SGS Humanities Working Group
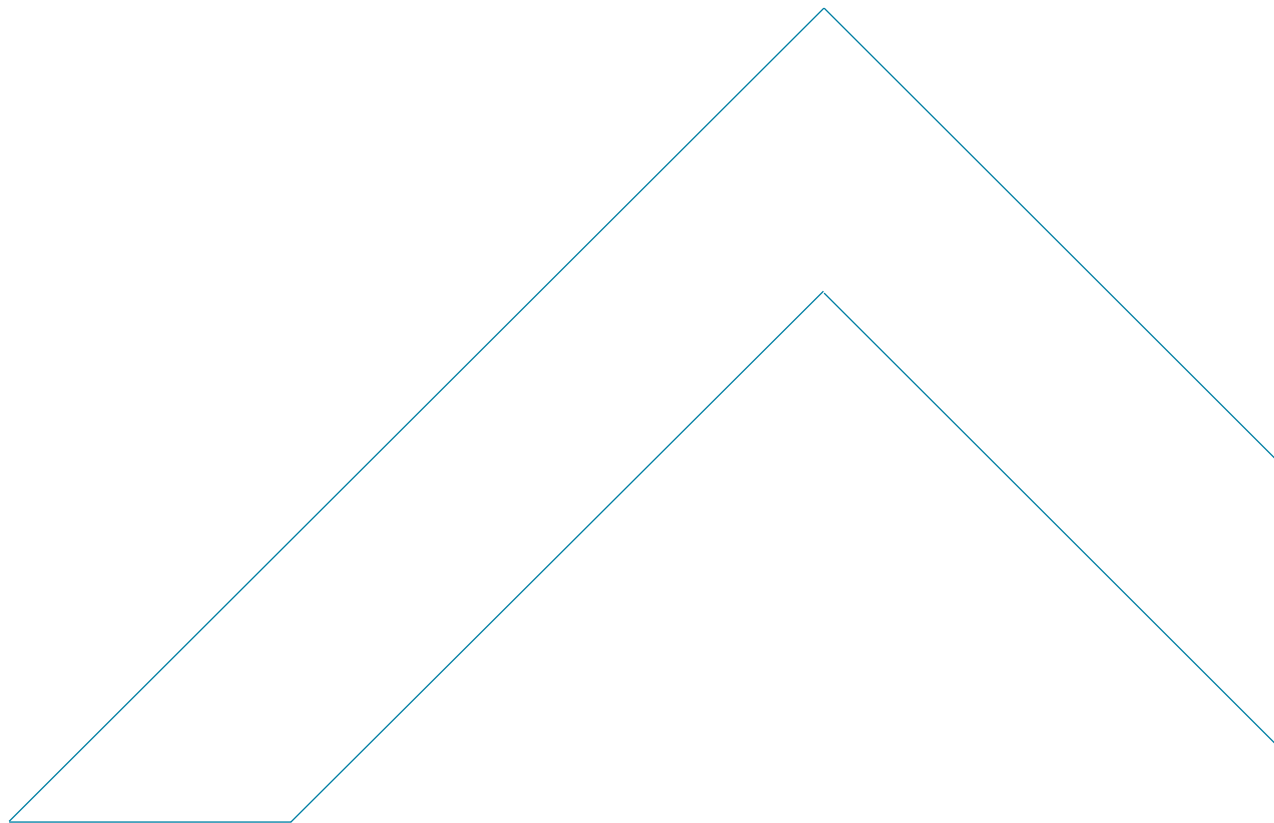
Working Group Recommendations Report

Summer 2024

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO
SCHOOL OF GRADUATE STUDIES

DEFY
GRAVITY

Working Group Recommendations Report

In the Fall of 2022, the School of Graduate Studies (SGS) struck the Humanities Working Group – composed of graduate students, chairs/deans or associate deans, faculty, and administrators – to review humanities student experience data, discuss current issues, share best practices, identify areas where there are opportunities to improve, and suggest practical measures graduate leaders, faculty, and students can take to help foster positive change within and across humanities graduate units.

Two documents were produced by the working group:
- Context for Working Group Recommendations
- Working Group Recommendations Report

Summary of Recommendations

Building community through the graduate student life cycle:

Rec 1: Graduate units should ensure that their admissions process reflects the intention of creating a cohort of students who will help build the graduate unit community and who will in turn be supported by multiple faculty members in the graduate unit.

