
Memorandum

Office of the Associate Provost (Graduate Education) and Dean, Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies

James Administration Building, Room 325
Tel: (514) 398-1224 | Fax: (514) 398-3296

TO: Senate

FROM: Professor Martin Kreiswirth, Associate Provost (Graduate Education) and Dean, Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies

SUBJECT: Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies: Continuity & Growth for the 21st Century

DATE: November 20, 2013

DOCUMENT #: D13-30

ACTION REQUIRED: INFORMATION APPROVAL/DECISION

ISSUE: Graduate and postdoctoral supervision is central to the research and teaching mission of McGill. The presentation will provide background information on graduate education and postdoctoral training at McGill, but focus mainly on the university's goal of improving supervision, and specifically, on the Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies' (GPS) supervision initiative and the new *Supervision: Graduate and Postdoctoral Support* website.

BACKGROUND & RATIONALE: GPS works closely with the University's academic and administrative units to support and improve graduate studies and postdoctoral research, degree completion, academic oversight, fairness and equity, and the overall experience of graduate students and postdoctoral fellows at McGill.

The presentation and the accompanying report will provide Senators with some background information about new initiatives to support research through effective graduate supervision, while also touching upon trends in graduate enrolment and funding, and achieving increased, more flexible and better distributed financial support for graduate students.

MOTION OR RESOLUTION FOR APPROVAL: N/A

PRIOR CONSULTATION: With respect to the ongoing supervision initiative GPS has consulted with the Post-Graduate Students' Society (PGSS), the McGill Association of University Teachers (MAUT), the Faculties, the Graduate Council, and the Graduate Advisory Board and more actively with supervisors and supervisees.

NEXT STEPS: N/A

APPENDICES: Appendix A: Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies: Continuity and Growth for the 21st Century

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Executive Summary

GPS advances the graduate and postdoctoral research and teaching mission of McGill in accordance with the university's Strategic Plans, Strategic Enrolment Management Report, Key Performance Indicators (KPI) and Strategic Reframing Initiatives (SRI). During the last 18 months, GPS has restructured its organization and procedures to better achieve the university's academic objectives: transactional activities were integrated with other units; operations, regulations, services, and procedures were streamlined; and more efficient communication and processes were introduced (e.g. uApply¹, thesis submission and examination², graduate student financial support and the data associated with it, supervisory information.) The outcome of this reorganization is that GPS has been able to direct resources to work closely with the university's academic and administrative units to enhance and improve graduate studies and postdoctoral research, degree completion, academic oversight, fairness and equity, and the overall experience of graduate students and postdoctoral fellows at McGill.

Note on the December 4th Senate Presentation

This report will provide Senators with background information about new initiatives to support research through more effective graduate supervision, while also touching upon historic and emerging trends in graduate admissions, enrolment and funding. The presentation planned for December 4, 2013 will open up a conversation on issues and initiatives surrounding graduate supervision. To prepare for this discussion, Senators are encouraged to explore the [Supervision: Graduate and Postdoctoral Support website](#) in advance of the presentation, focusing particularly on the following webpages:

Clarifying Expectations: <http://www.mcgill.ca/gradsupervision/supervisors/roles-and-responsibilities/expectations>

¹ The new online graduate admissions system. See <http://www.mcgill.ca/gps/about/uapplygrad>

² Since the introduction of new thesis examination process 70% of theses were sent to the examiners within 5 days of receipt of the nomination form; previously only 40% had a 5 day turnaround (and more than 40% took over 16 days).

Problems and Solutions: <http://www.mcgill.ca/gradsupervision/supervisors/problems>

Mission

The mission of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies is to promote university-wide academic excellence for graduate and postdoctoral education at McGill. GPS works in collaboration with Faculties, graduate programs, graduate student and postdoctoral associations and other administrative and academic units to oversee graduate policies and regulations, advocate broadly for the cause of graduate education and to foster an environment that actively promotes each student's or postdoctoral fellow's realization of his or her full academic and research potential.

Background

Over the last eight years, supporting its identity as a research-intensive, student-centered university, McGill has emphasized the critically important role of graduate education and postdoctoral training. Supported by the two strategic plans,³ the Strategic Enrolment Management report,⁴ the focus on Key Performance Indicators, and the Strategic Reframing Initiative,⁵ GPS's objective is to develop, coordinate and help facilitate the advancement of graduate and postdoctoral planning goals – enhance graduate student support, strategically increase research graduate student ratios, improve supervision— and, in this way, to help McGill achieve the position of premiere graduate institution in Canada for the 21st Century.

