Simon Fraser University
Office of the Dean of Graduate Studies
Three Year Plan
2010 to 2013
Submitted to Dr. Jon Driver, Vice-President, Academic
by
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Expansion of graduate student enrolment, graduate programming, and both the amount and complexity of external funding to support graduate students have reached a level where the ability of the Office of the Dean of Graduate Studies to meet these demands is severely stressed. For the next three years we intend to re-organize and institute business practices that will reduce the workload in this office. Clearly, some resources will need to be shifted to deal with ongoing problems and new opportunities to enhance the quality of the graduate student educational experience. In an attempt to summarize this lengthy list of goals, we have identified the following as overarching themes.

ALIGNING RESOURCES AND SERVICES: one of the key elements of this plan is to align services and resources with the University’s academic and research agendas. The decisions as to how best to use these limited resources must take into account the expanding nature of graduate programming and graduate student enrolments, and the expected turnover of administrative staff in graduate studies over the next three years. We need to plan for these changes by increasing the ease, efficiency and transparency of our operations, by preparing information for incoming staff, and by continued training and better information sources for graduate program administrators.

GRADUATE STUDENT EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE: many goals relate to improving the graduate student experience at SFU. These include the development of better supervision practices, better information on the website, and efficient payment of awards, enhanced professional skills programs aimed at graduate students, and better enrolment and funding management. Graduate Studies will be mandated to liaise with areas in which services to graduate students are performed by units outside the office of Graduate Studies, such as Student Services or the Learning Commons. Further, the creation of new student space is planned should money from the graduate student expansion be allocated for this purpose.

STUDENT AWARDS AND RECRUITMENT INITIATIVES: international and domestic recruitment initiatives are aimed at attracting the best students in research-intensive degree programs and the graduate awards budget must be used to support these initiatives. However, some of the goals are directed to developing graduate student awards tailored specifically for professional programs.
Core Activities
The office of the Dean of Graduate Studies (DGS) is responsible for most aspects of graduate studies at SFU and has academic, administrative and service responsibilities. Much of the day-to-day activity is performed in the departments that administer graduate programs. Much of the academic responsibility has to do with policy and program development through the Dean’s role as Chair of the Senate Graduate Studies Committee, and as a member of the Senate Committee on University Priorities, the Senate Committee on Enrolment Management Planning, and Senate. The DGS Office is responsible to align its academic, administrative and service roles with the University’s academic plan, the institution’s strategic research plan and the President’s Agenda where feasible. Currently, the following major activities are the responsibility of the office of Graduate Studies:

Academic
- Development of graduate regulations and policies and associated recommendations to Senate
- Insight and oversight in areas of graduate program development
- Oversight of graduate program and curriculum changes
- Home for Special Arrangements students (individual and cohorts)
- Home for Graduate Certificates
- Ensuring adherence to graduate general regulations
- Assisting in the development of enrolment targets and management
- Recruit outstanding graduate students

Administration
- Administration of graduate regulations and policies
- Admissions, registration and student records
- Monitoring of student progress and eligibility to graduate
- Administration of all graduate student merit-based awards (internal and external)
- Administration of doctoral thesis defences (including external examiner oversight)
- Administration of the awards Budget (external and internal awards)
- Development of procedures for allocating awards and award decisions
- Communication of all graduate matters to individual graduate programs

Services
- Promotion of the graduate enterprise
- Student advising over a wide range of issues, including registration and fees, policies and procedures, scholarship programs and disbursements, and personal/individual problems
- Postdoctoral Fellow Office
- Advising faculty and staff on both policy issues and technical (system ‘how-to’) issues
- Graduate Student Professional Development
- Convocation services for graduating masters, doctoral and graduate diploma students
- Recommendations, analysis, requirements gathering and testing of enhancements to the student information management system
- Providing data and statistical information from SIMS
- Organize and facilitate graduate program workshops

The Dean and staff interact with the University in the following ways:
- Through Senate and Senate committees, and Deans’ Council
- Regularly with University Advancement and Financial Services concerning award administration from endowed and annual sources.
- Participation in various regular meetings of administrators
- Semester meetings with graduate program chairs
- Bi-monthly meetings with graduate secretaries
- Monthly meetings with the Graduate Issues Officer (SFSS) and Graduate Student Society
- Bi-annual meetings with the Graduate Student Caucus
- Through regular messages sent as e-mails and memos
- Through our web site
- Via special event offerings such as Scholarships Day, writing workshops, New Graduate Student Orientation, SFU Open House(s)
- Attendance, when requested, at Departmental Orientations
- Meetings with individual graduate chairs, faculty members, and graduate students
- Training of graduate secretaries on graduate policies and procedures and on the student information system
- Provision of telephone and e-mail assistance on a wide range of policy, procedural and technical issues
- Monthly meetings with Undergraduate Student Services
- Regular meetings with the SFU Convocation team
- Executive Steering Committee Meetings
- Regular meetings with the Application Integration and Support Group
- SIS Priority Setting Committee Meetings
- Involvement in university-wide projects such as Curricunet and document imaging