Rec 2: Graduate units should utilize the time between acceptance of an offer and arrival on campus to build community for the incoming cohort, establish expectations, and integrate them into the graduate unit community.

Rec 3: SGS should create a working group consisting of graduate coordinators, students, and graduate administrators to review the information packages given to graduate students at the time of the campus visit and during orientation with the goal of coordinating efforts between SGS and graduate units.

Rec 4: SGS should conduct regular reviews of its communications to graduate units and students about supports available (e.g., mental health, supervisory relationship challenges, etc.).

Rec 5: Graduate units and individual supervisors should formalize, where possible, regular in-person gatherings so students and faculty can stay connected.

Rec 6: Graduate units and SGS should utilize the new possibilities offered by online participation to complement in-person learning and community-building.

Rec 7: Graduate units and individual supervisors should facilitate interdisciplinary connections for students, including during the coursework phase.

Rec 8: SGS should promote the delineation of learning outcomes focused on the development of collaborative research skills and the provision of collaborative research opportunities in program and major modification reviews.

Rec 9: Graduate units, supervisors, Jackman Humanities Institute (JHI), and SGS should connect students with other researchers with shared interests.

Rec 10: Graduate units and faculty members should provide opportunities for students who are mid-research to gather and discuss their work.

Rec 11: Graduate units and SGS should refine and target communications to upper-year students in the research and writing phases.

Rec 12: Graduate units should provide group supports for students in the writing phase.

Rec 13: Graduate units should use teaching opportunities to engage students during the writing phase and build a community around teaching.

Rec 14: Graduate units should celebrate the thesis defense and use it as a key community-building moment.

Professionalization:

Rec 15: SGS, graduate units, and departments should consider increasing emphasis on graduate studies as the first step in students' careers to enhance student autonomy and encourage ownership over their professional development. Framing graduate school as an early-career role may incentivize graduate students to attend professional development courses, cultivate networking skills, and engage in relationship-building activities within and outside of academia.

Rec 16: SGS, graduate units, and departments should provide relevant professional development opportunities and information about potential career pathways for humanities students in preparation for future career roles and responsibilities.

Rec 17: SGS, Student Life, graduate units, and departments should coordinate communications related to the activities, resources, and services for career guidance and professional skill development.

Rec 18: SGS should promote overarching and interdisciplinary skills development workshops and/or curriculum that provides a general foundation for more specialized discipline-specific training in graduate units and departments.

Rec 19: SGS should enhance its role in building relationships with people in diverse career roles for the purpose of advising, mentoring, and facilitating programming related to graduate student professional development and post-graduate planning and activities (e.g., job searching, resume/CV development).

Rec 20: Graduate units or departments should conduct an environmental scan of their master's programs to determine the landscape of professional outcomes associated with the degree and use that information to assess professional development needs.

Rec 21: SGS, in partnership with JHI, should facilitate an annual/biannual forum on Humanities Students' Experiences to continue the conversation and further encourage the sharing of knowledge and resources to improve student experiences and professional outcomes.

Rec 22: SGS should establish an ad-hoc working group to explore the possibilities and potential impacts (e.g., financial, curricular, health and wellness, equity) of changing the 10-year Program Time Limit rule to seven years, with the purpose of encouraging timely, high-quality academic progress and reducing extended time-to-completion rates, while supporting the health and well-being of graduate students and faculty.

Rec 23: SGS and graduate units should explore strategies for enhancing academic progress and reducing time-to-completion through more responsive feedback loops between supervisors and students during critical phases of the graduate life cycle (e.g., research, dissertation writing) and by ensuring graduate student activities serve appropriate pedagogical and professional development purposes (e.g., TAships, RAships).

Rec 24: Graduate units – particularly those where the median time to completion is significantly longer than the length of the funded cohort period – should make a concerted effort to strengthen alignment between these two variables so as to fund to the completion of the program.

Rec 25: SGS should explore the potential to create a guiding framework for offering Research Assistantships on a stipendiary basis that have explicit connections to degree expectations, program learning objectives and outcomes, and professional skill development.

Rec 26: SGS, in collaboration with graduate units, should enhance resources to support continual peer-learning and professional development in the area of graduate supervision.

Recommendations and Companion Mechanisms

Building community through the graduate student life cycle:

Rec 1: Graduate units should ensure that their admissions process reflects the intention of creating a cohort of students who will help build the graduate unit community and who will in turn be supported by multiple faculty members in the graduate unit.

