

Dean's Annual Report to Graduate Faculty

As dean, I offer heartfelt thanks to the USask community for welcoming me into the fold mid 2020 – a year of history making in every way.

I am grateful to have engaged this past year with the members of the GSA Executive and the SPS leadership. Their advocacy from the perspective of graduate students and postdoctoral fellows at all levels of the university was critical to adapting to the ever-changing landscape brought on by the pandemic and their service on college committees is invaluable to ensuring student-centered approaches remain in the foreground.

I want to acknowledge the incredible dedication of the graduate faculty who have supported students and fellows in their studies and research, adapting to the virtual environment and pivoting research to tackle the many aspects of the pandemic.

Our college priorities to enhance the student experience, foster a strong graduate community and develop flexibility to best support students, fellows and faculty are grounded in the institutional pillars of boundless collaboration, courageous curiosity, and inspired communities. Despite the challenges of the year, our college leadership team has pushed forward on projects and started new initiatives and our staff have been steadfast in delivering service through it all.

On behalf of CGPS, I submit the following report of the activities of the college for the 2020/21 academic year.

Enhancing Experiences

Enhancing our services

- Recruitment remains a key priority for our college as we work through partnership with Student Recruit (TSLE). While travel was not possible, under leadership of Danny Freire the team pivoted to participating in virtual recruitment fairs and delivering a pilot virtual recruitment event targeting our own undergraduate students. The virtual platform has opened possibilities to reach more potential students and may become a low-cost mainstay of our recruitment efforts. The agreement with the China Scholarship Council is in the final stages for renewal and we continue to explore new sponsorship agreements
- This year marks the culmination of the ICT-TSLE-CGPS collaborative project to implement the new graduate admissions system – RMS Recruit, in a remarkable feat of being ahead of schedule and under budget. All programs (MPAcc set to come online August 2020) are now receiving applications through the system. We will be taking stock after first admissions cycle in Recruit concludes during a special June Graduate Administrator Forum that will focus exclusively on “RMS Recruit lessons learned”. A few refinements are in the works and in August 2021, we will launch an innovative supervisor selection functionality for units who require students to identify a supervisor prior to application. As a recruitment tool, the new system provides a slick interface for applicants and enables reporting to make data informed decisions in real time. Thanks to the unit graduate administrator ambassadors that gave

their time to ensure the best system was built for our needs. As of April 20th, we have received a total of 8,610 complete applications for programs beginning in the 2021/22, an increase of 594 applications (7.41%) year over year indicating healthy application pressure and a fully functional system.

- Applications from international applicants are up by 5.5% compared to this time last year, international admissions are down by 95 students (15.5%) while applications from domestic applicants are up by 17.3% compared to this time last year, and domestic admissions are also up by 22 students or 5.1%. To date 971 students have accepted offers of admission (down by 72 or 6.9% compared to this time last year).
- Converting forms into the Jira platform enables our staff to triage requests and provides tracking abilities. Between May 1, 2020 and April 20, 2021, we supported units by addressing 4,130 requests related to students in-program received through Jira and facilitated 1,223 admissions. We continue to work to encourage all units to make use of the [CGPS service desk](#) Jira platform that now includes Awards and Scholarships.
- Under the new leadership of Marc Usunier, Director of Programs and Operations, we are examining our workflows and practices with a view to balancing workloads and streamlining processes that will speed up our turn-around times for routine transactions.
- In collaboration with TSLE, we are developing robust graduate enrolment report for next fall that will present a complete picture of our student body from application to entrance to retention and time to completion.
- We invested in a term appointment to in the Awards and Scholarship team to improve the success of our students at Tri-Agency scholarships. We created recorded tips for successful applications, improved the website information and contacted high achieving eligible students to encourage them to apply. We received 3 Vanier Awards, 1 NSERC and 2 SSHRC pool improving over the single NSERC Vanier last year and improved our success for the CGS-D awards as detailed in the report from the Awards Committee.
- Our governance committees have engaged in thoughtful discussion about their mandates and composition, and we are embarking on a renewal of the governance over the coming year. At the same time, Associate Dean Ryan Walker and Committee and Programs Administrator Kelly Clement are members of the Program Approvals Process Review project team led by the Governance Office with a view to improving the efficiency and effectiveness of the academic program approval pathway. Walker is also a member of the Microcredentials Working Group led by Teaching and Learning Enhancement.