**Planning Assumptions**

a) That SFU is a research intensive university and that graduate students are integral to the research enterprise
b) That SFU wishes to increase the relative proportion of graduate students to its total student population
c) That SFU, while maintaining a balance in its graduate program offerings, wishes to expand its graduate programs strategically given the fiscal realities
d) That enhancing the graduate educational experience is a priority but it cannot be accomplished solely within the Office of the Dean of Graduate Studies
e) That maintaining quality programs and high standards is essential to graduate training experiences at SFU
f) That both faculty members and the senior administration are interested in the development of more interdisciplinary programming
g) That not all students can be supported by the University Graduate Scholarship, Bursaries and Awards budget (Grad SBA budget)
h) That a high priority will be placed on maintaining the financial support available to graduate students in the form of the Graduate SBA budget and the Teaching Assistant budget
i) That the Office of Dean of Graduate Studies will be somewhat protected from the fiscal realities the University is facing
j) That SFU has to a certain extent a decentralized model for administering much of the day-to-day activities related to graduate students
k) That the office of graduate studies does not have resources commensurate with the growth and increase in complexity in both graduate student FTEs and graduate programs
STRATEGIC INFLUENCES

Opportunities

- Considerable interest in interdisciplinary programming at SFU
- Funding for new graduate student spaces for one more year from the BC Gov’t
- Interest in developing international partnerships using local expertise and personnel and through the development of international contacts
- The Bologna process has made Europe attractive for joint degrees
- Significant interest from many countries in leveraging their financial support of their best students
- Interest in professional or applied master’s and doctoral programs in traditional faculties
- The review of Graduate Studies has identified the need for SFU to have a Faculty of Graduate Studies
- The external review of Graduate Studies has identified the need for SFU to review its policies related to graduate supervision and adherence to GGR related to student progress
- Service units including student services would like to expand specific professional skills training to graduate students

Threats

- Extreme competition for students across Canada and the world
- Demographics relative to the nature of other graduate programming. Older graduate students are looking for more career-oriented graduate programs that can be completed while working full-time.
- Lack of coherent planning on the academic side due to our largely decentralized graduate programs
- A culture of not specifically targeting certain programs/disciplines for growth
- Entrenched programs that are resistant to change
- Insufficient student funding
- Upcoming retirements and the possible loss of younger staff to more attractive opportunities elsewhere
- Lack of institutional discussion of a vision for the relative balance of different types of graduate programming
- Loss or reduction of administrative support at the faculty and department level for graduate students
- Growth of graduate programming and students is outpacing infrastructure support (people and operating funds) in the Office of the DGS resulting in more mistakes and declines in quality of service
- Workload issues leading to increasing stress and illness in the Office of the DGS

SELF ASSESSMENT

Strengths: The biggest strength in the Office of the Dean of Graduate Studies is the experienced, knowledgeable and committed staff. In terms of academic planning, the greatest strength lies in the collective wisdom of SGSC and their willingness to support and facilitate innovative new programs while recognizing the need to maintain standards. I am extremely pleased with the interactions of my own office and that of the Graduate Student Society. Our ability to process applications in a timely fashion and to maintain academic records is very good, as is our ability to deal with individual inquiries from departments. Our ability to process student’s awards, payments and adjudicate award competitions is very strong.
Weaknesses: We have significant communication issues between the Office of the DGS and the community it serves, including but not limited to, the decentralized structure of graduate affairs throughout the university and the frequent turnover of departmental graduate program chairpersons and secretaries. We have substantial award disbursement issues and record management issues related to SIMS that will be alleviated as our requested and planned future SIMS modifications are approved and developed. We have a limited ability due to staffing complement to provide, or coordinate, professional skills workshops for graduate students. Our ability to participate in international and domestic recruitment activities is limited by resources and the absence of specific direction from the community to undertake these activities. The power of this office to ensure that the University General Graduate Regulations, graduate practices and supervisory issues are adhered to is limited by a lack of clear policy or mechanisms to promote best practices.