Suggested mechanisms:

- Build pathways that will bring in the best students for the program. For example, cultivate relationships with faculty members (whether from U of T or other institutions) who have recommended good students in the past. Organize Information/Meet-and-Greet sessions before the admissions.

- Structure the admissions process so that many potential supervisors/committee members are able to review the applications of students they might work with. (Anthropology has a good system for this.)

- Create opportunities for students and faculty members to meet through curricular and extracurricular activities, with the purpose of actively involving students in the process of selecting a supervisor.

- Include a prompt in the application package that asks about applicants' community engagements or areas that they would look to contribute to the department.

- Ensure that every person admitted has the support of at least one or more faculty member(s) who take an interest in their work and will support them throughout their program.

- Develop guidelines specific to supervision matching processes (prior to and after admission) with expectations, roles/responsibilities, and best practices for students, faculty, and administrators.

Rec 2: Graduate units should utilize the time between acceptance of an offer and arrival on campus to build community for the incoming cohort, establish expectations, and integrate them into the graduate unit community.

Suggested mechanisms:

- Units should optimize the structure and content of any spring/summer campus visits from prospective students so that students are able to meet faculty members, upper-year students, and also other prospective or incoming students from the same cohort.

- Consider assigning new students a buddy – a more senior graduate student from the program who is available during the campus visit but also until September so they can stay in touch through email/Zoom, etc.

- Between the campus visit (in spring/summer) and the start of term in September, invite your graduate students to stay connected with the department through a social media channel or else an exclusive e-newsletter tailored to the incoming cohort. The goal is for students to connect with their peers as well as other students in the same department.

- Ensure that international students have an opportunity to engage with the Centre for International Experience during and after the campus visit, and other appropriate supports as needed during this time. (E.g., financial aid and advising, housing services, etc.)

Rec 3: SGS should create a working group consisting of graduate coordinators, students, and graduate administrators to review the information packages given to graduate students at the time of the campus visit and during orientation with the goal of coordinating efforts between SGS and graduate units.

Suggested mechanisms:

- The group would review what is currently being done in sample units and at SGS – services offered by each, timing of SGS communications, and so on – and see how the two can better coordinate efforts.

- The group could also suggest a list of non-departmental activities – like SGS campus tours – that could be engaged in spring and/or September. (Other things to consider: what a campus tour looks like; what speakers should they bring in; what can students expect of the program and how are these expectations/limitations being communicated.)

Rec 4: SGS should conduct regular reviews of its communications to graduate units and students about supports available (e.g., mental health, supervisory relationship challenges, etc.).

Suggested mechanisms:

- SGS can review its mailing list and send a memo to grad admins and coordinators inviting them to sign up for the e-news.

- SGS can develop new information sheets outlining available supports.

Rec 5: Graduate units and individual supervisors should formalize, where possible, regular in-person gatherings so students and faculty can stay connected.

Suggested mechanisms:

- Implement a mandatory cohort-building course with a focus on research methods and/or professionalization. iCentre for Medieval Studies has a mandatory course for first-year PhD students focused on navigating the academic job market; English has implemented a series of workshops throughout the year that are open to all interested students.

- Create or further develop departmental gatherings or events as a means of building community. Units should consider making attendance mandatory – for both students and faculty – for a set number of gatherings to ensure wider attendance and help distribute the faculty workload more equitably.

- Create a series of skills-based workshops (e.g., offered monthly, bi-monthly) for students and faculty members centred on building trust, conflict resolution, managing difficult conversations and other related topics to enhance relationships between students, students-faculty, and between faculty members.

- Units can offer informal groupings – like writing groups or study groups – for coursework milestones like term papers, rather than just in the thesis-writing phase.

- Individual supervisors should take an active role in community building by creating more opportunities for social connection with the graduate students in their research groups (e.g., social activities, group research meetings, team-based projects, conferences).

Rec 6: Graduate units and SGS should utilize the new possibilities offered by online participation to complement in-person learning and community-building.

Suggested mechanisms:

- Prioritize in-person attendance but offer online participation by request. (The English department has a good model for this, where tri-campus events are advertised as hybrid, and St. George events are in-person with online participation available upon request.) Units should remember that hybrid participation is important to ensure that some segments of the population – students travelling for research, students with childcare/family responsibilities, students on different campuses – are not left out of cohort-building activities.

- Institute regular Zoom check-ins with upper-year graduate students.

Rec 7: Graduate units and individual supervisors should facilitate interdisciplinary connections for students, including during the coursework phase.

