Report of the Graduate Student Experience Committee 2010-2011

21 January 2011

Proposals for Enhancing Graduate Student Experience

Proposal 1: Representatives of the Faculty of Arts consult/meet with the Chairs of the various graduate student associations to discuss the issue of space.

Proposal 2: Assign academic assistants specifically to graduate programs, locate them in departments, and enable them to assist students by granting the necessary training and a manageable workload.

Proposal 3: A regular schedule of orientation and training sessions offered in part by departments and in part by the Faculty of Arts.

Proposal 4: Departments maintain a webpage, uoZone page, or a handbook posted on the web, updated annually, providing essential information about program requirements and practices as well as making hard copies of such information available.

Proposal 5: Convene occasional meetings of graduate directors to discuss and compare their practices in facilitating the progress of students through a program.

Proposal 6: Engage in transition planning when a new director of graduate studies is to be appointed.

Proposal 7: Enhance the diversity of relevant course offerings for graduate students by identifying and pre-approving at the department/program level courses offered in other departments that could be incorporated into existing graduate programs and accessed by graduate students, where appropriate.

Proposal 8: That the Faculty of Arts, along with the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies, re-examine the 10-hour cap and the potential for making graduate student funding more flexible.

Proposal 9a: Offer regular teaching assistantships to all students with external scholarships along the lines of the admission scholarship that they have obtained, or likely would obtain upon admission into their respective programs.

Proposal 9b: Guarantee a set level of teaching assistantships (e.g. 2 for MA, 4 for PhD) for graduate students holding external scholarships.

1. The Committee

The Graduate Student Experience Committee was established in early November 2010 as part of the 2010-1015 Strategic Planning exercise undertaken by the Faculty of Arts. The Committee was comprised of ten people representing various facets of the Faculty:

Name	Affiliation	Position
Lori Burns	Faculty of Arts	Vice-Dean Graduate Studies
Mary Cavanagh	Information Studies	Regular Professor
Theodore De Bruyen	Classics and Religious Studies	Regular Professor
Rachel Fontaine-Azzi	Office of Graduate Studies	Graduate Studies Administrator
Alexandre Gauthier	Département de français	Graduate Student
Juana Muñoz-Liceras*	Modern Languages and Literatures	Regular Professor
Danielle O'Connor	Translation and Interpretation	Graduate Studies Academic Assistant
Daniel J. Paré*	Communication	Regular Professor
S. Kate Ploeger	Geography	Graduate Student
Roxane Prevost	School of Music	Regular Professor

* Committee Co-Chairs

2. Information Gathering Strategy

In order to obtain information about the existing graduate student experience within the Faculty of Arts, as well suggestions for improving this experience, the committee engaged in two major information gathering exercises.

The first was a roundtable meeting, held on the afternoon of November 2nd 2010, with members of the graduate student associations of each of the different departments and schools in the Faculty of Arts. The objective of this meeting was to learn firsthand from graduate students about issues that matter to them. The role of the Committee members at this event centered primarily upon facilitating discussion and taking notes.

The issues raised at this meeting served as a broad framework for guiding discussions at the second major information gathering exercise – i.e., the Town Hall meeting held on November 22nd, 2010.

In addition to these two events, the Committee members engaged in a series of brainstorming meetings aimed at developing propositions for moving forward on the basis of what it had learned from the above undertakings. These are presented below.

3. Domains Identified As Enhancing Graduate Student Experience

There were four domains identified as needing attention by the Faculty Arts in order to enhance Graduate Student experience. The Committee categorized them as follows:

1. Space;
2. Administration and Orientation;
3. Graduate Course Offerings; and
4. Funding

A breakdown of proposals, actions, and metrics of evaluation for each of these domains is presented below. The Committee notes that some of the issues raised for consideration in the domains of *Space* and *Administration and Orientation* appear to be addressed (or at least appear to be being given serious consideration) in the recently released *Arts Strategic Planning* document distributed throughout the Faculty of Arts on January 17, 2011.

3.1 Space

The issue of the need for more effective use of space was a recurrent theme throughout the meetings with graduate students. This notion revolved around the need for more spaces within which graduate students could: (i) lounge; (ii) work in a quiet environment; and (iii) easily reserve to conduct seminars and other related small-group activities.

