Online Resources

Academic Support & Professional Development

- ▶ Accessibility Services: http://www.studentlife.utoronto.ca/as
  (note: SGS hosts an embedded Accessibility Advisor for graduate students)

- ▶ Career Exploration & Education: http://www.studentlife.utoronto.ca/cc

- ▶ Graduate Professional Development (GPS) Programs: https://uoft.me/gps

- ▶ Graduate Centre for Academic Communication (GCAC): https://uoft.me/GCAC

Financial Support & Resources

- ▶ Base Funding: http://www.sgs.utoronto.ca/about/explore-our-data

- ▶ SGS Grants, Bursaries & Emergency Funding:
  https://www.sgs.utoronto.ca/awards-category/financial-assistance/

- ▶ Financial Aid & Advising:
  https://www.sgs.utoronto.ca/awards-funding/financial-aid-advising/

- ▶ Scholarships & Awards:
  https://www.sgs.utoronto.ca/awards-funding/scholarships-awards/

Wellness Resources

- ▶ Graduate Conflict Resolution Centre (CRC): http://gradcrc.utoronto.ca/

- ▶ Graduate Counselling Services: https://www.sgs.utoronto.ca/resources-supports/graduate-wellness-services-at-sgs/

- ▶ Graduate Student Wellness Portal: https://uoft.me/wellnessportal

- ▶ Safety & Support: http://safety.utoronto.ca/

Resources for Faculty & Staff

- ▶ Centre for Teaching Support & Innovation (CTSI): http://teaching.utoronto.ca/

- ▶ *Graduate Supervision Guidelines - Faculty edition*: http://uoft.me/supervisors

- ▶ *Guidelines for Departmental Monitoring of Progress Through the PhD*:
  https://www.sgs.utoronto.ca/policies-guidelines/monitoring-doctoral-progress/

- ▶ Checklist for Supervisors: https://uoft.me/supervisors-checklist

- ▶ Termination of Registration Guidelines:
  https://www.sgs.utoronto.ca/policies-guidelines/termination-of-registration-guidelines/

- ▶ Academic Appeal Procedures:
  https://sgs.calendar.utoronto.ca/general-regulations

Improving Doctoral Program
Time to Completion

Top 10 Best Practices for Graduate Units

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO
SCHOOL OF GRADUATE STUDIES

Top 10 Best Practices for Graduate Units

1. **Begin with Fit**

2. **Provide Clarity in Financial Support**

3. **Support Effective Supervision and Mentoring**

4. **Provide Access to and Build Awareness of University Resources**

5. **Build Community within Programs**

6. **Support Research Early and Often**

7. **Prioritize Student Well-Being**

8. **Monitor and Track Student Progress**

9. **Champion Professional Development for All Career Pathways**

10. **Consider and Communicate Time-to-Completion Data**

Have feedback?

The School of Graduate Studies welcomes your feedback and innovative ideas on how to support students in their programs and improve Time to Completion. Please e-mail suggestions to sgsvdeanstudents@utoronto.ca.

Background

Giving students the support and resources they need to complete their doctoral programs in a timely manner has far-reaching benefits. For students, it can mean avoiding prolonged mental and financial stress, and improving professional opportunities upon graduation. For Graduate Units, it can mean both substantially reducing financial costs and enhancing a unit's culture and reputation.

Students who complete a doctoral program in a timely manner are also more likely to perceive their relationship with the University in a positive light. Such relationships not only help students build a professional network for the next stage of their careers, but also build the University's profile and level of support within the larger community.

For additional information and to access the companion resource, *Best Practices for Doctoral Students*, please visit the School of Graduate Studies (SGS) website.
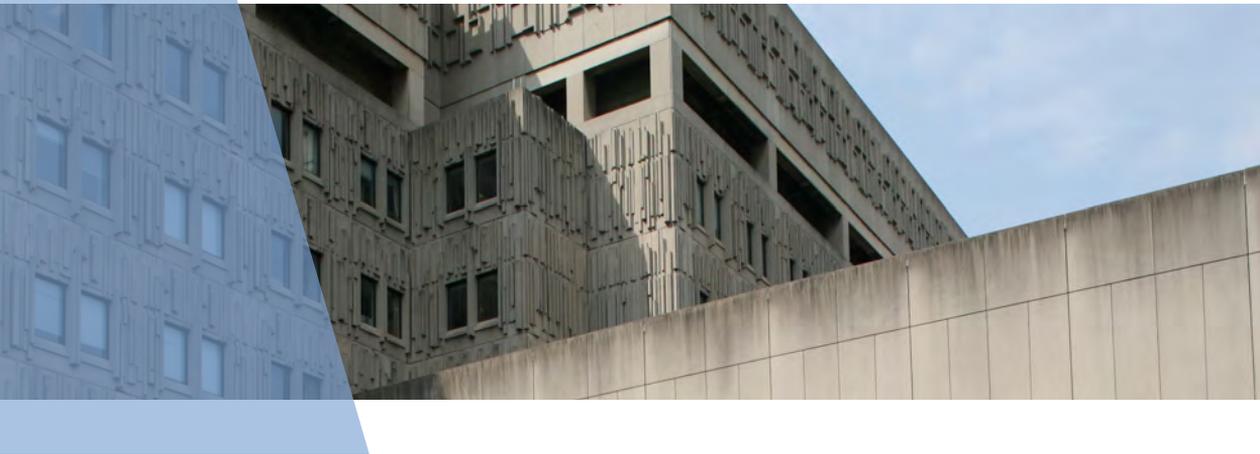
Top Ten Best Practices for Graduate Units