Suggested mechanisms:

- Invite speakers from other graduate units to your departmental colloquia/gatherings. Some units, such as Institute for the History & Philosophy of Science & Technology, have tried this with good results.

- Faculty members who are working across disciplines should be intentional about facilitating interdepartmental connections for interested students.

- Create interdisciplinary opportunities that emphasize community-building and cross-disciplinary sharing about ongoing works or activities (e.g., interdisciplinary study groups, dissertation writing groups, research-sharing forums on cross-disciplinary topics, teaching forums).

Rec 8: SGS should promote the delineation of learning outcomes focused on the development of collaborative research skills and the provision of collaborative research opportunities in program and major modification reviews.

Suggested mechanisms:

- Graduate units or departments strengthen incentives for supervisors to facilitate collaborative or team-based research projects, such as establishing formal awards to recognize good supervision and efforts to build community for graduate students.

- SGS, in collaboration with the Vice-Provost, Academic Programs, develop standardized rubric for the program review process that includes criteria related to the integration of collaborative research skill development and opportunities.

- SGS to explore collaboration with the Centre for Community Partnerships to develop training modules focused on engaging in collaborative research that can be incorporated into research assistantship contract hours/activities.

- SGS, in collaboration with other units, discuss strategies for encouraging culture change related to collaborative research in the humanities and explore the possibility of organizing workshop sessions facilitated by individuals in other divisions who successfully implement collaborative research projects, to share best practices and demonstrate possibilities of this research within humanities units.

- Supervisors in the humanities to encourage students to engage in collaborative opportunities, where available and possible, in the interest of professional development.

- Graduate units to review internal principles around collaborative research and develop strategies to recognize the value of this work in existing practices (e.g., Progress through the Ranks).

- SGS, in partnership with JHI and Centre for Graduate Professional Development (CGPD), explore the possibility of providing a collaborative research grant to humanities PIs that requires the integration of specific teaching, learning, and training outcomes for all involved.

Rec 9: Graduate units, supervisors, JHI, and SGS should connect students with other researchers with shared interests.

Suggested mechanisms:

- Try a scaled-down version of the JHI Fellowships model that asks students to indicate their key interests so they can be matched with faculty/helpful contacts to create an interest group. This could be done with modest funding at the level of the graduate unit, a lab, by JHI, or by SGS.

Rec 10: Graduate units and faculty members should provide opportunities for students who are mid-research to gather and discuss their work.

Suggested mechanisms:

- Where there is a critical mass of students, develop a faculty-led group where a supervisor brings all of their students together for a seminar once a week/biweekly to allow PhD students at different stages of their work to meet each other, form community, discuss methods and so on. (Consider investigating the German model.)

- Utilize a lab/team model as a way of building community – a form of community that is in between the level of the individual and the graduate unit. This could also offer opportunities for co-authorship, collaborative research, or creative scholarship (like the sound lab, where students work together on developing podcasting skills).

- If possible, offer dedicated office/lounge space or time to upper-year graduate students where they can meet other upper-year students.

- If there are sufficient numbers, create periodic online opportunities to engage those students who are abroad/travelling for research.

Rec 11: Graduate units and SGS should refine and target communications to upper-year students in the research and writing phases.

Suggested mechanisms:

- Think about upper-year students – a missing demographic – as a separate category with distinct needs. Graduate units should review their communications with upper-year grad students, identify gaps, and work with student to fill those gaps.

- SGS should consider developing a new rubric (in the existing e-news) for communicating with grad students in their upper-years or else develop a new communications vehicle for this subset of students.

Rec 12: Graduate units should provide group supports for students in the writing phase.

Suggested mechanisms:

- Organize thesis-writing groups for all students in the writing phase (e.g., a series of cohort-based workshops over a term or a year, weekly writing sessions in a departmental space, summer bootcamps, etc.).

- Organize opportunities for graduate students who have successfully defended their theses to come in and present their research to those who are still writing.

- Invite a student to present a dissertation chapter at a small roundtable with their peers. (Refer to Faculty of Music practice – they have roundtables.)

Rec 13: Graduate units should use teaching opportunities to engage students during the writing phase and build a community around teaching.

Suggested mechanisms:

- Design a competition where graduate students can submit a syllabus for a Special Topics course that is closely aligned with their research interests. The department lists the course, and the graduate student who wins gets to teach it to a class of undergraduates.

Rec 14: Graduate units should celebrate the thesis defense and use it as a key community-building moment.