Environment (Context)

Sharing responsibility for graduate studies with faculties and other units, Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies is a collaborative and consultative unit with university-wide academic and administrative responsibilities for graduate education and postdoctoral training. In 2011, responding to the recommendations put forward by the Principal's Task Force on Student Life and Learning (2006), GPS initiated the integration of registrarial and graduate student record and fellowship payment transactions with partnering units (Enrolment Services and the Scholarship and Student Aid Office), facilitating improvements in the delivery of administrative and registrarial services and information to academic units, graduate students, and postdoctoral fellows.

In August, 2013, GPS launched a new operational model (Figure 1) to facilitate more effective project management across its “core pillars”: Graduate Funding; Thesis and Graduation; Communication and Outreach; Programs; and Improving Supervision and Progress Tracking.⁶

Under this restructured model each area of concern is guided by a GPS Associate Dean, ensuring that decisions on policies, procedures, and personnel have academic leadership and oversight. GPS maintains

³ Anthony C. Masi “ASAP 2012: Achieving Strategic Academic Priorities: A plan for McGill” (submitted for the consideration by and endorsement of the University Senate, October 17, 2012); Anthony C. Masi, “Strengths and Aspirations: A white paper call to action regarding McGill University's future” (2006).

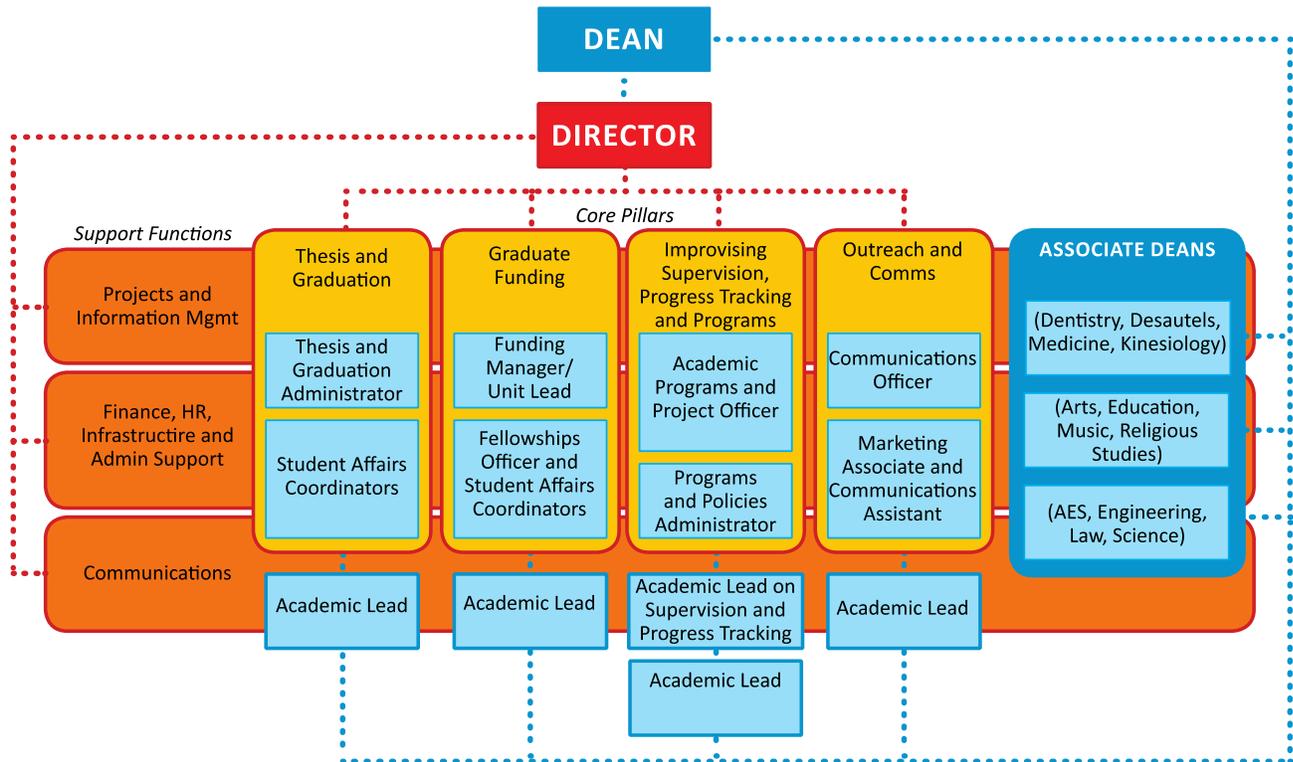
⁴ Morton J. Mendelson, “Strategic Enrolment Management Plan (SEM)”, (submitted for the consideration by and endorsement of the University Senate, March 23, 2011.)