OBJECTIVES
The DGS has a number of ongoing objectives that include:

Encouraging the development of high quality programs. This is a continuing mandate that is achieved through improvement and implementation of Graduate General Regulations, the facilitation of changes to existing programs, the development of new programs, and through the Dean’s participation in external reviews.

Providing incentives for the recruitment of the best students. We are continually trying to improve the budget available for financial recruiting incentives and to increase the efficiency of the admissions process. We are also working to promote our best graduate students.

Encouraging the creation of programs in areas of strategic importance. We continue to promote and facilitate the development of outstanding programs in areas of importance to the University that for the most part originate from academic units. This includes the identification of policy that will best support the development of interdisciplinary programming.

Increasing graduate funding. This has been achieved partly as a result of increased tuition fees, and partly as a result of the development of new provincial and federal funding programs.

Maintaining efficient and fair graduate policies and procedures. This is an ongoing mandate. We must create a set of appeals processes for graduate students and ensure that all GGR are being adhered to by the academic units. In general, SFU is well served by its decentralized system of graduate program governance, and the conscientious work of graduate program chairs and secretaries is a major contribution to the quality of our programs.

In addition to these ongoing objectives, the following goals have been identified for the next three years.

Goal: to promote an integrated vision for the nature of graduate programming at SFU and to align our services and resources with this vision. The largely decentralized nature of graduate studies at SFU, the administrative structure at SFU, and the financial pressures that have governed program expansion have combined to create a large mosaic that does not align well with the current President’s agenda, the current academic plan and the strategic research plan of the University. In fact there is some incongruence behind these three plans. It is imperative that a clear agenda for developing further graduate academic programming be aligned with these three integrated plans so that appropriate decisions regarding our limited resources can be made.

Goal: to enhance the graduate student educational experience. A number of issues (some of which are addressed more specifically in other goals) have arisen that are impacting on the quality of the educational experience of graduate students. These include a lack of community, limited
resources to support the needs of international graduate students, graduate supervisory issues, inaccurate information and the timeliness of information provided to students, limited opportunities for professional skills training, housing issues. As part of this process, we plan to create an additional general graduate space on campus to address the community issues and a graduate student central space within the library.

**Goal:** to develop a graduate studies international/globalization strategy. We have no formal plan in place for internationalization of graduate studies at SFU despite the fact that graduate applications to SFU have increased 10 fold in the last decade and a large percentage of our students are non-Canadians. We have a limited number of international field schools, exchange students and “one-off” joint degree students but a more formal plan is needed. This plan must include a recruitment plan tied to financial support programs, plans to meet international student needs on campus in terms of language and cultural training, and exploration of joint and/or dual degrees to name a few.

**Goal:** to establish a Faculty of Graduate Studies with corresponding adjustments to university policies to address issues of adherence to General Graduate Regulations and graduate student supervisory issues. In the external review of SFU Graduate Studies, the external reviewers correctly identified that SFU has a mixed model administrative structure that impacts correspondingly on its visibility, importance and authority and that graduate studies at SFU should become a Faculty. We agree that the title of “Office of the Dean of Graduate Studies” is misleading. Most students and faculty assume that the title reflects that we are a simply a Dean’s Office, not the administrative unit for graduate studies at SFU. Therefore, it is common for our roles to be undervalued when, in reality, many of our centralized functions are identical to those performed by a Faculty or College of Graduate Studies at other Canadian universities. The external reviewers have correctly identified several areas related to the management of individual graduate programs including quality control, monitoring of student progress, and graduate supervision for which the DGS Office lacks the authority either under policy or through its administrative structure to act. Further, the reviewers clearly point out the limiting nature of the DGS administrative unit’s mandate whose description does not include the promotion of graduate studies, the provision of insight and oversight in areas of graduate program development, graduate student professional development and enrolment management. While the DGS Office plays a limited role in these aspects of the graduate enterprise, it is clear that a quick survey of other institutions shows that these are essential elements of Graduate Studies activities normally performed by a Faculty of Graduate Studies. The Dean of Graduate Studies must find ways to improve the quality of supervision and the supervisory experience, for both students and faculty members through workshops and implementation of the recommendations of the Supervisory Task Force Report (2005).

