

Graduate Transformative Skills Training

Ideas for Universities

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CREATED FOR: UNIVERSITY OF SASKATCHEWAN

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How can universities ensure that graduate students are receiving the training needed to be the transformative citizens the world needs? In 2019-20, in my capacity as Faculty Fellow at the Gwenna Moss Centre for Teaching and Learning (GMCTL), University of Saskatchewan, I led the Graduate Transformative Skills Project. As part of my research, I conducted detailed interviews with graduate professional development professionals at thirteen Canadian research universities, including nine U15 universities known for their graduate skills training approaches. Most of the interviews were conducted after Covid-19 and the realities of its impact on graduate education were being realized.

In this short report, I identify a number of ideas that I believe have the opportunity to benefit the universities as they aim to provide graduate students with the professional skills training that they need and desire. I encourage readers to consider these ideas in light of their own university's unique culture, community, and context, and then adapt accordingly.

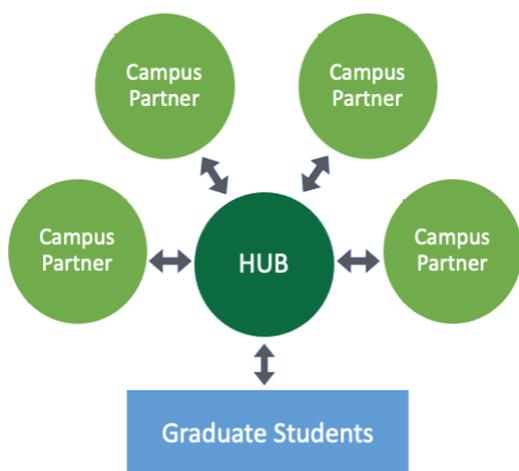
Like many faculty and university leaders, I am excited about the potential of our graduate students to play a transformative role in Canada and the world. I believe these ideas for graduate professional skills training will assist universities in equipping graduate students to do so.

Loleen Berdahl, PhD

January 2021

1. Adopt a hub and spoke model, guided by a coordinated cross-campus team, with the hub located within the Faculty of Graduate Studies.

A challenge facing many universities is coordinating the various training activities and opportunities available to graduate students. Some universities opt for a highly centralized model, with the Faculty of Graduate Studies running all (or almost all) programming, others opt for a highly decentralized model, with Graduate Studies running little to no direct programming. While each of these approaches has its merits, I feel that a shared responsibility model with centralized Graduate Studies coordination shows the greatest promise. This model is often referred to as a hub-and-spoke model and has been used by a number of Canadian universities with success.



In this approach, Graduate Studies serves as the coordinating body and the hub for graduate student career skill training. Graduate Studies has the responsibility to establish and lead a cross-campus team that shares a collective goal, and to serve as the communication hub, with a single one-stop online interface for students. Other campus partners, including career services, the teaching and learning center, the library, and individual faculties/colleges/schools, have the responsibility to participate in the team, co-develop the framework (discussed below), and to share their information with Graduate Studies for broader communication.

The single hub presents a convenience for graduate students, as they don't need to figure out where on campus to find different services. Stated one university professional development officer, "We have partnered with Career Services, Teaching and Learning, Help Services, and about 20 campus partners. We are kind of like a hub where graduate students can register in these workshops. The workshops they put for us are just for graduate students. It creates a safe space, more targeted conversations. That's why students would choose to enroll with us, it's kind of like a one-stop-shop where they can see all these services that are available and then be with just graduate students and have it on their record afterwards."

Another advantage of the hub is calendar coordination and centralized communications. As one interviewee explained, "we now have a calendar and then we put the programming that we know that's being offered so we're not competing with another group. I don't want to compete with the Dean of Student's week on something. So just trying to be really mindful of what's being offered so you're not competing for the same bandwidth."

A number of university professional development officers stressed that the location of the hub in Graduate Studies is important. Stated one: "I called and had phone chats with colleagues in similar positions to learn what they were doing in this area. And quickly it became clear to me that best practice was to have these positions located in graduate studies offices, not career centers. And I think part of the reason for that was that it was in that sense more neutral. It's like we're not promoting just career

development but also professional development.” Another argued, “the Ph.D. and postdoc don't go to the career center, [they] go to the faculty of graduate studies. It has to be someplace far enough away from their program office that their professors can't see where they're going, but not so affiliated to the dark side that it looks like that they're thinking about not continuing in academia.”

