**Graduate Student Forum**

August 5, 2020 over Zoom

Start: 1:03 pm

1. The forum started with introductions by Julie McNutt and Mike Wolf. Mike reiterated that students feeling sick should stay home and call 811 for instructions; to return to work, a negative test is required (more information on this will be sent to students at later date).
2. At 1:09 pm, Daniel Luo began his presentation on the wellness data collected in the Graduate Student Wellness Network survey. The figures presented represent the data solely for the Chemistry Department; a report for all of UBC will be coming in the fall.
3. At 1:21 pm, the question/comment period for the wellness data began.
   1. Q: Why do some figures present mostly neutral responses while overall scores give a negative value for the same question?  
      A: Overall score excludes neutral answers, so tend toward negative.
   2. Q: Have you looked at comparisons between the Chemistry Department and UBC as a whole (e.g., worst, similar, better)?  
      A: For security reasons, Daniel was only able to look at the data for the Chemistry Department. Comparisons can be made when the other data report comes out.
4. At 1:28 pm, the overall question/comment period started. The questions were those previously submitted by graduate students and the Graduate Student Initiative (GSI) Committee.
   1. Q: What funding changes will be made in light of the delays we all experienced in our research progress? Will funding be extended to make up for the lost time? Both in terms of the stipend and the tuition fees.  
      A: An extra semester will be added onto the 5 year and 2 year guaranteed stipends for PhD and MSc programs, respectively. Stipend changes will be discussed later. There is not much that can be done regarding tuition (decided by Faculty of Science).
   2. Q: UBC might not negotiate a bus pass arrangement, given the student presence on-campus will be much lower in the fall. Is the Chemistry Department looking at providing some sort of subsidy to help get graduate workers to the lab?  
      A: They are no plans yet. This is something the university arranges, so waiting to see what happens.
   3. Q: The mass spec and NMR technicians are understandably becoming overwhelmed with the number of samples they need to run, even during Phase 1 with the department at 1/3 capacity. What are the department's plans to try and minimize backlogs occurring for such characterization data collection?   
      A: NMR and Mass Spec facilities have been monitored. NMR seems to be doing okay, but Mass Spec has delays. For NMR, self-run samples will be implemented as we go into later phases; for Mass Spec, they are hoping to increase technical supports.
   4. Q: If labs are not being conducted in person, how will the department fill TA units with their hours?   
      A: First and second year labs will no be running in fall; some third year labs will be. TAs will be need for these third year labs and for online classes. Some TAs might have their units shifted to next summer for makeup labs, but number of total units for year will remain the same (i.e., not much change except for when the units will be allocated through year).
   5. Q: What is going to happen to the IDG/ODG/CBDG etc. seminars? Will these still occur in the coming year/be required for graduation?  
      A: In person meetings are not permitted, but the seminars can be organized virtually by their respective organizers. These seminars are not required for graduation.
   6. Q: What are PIs doing during these times to ensure that grad students mental health needs are respected? Respect is a two-way street and research has definitely delayed, but students should not be pushed into a corner or made to feel like they’re not doing enough particularly in the midst of a global pandemic on top of health and financial worries we are dealing with as students.  
      A: Mike agreed and has specifically pointed this out for discussion in faculty meetings since the start of COVID-19; expectations and pressure should be lowered.
   7. Q: There are only a few graduate classes offered and a low diversity in subject matter. Are there any plans for graduate course development? Common practice in our department is to pool undergraduate and graduate courses into one. Could you comment on this and if there are any plans on separating undergraduate and graduate courses?    
      A: At the moment, there are no plans to expand graduate courses (at least not now during the pandemic), but they are open to suggestions in future. Martin Tanner brought up that students have the option to take online courses from other Western Canada universities (e.g., SFU), which might expand options this fall. There are no plans to separate undergraduate/graduate courses.
   8. Q: Graduation times in our department are long and this is not aided by a cumbersome thesis submission and defense planning process. Could you clarify the timeline for this process, keeping in mind the extra documentation Chemistry requires?   
      A: Thesis submission is completely set up by Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies, so not much the department can do. There are no extra requirements for Chemistry (aside from second reader).
   9. Q: Are there plans to deliver students feedback of TAs in a timelier fashion?   
      A: The Faculty of Science plans to switch all TA evaluations to online system (same as current professor evaluations) starting this fall.
   10. Q: The cost of rent increases every year and the stipend does not increase to match it. Are there any new initiatives the chemistry department is doing to address the affordability of graduate school in Vancouver? Does the department have plans to mitigate this having in mind the possibility they'll lose talented and hard-working students due to financial concerns?   
       A: The value of the stipend was compared to other Canadian universities and was found to fall in the middle, but Vancouver is expensive. In a faculty meeting, a vote was held to gradually increase the Research Assistantship (RA), starting with a 4% increase beginning in September 2020 (for both PhD and MSc students). This will be revisited next year (2021) for another potential 4% increase. Nothing can be done by Department regarding TAships.
