of today's graduate students (as few as 30% in some programs and disciplines) will find traditional tenure-track positions in the academy.
- It is essential that our institutions prepare and graduate students who are flexible, adaptable, and (to put it bluntly) more employable than may have been the case in the past.

- The need is especially acute given the costs of educating graduate students, the shortfall in government funding to meet these costs, and the general environment of accountability on the part of the government and the public with respect to the necessity of educating a workforce that meets many more potential needs than the staffing of postsecondary institutions.
- Yet change is very difficult for institutions like universities, with ancient roots, and this is exacerbated by the fact that the relationship between supervisors and those supervised is mythologized as private, idiosyncratic, and sacrosanct – so that opportunities for self-replication on the part of university professors abound.
- It is also exacerbated by the emphasis on universities with respect to increased competition for fewer external grants, so that the emphasis on the graduate student as labour needed to support faculty success (and university success) in research competitions is increasing.

His advice?

- Reshape curricula so that original research/contributions to knowledge remain significant if not central, no matter how utilitarian the program or the discipline.
- Revisiting candidacy examinations is a start: not all need to be ‘comprehensives’ in nature – e.g. portfolio examinations may be even more beneficial in terms of training and as knowledge indicators.
- However, must supplement the original research contribution component with other kinds of teaching and training.
- It is especially important that graduate students be trained in communication skills that include writing for different audiences, and ‘writing short’ as well as ‘writing long.’
- Graduate students need career preparation – for jobs different from those traditional academic positions we have almost exclusively privileged.
- Students will need to multitask and to work in team environments.
- They need to be prepared for a world that involves more collaboration and is more interdisciplinary.
- Entrepreneurial thinking is essential – and must be based on thinking about, knowing, and acting upon one’s strengths.
- And they need to profit from our willingness to put our time and resources into supplementing their core education with skills training that will help them to forge their pathway into the world of work and their potential contribution to the wider world in varied ways.
- Above all, graduate students need to profit from a culture shift on our part – we need to internalize (so that they can internalize it) respect for non-academic careers.

A great deal depends upon what we think graduate education is for. Clearly the intellectual formation and development - academic skills, independent

thinking, generating new knowledge, and so on – will be paramount. However, much of the discussion sparked by the plenary address assumed that we ought to be assisting students to develop themselves as well as their disciplinary or interdisciplinary expertise.

- There was discussion of the importance of “citizenry” – the responsibility of graduate educators to model and encourage integrity, compassion, commitment, and the desire and will to make a positive difference in the world.
- Students themselves want to be able to acquire, or create, jobs that are more than jobs, work that will make a difference to the world at large. They see themselves as needing coaching in “real-world” habits, attributes and strategies. They prefer workshops with a tight, practical focus - hands on and/or interactive where possible.

A number of universities shared their university-wide structures for offering graduate student professionalization, notably the University of British Columbia, University of Toronto, University of Western Ontario, Queen’s University and McGill University. As well, there were representatives from American institutions, including Berkeley, Pepperdine, the University of Colorado and Michigan State. What struck me was

- The reliance of Canadian universities on their Centres for Teaching and Learning to offer, and often to coordinate their offerings
- The thinness of the staffing, and lack of dedicated ongoing budget lines for the support of this activity
- How frequently the expressions “good will” and “voluntary labour” came into play in discussion of their operations
- On the American side, the ability of most such programs to get off the ground because of substantial support from grants from significant national Foundations
- Lastly, the assiduousness with which the American schools collected data and generated statistics in support of their success - which assisted with the ongoing funding put into place once the foundational grants had expired.

The need for professional skills training for graduate students is not new. The Canadian Association of Graduate Studies developed a list of nine areas of professional skills development as proposed in a TriCouncil/STLHE/CAGS workshop in 2007:

- Communication and interpersonal skills
- Critical and creative thinking
- Personal effectiveness
- Integrity and ethical conduct
- Teaching competence

- Leadership
- Research management
- Knowledge mobilization and knowledge translation
- Societal/civic responsibilities.

Since then, CAGS has summarized these into four areas of focus: communication, management, teaching, and ethics. For more information, see the 2008 CAGS document Professional Skills Development for Graduate Students.