Locating the hub in Graduate Studies also clearly communicates to students and to partners that graduate students have unique needs and interests. The hub-and-spoke model located in Graduate Studies meets graduate students' desire to be distinctive as *graduate* students and can encourage graduate students to access services they might not otherwise consider. University professional development officers emphasized the importance of the graduate student focus: “We need to put it under one umbrella so that grad students find it and know that it's designed with them in mind and know that it's exclusive to them and tailored to them.”

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– interview quote

It is important that the partners - the delivery spokes in this model - are true partners in identifying and designing programming. Explained one interviewee, “Getting buy-in from across campus is really important. You want to include as many professionals as possible and probably at the beginning. ... I wanted their input and their ideas on it. And I'm really glad I did it because I think I would've put up with a much worse framework if I'd been sitting there all alone trying to do it. You know what's great about that is, that we work together to establish what we thought were the criteria for the graduate student's success and wellbeing, it created a sense of community and bonding between us.” This collaborative approach can then lead to synergies and greater overall resourcing to graduate student professional training: “just pulling in these campus partners where you can ... ends up creating even more services and programming for grad students because they see more and more demand from that audience and then they kind of respond. So, the writing and communication center example, they created a position that specializes in graduate students and postdocs, kind of in response to this uptick in demand.”

In addition to coordinating existing programs, the cross-campus team can identify skills training gaps and reach out to campus partners for delivery. One university professional development officer explained, “if we were wanting to do a workshop on wellbeing, we can reach out to the counsellors in the wellbeing hub. If we want to do a workshop on career development, we reach out to the career office, if we want to do a workshop on how to, you know, get an internship, we reach out to the internship network. We have a writing center, so there are specialists there that we can reach out to you to talk about that.” The team can also identify opportunities for partnerships: “I used to pull everyone all the student service providers together every year so that we'd get a sense of what different units are offering. And then that just helps us not ... offer the same kinds of things where we can piggyback. We've now really connected closely to the career center and that allows us to do joint programming. So, I think going forward, especially with our budget constraints, is really looking at how do you not reinvent the wheel, but how do you really leverage the offerings you have?”

Further, the team can also identify things that might be best done at the department/program level and assist with developing unit-level capacity: “if there's a lot of departments that are putting on some training that you don't need to offer because it's offered at most of the departments. Maybe some of the groups are willing to share what they have. And so you could have a resource available for departments instead of going, okay, we're going to create a whole suite of training on this. Here's a resource document if you'd like to create your own training in that area.”

2. Establish and consult an external advisory group.

To ensure that graduate training is beneficial to the larger community, programming must be aware of and responsive to stakeholder interests and input. Stakeholder input is valuable as programs are being established and later when they are evaluated and evolved to meet changing needs.

One university professional development officer described their advisory committee as including alumni, government, industry, entrepreneurs, angel investors, and recruitment agencies, as well as “people that are invested in bringing graduate students into their community or where we can see that a bridge would be really useful for us to be able to build because then they get to see what graduate students are capable of. They give us advice on how to help bridge that, you know, how do we get graduate students into their environments?” Another university professional development officer spoke of the importance of ensuring that professional training “resonates with the employers who are most likely to be hiring your students.”



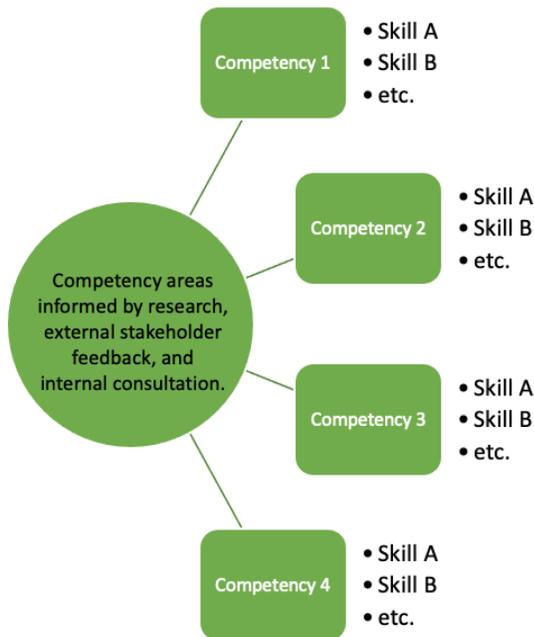
3. Develop a clear, focused framework with few categories.