Suggested mechanisms:

- Organize a pot de thèse (celebratory event) following a student's successful defense. This will bring the supervisor's or unit's students together, fostering community, helping other students feel invested in their peers' success, and showing them that completion is possible.

- Create an annual alumni lecture – invite a recent graduate back to speak to a cohort that's nearing completion.

- Encourage faculty members to share news of recent thesis defences during Faculty Council meetings and other department-wide gatherings. This helps keep the focus on the students, raise departmental morale, and remind people why they're there.

Professionalization:
Rec 15: SGS, graduate units, and departments should consider increasing emphasis on graduate studies as the first step in students' careers to enhance student autonomy and encourage ownership over their professional development. Framing graduate school as an early-career role may incentivize graduate students to attend professional development courses, cultivate networking skills, and engage in relationship-building activities within and outside of academia.

Rec 16: SGS, graduate units, and departments should provide relevant professional development opportunities and information about potential career pathways for humanities students in preparation for future career roles and responsibilities.

Suggested mechanisms:

- Graduate units and departments could collaborate with students and alumni in the planning and delivery of professionalization workshops and/or events to understand specific needs of current students, create continuity across cohorts, and ensure information on which offerings are most valuable/effective is not lost after cohorts graduate from the program. Strengthened connections with alumni may help create more comprehensive and sustainable professional development opportunities.

- Reframe course assignments or activities as an opportunity to build students' professional skillset and create sample materials for potential career portfolio (e.g., design sample course syllabi and course content, create sample industry knowledge mobilization activities, craft a teaching philosophy).

- Graduate units and departments may consider designing and delivering credit/no credit professional development course offerings that students can register for throughout their degrees.

- Graduate units and departments consider integrating "bite-sized" innovative professionalization activities throughout existing curriculum to encourage "just-in-time" skill development, manage students' workload, and prepare students for future career roles and responsibilities (e.g., more general skills early in the program, more tailored skill-development in latter stages).

- Develop resources that provide supervisors and students with practical strategies for prioritizing academic progress while also engaging in diverse experiences to build skillset and CV (e.g., conferences, RAships).

- Create sample career trajectories and articulate the graduate experiences and professional development opportunities that are most helpful in acquiring the required skillset for each trajectory, in addition to an outline of the concrete steps that may be taken to seek employment in that type of career (e.g., resume building, networking).

- Graduate units and departments consider developing a framework or guidelines to support graduate students in obtaining structured work experience in relevant fields during specific timeframes of the degree (e.g., graduate units could seek partnerships with non-governmental organizations for students to complete a research-to-practice internship over the summer).

- Graduate units and departments consider actively promoting public scholarship opportunities for graduate students, such as the SGS Connaught PhDs for Public Impact Fellowship and SGS Three Minute Thesis (3MT). To best support students engaging in these opportunities, graduate units or departments may also consider providing mentorship opportunities with peers, supervisors, and program leaders.

Rec 17: SGS, Student Life, graduate units, and departments should coordinate communications related to the activities, resources, and services for career guidance and professional skill development.

Suggested mechanisms:

- Enhance articulation/communications of the connections between aspects of graduate programming (i.e., research assistantships, teaching assistantships) and transversal skill development and training for future roles.

- Enhance communication pathways amongst humanities departments to share best practices related to professionalization programs, services, and activities.

- Increase clarity in existing communications to increase participation (e.g., indicate the time commitment required of graduate students to engage with the activity, resource, or service).

Rec 18: SGS should promote overarching and interdisciplinary skills development workshops and/or curriculum that provides a general foundation for more specialized discipline-specific training in graduate units and departments.

Suggested mechanisms:

- Create workshop series that assists humanities students in marketing themselves, including skills that relate to talking and engaging across disciplinary boundaries.

- Encourage departments to provide formal peer review opportunities (e.g., workshops, office hours) throughout the award application process; this would allow graduate students to receive constructive feedback on their applications from peers, supervisors, and program leaders and make improvements prior to submission.

Rec 19: SGS should enhance its role in building relationships with people in diverse career roles for the purpose of advising, mentoring, and facilitating programming related to graduate student professional development and post-graduate planning and activities (e.g., job searching, resume/CV development).

Suggested mechanisms:

- Connect with alumni to establish and expand network of professionals in a variety of careers to advise and guide students on career trajectories outside of academia.

- A coupon-based system, where students who participate in a pre-determined number of professional development workshops or activities are eligible for tailored one-on-one sessions with a career coach of their choice from the SGS directory.

