

A NEW VISION FOR GRADUATE STUDIES IN CANADA

Graduate students in Canada face a myriad of obstacles in their attempt to become well rounded scholars, from low funding to declining morale about the future of the profession. There have been four major developments affecting graduate students in history over the past few years which signal a recognition of these problems. First, in 2001, the Canadian Historical Association (CHA) amended its constitution to guarantee a place on its Council to one graduate student representative. Second, in 2002, the Federation of Social Sciences and Humanities of Canada appointed a Task Force on New Scholars to study the needs of new scholars. Third, in 2003, the University of British Columbia eliminated tuition fees for doctoral level students, joining the University of Toronto as only the second institution in the country to defray fees for senior level graduate work. Finally, in the same year, the first Canada Graduate Scholarships were dispensed, providing a generous series of grants to the humanities and social sciences at both the masters and doctoral level.

These developments are certainly welcome, but it remains to be seen if they will adequately counter the most disturbing problems undermining the quality of graduate training in Canada. The first fundamental problem is the inherent isolation in graduate work. In a national survey of graduate students conducted in 2002 by the CHA's Graduate Student Committee (www.cha-shc.ca/gsc-ced/Survey/index.html), students expressed deep concern about the lack of encouragement by departments and supervisors for participating in conferences and professional associations. Graduate students have become so focused and obsessed with dissertation and thesis work that they are able to consider few other priorities. At least five initiatives of the Graduate Student Committee have been put off indefinitely because students are told to focus on their thesis work to the detriment of all else. While most departments will offer one grant to attend a conference during the course of a graduate degree, a disturbing number of Masters students are unaware of these grants and most doctoral students need to attend more than one conference during their graduate career. Few students are present at the graduate student meeting at the CHA conference and only a small minority actually join professional associations. The result is an isolated profession, with graduate students cut off from each other and no appreciation for a national community of scholars.

Regional conferences are far more successful in bringing graduate students together. Qualicum in British Columbia, Atlantic Studies in the east, IHAF in Québec and the York Graduate Student Conference in Ontario are a few examples of regional meetings where graduate students meet, exchange ideas, network and socialize. But this is as much a problem

as a solution- students are discouraged from conceiving of their profession in a national scope and limit their perception to regions. Coast Under Stress, a tri-council funded research project bringing together researchers to study issues of ecology and health from Newfoundland to British Columbia, may not be replicated in the future unless graduate students are directed into more national cooperation and interaction.

The second major problem, complementing the first, is supervisors. Supervisors who do not encourage their students to join professional associations and attend national conferences are contributing to the fragmentation of the profession. But the problem is more deep rooted than this. The national survey also found that a surprisingly large number of graduate students feel they receive only limited direction from their supervisor. For instance, they are told to publish but not how, why and where. At a meeting of graduate students at the Canadian Law and Society Association in 2003, students showed little or no awareness of the process and qualifications involved in hiring faculty. The realities of academia, both in publication and in the hiring process, continue to escape much of the next generation of scholars. With the profession facing a virtual rebirth with the replacement of so many faculty over the next ten years, we are in a unique position to affect the nature of the profession, an opportunity which will not exist for a generation or more. A potential solution is a new vision of the nature of graduate studies. At the core of this new vision must be a fundamental realignment of the student-supervisor relationship. Supervisors enjoy God-like control and influence over their students, but far too many uncaring, overworked or poorly organized faculty accept students who suffer under their tutelage. What is called for is a forum for evaluating supervisors, one that is anonymous, web-based and organized at a national level to allow students to filter out those faculty who have abused their position in the past. This is something the CHA should seriously consider implementing. At the very least the CHA, as an association of professional historians, has a responsibility to make faculty and departments aware that a problem exists. Since students are often too afraid (justifiably) to speak up, the association needs to take the lead in ensuring faculty who abuse their position are not given the opportunity to supervise students. A new vision would encompass a national approach and encourage cross-border interaction. With a much larger number of humanities and social science students being funded through federal grants, SSHRC could take a lead in promoting this new vision. Grants could be tied to conferences. Much in the way a research allowance is tied to postdoctoral grants, SSHRC could reduce the current doctoral fellowship to \$18 600 with the remaining \$400 earmarked for travel grants each year to a conference. It could further provide graduate students with a list of professional

associations, members of the Federation for example, and offer to cover the membership fees each year for its grants holders to one professional association. The CHA and other associations could offer free introductory memberships to graduate students. Departments could go much further in encouraging students to join professional association, providing new graduate students with lists of associations and having the graduate advisor recommend they join one. In a culture that encourages students to adopt an obsessive focus on their thesis work to the detriment of all else, this could be the first major step in promoting greater interaction among graduate students and perhaps even collective ventures in research and voluntary initiatives. Most importantly, returning to the relationship with supervisors, universities must acknowledge the critical role of supervisory work as part of their faculty's responsibilities. In a 1999 report by the University of British Columbia proposing to develop a points system to determine salary and promotion, no recognition was given to supervisory work. Promotion and salary must be linked to an individual's willingness to supervise graduate students. Training courses, such as those currently made available to faculty for teaching, could be developed for supervisors and made a requirement for new faculty. The CHA could develop a flyer or booklet on tips for supervisors. SSHRC could recognize the value of supervisory work in evaluating grant applications.

Improving the quality of supervisory work and encouraging students to become more active at conferences and in professional associations in only the beginning. There are numerous

ways in which we can help prepare and shape new scholars in the upcoming years. In the University of Alberta's Department of English, for instance, the department makes available to its doctoral students mock-interviews to prepare them for applying to academic posts. An Office of Faculty Recruitment and Retention at the University of Windsor provides programs and workshops to support its graduate students and faculty, including workshops on how to find and apply for academic positions. The Federation, in 2004, is organizing a major social event for graduate students to encourage cross-disciplinary interaction. All of this comes down to a fundamental recognition that training graduate students is one of the central functions of Canadian universities and that developing a national community of scholars is a priority for the future. Imagine the potential for greater collective efforts and cross-disciplinary work if academics are trained in their formative years to think nationally. Everyone, from local departments to national granting agencies and professional associations, have a responsibility to help make this vision a reality.

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