

Graduate Student Forum Minutes – February 7, 2013

Time: 12:30 PM

Location: D211

Hosts: Michael Fryzuk and Michael Wolf

Speaker Codes:

MF: Michael Fryzuk

MW: Michael Wolf

Q: Question asked by audience

A: Audience member reply/input

Introduction:

MF – The graduate student forum was started last year when I was the new head of the department and MW was the new advisor, and we needed to know some things that were important to graduate students. It was pretty successful last year – the idea of a 4th year meeting to be put in place for graduate students to meet with their PhD committee in an attempt to shorten the PhD length from the average of 5.5 years. The 4th year meeting proposal was brought to faculty and it was approved. A few more years are needed to see how it all shapes up. The idea is to continue to do this regularly to talk openly about things.

Two things – we are striving to be a top research university in North America, which requires good support staff/faculty/facilities/graduate students. The graduate student population is key to research success. Also, we are undergoing a big curriculum review that involves both the undergraduate and graduate courses. Graduate student response in this review is critical.

Q: Do you think that the faculty and students like the 4th year meetings? Are they making a difference?

MF: I personally like them, and I think they will make a difference. Some colleagues reacted negatively, but that may be because they didn't receive the correct instructions: 1 hour meeting, no comprehensive questions, 15-20 minute summary of what you think your PhD thesis is going to look like and where you're at, followed by questions about your research plan. There was an option for the research supervisor to leave, but it's debatable if this should be maintained.

MW: They're new, so some faculty and students didn't know what to expect. The kinks are starting to get worked out, and they're definitely a good idea. May not work in every case, but it's a good opportunity to talk about what your thesis is looking like.

Q: Is there a need to change the format of the meetings so they are more concrete?

MF: I don't want to make it so it's a set structure, but the format is pretty close to what it should be. It should be all focused on the thesis and what the thesis is going to look like – chapter outlines, progress. What you need to do to complete thesis chapters.

Q: Do you think the meetings happen too early or too late?

A: Liked how it was, really appreciated the feedback. Forces you to think about what you need to cover in all of your thesis chapters – it makes it easier to put together IDG slides. The meeting itself was good, but more questions would be preferred, it's a bit too late if lots of research and changes have to be done to complete your project.

MW: There is the option to have more than one meeting, but that makes more work for everyone involved. Students complete their comprehensive exam in their second year. 4th year is close enough to the end, but not so far away that you can't change a few things.

A: Beginning of fourth year is appropriate. The presentation itself is good practice, but if it happened in the third year as well, it would help with keeping things focused. The meeting also allows you to get to know your committee better.

MW: There's no set point when the meeting has to happen.

MF: You have to decide with your supervisor when is the best time to do it. Varies group to group, but students can talk to their supervisor at any time to evaluate where they're at.

MW: Students can also call a committee meeting at anytime.

Q: What do you think the relationship should be between the student and the committee? Informal? If a student has an issue with their research and supervisor, can they go to their committee members?

MF: We have a department full of supervisors with lots of expertise. If you need help with a certain technique, maybe your committee doesn't have that sort of expertise, so you can talk to other supervisors in the department. We hope that the department is open and that no one is intimidated to talk to other professors in the department.

Q: From the looks of the meetings, it seems that part of the role is to make the relationship between the student and committee more informal. Is this the goal of the meetings?

MW: The formal relationship is for the committee to ensure you're completing your studies, but most of the responsibility lies with your supervisor. Formally, the entire committee is responsible.

Q: What is your opinion on the new curriculum changes? Do you think the graduate students do enough courses, and are they specialized enough?

MF: I haven't filled in the survey yet, and I'd be uncomfortable saying anything specific right now. Overall, I think the graduate course curriculum is a bit dysfunctional and not serving the needs of the graduate students as well as it could. I think there should be a better suite of courses available. Right now you're locked in to a particular set of courses. I want to hear your issues on what you think about the courses.

A: You don't know what you need to know about for your research until you start actually doing it. Supervisors are typically very open to any choice of courses, so this may not be very helpful to your actual research.

MF: Typically the research comes after the courses. You are available to sit in on any courses. We are tied to the faculty of graduate studies and their requirements. They have a course requirement issue and we have to make sure that is done so that the graduate students can move forward.