   11. Q: International students have to pay more without stipend increases and the same scholarship opportunities aren’t available. Can the department see a way of addressing this to allow more opportunities for international students?   
       A: Increase discussed in previous question also applies to international students. Other things are being done as well, such as more Four Year Fellowships being given to international students as they cannot receive NSERC/CIHR awards. The UBC Chemistry Award for Graduate Research Excellence is also often given to international students.
   12. Q: Negative emphasis is also placed on TA hours as 'taking away' from research and being something that a student needs to 'make up for' in the lab while the survey shows that TAing has a positive impact on graduate student mental health. How can the Department strive to publish excellent science while ameliorating the strain some students are placed under.  
       A: TAing hours are strict and sent out by union; students should keep track of them. Supervisors are expected to understand the amount of TAing required and not place pressure on students. It is believed that most supervisors understand this, but if not, students were encouraged to discuss it discreetly with graduate advisor.
   13. Q: There isn’t a lot of direction in the program to graduate in a reasonable time (i.e. no required check between the comprehensive exam and 4th year meeting). Will anything be implemented to increase structure to ensure faster graduation times? Thesis completion is the responsibility of both the student and supervisor. How are supervisors held accountable for impeding the graduation of students?  
       A: There are no plans of yet to increase number of meetings, but students have the right to set up as many as they would like without any penalty (e.g., during third year). If students feel their supervisor is impeding their graduation, then they are encouraged to speak with Martin. Martin also noted that an annual meeting is held to determine PhD students in fifth year or above and to ask supervisor why this is the case (so some accountability is present).
   14. Q: It seems that UBC continues to expand in that we see yearly renovations and construction of buildings and facilities. What are the plans to renovate or improve the chemistry research wings in the near future? Can you comment on the logistics of this process, timelines, downtimes and what plans will be implemented to ensure students won’t be hindered in finishing their degree?  
       A: Renewal of Chemistry A-Wing and B/C-Teaching Wings is continuing, process for approval is slow. Site approval for new teaching building (across from Bookstore) is happening relatively soon, but the project will not likely start for quite some time so it will likely not affect anyone currently here. Once teaching wing is moved to a new site, a new research building is planned for current site of B-Wing where A-Wing will be moved (current A-Wing will then be torn down). This will likely occur over next 10 years, but it is thought that very minimal disruption will occur due to the number of facilities (e.g., fume hoods) Chemistry has.
   15. Q: Many of the facilities in Chemistry are subpar and do not compare to other universities, take our closest neighbour, SFU as an example. Is there a plan to update/upgrade facilities such as mass spec, SIF, NMR etc.in our department?   
       A: Mike acknowledged that SFU has very good facilities and that UBC is constantly trying to improved (e.g., new mass spec and SIF instruments to be installed in Fall, proposals for more NMR facilities being worked on). If particular needs not met, students were encouraged to bring it up to their PI and/or to Mike.
   16. Q: Graduate school is a stressful environment. Juggling research and TAing, Vancouver’s cost of living and financial concerns, publish-or-perish culture and increasing graduation times can be a huge strain on a student’s mental health and overall well-being. The CGSS organizes events to attempt to lower the stress level of the graduate student body, but I am wondering if the Department, on their level, have any plans to help chemistry graduate students with supporting mental health initiatives?  
       A: Martin stated that organized/profession health resources provided by university are likely best for students. Things like online support, counselling and seminars are already provided by mental health experts via the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies. Students can ask Sheri or Martin if they do not where to access these options. There are no current plans for more departmental events.
   17. Q: What is the Department of Chemistry doing to address issues surrounding equity and inclusion in the department? Research conducted at UBC shows a clear drop-off in the number of people who are female or from under-represented minorities during the transition from PhD to post-doc, and then post-doc to faculty. How is Chemistry going to participate in acknowledging this and attempting to increase inclusion of female and under-represented people in their department?  
       A: Mike noted that two faculty and two staff liaisons have been appointed to Chemists for Diversity and Inclusion (CDI) group, which will be leaders in these initiative pushes. Specific initiatives regarding anti-racism movement and underrepresentation of women and minority groups, specifically at faculty level, are being worked on. The faculty hiring plan has specific parts directed towards increasing number of applicants from underrepresented groups. Through CDI and the department, there should be more specific things being planned in the coming months.
   18. Q: The chemistry email server lets in many phishing emails and scam emails from a variety of sources and it has appeared to worsen not improve. Are there any plans to mitigate this situation?   
       A: Mike agreed that there is a problem here. The email was recently switched to UBC Central IT for filtering, so possible that things might improve or worsen. IT is constantly trying to use best filters possible, and Mike talks to them regularly about this issue, and they ensure they are constantly working on it. Mike noted to be particularly wary of phishing emails coming from supervisors/PIs.  
         