Other key points regarding these spaces included the need to be able to:

1. safely store one's personal items (e.g., lockers, cabinets, etc);
2. have electrical connection points for laptop computers as opposed to many PCs; and
3. ideally, access to printers.

In addition, there was a resounding view that students from the various academic units wanted to be able to convene with their own respective peers so as to ensure the fostering of a greater sense of 'belonging' to the individual academic units.

Proposal 1: Representatives of the Faculty of Arts consult/meet with the Chairs of the various graduate student associations to discuss the issue of space.

Objective: To identify specific and common needs regarding the spatial and physical infrastructure needs of graduate students enrolled in the Faculty's diverse programs – e.g., while the needs of graduate students from the Department of Theatre are likely to differ from those of Communication students, there may be areas of overlapping interests.

Metric of Evaluation:
  ➢ the undertaking of the proposed meetings.

3.2 Administration and Orientation

Students described the difficulties they encounter in obtaining information as they proceed through their respective programs (e.g., information about degree requirements, registration and leaves of absence, applying for external scholarships, preparing and submitting theses, and so on). They recognize that in a complex institution the information they require is not always going to be immediately accessible. They suggested four principal ways in which they could obtain information more easily, and in a timelier manner. Each is outlined below.

3.2.1. The central role of the academic assistant

Students emphasized the importance of the departmental academic assistants in their interactions with their respective departments, and the university more broadly. For graduate students these individuals tend to be the person whose counsel they most frequently seek for program related information and who is able to answer most of their questions in an informed manner. Since the Faculty of Arts already has academic assistants dealing with graduate studies within departments, what is proposed here is that the practice be maintained and enhanced.

Proposal 2: Assign academic assistants specifically to graduate programs, locate them in departments, and enable them to assist students by granting the necessary training and a manageable workload.

Objective: Ensuring that academic assistants dedicated to graduate programs are easily available to students within their respective departments or, in the case of smaller departments, within a cluster of graduate programs.

Metrics of Evaluation:

➢ administrative review of the location, workload, and turnover of academic assistants; and
➢ survey of students (broken down by departments or programs) of satisfaction with information services

3.2.2. Orientation and training sessions for graduate students

Graduate students require different types of information and skills at different points in their career. To be effective, such information or skills should be offered when they are most needed and appropriate. Where this is occurring, it should be maintained. Where this is not occurring, it should be encouraged. Some information and skills development sessions are best offered, and currently are offered, by the department (e.g., orientation to the program upon entry, preparing the thesis). Other sessions could be offered annually by the Faculty of Arts (e.g., applying for external scholarships, teaching one's first course, preparing a curriculum vitae or a dossier, applying for employment). As is the case with some other Ontario universities, students could be awarded a "professional development" certificate for having completed a certain number of these sessions.

Proposal 3: A regular schedule of orientation and training sessions offered in part by departments and in part by the Faculty of Arts. These might include:

> - **orientation to the degree program upon entry**
> - **applying for external scholarships**
> - **preparing the thesis**
> - **teaching your first course**
> - **preparing a curriculum vitae or a dossier**
> - **applying for employment**

Metrics of Evaluation:
> - review of sessions offered by the department
> - review of sessions offered by the Faculty of Arts
> - survey of students (broken down by departments or programs)

3.2.3 A guide to essential information

Much information is provided by the University of Ottawa on its web-site, and this often is a first stop for information resources by graduate students. However, directly accessing the information one needs online often is a complicated matter. A guide to essential information would help both students and faculty navigate the main aspects of the university's online information resources. Further complicating matters is the fact that departments vary in the amount of information they provide. For example, while some may provide comprehensive information resources, others may be more selective, publishing only what is viewed as 'essential' information on departmental web pages.