MW: The university requirement is that you complete all coursework in your first year. It is important in the masters program to complete the courses in the first year, because

the second year is all devoted to research. In the PhD program, you're around longer and can take some courses in your second year within reason. You are free to audit or informally sit in on courses if you're interested in them for your research. It is good to have some courses outside of your immediate focus area.

A: I feel like it's more of a continuation of my undergraduate degree, but the courses have more work. I thought that graduate courses would have more discussion and special topics, but I feel like I'm still in undergrad.

MF: That's a good point. There's been an evolution. When I first came here, you were expected to teach 3 courses: 2 undergrad courses and a graduate course. Over the years, we started to recognize that in order to generate research output, we were doing too much teaching, so combining 4th year courses with graduate courses reduced the teaching load. The consequence is that it's an undergraduate course that's molded with some graduate courses aspect, but it's not a true graduate course with discussion and coverage of research papers.

A: Some coupled courses have varying requirements for undergrad vs graduate students. The graduate students typically have to do way more work than the undergraduate students, but in other courses there isn't very much difference. Graduate students get to do more practical work in the crystallography course (solve a crystal), which is way more effective towards research compared to writing the final exam than the undergrads write.

MW: We don't have a unified vision on what a graduate course should be. If no one can agree on how it should be done, there should be lots of options.

Q: How many graduate courses are mandatory for each discipline?

MW: There are no mandatory courses for any area. That said, some of this is up to your supervisor. As long as you fulfill the formal requirements (4 courses, 3 of which are 500 level), some supervisors are more open about what courses you can take.

Q: We know that we have a chemical inventory database, but it's not utilized properly. It would be a good idea to make a standardized system again to prevent mass department emails, and to make it easier to borrow chemicals.

A: When chemicals were ordered at stores at my old university, they were scanned into an inventory that everyone could access. It's a good thing to have an inventory that is completely up to date in the department.

MF: I was very impressed with that system. As a safety issue, people need to know what chemicals are located in which labs in case something happens. We talked about changing the inventory, and it's more of a software issue. Some people in IT services are helping us with daily tasks/routine things, and we should make sure that this is on their radar.

A: There is freeware available that can be used to connect all lab inventories.

I was at the IT committee meeting and they think it's more of a supervisor issue; some supervisors would rather keep their inventory private. Every lab uses different formats. They were thinking about using a unified scheme, where you can submit the inventory to Jane and she can submit it into the database.

MF: One idea was using peoplesoft, so when you order chemicals it is automatically fed into a database.

A: When you order chemicals, they have a barcode. When the bottle is finished, you had to scan the barcode to sign it out. If we had this system in chem stores, it would solve a lot of problems.

A: The issue is that you still have to email a person from the group to see if they still have the chemical, since the inventory online is over 12 years old. This leads to emailing the entire department.

MF: Karen was interested in doing this, but it takes time to implement.

MF: How about access to shared facilities? Do people have comments on this?

A: When Emily went on vacation, it shut down the shared instrument facility at a time when graduate students didn't have to TA or had class, which was unfortunate.

MF: I assure you that this won't happen again.

A: I think that if you want to do more complicated NMR, I don't think there are training facilities available to learn it. Maria might talk you through it, but if she doesn't have time then you can't do it. I wonder if there could be some training course for more advanced techniques, which would be useful for a lot of people's research. There is a course on basic techniques, but it is really only for ^1H NMR. It seems that most people learn these skills from senior graduate students, but that's not available in every group.

A: You can sit on Andersen's spectroscopy course if you wanted to learn about advanced techniques.

MW: That's a good suggestion.

A: One thing that would be great is to have an aqueous waste system. You can neutralize it and put it down the sink, and that's the UBC protocol. There are issues with this, because there can be residual solvents in the work up. We let it evaporate in the back of the fumehood, but that takes up space in the fumehood.

MW: Waste disposal is the University's responsibility.

MF: It's an interesting dilemma, because we are trying to protect the environment, but we do things that are clearly at odds with it. It does match UBC's policy.

MW: The best advice is to bring it to Helen's attention.

A: You're supposed to neutralize every aqueous waste after extractions, but this becomes very laborious for synthetic chemists.

MW: Our department generates the most waste.

A: I get the feeling for the biohazardous stuff gets taken away, even if it's aqueous. This is similar to heavy metal waste.

MF: In new buildings, all waste water doesn't go into the water source, it goes into a holding tank and gets treated before it gets returned to the environment. This isn't the case in chemistry. It would have to be retrofit to do something like that, which would be expensive.