When it comes to graduate career skills training, the interviewees were clear: create a simple structure, and remember that less is more.

One recommended model is to have a small number of skill areas in which to group program offerings. Stated one interviewee, “Don’t overwhelm students: if you want to motivate people to do stuff, don't go and show them 25 options. Show them three or four buckets of options and get them into that bucket and then go, okay, from here, now where do you want to go? So it's kind of like the analogy the paper used was when you're buying a car, they don't go, here's your 5 billion models to choose from. Do you want a car, an SUV, or a truck? And then they kind of branch out from there.” Universities that start too broad report facing challenges. Stated one, “I was talking to my new manager the other day and saying, do we have to start offering less. And less, I mean in a decreased scope of topics, and just really focus on what graduate students are going to come out for as a start, sort of building those communities.” Another

reported, “one of the advantages of sort of being late to the game is that I, in talking to some of my colleagues, they said they kind of regretted having so many categories because there's just so much overlap and we find the same, you know, where do you draw the line between leadership and communication?”

The selection of the three or four competency areas should be informed by research, external stakeholder



feedback, and internal consultation. The identification of competency areas allows for both prioritization and filtering. One interviewee stated, “we've got a set of competencies and then different skills underneath each one. So if you have a framework, I think being able to bring everything back to that framework is important. So [you have an answer] when people ask why are you doing this, or why that, why didn't you do it this way?” Competency areas that were mentioned regularly include innovation, which includes ideas of creativity and entrepreneurship; communication; leadership; and project management. It should be clear to graduate students and faculty alike how the overall competency areas link to the university’s academic mission. Explicit linkages to the university’s learning charter, if one exists, would achieve this.

In presenting the larger framework, caution should be taken to avoid creating, even implicitly, two tracks, academic and non-academic/ alt-ac. The competencies should be framed as abilities that will aid graduate students with the present programs as well as their career futures, and that will aid them in both academic and non-academic careers. As one interviewee noted, “sometimes the idea is, ‘if I’m going to be an academic, I don’t need to do any of that stuff.’ I found almost all of it would serve in whatever career path you end up pursuing and also really knowing that you really can’t effectively predict very well during your time as a graduate student. I think not setting up as a PD that is divided between academic and non-academic, but just PD for graduate students.” The immediate relevance of the competencies to their current program is important for student engagement: “they come in rows for stuff that is clearly linked to their academic goals and all the other stuff is sort of like, ‘that's gravy. If I have time, I'll do that. Well, I don't have time, so I guess I'll have to let it drop.’”

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4. Establish completion records that ladder into a micro-credential.

Universities vary in how they record participation and completion of professional skills training. Some have letters of completion after a certain number of workshops or courses, others include training into students' co-curricular records, and still others have formal micro-credentials such as badges or certificates. The external value of non-formal credentials is unclear. As one interviewee notes, "the point is the student has kind of a list of all the different things they've participated in that they can customize and share with an employer if they choose to do so. I think it's mostly useful as a reflection tool in the sense of, 'Oh wow, like I did do all these things. I guess I did gain those skills.' I don't think employers actually really care about that."

More formal micro-credentials are seen as having more external value: "If you go through, you get the certificate, that's quite a big thing to be able to show a future employer university that you've taken that training." Ideally, the micro-credential will identify a specific career competency or skill of value to a future employer. This is a point where feedback from an external advisory committee would be highly valuable.

5. Establish a mix of elective program formats, timed around graduate students' pragmatic needs.

Most universities have opted to keep graduate professional training optional for students, at least at the university-level. (Some programs build professional training explicitly into the graduate curriculum.) Interviewees spoke of some of the challenges of mandatory training. Stated one: "my feeling is they're grownups, if they need this, they know they need this. And as long as we make sure they're aware of this existing, that's our responsibility in creating good quality tools with quality programming and good quality communication so that they're aware that this all exists for them. And then they get to decide, 'do I need this, or do I not need this?'" Another stated, "while I admire institutions that have found ways to kind of embed professional development through mandatory practices, I am uncomfortable with mandatory. I really do think that we need to treat our students, as adults respectfully, and our job is mostly to make sure that they're well aware and to create institutional changes that need to happen." In most contexts, I feel that leaving this training optional for students is most appropriate.