⁵ “Strategic Reframing Initiative”, accessed November 12, 2013, <http://www.mcgill.ca/sri/>

⁶ See figure 1, Senate minutes.

responsibility for ensuring the consistency and fairness of the graduate and postdoctoral experience and providing overall quality assurance for the graduate degrees granted by McGill.

Figure 1: GPS operational model



GPS works to ensure that academic decision-making regarding graduate education and postdoctoral training is appropriately distributed and that graduate students and postdoctoral fellows achieve their academic and research objectives in the most efficient manner possible. GPS also partners with researchers, institutes, Faculties, departments and other academic units to create and support new graduate program development in alignment with existing and evolving university research strengths.⁷

Initiatives

GPS is committed to driving initiatives that supplement fundamental graduate and postdoctoral research training with other forms of advanced knowledge and education, with strong collaborations across the university:

- The ongoing **Supervision Initiative**, with PGSS, MAUT, the Faculties, and more actively with supervisors and supervisees.
- The initiation and development of **SKILLSETS** with TLS

⁷ New programs approved in the 2012-2013 academic year include the A.M.A. in Art History: Thesis, and M.A. in Counseling Psychology, and a new MSc in Family Medicine is currently going through the ministry approval process. New programs in development include, for example, a PhD in Quantitative Life Sciences, a MA in the Public Life of Arts and Ideas, and an Interdisciplinary Health Science PhD.

- **Graphos** – the graduate and postdoctoral writing initiative with the McGill Writing Centre and TLS
- The follow-up to the 2010 **PhD Tracking Survey**⁸ through collaboration in 2012-13 with Planning and Institutional Analysis (PIA).

GPS also recognizes that upholding the quality and vitality of our graduate community and its research activities begins with an efficient graduate application and admissions process:

- In 2013 **uApply** – the graduate e-admission and evaluation system was launched, thanks to the outstanding support of Enrolment Services and IT Services.

As well, GPS partnered with McGill’s Office of Sustainability and the Post-Graduate Students’ Society to present **Three Minutes to Change the World**, an annual event featuring McGill graduate students speaking in 3 minutes or less about the importance of their thesis work to the community at large.

Trends in Graduate Enrolment and Funding

McGill has recognized the need to provide competitive graduate student financial support in order to be able to attract quality students to work alongside our prestigious professors. Graduate education is global and has become globally competitive, with the expanding realization of the increasing need for highly qualified personnel to fuel the knowledge economy and advance innovation and development.

Over the past six years, GPS has been working with the units to find ways to keep McGill’s graduate financial support competitive. Our base level resources are lower than our peers; however, through prioritizing university resources and philanthropic gains, researcher contributions, Faculty initiatives, and more efficient distribution, we have been able to increase our relative funding position in the G13 (U15) (Figures 2 and 3).

Figure 2

⁸ The survey was composed of 38 multiple-choice questions and 1 open-ended item (for comments about experiences or the survey). The questions covered several aspects of PhD graduation outcomes, including employment, postdoctoral studies, skills and knowledge, and community involvement and networking.