**Goal:** to act as the administrative unit for all graduate interdisciplinary programming leading to credentials that do not naturally fit within any existing Faculty. While we recognize that whenever possible, interdisciplinary graduate programs should reside in an established Faculty, occasionally programs will emerge that do fit naturally more than one Faculty and in these cases they will reside within Graduate Studies. This is the case for Graduate Certificates already and this scenario would merely be an extension of this policy reflecting the interdisciplinary nature of the programs.

**Goal:** to increase the relative percentage of graduate students pursuing research-intensive (primarily thesis-based master and doctoral) degrees. As a research intensive university it would
be expected that a large percentage of graduate students would be completing degrees that have a thesis as a capstone requirement.

**Goal: to increase the relative percentage of doctoral graduate students compared to masters students.** Currently about 30% of all graduate students (excluding diploma students) are pursuing doctorates and we would hope to increase that number to about 35% over the next three years.

**Goal: to increase the number of premium-fee based graduate students at SFU.** Presently about 39% of all students are pursuing programs that have a premium-fee attached. Given the need to address the working professional market and the increasing reliance on non-thesis (project) based masters programs, it would be reasonable to increase this percentage to about 45% over the next three years. This would require a flexible approach as is used in Business Administration and Education to offer these programs.

**Goal: to reorganize the Office of Graduate Studies and its reporting structure to better fulfill its mandate and provide administrative service to the academic units.** It is recommended that the Office of Graduate studies be reorganized so that we are in a position to

- a) respond to the increased needs for electronic data management,
- b) implement for technological improvements that will enhance productivity,
- c) to develop the resources required to provide effective professional development opportunities and workshops,
- d) to improve the professionalism of all of our communications

**Goal: to improve staff complement and training, in order to deal with all areas of graduate studies.** The rapid expansion of graduate enrolment and graduate programs over the last few years, the increasing complexity and numbers of externally funded graduate award programs, and increases in internal award dollars have pushed the staffing complement within graduate studies to the breaking point. The self-study document for the external review highlighted the high number of unpaid work hours being performed by the APSA staff and during the past year, we have experienced an increased number of staff complaining about workload stress which has likely contributed to at least one leave due to stress. We need to continue to encourage staff professional development and training and to train staff at the academic unit level. However, academic units are being increasingly reluctant to allow their graduate program assistants to attend the meetings that DGS organizes for their benefit.

**Goal: to improve the management of graduate records.** The external reviewers correctly identified an important issue that no unified system exists for the storage, tracking and maintenance of official student files. We agree that an electronic data management system linked to SIMS would be advantageous and we are currently reviewing potential programs that would allow us to move in this direction. There is a general reluctance on the part of academic units to move in this direction as they cling to outdated data management systems.

**Goal: to better manage internal scholarship competitions.** The reviewers have identified issues related to excessive paperwork, increased staff time and complexity of our Scholarship competitions. We appreciate that they recognized the efforts of our office to move to an electronic review of applications. It is apparent to us that we must streamline the internal scholarship competitions as suggested by the reviewers. We have already instituted several major efficiencies in recent months and will continue a business process review of these operations.
Goal: to improve the use of available funds and to develop new awards. While this is an ongoing task, we recognize that the model currently used to allocate internal support for graduate students does not reflect the differing needs for unique award programs that would better serve our students in professional programs. We also recognize that the merit-based funds available to provide support to graduate students are insufficient relative to our student numbers.

Goal: to improve communication with graduate students. The external review identified two areas for improvement in this regards: the DGS website and direct correspondence with graduate students. At present information flow from graduate studies to students is for the most part directed via the department graduate secretaries and graduate program chairs. We agree that the information does not appear to be reaching the students at times, nor is it directed only to the appropriate students. We are exploring whether we can identify the relevant groups of students and maintain them easily via SIMS. We are in the process of revamping our website and we will continue to upgrade it. We have also requested that its visibility be improved on the SFU home page.

Goal: to develop/promote professional skills development programs for graduate students. The external review acknowledged that Graduate Studies has a limited capacity to provide this programming. We are currently constructing an inventory of existing activities directed at graduate students by units around campus that can be communicated to graduate students and graduate programs. Through this process we hope to identify any gaps in professional skills programming and explore whether we have the resources at SFU to offer them. It is clear that the DGS office can participate more actively in some areas such as external scholarship competition workshops.

