

Letter to graduate students from the Dean, School of Graduate Studies.

Dear graduate student community,

It's been close to eight weeks since the School of Graduate Studies paused its campus-based activities and started to work remotely. It feels like a lifetime.

In that time, many things have happened. Some of you have moved or travelled home. You've set up home offices in kitchens, living rooms, bedrooms, or wherever you're reading this. You became at-home teachers and caregivers to loved ones of all ages. You've turned in final papers and completed your exams. You've adjusted your research plans. You've done things you never thought you'd do, like baking sourdough, starting an at-home fitness routine, or meditating. And if you're anything like me, you started all those things with the best of intentions but have found that making these changes has not been easy.

Remarkably, over this time, more than 140 of your graduate classmates have virtually defended their theses. Close to 4,000 of you will have completed your course requirements and are set to virtually convocate [June 2](#). Amalia Gil of the Institute of Biomaterials and Biomedical Engineering, [won U of T's 3 Minute Thesis competition](#) with her compelling presentation on identifying distractions in surgery with eye-tracking. Indeed, I've heard countless other ways people and departments across U of T are experimenting, organizing, innovating, supporting others, and rising in these unprecedented times.

While we celebrate these achievements, we also recognize that it hasn't been easy to have our lives upended. The sense of uncertainty that we all feel right now has taken a significant toll. Within our community, some are at the front lines of the health emergency, either because they have lost loved ones or fallen sick themselves, or because they're braving the risks of exposure in hospitals and other sites of essential services at a time when personal protective equipment is still not always available. It's important that we keep these people in mind.

Away from the front lines, some are much more profoundly affected than others. And since this is a cascading event, with the health emergency giving rise to an economic crisis and a reordering of social relations, the impacts extend well beyond the immediate risks posed by the virus. Pre-existing vulnerabilities and inequalities have been amplified and new dimensions of vulnerability and inequality have been layered upon them.

To appreciate this unevenness, one need only think of the very different realities currently faced by various members of the graduate student community. Many can work from home and are eligible for government supports. Others aren't eligible for government supports, have lost outside jobs, and find themselves experiencing significant financial hardships. And those with caregiver responsibilities or accessibility challenges may be finding it particularly challenging to work from home and advance their academic work. Letters I have received in recent weeks

from both students and faculty alike have all drawn attention to the need to keep these distinctions in mind as we chart our path forward.

Addressing these challenges in a fair and sustainable way requires creativity and flexibility on all our parts. In collaboration with our student advisory bodies, graduate councils, working groups, and others from the U of T community, we've been developing principles, processes, and supports to allow those most affected by COVID-19 to obtain a range of accommodations. Our approach prioritizes the health, wellness and safety of students; recognizes the diversity in the student body and in learning opportunities; seeks to minimize the financial impact of disruptions on students while facilitating their academic progress; and recognizes that the impacts of COVID-19 on students are both uneven and evolving, so won't be fully known for some time.

Here are some resources we have put in place to support graduate students in both the research and professional streams:

- Continued SGS and Faculty-level supports to students experiencing financial need related to COVID-19 (e.g. [SGS Emergency Grants](#) and [Loans](#)).
- Increases to both the duration and amount of the SGS parental grant (retroactive to the beginning of the 2019-2020 academic year).
- Adjustments to the SGS Summer Gym Bursary to cover summer gym purchases to access online programs being developed by athletic facilities on campus.
- Virtual programs & services through the [Graduate Professional Skills Program](#), [Graduate Centre for Academic Communication](#), [Grad Life](#) and the [Division of Student Life](#).
- New resources on [remote mentoring and supervision](#).
- Updates on relevant funding information, such as the new [Funding Opportunity Directory](#) that provides resources to access University financial aid supports as well as provincial and federal government programs.

In addition to these general resources, let me describe how we have been addressing some of the particular needs of professional students, research-stream students, and students with personal circumstances that are affecting their academic progress during COVID-19 (caregiving responsibilities, illness, disability, etc.).

Students in professional programs:

Since professional students generally move through their programs as a cohort and many such cohorts move in 'lockstep', the impacts of COVID-19 have often required program-level responses that could be available to all students at particular points in their program. For example, in those professional programs where placements or performances simply could not take place, adjustments have been made to ensure students are still able to meet their program requirements in a timely way. Where this means extending studies beyond the program length, arrangements have been made to ensure students don't have to pay additional tuition.

(Students in those professional programs with major research components and who experience disruptions may benefit from reading the section below).