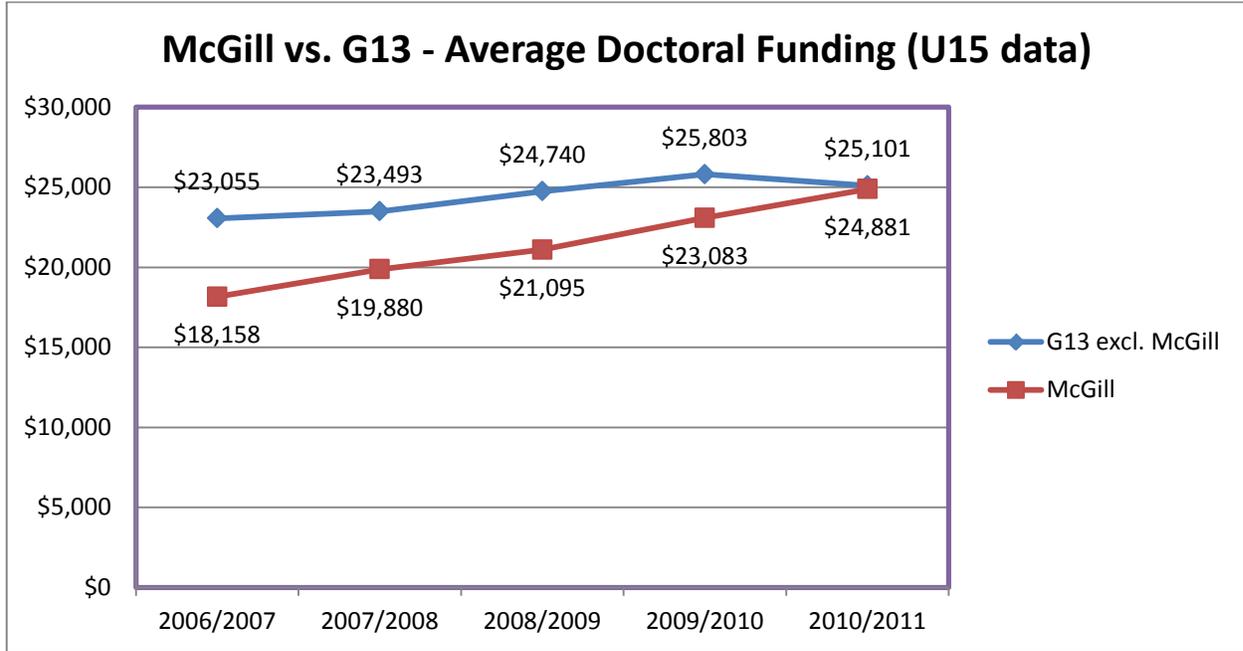
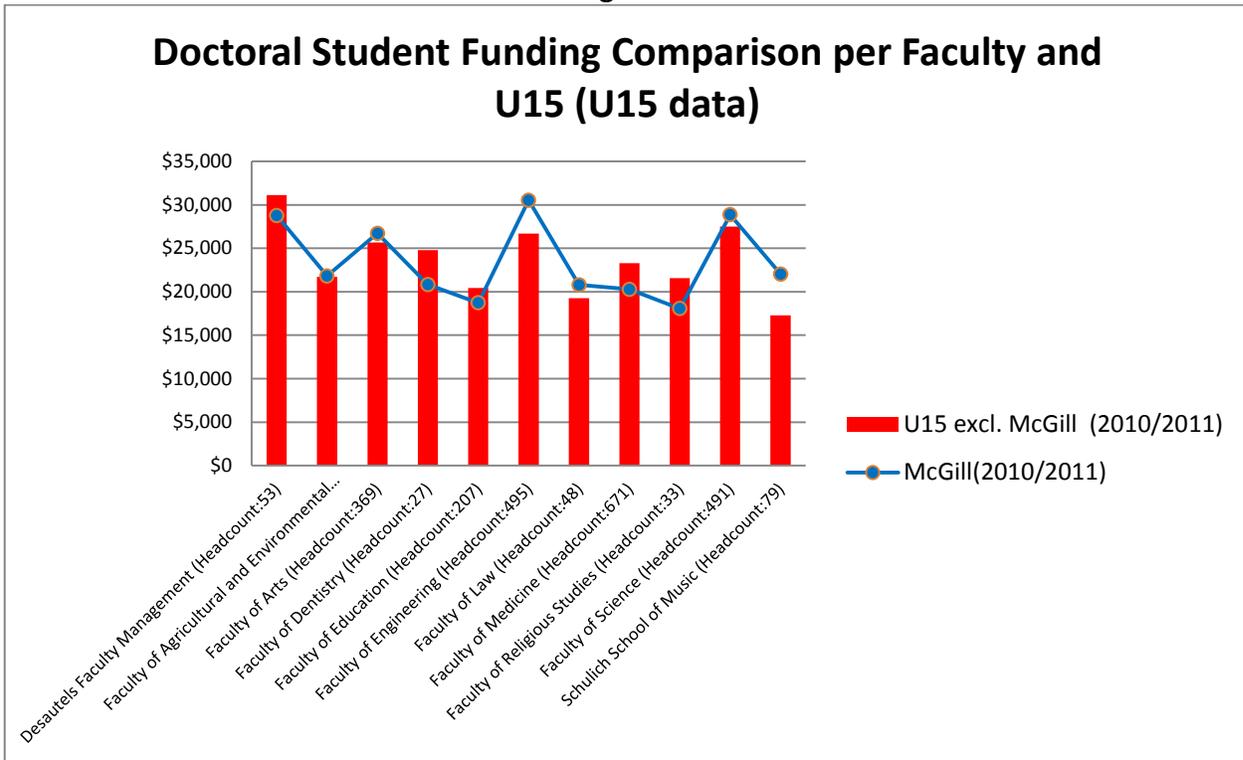