1. Begin with Fit

Admitting the right student to the right program is a key factor for student success.

What can Graduate Units do to ensure that prospective students' abilities and interests align with program requirements and culture?

- ▶ **Ensure** applicants are aware of all program requirements and funding expectations.

- ▶ **Encourage** prospective students to meet with potential supervisor(s) before applying for the program.

- ▶ **Sponsor** campus visits and host recruitment events.

- ▶ **Expand** the base of the admissions process to build a more comprehensive picture of a student's academic interests and personal capacity. Consider conducting student interviews and gathering writing samples.

- ▶ **Encourage** both current students and faculty to participate in admissions procedures and activities.

2. Provide Clarity in Financial Support

Keeping students well-informed about financial support can alleviate their stress, helping them feel more in control of their academic futures, and improving program culture.

How can Graduate Units promote a better understanding of graduate student financial support?

▶ **Provide** complete funding information in admission letters.

▶ **Provide** annual August/September funding letters outlining the annual amount, source, and timing of financial support.

▶ **Share** the department's funding policy online and respond to student questions.

▶ **Review** funding structures and opportunities regularly, gathering feedback from both students and faculty.

▶ **Align** funding payments with tuition payment dates.

▶ **Ensure** students know there are additional resources to help them, such as SGS emergency funding and bursaries and the dedicated financial counsellor at SGS.

▶ **Encourage** students to consult the SGS website regarding base funding and actual incomes and funding award requirements and deadlines.

3. Support Effective Supervision and Mentoring

Students can focus their research earlier and make better progress when supervision is frequent, consistent, supportive, and transparent.

How can Graduate Units increase the effectiveness of supervision and mentoring?

▶ **Assign** each student an advisor upon admission to the program.

▶ **Promote** procedures for students to make informed decisions about selecting their supervisor and their topic of study (for supervision not yet identified).

- ▶ **Establish** structures that connect students to potential supervisors.

- ▶ **Ensure** procedures are in place to facilitate a change in supervisor in the event that this becomes necessary.

- ▶ **Require** frequent student meetings with supervisors and supervisory committees to review progress. A helpful guide is *Guidelines for Departmental Monitoring of Progress Through the PhD*.

- ▶ **Encourage** students and supervisors to use a Supervision Checklist, which documents a common understanding of program expectations, meeting frequency, evaluation style, form of communication, and feedback. See *Graduate Supervision Guidelines - Faculty edition* for template checklists.

- ▶ **Encourage** supervisors and students to establish an individual development plan early in their program. Such plans will serve as the students' personalized roadmap to graduation.

- ▶ **Offer** training on supervision/mentoring to faculty and administrators to spread innovation and best practices in supervision. Reminder: SGS and CTSI host an annual Graduate Supervision Workshop.

- ▶ **Monitor** the ratio of students per supervisor to maintain reasonable supervisory expectations and workload.

- ▶ **Provide** mechanisms for resolving problems early that may arise between graduate students, supervisors, and/or members of the supervisory committee. Reminder: the Graduate Conflict Resolution Centre, offered through SGS and UTGSU, is a helpful resource.

- ▶ **Actively** follow up with students who are not making progress in the program. Consider providing a second supervisory committee meeting two to three months after an unsuccessful meeting. Suggest additional academic supports, if necessary.

4. Provide Access to and Build Awareness of University Resources

With the right resources and supports, students can deal effectively with challenges before they impede academic progress.

How can Graduate Units help students find resources when they need them?

▶ **Organize** timely orientation sessions to inform students about policies, procedures, resources, support initiatives and timelines.

▶ **Develop** a Graduate Unit/Program Student Handbook and ensure current handbooks are up to date. Consider consulting with SGS and Student Life on draft Program Handbooks to ensure policy information and resources are up to date.

