

Student Advisor Case Summaries: 2004-2008

To:

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CC:

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Introduction

The Student Advisors have been writing annual term reports and fall/winter/summer term reports since the program started documentation in 2004. We have made many recommendations to the School of Graduate Studies over the course of the program after dealing with student problems “on the ground”. Many of these recommendations have equity components to them especially since many of the cases seen by the Advisors involve international students, students of color, and female students. Some of the problems and recommendations are discussed in this report. The areas in which Advisors have dealt with equity issues are:

- Lack of academic support for international students
- Lack of funding for international students including access to funding beyond eligibility years
- Lack of TA/TF/RA protection
- Lack of strict guidelines around intellectual property
- Little or no access to child care support

Problems

I. Lack of academic support for international students

International students coming to the Student Advisors have brought up issues such as:

- The student is provided with no time to work on her own thesis/research because her supervisor requires that she constantly be working on his projects/papers.
- The student researches and writes papers in their entirety (with minimal or no input from the supervisor), and then is either denied or given only limited authorship credit.
- The student is generally ignored by the supervisor, who refuses to provide the level of guidance requested by the student and avoids the student's requests for contact. The student observes that other (often non-international) students under the same supervisor are provided with more attention and support.
- The supervisor regularly speaks to the student in an abusive or threatening manner (either privately or publicly). This may or may not involve obviously discriminatory remarks, such as: “We don't know how things were done in

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[student's home country], but here you do them my way.” This may also include threats to contact the student's home government.

Common to almost all of these typical situations is an overwhelming fear of reprisal on the part of the student if any action is taken to confront the professor, report the abuse, or otherwise address the problem. Indeed, many of the students who have already built up the courage to approach our office with their concerns are nonetheless unwilling to approach their supervisor or department, as they perceive that they will be identified as a trouble-maker and face retaliation through the exercise of their supervisor's (or department's) considerable discretion over them. Unfortunately, this fear is often well-founded and it would be irresponsible for us to advise students otherwise.

II. Lack of funding for international students

Many international students face considerable financial challenges. While graduate students are fortunate to be able to take advantage of opportunities offered through Student Awards, and even the Ban Righ Centre, there remains a concern over funding in the sciences because that funding is tied to specific professors or projects. Unlike the humanities, sciences and engineering provide a less flexible funding environment when there are conflicts between students and supervisors.

At the same time, the lack of comprehensive internal funding at Queen's affects the most marginalized groups on campus. International students are seeing rising tuition costs while funding streams like TAships are becoming more scarce. Many departments are cutting TA/RA positions to save costs, but many students depend on these sources of funding. When supervisors fund their students, this can lead to problems as supervisors can allocate funds to their research groups/labs as they see fit. Again, marginalized student groups are often pushed outside since those students (for various reasons) may not be as quick or “efficient” with their research.

With International Tuition Awards being “downloaded” to the departmental level and not guaranteed for Master's students, we anticipate that international students will be facing even more financial pressure.

In addition, it should come as no surprise that students are concerned with funding beyond their funding eligible years. This general problem is disproportionately borne by international students, who have far less access to the typical financial resources accessed by domestic students when their funding runs out such as bank loans. Several international graduate students approaching their fifth year have contacted the program for advice and assistance. Unfortunately, there is little we can do for students in this situation other than to make them aware of various resources, from bursary assistance through Student Awards to emergency help from the Chaplin's office or the AMS foodbank. It seems both unfortunate and absurd for the University to partially subsidize the first four years of an international student's PhD only to force them out in the fifth year, particularly when the average time to completion in some departments remains high.

Unfortunately, it seems that Queen's is pressing ahead in the wrong direction on this issue. The existing situation will no doubt be exacerbated by the new tuition increase, which is also designed, in real terms, to be disproportionately borne by international students.

III. Lack of TA/TF/RA protection

While many of the potential institutional safeguards that one would expect might protect university employees are non-existent for student employed in these capacities, others that have been adopted at the level of Graduate School policy do not appear to be consistently implemented at the department level.

The failure of departments or individual faculty member to implement or behave in accordance with SGS or Senate "policies" has been a recurring theme from the viewpoint of Student Advisors. We believe the difficulty lies in the lack of effective enforcement mechanisms for these policies due to the University's collegial governance structure, with its deep respect for departmental and individual autonomy.