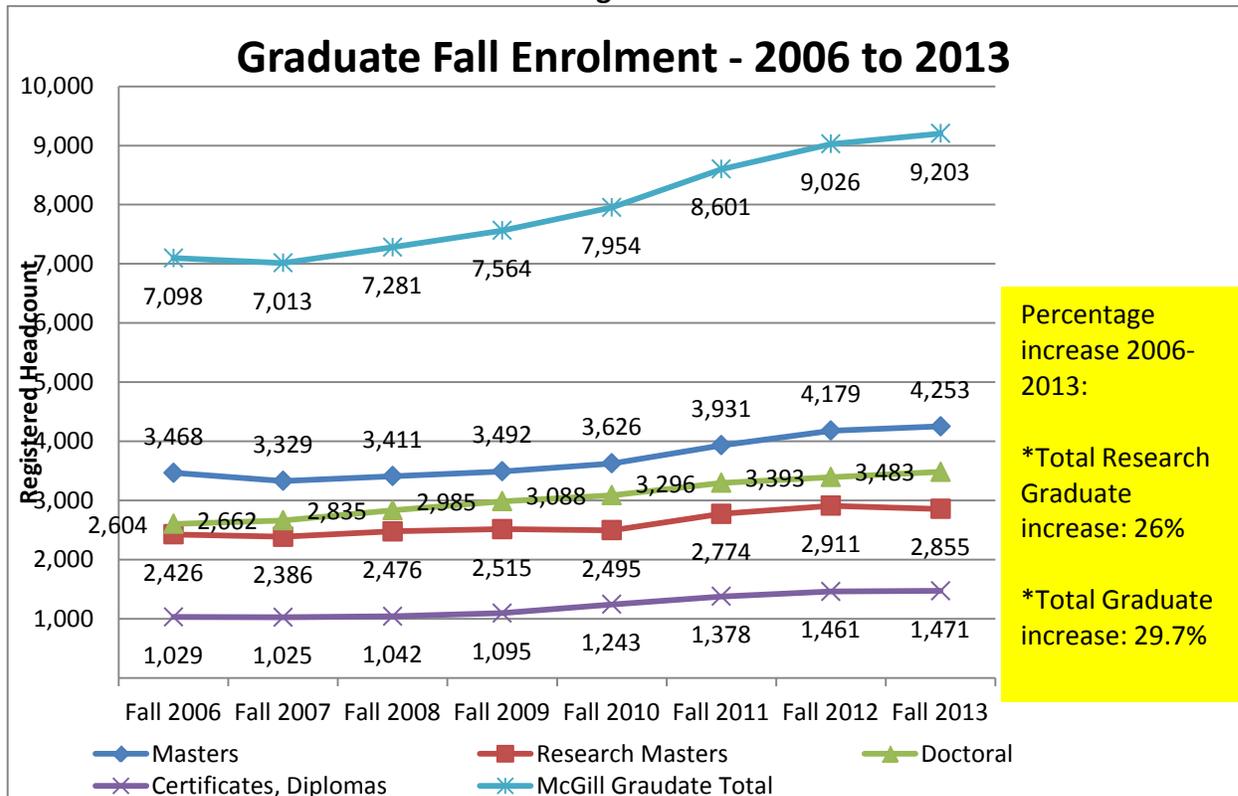


