Graduate Student Supervision and Mentorship Teaching Remotely: Shared Experiences

Summary of virtual panel event held on December 4th, 2020
[Link to video]

Relationships, studies, research and work have all been impacted as a result of the transition to a remote teaching and learning environment. These changes have also disrupted graduate student activities such as degree completion, thesis defenses, and academic research. Supervisors and mentors will need to be prepared to help grad students navigate these challenges and inevitable changes that must take place to successfully deliver on their plans, timelines, and program requirements.

Panelists:

Sandeep Raha, Associate Professor, Department of Pediatrics & Director, McMaster Children and Youth University

Lorraine York, Distinguished University Professor, Department of English and Cultural Studies

Qiyin Fang, Professor, Department of Engineering Physics

Karen Balcom, Associate Professor, Department of History &

**Sarah Whitwell**, PhD – Department of History

Panel Questions:

How has remote teaching and learning impacted graduate students in your area?

What strategies have you used to help guide, mentor and assist graduate students in adapting?

How are you staying connected to help graduate students complete their research and program requirements while operating virtually?

3 Key Takeaways from the panel

1. Graduate students have faced disappointments in the progression of their work in addition to having to face an amplified uncertainty about their future after graduation. [4:35 – 4:44]

2. Students are missing out on forming connections and networking. In addition to assisting students in this and facilitating informal conversations, encourage them to do so on their own. [21:29 – 21:52]

3. Create "scheduled serendipity" and intentional opportunities to connect students with peers and colleagues in the field to assist them in their careers and ease some of their anxieties. [54:58 – 56:22]
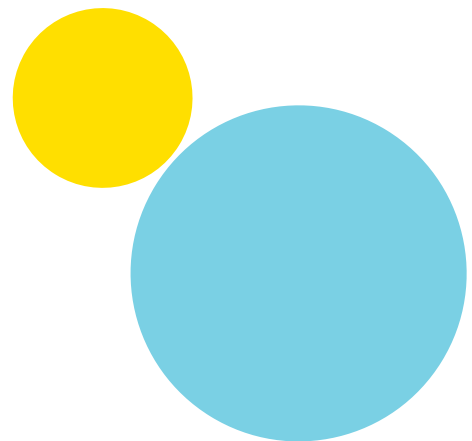
Some key takeaways from each panelist
Sandeep Raha, Associate Professor, Department of Pediatrics & Director, McMaster Children and Youth University

- Many challenges are not COVID-specific but are long standing issues which have been amplified by the transition to remote learning. Four of these areas are clear communication, access to mental health resources, delineation and clarification of expectations, and the need for personalized mentorship [11:51 – 12:41]
- The biggest area that students are missing out on is networking. Organic conversations are not happening as much since they must now be orchestrated. Student anxiety and uncertainty are also heightened. [13:14 – 14:03]
- Lab supplies are backlogged, and students are struggling with anxieties regarding this; try to assure them progress is being made and we are doing the best we can. [13:57 – 16:04]
- Sandeep has implemented logistics meetings to notify students that certain supply chains are backlogged, and supplies must be ordered a certain time in advance. [19:17 – 19:55]
- Very early on, Sandeep recognized the importance of talking to students and making assurances. He has implemented more individual meetings in addition to regular lab meetings. [16:46 – 17:08] He has also used more breakout rooms to encourage students to share their projects with others and facilitate critical thinking and more discussions. [18:08 – 19:12]
- He has also made an effort to celebrate micro-achievements to create a sense of progress for students. [20:20 – 20:58]

Lorraine York, Distinguished University Professor, Department of English and Cultural Studies

- Ask students what they are missing and use it as a foundation to try and supply some of what they need. One thing students are missing is informal mentorship and serendipitous conversations. [23:10 – 24:05]
- Be intentional and explicit about explaining how you can help students as a mentor and what they can reach out to you for (e.g. cover letters or email drafts). [24:15 – 25:29]
- Students are missing the opportunity to share their work, so it is importance to make an increased effort to connect students with peers and colleagues. [25:35 – 26:55]
- When asking students if they require any assistance, be specific to encourage a response. For example, try asking, "What is one thing that I could be doing right now that would assist you in the phase that you are working in" (specify phase if known). [27:39 – 28:35]

Qiyin Fang, Professor, Department of Engineering Physics

- Formal mentoring and communication have not been changed as much as informal. Qiyin was able to host grad students from different programs in the same office location which has helped create an environment where students can get to know one another. [34:04 – 35:00]
- Hold individual project meetings as well as large meetings and encourage students to talk about things unrelated to their projects. New students are challenged to initiate individual meetings with other students rather than being introduced in a large group setting. [35:50 – 37:02] Additionally, students are encouraged to call one another rather than message in order to increase communication and informal interactions. [37:29 – 38:49]
- Online conferences have enabled more students to attend and helped them interact with speakers, as it can sometimes be easier to start conversations in the chat box. [40:35 – 42:10]

Karen Balcom, Associate Professor, Department of History

- Create scheduled serendipity by holding regular meetings with agendas including topics of discussion (e.g. emotional support and mental health, discussing and critiquing their work, navigating the university, and next steps after graduate school). [44:53 – 46:18]
- Connect colleagues with students through meetings and conferences and ask about available online resources for their projects. [46:57 – 48:04]
- Have conversations with incoming students about whether graduate school makes sense right now and be clear about what their expectations should be. [48:05 – 48:50]

Sarah Whitwell, PhD – Department of History

- It is important to be thoughtful with feedback as students put a lot of themselves into their work and it essentially becomes part of their soul. Take the time to not only provide constructive feedback, but also to recognize and praise their good work. [50:12 – 52:20]
- Finding alternative forms of communication is important and keeping these practices in place may be very useful for the future. [52:21 – 53:21]
- Discuss job expectations and what options are out there. Sending students workshops and other resources that may be of interest can be very useful for them. [53:22 – 54:31]
- Encourage students to take breaks from doing work as they often neglect this. [54:32 – 54:51]

Referenced Resources:

- Teaching Remotely: Sharing Experiences – Working with TAs (Nov. 19, 2020): (Carly Ciufo 28:00 – 35:00)
- Active History: Precarious Instructors Manifesto
- Canadian Historical Association: Precarious Historians – Diversity, Inclusion and History Departments