Professional Development

- On the postdoctoral front, you may have noticed the efforts from our Postdoctoral Studies Advisory Committee and Postdoctoral Studies Coordinator to feature our PDFs in the CGPS newsletter. Postponed last year due to the timing of the pandemic campus shutdown, the inaugural PDF Career Development Day was held virtually on March 4, 2021. 40 PDFs (~25% of all our PDFs) attended the successful synchronous event and as one of the benefits to the online platform, sessions were recorded and will become part of an online resource library.
- The 3MT competition provides a great opportunity to showcase our students research and ability for communicating their work to a public audience. Congratulations to the local 3MT winners: **1st Place:** Ahmad Karimi, **2nd Place:** Kayla Cropper; **3rd Place:** Alivia Mukherjee; **Honourable Mention:** Ninu Kallingal Mohandas. Ahmad Karimi goes on to the western finals May 13, 2021 (<https://fgs.athabascau.ca/news/events/3mt.php>)
- As part of building a strong relationship with the Government of Saskatchewan, the CGPS had the opportunity to collaborate with government relations to present some exciting student and fellow research in the first inaugural *Celebration of Scholarship Event* with Saskatchewan Minister of Education Gene Makowsky (on April 1st, 2021). Two PDFs and three students shared their enthusiasm and demonstrated the impact of their research and gained valuable coaching and experience communicating to a broad audience. We intend to build upon the success of this event in future years and draw in more government and public stakeholders.
- The [Grad Hub](#) was introduced to the USask community. Building Paths of Self-Discovery & Development: Empowering Graduate Students Through a Digital Platform was presented at the CAGS virtual symposia April 29, 2021. The hub approach embraces the complexity of graduate students' roles within the institution by introducing development opportunities during the student life cycle, not only as students, but as influencers and as champions of graduate education. Our innovative platform leads students to self-discover their own unique independent learning plan while introducing academy norms.

- Preparing our graduate students and fellows for employment outside of academia is paramount to their academic journey. This year we sponsored more than 100 students and PDFs to attend the “Beyond the Professoriate” annual conference. The results of [The Graduate Transformative Skills Project](#) (Loleen Berdahl) are now available on the GMCTL website. The study provided insight into the views of our students who want more integration of skills development into their programs and makes recommendations to address the needs of both students and faculty. CGPS and GMCTL will continue to collaborate to incubate and pilot new formats to deliver the necessary skills training.

Creating Community

The college continues development of a community of collaborators in the pursuit of excellence through a variety of activities and introduction of inclusive practices.

Celebrating and supporting mentorship of students and fellows

- We congratulate Jeanette Lynes, Director of the MFA in Creative Writing as this year’s Distinguished Graduate Mentorship Awardee. As dean, I had the great pleasure to work with our Doctoral Mentorship Committee and meet several of our previous graduate mentorship awardees as we further modified the application and adjudication process for future to define of excellence in mentoring to be inclusive and to align with the national award to best position our nominations.
- Our graduate faculty membership has grown to over 1800. The New *Graduate Supervision Handbook* is now available [Faculty Resources - College of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies - University of Saskatchewan \(usask.ca\)](#). Created by CGPS in collaboration with the Gwenna Moss Centre for Teaching and Learning and the Graduate Students’ Association, creation of the resource marks an important step along the way to building a faculty community of practice centred on excellence in graduate supervision and mentorship. The Handbook provides a guide and is complemented by the Student Supervisor Agreement, a tool for a guided conversation with students to foster strong communication and transparency for expectations that was instituted as a requirement for all new students as of September 2020.
- After several months of CGPS consultation, a revised University level [Postdoctoral Fellows Policy](#) was approved by University Council and is scheduled to go to the Board of Governors for decision in June. The refreshed policy and parsed out procedures will bring our policy in line with the collective agreement and provides much needed clarity for fellows that are funded exclusively through external funds.
- CGPS continues to hold virtual forums with key stakeholders to deliberate about key topics in graduate and postdoctoral education and training. Monthly forums with Graduate Chairs enabled frequent touchpoints with the dean and each other to share information with particular focus on mitigating the impacts of the pandemic and to discuss and consult on new initiatives including the Pandemic Shift Project with Vice-President Debra Pozega-Osburn and revisions to the Responsible Conduct of Research Policy led by Associate Vice President Research Darcy Marciniuk.