There are a number of program formats that interviewees identified as effective, and providing students with a menu of options would allow the graduate students the best of all worlds:

- **Host an annual intensive professional development event, similar to an academic conference, for more extended skill-building.**

Reports one interviewee, "We did one, we called *Research Matters* and we pulled in like someone from the commercialization office, someone from the library, ... it was essentially three workshops back-to-back with lunch included. And then we were blown away by the response like we had. It was like 90% attendance and really good feedback."

Another reported, “We’re also finding students like condensed; they like it when everything is kind of packaged in the same time.... it’s been much better to say we’re going to call it PD week ... or we would offer like two full days from 8-5. So, they prefer having ... sessions that are packed into like that tight little timeline versus spreading it out over a semester.”

- **Use ongoing programming for building self-knowledge and community.**

While some graduate students simply wish to gain skills quickly, others are seeking more benefits from professional training. Ongoing programming with a cohort meets these needs. One interviewee reports, “People feel really alone and it’s just so wonderful to not feel alone about whatever subject it is, whether it’s developing leadership skills or, writing your CV for the first time for something other than academia. But what’s hard about that? Probably the same thing as what’s hard about it for your peer, even if they’re not in the same field as you. So that’s sort of the number one thing I hear in terms of what they found helpful.” Stated another, “students report high levels of satisfaction with opportunities for deeper engagement with each other.” Still another stated, “the feedback that I get is, it was really, really valuable to talk to my peers. I wish I’d had more time to talk to my peers.”

- **Offer intensive half-day workshops for specific skill training, such as IT, programming skills, and website design.**

It was stressed that these workshops should be exclusive to graduate students to create a safe space. One university hires more senior graduate students to deliver these programs, thus allowing the senior students another career development opportunity.

Attendance rates are reported to be better when the skill is tied to pragmatic matters in the graduate students’ current lives: “some of our most well attended and beneficial workshops relate to overcoming procrastination, overcoming perfectionism, learning how to be assertive, professionalism, project management, but then also the straight-up how do I look for jobs, how do I write my resume, how do I have a good LinkedIn profile. Pragmatic but also some of the new nuances around managing multiple priorities”.

A common challenge noted by interviewees is that attendance rates are considerably below registration rates. One university used a model that proved effective at addressing this and should be considered: “Charge a non-attendance fee. Because we are on the same system as the academic student record and scheduling, we just grade them as attending or not attending and it automatically charges them a nonattendance fee.”

Numerous universities offer workshop and program sections exclusively for international graduate students. This is an option universities may wish to consider.



6. Use effective pedagogy within training programs and workshops, including skill training and application, community building, and reflection.

Graduate professional skill development, like all other university training, should follow effective pedagogy that includes applied learning, group interaction and engagement, and reflection activities.

Interviewees identified pedagogy as important to effective programs:

- “The academic workshops have become two weeks, where the first week we put up the content and the second week they come back with a mocked-up poster where we give feedback. Increasingly we will move towards that model where they come back and practice something”.
- “even in a short hour-long workshop, having something where they walk away with and they've done something to kind of start practicing whatever skill it is that you're teaching them. ... for example, in my slide design workshop, ... we go through elements of design and how that applies to three-minute thesis slides. And then I go, ‘okay, well let's take five minutes to sketch out an initial plot process for your slide’, and then they'd pair and share. ... in the class, they can focus on just learning and absorbing and making their keynotes and then they can go away and they've gotten that piece of paper of, ‘okay, I've started to do something. I've had the opportunity to think and apply my learning’, even if they haven't fully fleshed it out. Whereas if you don't, they might walk away and just forget about it and not go back to it.”
- “increasingly what we are doing, and what other members of the graduate network program are doing, is having less topics so we get more focused and having more, longer or more pairing and sharing, coming in with their work and working through it.”

7. In addition to interactive in-person and online programs, provide open access online resources.

Some students lack the flexibility in their schedules to attend programs or have other reasons that they are not able to participate. For these students, an online repository of resources, including recorded talks and trainings, is invaluable.