▶ **Provide** support systems as problems are detected (e.g. Accessibility Services, Health and Wellness, Writing Support) and inform graduate students about resources such as the Graduate Conflict Resolution Centre, SGS Counselling Services, Grad Minds, and Academic Success.

5. Build Community within Programs

Feeling part of a larger graduate community helps students maintain a positive attitude and stay motivated personally and academically.

How can Graduate Units build community among graduate students?

▶ **Organize** social events, forums, speaker series, retreats and workshops.

▶ **Create** a common place for students and faculty to gather and meet — socially and academically.

▶ **Enlist** student leaders in maintaining community by organizing social events

and other initiatives — including leaders for specific student populations such as international graduate students.

- ► **Organize** and promote collaborative ways for students to connect with faculty and one another (blogs, newsletters, e-mail bulletins).

- ► **Make** community a priority by emphasizing the program's common purpose and goals, while actively supporting a broad set of opportunities (academic and non-academic) for students beyond graduation.

6. Support Research Early and Often

Students given early and frequent opportunities for research, supervision, and academic collaboration are better prepared to meet dissertation requirements later in their program.

How can Graduate Units prepare students for advanced research and writing?

- ► **Engage** students in opportunities for early research and support the challenges of advanced stage research.

- ► **Support** and encourage student presentations of their own work and frequent attendance at conferences and professional meetings.

- ► **Establish** research and writing requirements early in the program.

- ► **Provide** ongoing writing support beginning in the first year and for each stage of study. Reminder: A helpful resource is the Graduate Centre for Academic Communication (GCAC), offered through SGS.

- ► **Offer** opportunities for thesis writing support such as dissertation writing groups organized by the Faculty, SGS and Academic Success.

- ► **Consider** alternatives to the one-on-one supervision model, such as a research group-based model.

Encouraging students to strike a healthy balance between academic work and personal life helps them gain perspective and stay motivated in their program. It can also help them cope more effectively with any life transitions, stressors, and changes in mental and/or physical health that they may encounter along the way.

How can Graduate Units support student well-being?

► **Promote** mental health resources tailored to meet the needs of graduate students (e.g. the SGS Wellness Counsellor, SGS Wellness Workshops, and Grad Minds).

► **Build** awareness of the broad spectrum of University-wide resources promoting a balanced lifestyle — from athletic facilities and multifaith centres to the Health & Wellness Centre on St. George campus, the Health & Counselling Centre at UTM, and counselling services at UTSC.

► **Inform** students about resources that can alleviate financial stress, such as financial counselling available through SGS and SGS emergency funding and bursaries.

8. Monitor and Track Student Progress

Getting an accurate understanding of student progress allows Graduate Units to provide more effective support when it is needed.

How can Graduate Units better monitor and support student progress?

► **Establish and track** program milestones and requirements. SGS Progress Tracker is a useful resource.

► **Address** student and program issues when progress is not on track.

► **Survey** current students on a regular basis and upon graduation to evaluate student experience regarding resources, academic support and the supervisory relationship.

► **Use** data and student feedback (such as surveys) as a performance indicator in program reviews and as a basis for resource allocation and departmental decision-making.

9. Champion Professional Development for All Career Pathways

Students with professional skills are more equipped to find employment sooner,

whether inside or outside of academia. Awareness of relevant and stimulating professional opportunities outside academia may decrease TTC.

How can Graduate Units champion professional development?

- ▶ **Promote** student participation in professional development offerings and workshops.

- ▶ **Reach** out to alumni and industry leaders to mentor and speak to a broad set of careers inside academia and beyond.

- ▶ **Identify** and support opportunities to develop student networking.

- ▶ **Consider** experiential learning programs such as internships, service learning programs and industry placements.

- ▶ **Encourage** the use of career services and professional development such as Career Exploration & Education and GPS programs.

10. Consider and Communicate Time-to-Completion Data

Timely completion rates improve when programs are better aligned with student objectives and both students and faculty understand the implications of longer completion times.

How can Graduate Units make TTC data a key part of program design and delivery?

- ▶ **Post** times to completion, completion rates, and graduate outcomes on departmental websites and in supplementary materials (e.g. brochures, handbook, recruitment collateral).

- ▶ **Build** in a review of TTC rates when reviewing program objectives, learning outcomes and delivery methods.

- ▶ **Consider** student goals, abilities, and interests when designing coursework, determining timing of departmental exams, and approving

dissertation formats.

- ▶ **Ensure** that supervisory workshops for faculty and administrators include TTC data and promote strategies for achieving timely completion.

- ▶ **Offer** information sessions and/or workshops for prospective and current students to address expectations about program length, to contextualize student progress, and to engage with recent graduates.

- ▶ **Review** program and candidacy extension requests carefully; these requests may indicate the need for additional support or, occasionally, withdrawal from the program or termination of registration.