

Coming to Terms with Personal and Professional Development for Graduate Students



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The debate about the place of personal and professional skills development in the modern university is not at all new. There has been no shortage of effort invested in addressing students' personal and professional skills development, occupying the attention of university leaders at many institutions and at many levels within those institutions. Yet there is rather less agreement on the part of universities on what their responsibilities in this area might be. Meanwhile, stakeholders of all stripes (private sector, public sector, and NGOs) have had much to say about the limitations of the skill sets of university graduates, whatever the level of their accomplishments. This ongoing attention to personal and professional skills development at the university has some of the characteristics of a low-grade infection. On one hand, it does not seem serious enough to get professional help, and perhaps if we ignore it, there will be some kind of spontaneous resolution. On the other hand, the infection continues to sap our energy, and we are not working to our full potential.

Three years ago, Dalhousie's Faculty of Graduate Studies (FGS) undertook a strategic planning process that, among other things,

raised the issue of a potential role for the Faculty in personal and professional development for graduate students. It seems there is something of a pent-up demand for such a capability, especially in the context of the new demands of the Postdoctoral Fellow's (PDFs) administration occasioned by a change in the taxation approach to fellowships.

FGS wasn't quite sure how to deal with the increase in their responsibilities, but the addition of another part-time associate dean to share the heavy lifting made it possible for us to take an initial run at the question. We began with a survey in which we asked graduate students what they think are their development needs. We ran a subsequent survey asking faculty what they believe are the personal and professional needs of graduate students. We then went one step further and asked our alumni the same set of questions. Of particular interest was the response from alumni who have never been graduate students, and have no interest in ever becoming one, but who hire them.

These data sets provided much food for thought and the conclusions were reported in a paper presented at the Administrative Sciences Association of Canada annual conference in 2008—"Professional Development Needs of Graduate Students: Comparing and Contrasting Perspectives"

(available at http://www.dalgrad.dal.ca/annualreports/professional_development_publication.pdf.) It turns out that there are significantly different views about development needs, depending on whom you ask. Bottom line—FGS has taken this thinking to heart. Our view is that the university that does a superior job on this front will have a significant recruiting and retention advantage. We have also had a hand in working with the other members of the Canadian Association of Graduate Studies in drafting a set of national principles on the topic, entitled "Professional Skills Development for Graduate Students." (Available on-line at: <http://www.cags.ca/pages/en/publications/cags-publications.php>) This paper argues that the skills we are most readily able to implement in the university are:

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communication skills, management skills, teaching and knowledge transfer skills, and ethics. Our goal is to help ensure that graduate students and post-doctoral fellows are prepared for all aspects of the

positions they hope to obtain upon graduation, and that employers believe they are reaping the rewards of the preparation that Dalhousie provides to its students.

Of course there is an old saying, "principles without programs are platitudes." We have begun to work at developing programming. We started with the post-doctoral fellows for three simple reasons: 1) they benefit from personal and

professional development; 2) for PDFs who are in the first 3 years of a fellowship, such a program reinforces the development nature of their relationship with the supervisor, and 3) this programming supports the non-taxable status of their award.

We have had one initial year of experience with the PDF program. Programming has included a course, “Professional Development for Post-doctoral Fellows,” that we designed to extend competencies in the general areas of personal effectiveness, managerial effectiveness, and career intelligence. For the broader topics such as CV writing and public speaking we have invited PhD students who might have an interest. Other programming such as Write Here, In Plain Sight (WHIPS), a now annual demonstration of academic writing, is open to the wider university community. We are entering into the second year of the PDF

program this fall, and therefore have had to organize program material for those students who completed the first. This second year of programming will build on the competency areas established in the first year.

There are many challenges in this work, beginning with the issue of FGS’s internal capacity to develop and deliver the content. The second challenge is sorting out what part of the responsibility belongs to the host Faculty, School, or department. We have expressed these concerns informally with our faculty colleagues, and they understand what we are saying. But they have pointed out that their students sometimes benefit from hearing these messages from voices other than the ones they hear day-in and day-out. This will be a matter of ongoing thought and experimentation.

In the short- to medium-term, we will continue to develop, source, and deliver a variety of personal and professional development sessions. Now that we have additional staff we will develop a certificate program akin to the Certificate in University Teaching and Learning designed, run, and administered by our colleagues in the Centre for Learning and Teaching [See article pp 7-9]. In

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the long term, there are two imperatives we would like to see addressed. First, that these kinds of development opportunities for graduate students should be much

more comprehensive in their reach (i.e., expanding the kinds of skills addressed), and much more sophisticated in their delivery (providing far less of Sunny Marche’s talking head and far more genuine coaching). This can only happen if the universities in Canada collaborate in developing the program, since it is unlikely any one of us can do as good a job as all of us.

Not all graduate students are a fan of this kind of thinking. There is more than a little credentialism out there—people who imagine that they simply need to get the credential and their troubles are over. They offer me the argument that they took all this stuff in high school and they don’t need any more of it. The counter-argument is two words—“Tiger Woods.” He is the best golfer on the planet, and arguably the best golfer in history. He has a swing coach. What is it about the rest of us that makes us think our skills development doesn’t have to be deliberate?



Master’s student Stephen Petersen and PhD candidate in Oceanography Yuehua Lin discuss their C.V.s with workshop leader Sunny Marche. (Nick Pearce Photo)