Students in research-stream programs:

The experiences of our research-stream students and those professional students who are engaged in research are harder to characterize in general terms. There are many who, due to the stage of their program or the nature of their research, are continuing to make meaningful academic progress. This could be because their course work, research, or writing can readily be done remotely; or it could be because they have found ways to re-order the sequencing of their planned program of work, or to pivot it in a way that allows the disruption to be managed. For many, these adjustments will carry them through to the end of their program, which is great.

But I have heard from a good number of students who say that although they can remain productive for the time being, they are worried about what will happen if they reach a point when they have exhausted all their alternatives and can't progress anymore. What then?

More distressing still are reports of students who are already hitting that wall: a lab-based student who has lost years of usable data with the temporary closure of a lab's work; a student who had recently embarked on an extended international field research project only to have it cut short, before meaningful progress could be made; a student whose research partnership with industry was abruptly halted, leaving them in the lurch. Students in these circumstances may be able to pause their work or pivot to a related project, but they will be wondering what this might mean for their time to degree, their funding, and their obligations vis-a-vis tuition and fees.

These examples illustrate why the institutional response to these challenges needs to take an individual approach. It should start with a conversation between a student and their supervisor/supervisory committee, and be ongoing, recognizing that a student who is currently able to adapt to the conditions of the pandemic may eventually be unable to progress, depending on how things evolve. (Or more optimistically: how a student who has just hit a wall in their research may find out in retrospect that it was a surmountable one!) This approach will allow the institutional response to be proportionate to the problems each student is facing.

SGS asks that a student and their supervisor/supervisory committee take a staged approach to addressing any potential research interruption.

- First, assess and document the interruption (SGS has already distributed a COVID-19 mentoring record to assist with this, so please [check it out](#)) and take steps to transition to other academic activities where progress *can* be made.
- Once this approach has reached the limits of its usefulness, consider pivoting the research by revising the research questions, the methods of data collection, or analyses, as some examples. A number of Faculties are making plans to offer new COVID-19 research pivot funding to assist with additional costs associated with this. Some may have this funding in place as soon as July.

- Finally, should it become necessary, request registration with a tuition fee exemption. A student who was making good progress with their dissertation, but whose data collection or access to necessary sources/materials has been significantly impeded, who has completed all feasible alternative academic activities, and who ends up requiring additional time beyond the program length will have tuition fees waived (non-tuition ancillary and incidental fees will still be charged). Students may also be able to pair this support with new or existing funding available through their department or Faculty. This might include, for example, a Doctoral Completion Award, RAships/TAs/GRAs, PI stipendiary support, emergency grants, and/or new COVID-19 research completion funding that some Faculties are putting in place.

Students with Personal Circumstances affecting Academic Progress:

We are keenly aware that COVID-19 has had multiple impacts on students' personal lives. Some students are attempting to maintain academic progress while also serving on the frontlines of the healthcare system, caring for dependent family members, or managing illness or disability that may be caused or exacerbated by the pandemic. The economic disruption has created financial crises for many. In addition, the directive to stay at home has altered the conditions under which students are attempting to complete their academic work, often with negative consequences for their productivity.

These personal circumstances, like research disruption, may require interventions like transitioning, pivoting or extending time to complete degree requirements. Students should be aware that personal circumstances can be the basis for exercising options like taking a personal leave, altering the order of academic activities, or seeking extensions for coursework or completing milestone academic tasks. Students in such situations also may be eligible for COVID-19 student bursaries or grants offered by Faculties or by SGS.

Please also know that we will continue to evaluate our approaches in all these areas and to adapt them to the changing circumstances as they unfold.

Looking Ahead:

As talk turns to relaxing social distancing measures, and the possible resumption of some in-person research and learning activities that had been paused, we have heard concerns from students about what this will mean for them. SGS, with direct student input, and in collaboration with the Office of the Vice-President Research & Innovation, has already started work on establishing clear principles and protocols for the return to labs, in-person and field research that prioritize student safety and consider the needs of students to progress through their programs. SGS is also collaborating with the Office of the Vice-Provost, Academic Programs, to ensure planning for courses in the Fall takes account of graduate students' multiple roles as students, researchers, and TAs. We will do all we can to make sure these upcoming transitions are as smooth and transparent as possible for everyone, and respect student interests.

As the pandemic continues to impact your life and shape our world, I invite you to explore the [SGS COVID-19 page](#) and the links below. Please don't hesitate to [email us](#) to let us know how you're doing and how we can continue to support you on this journey.

With tremendous care and support,

Joshua Barker
Dean, School of Graduate Studies and
Vice-Provost, Graduate Research and Education

Key Links and Contacts

- [SGS COVID-19 Page](#)
- [Supervision Guidelines and Mentoring at a Distance Resource](#)
- [SGS Financial Aid and Advising](#)
- [Health and Wellness Services](#)
- [Accessibility Services](#)
- [Family Care Office](#)