Indigenization and decolonization:

- We began to take steps to build an overt and explicit college strategy to support the success of Indigenous graduate students. To begin, the dean invited a small group of advisors to guide the initial work. The group has met twice to date and we are already forming a strong sense of where we can change and setting a priority list for actions to support Indigenous graduate students.
- As our college witness in the 4th annual māmowi āsohtētān Internal Truth and Reconciliation Forum in March, Associate Dean Walker will lead the CGPS team through important takeaways from the forum. We share his reflection here: “At the Forum we heard that racial literacy is not being learned in the western education system and remains a special interest topic. When race is discussed, the focus is mostly on disadvantage to racialized people, and almost never on the advantages bestowed by whiteness. We were given the understanding that we need to make racial literacy commonplace in teaching and learning at USask. And that

we need to tune-in to how the myth of cultural neutrality propping up white advantage in our university policies, structures, and norms is a barrier to reconciliation.”

- In partnership with the GMCTL and Library we launched the 4 Seasons of Reconciliation Pilot Course. The goal was to promote a renewed relationship between Indigenous Peoples and Canadians, through transformative and engaging learning and anti-racism education. It features award-winning films, slideshows, videos, quizzes, and a completion certificate issued through the University Library. Twenty spots were promoted and offered to graduate students for a four-week 4 Seasons of Reconciliation pilot project. The demand was great, with almost 100 students responding within 48 hours. The student group was diverse with students from the social science, humanities, and science backgrounds. Supervisors also expressed interest in their own version of the project.

Developing Flexibility and a Pandemic Response Update

All policies need regular review. The 455 theses successfully defended remotely (May 1, 2020 – April 20, 2021) is a testament to the power of technology and our ability to adapt our beliefs about what is acceptable academic practice to meet learning outcomes and standards. Associate Dean Walker recently put out a call to explore changes to the advisory and examination committee and thesis defence policy and we look forward to a refresh that respects the need for rigor while at the same time building flexibility to suit the needs of disciplinary and interdisciplinary programs, and the evolving understanding of what is in the best interest of our students and faculty. We have also embarked on a project to rethink the many streams of central funding for graduate students

The pandemic caused much disruption for graduate students including temporary shutdowns of laboratories, access to field sites and the need to redesign research projects that required face-to-face interactions. Students also faced challenging personal responsibilities and situations that interfered with making progress in research such as remote school for children and inadequate access to internet or suitable workspace at home. In addition, many types of part-time employment in service industries that graduate students rely on to support themselves were also disrupted. 121 students who were admitted to terms since the pandemic started deferred and the majority of these were international and first time Indigenous students. We know that the financial impact has been particularly severe for many international students. Providing flexibility for leaves we had 182 leaves compared to 159 for the same period last year suggesting a fair number of students took leave due to the pandemic. We suspect additional students who might have benefited from a leave were reluctant to take one. To address the known disruptions, extensions to programs will be barrier free.

Mental health is always a serious concern with graduate students known for higher rates of depression and the strain the pandemic could add. The graduate community was introduced to [Empower Me](#), a remote counselling service offered to students coordinated by the GSA. Mental health initiatives continue to be offered to the graduate community through [USask's Wellness Centre](#).

As we engaged with students and fellows through meet the dean events and other venues, a sense of isolation and disconnection from students outside Saskatoon became a clear theme. Over the last several months various opportunities have emerged, albeit virtually, allowing students to form a sense of community like [virtual cafés](#), [wellness events](#), [research expos](#) and other community enhanced events across campus. The table below summarizes the many issues and responses from the university to support graduate students through the pandemic.



Spring - Summer 2020

- Programs were put in place to support students during the summer of 2020 from agencies (Tri Agency) and from USask in addition to many students having access to other provincial and federal programs.
- Leaves of absence were granted based on the students' inability to make progress in research.
- CGPS allowed new students to defer the Dean's Scholarship beyond the regular 8-month time-limit.
- CGPS informed units that "devolved funds" could be provided to students beyond normal time-in-program limits in 2020/21.
- Requests for financial supports were prominent in May-August 2020, Western Deans noted that requests for support had subsided by the fall.
- Increased campus activities were approved with graduate students prioritized to provide access to labs for those closest to finishing their programs.
- CGPS held sessions with Graduate Chairs to support remote supervision bringing in the Grad Dean from Athabasca University and colleagues who had been successful in pivoting graduate student projects.
- Bookable grad spaces were made available for students in need of reliable internet.
- Extra teaching assistants were hired largely to assist moving courses online through the GMCTL Summer Employment Program. Funding started with \$175,000 PAC investment and grew from redeployment of DSAE and APEF monies (and some federal funding that was sought out). Approximately \$144,000 of these dollars went to international graduate students.
- The Magnet Program was accessed that covered 75% cost of domestic TA & SA for September – December 2020 and again in winter term. Through the GMCTL 90 graduate students were employed who worked on eighty-two projects over the course of the spring and summer. These graduate students contributed to the delivery of programming, the conversion of content, the creation of content etc. for moving to remote delivery.
- Approximately \$175,000 was recouped and held by Colleges which was used for hiring additional TA & SAs in winter.