Proposal 4: Departments maintain a webpage, uoZone page, or a handbook posted on the web, updated annually, providing essential information about program requirements and practices as well as making hard copies of such information available

Objective: To ensure that that all departments present and maintain in an electronic format information relating to such things as:

> - program requirements;
> - major program elements (comprehensive examinations, theses);
> - the typical sequence of program elements (in chart form);
> - the list of graduate courses offered in the current or upcoming academic year;
> - departmental forms;
> - applying for external scholarships;
> - applying for graduate programs in the department; and
> - contact information of the academic assistant and the graduate director

Metrics of Evaluation:

> - annual review of departmental webpages or handbooks; and
> - survey of students (broken down by departments or programs)

3.2.4 Best practices for graduate directors

Departments and programs vary considerably across the Faculty of Arts. Graduate Directors are in a unique position to:

- ➢ understand the needs of their respective departments and programs;
- ➢ develop means of communication or other resources tailored to their programs and students; and
- ➢ foster attitudes and practices that enhance the experience of both students and faculty in a graduate program.

Graduate Directors, therefore, are likely to benefit from learning about the experiences, initiatives, and innovations of other individuals holding this position.

Proposal 5: Convene occasional meetings of graduate directors to discuss and compare their practices in facilitating the progress of students through a program.

Proposal 6: Engage in transition planning when a new director of graduate studies is to be appointed

Objective: To facilitate the sharing of information and resources in order to make it easier for Graduate Directors across the Faculty of Arts to manage their work and better serve the needs of graduate students.

Metrics of Evaluation:

- ➢ attendance at each meeting, organized by topic;
- ➢ a short evaluation form completed by participants at each meeting;
- ➢ annual review by graduate directors of the occasional meetings held in that year

3.3 Graduate Course Offerings

The departments in the Faculty of Arts offer a diverse array of graduate programming. However, the interests of individual graduate students frequently transcend disciplinary boundaries.[1] In order to take courses in departments other than the one with whom they are registered, students often must seek the approval of the Graduate Studies Committee of their home department. Graduate students are likely to benefit from a streamlining of the processes associated with enrolling in courses that are relevant to their areas of research interest, but which are offered in departments other than their own.

Proposal 7: Enhance the diversity of relevant course offerings for graduate students by identifying and pre-approving at the department/program level courses offered in other departments that could be incorporated into existing graduate programs and accessed by graduate students, where appropriate.

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[1] Graduate students also expressed frustrations about the limited number of courses offered by their departments in their own disciplines. The courses offered generally are far fewer than the courses listed, and may not be in the area of specialization of individual students. While the committee did not come to a proposal on this matter, it clearly needs to receive the continued attention of the Faculty and of departments in annual course planning, recruitment, and program development.

Objective: To provide greater flexibility and interdisciplinarity by making more effective and efficient use of existing programming resources.

Metrics of Evaluation:

> increases in the number of courses identified as 'optional' across departments
> assessing number of graduate students registering in courses across departments

3.4 Funding

Two issues pertaining to funding were consistently raised by graduate students: (i) the ten-hour cap placed on paid employment; and (ii) the possibility of getting teaching assistantships for external grant holders. Students understand that it may not be in the hands of the Faculty to ensure that there is flexibility in relation to the ten-hour cap but they still wonder whether the Faculty could clarify this issue with the University or even the Government of Ontario.

With regard to being able to teach, and in spite of the fact that it would be desirable to fund as many students as possible, not letting external grant holders teach is widely perceived as a form of discrimination that often penalizes the most qualified students.

3.4.1 Ten-hour cap.

Proposal 8: That the Faculty of Arts, along with the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies re-examine the ten-hour cap and the potential for making graduate student funding more flexible.

Objective: Taking into account the collective agreement obligations, budgetary considerations, and provincial regulations, look for opportunities to have funding policies that are better aligned with the real needs of the graduate students.

Metrics of Evaluation:

> the undertaking of efforts to re-examine current funding arrangements both at the Faculty of Arts and the University level

3.4.2 Teaching assistantships for external scholarship recipients

Two possible options were presented as a means of addressing this issue:

Proposal 9a: Offer regular teaching assistantships to all students with external scholarships along the lines of the admission scholarship that they have obtained, or likely would obtain upon admission into their respective programs.

Proposal 9b: Guarantee a set level of teaching assistantships (e.g. 2 for MA, 4 for PhD) for graduate students holding external scholarships).

Objective: Ensure that graduate students with external scholarships do not lose the opportunity to obtain teaching experience during the course of their studies.

Metrics of Evaluation:

- ➢ measuring the number of students with external scholarships who also have the opportunity to work as teaching assistants.