Q: With IT services, if our groups wanted to sign out a computer that was pre-loaded with general software, is this up to the supervisor or are there desktops available to sign out?

MF: There are programs that the department has site licenses for, and you have access to those programs. We do this through IT services, so there is a cost associated with their time.

A: There's no nmr software for mac users.

MW: There is computers in the main office available to sign out.

MF: I provide some windows based computers in my lab, but I expect students to provide their own.

Q: Touching on software, I was wondering why there isn't a site license for MestRenova or another nmr suite? I assume a lot of people would use this.

MW: I think this hasn't been brought to the attention of IT services. You can ask Jane if we can get a site license.

A: I was on the IT services committee, and some software are restricted by cost. We have the license for ACD, and we tried some other ones, but people didn't care or give feedback, so we've stayed with ACD.

A: Topspin is ~\$100 for a 3 year license, so talk to your supervisor.

Q: I work in A wing, and we got our hot water taken away. I really don't like the new hot water tank system. Will that ever get changed?

MF: There isn't much flow, and it isn't very warm. We went down this road to be part of the sustainability drive on campus, and the chemistry building is one of the most unsustainable places you can imagine. We're trying to help out, but we've heard and understand the complaints. I'm not sure what we can do about it. We brought those concerns back to building operations, but they said this system is more sustainable. It's just not very useful anymore.

A: Did they try it out in one lab, or did they just assemble it in every lab?

MF: I think they just came in and did it. I don't think we were aware of what was ultimately going to happen, we just thought it would reduce the flow. It doesn't heat the water very much.

Q: When you compare our graduate program to other universities, do you take into account how many hours they TA? I find that you lose your day if you have to TA that afternoon, and it takes away your energy. 2 units of TAing essentially make it so that you lose 2 of your research days every week.

MW: We're not unusually long, even compared to American programs when there is a lot less TAing. Time of completion isn't significantly different, and has been getting longer over time overall.

MF: Do people think that TAing prevents you from being more productive?

A: It does bite into your day, but you do have to TA. I don't think there is much of a solution around it.

MF: I think that being a graduate student isn't a job, it's not 9-5 5 days a week. The shorter period of time you spend doing the research to get out, the better chances you have of moving through and getting a job. My view is that this should be a 60-70 hour week thing. I don't want to enforce that, but it's something that we should talk about. What is involved with doing a PhD? If someone is putting in 60-70 hours a week with TAing, the PhD should be less than 5 years. People in my group who haven't put in that time don't have the results to graduate, and they know that. I try to challenge my students to put in the time and get done in a shorter amount of time.

Q: Is it possible to change around courses so that more graduate students can put all of their TAing on one day?

MF: It's a scheduling issue. For first year, that's a problem.

Q: Could the department set up a teaching reduction scholarship so that if you're really efficient and want to TA less, you can have that option in later years? The only way out seems to be to talk to your supervisor.

MF: Your supervisor has the option to buy you out, but that depends on their research grants. We do allow that later on.

MW: This year, there were less TA positions available, and because of that we actually encouraged some supervisors to buy out their senior students to reduce the amount of students needing to find TA positions. This can only be arranged through your supervisor.

A: I'm not sure if there is too many graduate students, or more demand for TA's, but when you want to graduate and get papers out, it's not the best thing to spend a lot of time teaching and marking.

MF: As you all know, we fund graduate students by a combination of TAing and RA's. The grants of faculty members depend on how much money they have to pay you.

A: Can there be an option for students to say that they don't want to TA. Can we cut mandatory TA options from 2 units to 1 unit?

A: I don't think it is mandatory to TA. It's about pay. You can apply for 1 unit instead of 2 units.

MW: I think all graduate students should TA some. I don't think there is anything stopping you from saying that you don't want to TA.

MF: TAing is a vehicle for us to deliver our huge undergraduate teaching load, and to help fund your graduate student stay here at UBC. You should be able to opt out if you want.

A: But there is no way for a scholarship to be set up by the department?

MF: Where is the money going to come from?

MW: In every year, there are roughly 40-50 students in that situation. Your TA salary is \$8000, so we'd have to come up with that money to make this scholarship.

MF: Buying out allows you to generate more results and be more efficient, and would be a reasonable investment for your supervisor.

MW: I don't do it very often, but I have done it and it can be valuable for both sides. Right now, the system is between you and your supervisor.

MF: Is this something we should do on a regular basis?

A: Definitely