Goal: to develop a mechanism whereby graduates students can gain access to legal advice in regards to IP and NDA agreements related to their research. The external reviewers noted some disparity in the way legal advice is available to graduate students as part of the research enterprise at SFU. While ORS does provide legal advice on IP and NDA agreements for all research contracts whether they involve students or not, it doesn’t have the resources to review IP and NDA for students that involve thesis work if the funds are being provided as an externally-funded research grant or part of student scholarship support from provincial or federal agencies. While ORS has attempted to draw up general agreements in response to requests from the Dean of Graduate Studies for specific programs (i.e. MITACS Internships), there are many other instances that require legal input.

Goal: to increase the communication between to the Office of the DGS and the VPR. While the external reviewers only briefly touched on it, there’s an ongoing lack of inclusiveness between ORS and DGS on matters that affect graduate students. We need to address overlapping interests or concerns to benefit graduate students.

Goal: to integrate all financial sources of income for graduate students into the SIMS system. The DGS office does not have access to all the databases where information on the financial support to graduate students is contained (i.e. payroll). This is problematic for students who frequently come to the DGS office to sort out their funding situation. This is compounded by offers of admission whose financial commitments are ambiguous. We need to integrate these sources and amounts of funding assigned to graduate students through payroll migrated into SIMS (such as teaching assistantships and research assistantships). It also is imperative that graduate studies implement a system to ensure that financial offers are not ambiguous and a record of these commitments are maintained in the DGS office.

Goal: to decrease the complexity of the graduate student tuition fee structure. It is clear that the tuition fee structure at SFU is exceedingly complex and needs to be addressed.
THREE YEAR GROWTH SCENARIO
We expect to see growth in graduate student numbers in the areas of the environment and health sciences, particularly at the doctoral level. Limited growth is expected within the Faculty of Science and the Faculty of Applied Sciences because these units are reaching saturation levels in faculty/student ratios, unless expansion takes place within specific departments such as Computing Science and Statistics and Actuarial Sciences through programming that calls for a non-thesis capstone. The Faculty of Communication, Art and Technology has experienced rapid growth in the past year in its two largest academic units and thus growth is anticipated to be modest without further financial resources. The Faculty of Education is in a consolidation mode of graduate programming, has a high supervisor to student ratio and is likely to see a continuing trend of declining diploma students and increasing thesis-based students. One area that could grow is the MSc in education. The Faculty of Business Administration expanded last year but has room for more doctoral students although issues surrounding the delivery of courses for these students need to be addressed. The Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences likely has the most opportunities for diversified growth. While some units have expanded recently and are reaching saturation levels for supervisor/student ratios, others have lots of capacity in this domain. Alternatively, non-thesis based programming is more common in these disciplines at other universities and a few departments within FASS have embraced this initiative. Ultimately, I suspect that we will see modest growth over the next two years and then a consolidation of programs after that with some changes in the relative balance of graduate programs thereafter. The goal of graduate studies is to develop financial incentive programs to assist in attracting the best students to SFU.

We anticipate that the success rate of our in national awards competitions will increase and that the number of national award recipients choosing SFU will also increase. Grad studies and many individual academic units are working together to improve the quantity and quality of the applications for these awards. We have recently approved a new award that is aimed at attracting more national scholarship holders to SFU.

We anticipate being able to provide additional services to graduate students should we receive new funds from this last year of funding for graduate spaces from the provincial government, through an increase in the dollars that flow to graduate studies from application revenues as a result of the substantial increases in application numbers over the last couple of years and anticipated growth next year, and through revenue generation associated with transcript fees. We would hope that as new programs are brought on stream, graduate studies would receive an increase in budget for its role in managing these students. One of the activities we would like to re-instate should we receive new funding from application fee revenues is the doctoral thesis external examiner support program.

We anticipate the need for some one-time funding from this upcoming year’s graduate expansion dollars to support the creation of enhanced graduate space as part of the goal of enhancing the graduate student experience.

WORST CASE SCENARIO
While graduate studies has been earmarked as being protected in the face of budget cuts, the only way we could achieve cuts of this magnitude (10%) would be through the elimination of 2.5 positions. The net result would be a significant decrease in our ability to process student applications and maintain their records while further erosion of our ability to manage the awards programs would occur. The net result will be a substantial decline in service, increased numbers of financial mistakes,
students would not receive their payments in a timely fashion, and increased numbers of staff would be off on stress leave.

COMMUNICATION
The plan will be communicated through SGSC, SPCSAB, FGSC Chairs, academic unit GSC via Chairs meetings and email correspondence, and through the GSS executive. Decisions will be discussed with the VPA through our regular meetings and conveyed through the Deans council where appropriate. Communication of the plan will flow through the senior personnel to APSA and CUPE staff in the DGS office.