Some of the most common TA issues that we have dealt with this year include:

- Lack of a TA contract
- Impossible to complete assigned work in hours allotted
- Mis/non-communication of expectations or job requirements
- The extent to which acceptance of TA-ship is voluntary, and the impact of refusing one on other departmental funding
- Ability of students to accept TA-ships from other departments, and the potential impact on their home-department funding
- Fractional TA-ships (i.e., ½ or ¼ TA-ships)
- Availability beyond fourth year of a PhD
- Employment Insurance eligibility
- Medical/parental leave issues

IV. Lack of strict guidelines around intellectual property

Authorship issues remain a major concern for graduate students across disciplines. These concerns remain very difficult to resolve given the lack of standards at the departmental level. Everyone knows that authorship conventions differ by discipline and department, but the uncritical support of faculty members in such disputes by all levels of administration facilitates exploitation of the student/supervisor relationship and potentially undermines the academic integrity of the institution.

The existing authorship policy is very vague and does not account for the power imbalances in the discussion between the supervisor and the student. This is especially worrisome for international students who aren't aware of their rights as far as authorship. The faculty member (as a supervisor and as a member of the field) holds expert knowledge and social power over their students. This makes any discussions on authorship biased towards the faculty member. The SGS needs to create clearer policy

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around authorship that recognizes that students may not be able to discuss authorship with their supervisor on an equal level.

V. Little or no access to child care support

The SGPS Exec and SGPS International Students Coordinator have both noted the lack of support from SGS for families of graduate students. This is problematic as Jennifer Massey indicated that a survey of graduate students in 2008 showed that 17% of PhD students have families/children. This is quite a large percentage of the graduate student body.

There are three distinct concerns for graduate students: spousal support, child support, and financial support for maternity leave. The first concern is not a problem for some families as both partners are graduate students at Queen's or employed at Queen's. However, many partners are not students or employed at all. In the case of international student families, the partner at home may not have a chance to connect with community or build social networks as there are little to no resources for them. They may also require support in learning English or in learning to live in Canada but, again, there is a lack of resources for them on campus. While some community organizations do exist such as Immigration Services Kingston, their services are catered more towards permanent immigrants to Canada as opposed to temporary students.

A secondary concern of graduate students with families is child support. There is an abhorrent lack of daycare in Kingston leaving many full-time graduate students to juggle their lives between work, child care, and other aspects of home/work life. This not only affects the work ethic of graduate students but also affects retainment & recruitment of potential graduate students at Queen's.

While Queen's does provide leaves of absence to graduate students for maternity purposes, financial support during leave is suspended. This obviously affects the ability of both parents (or the single parent) to take off from their studies. There are no maternity bursaries offered to parents leaving school temporarily for maternity purposes.

Recommendations

I. Publicize the experiences of international students

Given the level of fear in the international student community with respect to raising concerns or seeking assistance, we think it is reasonable to suspect that the inappropriate treatment experienced by these students in our university is more extensive than even we realize. The question of how to effectively address and remedy this systemic problem is ultimately one for the graduate school and the university administration. Given the university's recent decision to increase the number of both graduate and international students, if these systemic abuses are not properly addressed and eliminated, we will be headed for a crisis. While any public acknowledgment of existing systemic abuses may be temporarily embarrassing for the university, the failure to acknowledge and denounce such practices enables them to continue and will ultimately lead to greater embarrassment when others drag them into the light. It is also important to consider the extent to which the international reputation that Queen's would seek to further develop, is impacted by the actual experiences and stories of international students. We recommend the university make public the negative (and positive) experiences of international students at Queen's University.

II. Provide rights knowledge to international students

It would really help to educate new students on their rights at Queen's University, especially international students. It's not uncommon to have international students fall prey to harassment/discrimination due to a lack of knowledge. Secondly it could be important for the SGS to educate faculty/students on the need to be sensitive to the presence of international students in their departments. It might not be strange that some graduate students and/or faculty do not fully comprehend the impact of some words and actions on students from another country or culture.

III. Create standardized TA hiring, funding, and contract practices

Even when TAs are covered under existing policies, there have been different viewpoints on the meaning of the policy. It is recommended that the SGS in consultation with the SGPS and all SGS departments have a discussion on "standardized" practices and not just policy. This is especially important as many policies are being downloaded to the department level.

IV. Standardize authorship policy

Graduate students need access to fair, unambiguous, publicly available, written standards of the authorship conventions that apply to their work. We would recommend that the SGS propose a default policy for authorship, and allow each department to opt-out of that policy by promulgating their own written policy. The SGS authorship policy should take into account power differences between supervisors and their students in a discussion of authorship.

V. Provide supervision training to faculty

Given that the majority of cases seen by Student Advisors deal with student/supervisor

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issues, it is our belief that the SGS develop, endorse and enforce policies and procedures that will protect the interests of both student and supervisor. A two-pronged approach of a) requiring faculty training for supervision and b) maintaining departmental records about supervision that would promote an expectation of accountability for supervisors is recommended. Policies regarding this training should be developed in close consultation with both faculty and graduate student members who are familiar with the common conflicts and potential pitfalls of graduate supervision.