       Follow-up audience Q: Would it be possible to limit who is allowed t send emails to @chem.ubc.ca? That alone should cut out most spam.  
       A: Mike noted this and will ask IT.
   19. Q: New international students come to the department often without knowledge of the Canadian healthcare system. Can a portion of the website be dedicated to this?
   20. A: This is all detailed in the New Graduate Student Handbook, which is given by Sheri to all new students and is also posted under “Current Students” on the UBC Chemistry website. The Handbook has in depth coverage of medical costs, etc.
5. At 2:09 pm, the audience question/answer period began.
   1. Q: Some students are still only working half schedules (e.g., Shift A or B) due to lab capacity. Considering this halving of productivity, are there any plans specifically for students in this situation?  
      A: Mike noted that weekends are now available, which may help this issue, and that they are looking into other lab spaces that can potentially be used where social distancing can be maintained. Further extensions beyond the extra semester may be required and will be revisited in future.
   2. Q: Is there a cap on the increase in RAship that is being discussed, and what timeline would be needed to achieve that?  
      A: Each increase would have to be voted on in faculty meeting. Another proposal will be made for an additional 4% increase for September 2021.   
        
      Follow-up Q: So increases are on a year-by-year basis? There is not a set goal being aimed for?  
      A: Yes. Right now, the 4% increase in RAship is only for this September, but it will be looked into again for September 2021. Martin also noted that there was an increase in TAship (Julie confirmed here that there was a 2% increase in TA salary by CUPE in June). Mike also commented that they are not sure what fees will be removed for the fall (e.g., athletic and U-Pass costs) and asked students to let him know when it is confirmed to see how the stipend increase translates to additional costs for bus passes, etc.
   3. Q: Many students require access to other facilities that are not currently allowing students outside building/department. Is this being considered or is the one semester extension only on a person-by-person basis?  
      A: Mike encouraged students to talk to supervisor if they are being delayed in this way, and if expectations regarding required experiments do not change, then it is understandable to expect to receive an additional month or semester extension from supervisor. If still not satisfactory, students should talk to Martin.
   4. Q: In regards to stipends from other universities, different departments have different funding models (e.g., TAing vs no TAing). The Chemistry Department requires TAing, which needs to be balanced with research hours to be on track for five year times. Can you comment on any if there are any plans to change the number of TAing hours?  
      A: The TAing hours are set, so if changed, funding would have to come directly from PIs, which would be a big hit to many. Mike noted that most chemistry departments in Canada conventionally use a combination of TAing and RAships for funding, whereas many biology departments use different models. To move away from that would be a very large shift. It was also pointed out that many scholarships coming in provide a reduction in TAing to one unit.
   5. Mike had a question to students regarding survey:  
      Q: In regards to mental health support, it seems there is a consensus that active outreach would be preferred. What would this look like?  
      A: Daniel commented that beside the comprehensive exam and fourth year meetings, there is no one aside from the supervisor to check in with to make sure progress is going fine, so some survey participants seemed to suggest that having someone else to talk to would be beneficial when a support system was not developed within the department. Further, new students only have support from PI, as their comprehensive exam committee is not formed until second year.  
      A: Julie commented that a recurring notion is that professor support for events (e.g., the Chemistry Graduate Symposium) is low and would benefit from higher attendance, and that CDI liaisons are good active steps in this regard.
   6. Q: Now with more online TAing, there are different resources needed compared to in-person TAing. For example, a tablet has been invaluable for running office hours for the course I am teaching this summer. Will the department have resources available for TAs for teaching purposes (e.g., document cameras, tripods for filming, etc.)?  
      A: There are two document cameras in the department that can be signed out. Money has been made available for these resources for instructors, but if TAs need any, they are encouraged to ask instructors. Further, the university has mobile cart with some TAing resources. TAs will be made aware of what is available.

End of forum: 2:37 pm