We were interested in the wide array of skills that were identified in the discussions. In no particular order, these included:

- Communications Skills, both oral and verbal
- General Research Skills - i.e. beyond or outside one's own thesis area
- Teaching and Pedagogy
- Career Search - especially non-academic possibilities
- CV and Resume Writing
- Working in and Leading Teams
- Project Management
- Conflict Resolution
- Managing the Supervisor/Student Relationship
- Protecting Intellectual Property
- Supervising and Mentoring Others
- Making the Most of a Short-Term Contract
- Reflective Learning
- Working in Unionized Environments
- Media Relations
- Diversity Training
- Grant Writing
- Time Management
- Work Life Balance
- Setting Boundaries
- Avoiding Procrastination
- Ethics
- Entrepreneurship
- Networking
- Thinking Creatively
- Developing Portfolios

It would be interesting to know which of these foci are of particular interest to our own students, since student bodies differ in significant ways and may have different needs.

As a follow up to this conference, the organizers (Megan Burnett from the University of Toronto) facilitated the plenary session for TAGSA at the STLHE

(Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education) conference in Saskatoon June 15-18<sup>th</sup>, 2011.

Questions driving the discussion included

- what are the diverse ways we can prepare students for multiple roles and career paths?
- what are we doing now that is working?
- what can we do more of to assist graduate students?

Of interest was a report on a post conference survey asking conference participants to identify conference topics and issues they deemed important to assist them in their work as graduate students (or those who support graduate students). Participants upheld the comments of the PATH plenary speaker in voicing the need for career preparation for jobs different from those traditional academic positions. Also underscored were:

- ways of improving communication (ie assistance with how to communicate effectively with those who impact their work such as supervisors, how to effectively present their work, orally and in writing, how to network with scholars and with those in the industry).
- a focus on holistic development as graduate students, not just skill development: how to balance work and life; how to manage with limited resources; preparing for a role as an academic; how to handle interpersonal conflict such as challenges with supervisors, committee members and the politics of the academy; support and guidance around the expectations of graduate work as related to the defense, grant applications, etc.

Suggestions for moving forward with graduate education included discussions around the purpose of graduate education in light of changing workplace expectations and the job market, how to get buy in from senior leaders for professional development in graduate education, how to stay engaged in graduate education (retention issues) and the benefits of a holistic focus versus a skills based approach. Talking points that emerged included:

- the need for greater coordination of units and individuals that support graduate students education across campuses
- the need for graduate students to better network with each other for social and academic support
- the need for training and support for faculty members who supervise graduate students
- the need for buy in from all levels of the academy (top down) as well as the graduate students themselves
- an institutional message that says it recognizes diverse career paths and values the commitment to professional development of its graduate

- students. This can be done through transcript notation and marketing profiles of successful grads in non-academic career paths, among other examples.
- the need to talk with students and better educate the university community on what can be done with a graduate degree in each discipline. Modelling ways in which a graduate degree is used in industry. Stop seeing it as a failure if a job in academe is not secured upon completion of a PhD.
  - the need for a national initiative around the support of graduate students. (TAGSA plans to provide documents and web resources related to best practices in graduate education professional development through the newly launched web site). This could include profiles of graduate students who are successfully using their graduate degrees in industry and elsewhere.
  - Use of social media as an avenue for connecting and supporting grad students. This last item emerged in a number of sessions during the STLHE conference in that traditional marketing and communication avenues for reaching and connecting graduate students are shifting radically.

In identifying a plan for the support of graduate students at Brock University, it might be helpful to examine the range of professional and holistic skills identified by the various stakeholders at these two conferences and survey our own students to determine what their specific needs and interests might be. For example, UBC positions Disciplinary Knowledge and Research as the centre or core of graduate education, but identifies five spokes emanating from that centre which it calls Graduate School Success, Career Building, Self-Management, Constructive Leadership, and Professional Effectiveness.

It might be a good place to start for us to imagine what the core and the spokes might be for Brock, as we move forward. For example, UBC's model does not clearly include the development of teaching skills in graduate students, yet this is a Brock strength. The CTLET has, for a number of years, offered three levels of programming for Brock graduate students on teaching development which in some areas expand into the professional skills outlined above, including portfolio development, time management, reflective practice, and communication/presentation skills. The CTLET and Graduate Studies also began an initiative with other units on campus such as the Career Centre, Student Development Centre, GSA and the Library to look at ways of coordinating professional development initiatives across campus. We now have a web site in place to identify local resources for a more holistic approach to graduate student development, but there is still much we can do to support our students as they work towards career paths beyond the academy.

## References

Canadian Association for Graduate Studies “Professional skills Development for Graduate Students”, CAGS, November 2008.

<http://www.cags.ca/pages/en/publications/cags-publications.php>

TAGSA (Teaching Assistant and Graduate Student Advancement), a special interest group of STLHE web site

<http://www.stlhe.ca/special-interest-groups/tagsa/>

STLHE (Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education) web site

<http://www.stlhe.ca/>