Figure 3



Graduate students make up roughly 29% of McGill’s 36,500 students,⁹ with the highest proportion of doctoral students among Canada’s top research universities.¹⁰ From Fall 2006 to Fall 2013 there has been a 33.8% increase in doctoral enrolment, a 22.6% increase in Master’s enrolment, and a 29.7 % increase in total graduate enrolment, including graduate certificates and diplomas (Figure 4).

Figure 4

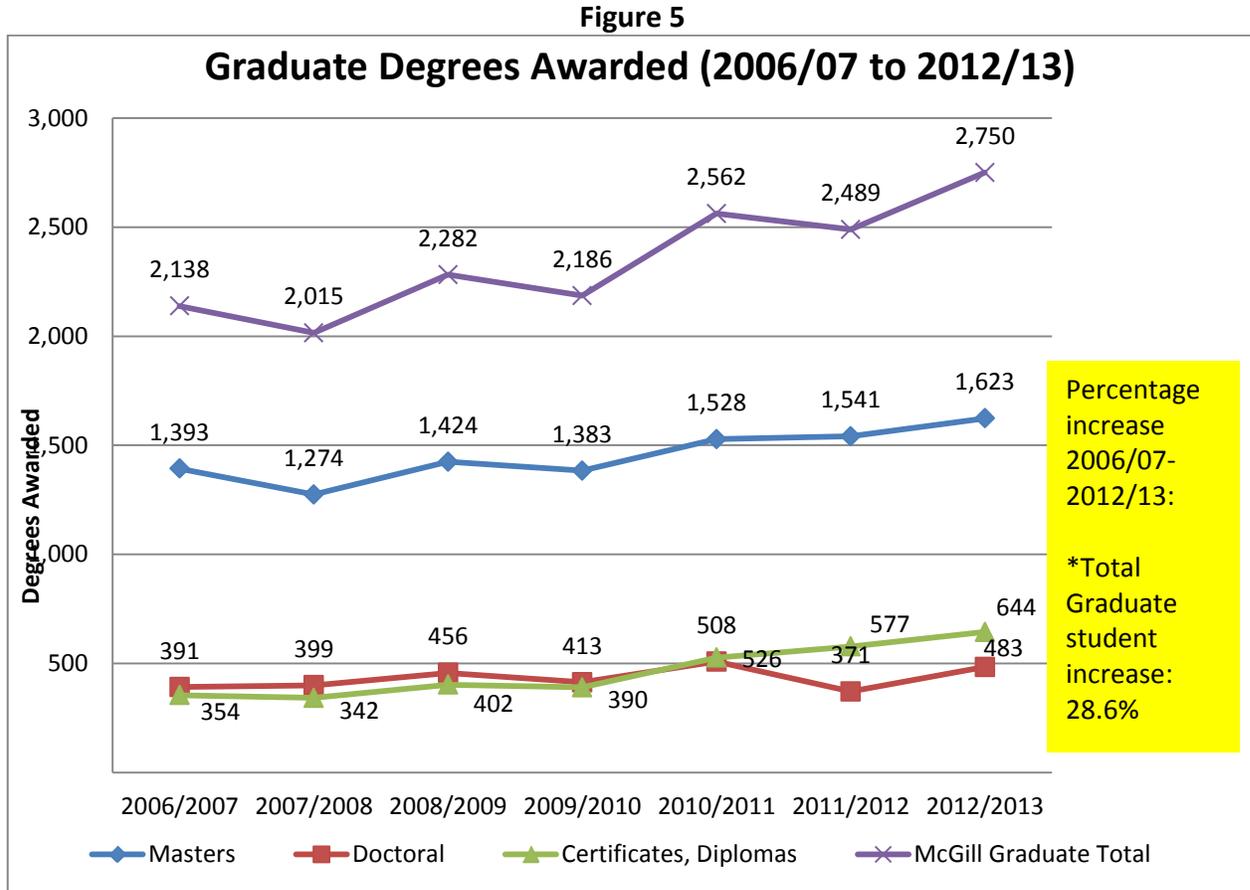


⁹ McGill’s Graduate Capacity Indicator dashboard shows that graduate students (Primary and Secondary Curriculum) in Master’s, Doctoral and Graduate Certificate Programs numbered 11,006 of McGill’s total student body (37,506), or 29%, in October 2013.

“Graduate Capacity indicator Dashboard”, accessed November 25, 2013.

¹⁰ Principal’s Report, 2011-12, U15 data exchange, p. 42.

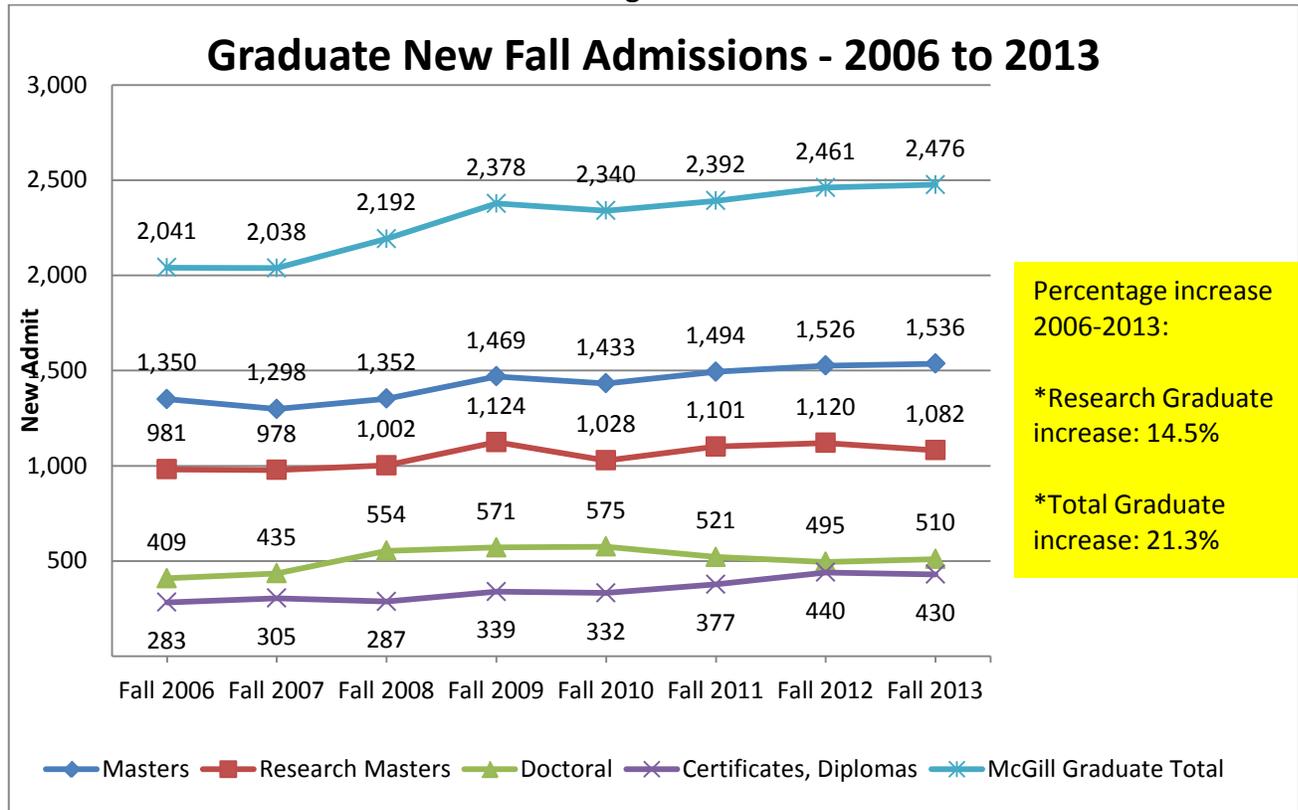
Enrolment of international students in doctoral programs increased 85% over the same time period.¹¹ There has also been an increase in graduate student degrees awarded (Figure 5).