One interviewee reported an anecdote that demonstrated the value of an online collection of graduate student resources: “I remember years ago meeting a student...and he said, Oh my God, I love the career services, they are wonderful.’ And I said, ‘Oh wow. So what have you participated in?’ ‘Just like, well, I've never been.’ I'm like, ‘what do you mean that you loved them?’ He said, ‘I've used all their resources online. They are just amazing.’ Interesting, for us to realize that we may be having more of an impact than we think we are having.”

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While universities may be tempted to put these resources behind a closed access portal, doing so misses an important opportunity to build community relations, alumni relations, and future student recruiting. Stated one interviewee whose university made all of its graduate student online resources open access, “we just want to make it accessible. we just recently opened it all to the public ... some of it is more relevant only to graduate students, more academic, and others it's more mainstream. And then there's some of the things we think are more academic, but alumni and undergrads and the general public are interested in. So, and of course we have no reason not to, we are doing it online and we have the capacity. So it's, we're just trying to make it to benefit everybody. And in terms of graduate education, the more we do this in terms of, I guess, recruitment, the presence of students that are interested in our program, the more they're exposed to, ‘Oh, this is what Graduate Studies is doing. And I never thought of doing a graduate program before, maybe I will now. That was helpful to me, you know?’”

8. Provide sufficient staff resourcing to support university-level graduate career skills training.

Interviewees regularly raised the importance of staff support dedicated to graduate career services and skill development. This was particularly a concern for PhD students. Stated one interviewee, “in most cases, graduate students are well served by the programs and services we provide for undergrads. There are a few exceptions in some of the professional fields, but for the most part, I think they're well served by those sessions. It's the PhDs and postdocs that are facing a very different context and need more specialized support.”

9. Engage units and faculty through communication and innovative collaboration.

While the university level plays an important role in providing graduate professional training, the units offering the graduate programs (departments, schools, colleges) are the main point of contact for students. Units and the faculty within those units, design and refine curriculum and supervise and mentor students. Engaging units and faculty is thus critical to successful graduate professional training.

An important starting point is simply the communication of university-level offerings to units. Interviewees spoke of the need to establish relationships with units and graduate chairs, rather than simply sending emails. Stated one, “If you email it to them, they will probably just delete it but if you go and speak to them, they are pleasantly surprised at what they see.” Strategies included annual visits to each unit to share information, and requesting opportunities to speak at departmental orientations or seminars:

- “I call these gateway workshops. It is a way for me to go out into student seminars, where students are forced to be there and do an hour-long mini session. They may find it interesting and come to other workshops afterwards. This is a bit of a marketing technique for me, and we are getting increasingly more requests for that, to come into a class or a graduate seminar and teach a

topic, like a guest lecturer. We get requests and also go out to all the departmental graduate orientations, so we go out at the beginning of the year and present the programs to the students. We get about 20-30 departments that request us to give a 5–10-minute pitch of our programs to their incoming students.”

Units can serve as important laboratories for innovation and experimentation. Some interviewees spoke of collaborating with groups of units to run pilot studies. One described a for credit capstone course open to students in all Faculties, with the class available as an elective in participating units’ programs. Another described a series of department-specific workshops:

- “I would deliver multiple versions of the same workshop with different groups...and if [students] couldn't make the time in their own department ... they were free to attend someone else's section.... students tended to stick with the group that they were attending. So they did tend to stay within their kind of subject area cohorts. But you know, they were not put off by working with people from other areas. I would send them messages if they missed their session. So I would say, ‘you were scheduled for this one, you didn't come. So these are the times that are left available. Please let me know which ones you want to attend.’ I know some of the spaces that we had were very tight. And so I always gave me the excuse to say, ‘if you'd like to attend a session, you need to check with me first before you can just drop in.’ And so they would, they were really, really good. We had a great group of students.”

10. Measure effectiveness and continue to adapt.

Interviewees spoke of the challenges of knowing the effectiveness of graduate professional skills training. Stated one, “Sometimes our impact is delayed; sometimes our impact is not in person. So how do we measure impact? That's a really tricky question. I think we try to make it easy for ourselves simply by saying how many people came and I don't know if that's the right way to do it.” Deliberate attention must be paid to defining what constitutes success and evaluation should be central to program planning.