Rec 20: Graduate units or departments should conduct an environmental scan of their master's programs to determine the landscape of professional outcomes associated with the degree and use that information to assess professional development needs.

Rec 21: SGS, in partnership with JHI, should facilitate an annual/biannual forum on Humanities Students' Experiences to continue the conversation and further encourage the sharing of knowledge and resources to improve student experiences and professional outcomes.

Fostering student progress:

Rec 22: SGS should establish an ad-hoc working group to explore the possibilities and potential impacts (e.g., financial, curricular, health and wellness, equity) of changing the 10-year Program Time Limit rule to seven years, with the purpose of encouraging timely, high-quality academic progress and reducing extended time-to-completion rates, while supporting the health and well-being of graduate students and faculty.

Rec 23: SGS and graduate units should explore strategies for enhancing academic progress and reducing time-to-completion through more responsive feedback loops between supervisors and students during critical phases of the graduate life cycle (e.g., research, dissertation writing) and by ensuring graduate student activities serve appropriate pedagogical and professional development purposes (e.g., TAships, RAships).

Suggested mechanisms:

- Graduate units to review workload policies to ensure reasonable expectations, fair distribution of responsibilities, and appropriate recognition for supervision and engagement on supervisory committees.

- Graduate units to consider encouraging co-supervision (where appropriate and feasible) and requiring consistent engagement with supervisory committees across the graduate life cycle.

- Graduate units to consider the development of standardized expectations and/or suggested best practices related to engagement with graduate students (e.g., meeting frequency, responsive feedback loops) to encourage academic progress and reduce time-to-completion, where possible.

- SGS/Centre for Graduate Mentorship and Supervision (CGMS) to support units through resources and educational workshops on the importance of robust committee involvement across the graduate life cycle and ensuring awareness and implementation of best practices outlined in the Supervisory Guidelines.

- Graduate units to create or refine program timelines to ensure expected milestones are clearly indicated and there is a concrete tool to guide and monitor progress on a consistent basis (e.g., bi-annual check-ins). Graduate units could explore incentivizing specific milestones to encourage completion of the program within the time limit.

Rec 24: Graduate units – particularly those where the median time to completion is significantly longer than the length of the funded cohort period – should make a concerted effort to strengthen alignment between these two variables so as to fund to the completion of the program.

Suggested mechanisms:

- Graduate units to examine the purpose of the master's program and assess whether the funding allotted to master's students should be re-allocated to provide an additional year of PhD funding.

Rec 25: SGS should explore the potential to create a guiding framework for offering Research Assistantships on a stipendiary basis that have explicit connections to degree expectations, program learning objectives and outcomes, and professional skill development.

Suggested mechanisms:

- SGS, in collaboration with Labour Relations, engage in discussions to determine if stipendiary research assistantships are possible and may increase flexibility for PIs to offer additional financial support to students while encouraging academic progress and professional skill development.

- SGS to identify and promote external supports (e.g., CGPD) and best practices in other divisions (e.g., life sciences) related to the integration of training and professional development opportunities into the structure of research assistantships.

Rec 26: SGS, in collaboration with graduate units, should enhance resources to support continual peer-learning and professional development in the area of graduate supervision.

Suggested mechanisms:

- Graduate units should consider creating a mentorship program for early-career supervisors, in which they are paired with supervisors that have a track record of successful supervision, for the purpose of learning and development.

- Graduate units should consider revising existing graduate student handbooks to ensure departmental specific information regarding supervision is clearly communicated. Information may include general best practices, departmental structures regarding supervision, expectations for both students and faculty supervisors, and suggested pathways to remediate challenges.

- Graduate chairs can collaborate with CGMS to discuss departmental culture, and methods of addressing the needs within their units, to further establish a constructive and supportive environment that allows for more transparent, encouraging, and transformative conversations regarding supervisory practices.

- Graduate units are encouraged to reach out to CGMS for workshops/programming on supervision, specifically in reference to communication and relationship repairing ("Understanding Conflict" and "Having Difficult Conversations").

Appendix A: Sample activities and curriculum from various departments

- English Program Essentials: Mandatory workshop series for graduate students (English Department)

    o Sample topics covered: writing, applying for grants, presentation skills

- Alumni Speaker Series (English Department)

    o Panels about variety of career trajectories for graduates of the program (e.g., topics include careers in government, corporate sphere, and other areas of relevance based on alumni pool)

- MITACS partnerships for industry experience and professional skills development