Looking at fall admissions rather than total enrolments from 2006 - 2013, there has been a 25% increase in new doctoral students, a 14% increase in new Master’s students, and a 21% increase in new graduate students overall (Figure 6).

¹¹Doctoral students only. Primary and Secondary program. Fee residence = international. Fall terms from 2007 to 2013. “Graduate Capacity Indicator Dashboard”, accessed November 22, 2013.

Figure 6



McGill aims to build on our successes in recruiting. To continue to advance this objective we must also provide better, more modern and effective infrastructure, more outreach and support services to graduate students and postdoctoral fellows, more competitive financial support, high quality supervision, improved professional training for both academic and non-academic careers, and a better overall graduate student experience.

Focus on Supervision

The research component of graduate education— dominantly the thesis—is what fundamentally differentiates academic activities at the undergraduate and graduate levels. The supervisory relationship is at the core of graduate education, postdoctoral training, and collaboration in research, absolutely central to Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies and the University’s mission. In the last 10 years, research universities across the globe have been working hard to improve and enhance supervision. McGill has been able to take advantage of institutional partnerships—with the Association of American Universities (AAU), *Universitas 21*, and most directly with Oxford University and the Australian National University — to develop leading practices and effectively combine these with innovative local initiatives.

History and Background

During this period, there has been wide-spread realization that the long-standing but still dominant “apprentice” model of research management and training, whereby a single expert in the field

(supervisor) provided guidance and academic mentorship¹² to a single student (supervisee), needed re-evaluation.

There are numerous examples across universities, and at McGill, of excellent supervision and effective supervisory practices. However, it is still often the case that whatever a professor's knowledge of or successes with supervision, he/she had experienced little or no training in it. Commonly, the way in which many of our faculty members have learned about supervision was to re-enact apprenticeship and use their own experiences of being supervised as models for their supervisory practices (either positively or negatively). Research has shown that improving this relationship should primarily focus on improving the training and activities of supervisors.¹³

First Responses: Phase One

It is well-known that the quality of supervision is notoriously hard to measure. Nonetheless, surveys do provide some information. The 2010 and 2013 Canadian Professional and Graduate Student Surveys (CPGSS) suggest that, while supervisors are rated highly at McGill and our peer universities, we are performing slightly below the average, a finding that identifies an area for improvement that could support McGill's high rankings in other areas and maintain our leadership among our peers.

To try to help supervisors build more effective supervisory relationships, GPS has held workshops for new supervisors, and a number of departments and Faculties have offered various methods of providing supervisor training. From a cross-university perspective, though, these efforts in supervisor education were not very well-attended, focused, or integrated; much more needed to be done to provide the training and support our supervisors needed. After taking some time to analyze the situation, it became clear, as well, that there were significant challenges at McGill that had to be addressed, and that GPS had to work with units across the university to try to address them; hence, Phase Two.