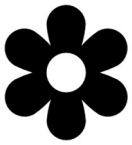


Of the 2500 approved campus research activities to date, 35% or 714 are graduate students. Of the 200 field research requests, 66 are graduate student related (or one-third).



Fall – Winter 2020

- From March to September almost \$1M was spent on student crisis aid. About half of that went to graduate students (they are 17% of the student population) and 2/3 of that half, or \$333,000, went to international graduate students. The average amount per student was approximately \$2000-\$2500.
- 2020 DSAE and APEF funds were used to replenish crisis funding together with other funding sources nearly a quarter of a million dollars was repurposed toward financial aid.
- In November 2020, the GSA received over 100 applications to their bursary program that provided \$1000 bursaries to 24 students.
- When COVID cases were high in late December and January new access to campus was suspended. Since then, new projects/graduate students continue to be approved while others have completed.
- CGPS commissioned GMCTL to provide workshops for faculty on "Remote Facilitation Strategies for Graduate Classes" – two sessions were held in December that were well attended.
- In fall 2020, CGPS informed units with devolved funding that they would be permitted to holdover funds more than 10% to next year and keep commitments to new students that deferred or could not take up the award fully 2020/21.
- New international students had increased times to obtain study permits and many started their programs from abroad while others deferred their starts to January 2021 or beyond. A mechanism was developed to assist new international students that hold a scholarship or stipend and who could not receive funds because they lack a Canadian bank account and SIN was created. This included students that were to be paid by Tri-Agency funds



Winter-Spring
2021

- International graduate students could enter the country starting at the end of 2020, made possible because USask was a designated learning institution with a robust quarantine plan.
- Impacts on enrolment were less than anticipated, domestic student enrolment was up while new international and Indigenous student enrolment was slightly down (see [fall term census data](#)).
- CGPS released the COVID supplement made possible by repurposing funding that had not been taken up as well as a small surplus in the general scholarship fund. CGPS awarded **\$172,500** in pandemic bursaries mid-April 2021 as seventy \$2500 bursaries were distributed to students whose need were determined by a lack of ongoing support either through a full stipend or scholarship; and whose research had been disrupted by the pandemic; and would likely to lead to a longer time in program. Since the call did not exhaust the funding, a similar call will be made in the fall of 2021.
- We are on par with 2020's convocation numbers. **529** students that have applied for spring convocation (2021) compared to 541 (2020) last year.

To close this report, I reflect upon the year that past and the one ahead. To be graduate students and postdoctoral scholars in this moment has forever linked our students and scholars to the biggest pandemic in the last century. A cohort of students worried about a low grade or a longer degree that might impact their competitiveness in the academic stream and yet so many applying their skills to pandemic related problems. The graduate education landscape has been forever changed; and paradoxically through enduring change we are exploring ways to adopt flexibility as a core value. I am enormously proud of the way our staff rose to the challenge and kept the wheels on the bus through enormous change. I commend the grad faculty who went that extra mile (virtually of course) to support students and to the many graduate faculty who volunteer their time for CGPS committees and working groups and are engaging with our consultations.

As we begin our 75th anniversary year (2021-22), CGPS is launching new initiatives and imagining the future of USask's graduate and postdoctoral programming. Through strengthened collaborations and consultation, we are exploring ways to streamline college managed funding models, embrace EDI, rebuild efficiencies through governance, build flexibility within our policies and more.

Our plan is bold and ambitious – and we are just getting started.

Reimagine Grad Funding Working Group

Angela Kalinowsky (SSHRC),
Heather Lukey (CGPS), David Cooper (CIHR),
Maureen Bourassa (Professional
Programs), **Debby Burshtyn (Dean)**, Ian
McQuillan (CGPS Executive), James
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Awards Chair)

Indigenous Advisory Group

Simon J. Lambert (Faculty Member in Indigenous
Studies), Meika Taylor (Project Manager,
Indigenous Initiatives, Office of the Vice-Provost
Indigenous Engagement), Graeme Joseph (Team
Leader, First Nations, Métis and Inuit Student
Success), Stryker Calvez (Manager, Indigenous
Education Initiatives), **Debby Burshtyn (Dean)**