Continuity and Growth: Phase Two

Phase Two of the Supervisory Initiative integrates three GPS-led projects with a broader collaboration on incentives for effective supervision. The first project, completed in August 2013, was the *Supervision: Graduate and Postdoctoral Support* website (www.mcgill.ca/gradsupervision) – a 40+ page resource of research and evidence-based practical advice for supervisors and supervisees. Helping both supervisors and supervisees to establish clear expectations for their relationship and thereby avoid common supervisory problems and needless delays in progress to graduation, the website also includes an expanding “Questions and Answers” section on difficult situations and how to remedy them. Improvements to the website based on Google Analytics and user feedback are ongoing. In the next few months, GPS is focusing on the “Timelines” section, which offers suggestions about the most efficient ways to navigate the typical stages and activities of graduate and postdoctoral education, and this section will expand in coordination with the Milestones progress-tracking tool currently being developed.

¹² “Mentorship” has a great variety of denotations and connotations, particularly in the context of graduate research supervision. This discussion focuses on “supervision,” but naturally includes many concerns and behaviours that often fall under “mentorship.”

¹³ It is, of course, important to provide guidance to graduate students about their roles and responsibilities as supervisees, and McGill provides workshops, among other events and information (<http://www.mcgill.ca/gps/students/new/supervision>), on these topics run by CaPS and GPS.

Over the past 10 years, many of our peer universities in the United States have purchased or developed electronic tools for effectively tracking students as they achieve specific milestones needed to fulfill their graduate degree requirements (including research progress on the thesis). These tools provide feedback to the student, supervisor, and program and aid in improving times to degree completion. All of our Canadian peer universities are developing or already have such tools. GPS is in the process of developing a **Milestones** tool for McGill. Most recently we have been surveying representative McGill departments across disciplines to build a template that visualizes their individual degree requirements and deadlines according to a timeline. The information gathered will assist our partners at Information Systems Resources, Enrolment Services, and departments that have created their own tools, in offering a university-wide mechanism that will effectively chart and communicate a student's individual progress in meeting degree requirements and thus aid progress toward graduation.

The combination of the Milestones tool and the information from the Supervision website will help graduate students, their supervisors, and graduate administrators monitor and ensure students meet program deadlines. The key indicator of the success of this combined-resource initiative will be measurable reductions in the times to completion toward students' graduation in accordance with the program's requirements and deadlines.

GPS anticipates that, using the methods outlined in the Supervision website, students and supervisors will avoid misunderstandings through more effective communication of expectations and improved tracking of progress. It is understood, however, that simply providing better tools will not improve supervision or times to completion and that incentives to alter behaviors are also required. GPS therefore envisions collaboration with units, Faculties, and departments to develop some cross-university models of supervisory acknowledgment that retain disciplinary and departmental distinctions. To achieve this objective, more accurate and detailed information is needed on the supervisory enterprise at McGill and more academically-precise designations and roles for supervision need to be established. GPS is providing such information on supervisory capacity and effectiveness; Faculties and departments are working with GPS to explore appropriate approaches for appraisal and recognition.

The Supervision website is informed partly by McGill's "2012-13 Supervisory Surveys," created in collaboration with Planning and Institutional Analysis (PIA) and the Post-Graduate Students' Society (PGSS), which helped to show how supervisors and their graduate students perceive supervisory relationships at McGill. From this survey comes a set of recommendations on supervision, widely consulted upon with the cross-university Working Group on Supervision (made up of departmental chairs, Graduate Program Directors, graduate students, Associate Deans, and faculty members), the Council of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies, and the Graduate Advisory Committee, that will help McGill to establish supervisory roles, responsibilities, and incentives for achievement. The full report of the survey results is available online.¹⁴

¹⁴ "2012-2013 Supervisory Surveys Overview", accessed November 22, 2013.

http://www.mcgill.ca/gps/sites/mcgill.ca/gps/files/nov22overview_of_2012-13_supervisory_surveys_-_31may2013.pdf

The recommendations will also assist the academic units in developing methods for assessing supervision so that it can be more effectively evaluated in, for example, promotion and tenure.

The Path Ahead

Going forward, the recommendations on supervision, the Supervision website, and the Milestones project will provide a map of where McGill needs to go to enhance graduate research, encourage progress towards the degree, and improve the supervisory experience for graduate students, postdocs and faculty members. And, given the quality and commitment of our faculty, graduate students, administrators and support staff, I am confident that we will go a long way towards achieving these goals. GPS intends to report on the progress of these initiatives through consultations with Faculty representatives throughout the academic year, and by way of regularly updated online resources for supervisees and supervisors and a follow-up report to Senate in 2014-2015.