

# The School of Graduate Studies Queen's University

## *SGS Habitat: resources to live well and stay well*

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### **SGS Habitat**

resources for living well  
and staying well in grad  
school



#### **Staying Well**

Addressing challenges



#### **Playing**

Finding friends and fun



#### **Coming from Away**

For students new to Kingston



#### **Managing**

Finances, housing, families,  
and more



#### **Navigating Academe**

From accessibility, to  
supervisors, to conferences



#### **Building a Career**

A hands-on perspective

The School of Graduate Studies at Queen's University (SGS) presents a comprehensive, integrated suite of initiatives relevant to wellness and balance in a fresh and focused web space *SGS Habitat: resources to live well in grad school*. One of four pillars of the Queen's academic plan – “health, wellness and community” – establishes a university-wide commitment to a safe, supportive, inclusive, and engaged community. Given the uniqueness of graduate life and study, programs that address and meet the specific needs of graduate students are an essential element of their success.

Wellness and balance programs in *SGS Habitat* are shaped by the following principles:

## 1. Evidence-based approach

- National surveys (CGPSS<sup>1</sup>, NCHA<sup>2</sup>) and Queen's-specific surveys identify student needs, behaviours and trends
- Student focus-groups review existing programs and inform new initiatives
- *Queen's Mental Health Commission Report* (2012) distils extensive consultation with students, faculty, staff, parents, alumni, mental health professionals and community members into concrete recommendations
- Scholarly research on health promotion, mental health (e.g. low mood, anxiety, loneliness, resilience) and learning pedagogies to support academic success (specifically on dissertation-writing) shape programs

## 2. A holistic perspective

The graduate experience comprises mind, body and spirit and well-balanced programs must support all facets of wellness, while recognizing the changing nature of this experience depending on where the individual is on their academic journey (transitioning into graduate school, in progress, or transitioning out). Recognizing the distinctive circumstances of graduate students with families is part of this integrated approach.

## 3. A collaborative network

- A campus-wide system of services including Student Wellness Services (formerly HCDS), Student Academic Success Services, the International Center, peer-to-peer advisory services and others share in the mandate to promote and support student wellness in living and learning.
- Administrative structure brings together stakeholders to ensure operational efficiency and effectiveness, recommend policy and best practice.
- The hub-and-spoke model incorporates local and discipline-specific resources.
- Faculty members present in co-curricular training and health promotion

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<sup>1</sup> Canadian Graduate and Professional Student Survey

<sup>2</sup> National College Health Assessment

workshops serving to validate this training, demonstrate shared responsibility and commitment to graduate student success and assisting students in distress.

- The Graduate Student Life Advisory Group, co chaired by School of Graduate Studies and Student Affairs, with graduate students forming half of the membership, ensures matters of social life and well-being are addressed.

## 4. Transparency

We strive for transparency about the challenges of graduate life (funding and cost of living, social isolation, maintaining momentum in the dissertation, supervisory relationships, anxiety and low mood, transition into career). Graduate studies entails working outside comfort zones, and experiencing successes and failures as new knowledge is created. Recognizing that these realities are part of the graduate experience normalizes the associated stress and anxiety that may be felt from time to time. Anxiety, however, that has a detrimental impact on student wellbeing requires professional assistance. Having graduate students representatives on mental health working groups, graduate supervision panels, decision-making committees and using student focus groups to review programs and plan new ones is paramount to supporting transparency.

## 5. Innovation: Re-thinking academic program structure and delivery

Being open to re-thinking aspects of academic program design from the perspective of student wellness is increasingly important and was a theme in the “Rethinking Graduate Education”, a CAGS-SSHRC sponsored roundtable held at Queen’s in April 2015 - *What new ways of learning, in graduate education, will Canadians need to thrive in an evolving society and labour market?*

## Key Programs and Initiatives

### 1. SGS Mental Health On-site Counsellor

Counselling services are used by approximately 10 per cent of the student population annually and includes one-on-one crisis counselling, short-term counselling interventions, as well as group programs focused on skill-development and wellness. Outreach

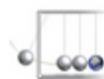
*“The SGS counsellor ... created a really positive atmosphere for a solutions-oriented discussion of the imposter syndrome.”*

(embedded) counsellors work with specific student populations (e.g. graduate students) to provide an alternative access point to services and fosters collaborations that fully support graduate students in all dimensions of wellness. A recent external review of services at Queen's (2015) advocated for the expansion of the hub-and-spoke embedded counselling configuration based on demonstrated effectiveness in consolidating services and their delivery. This single program has had a striking impact: reducing wait times for consultations, addressing stigma, providing graduate-specific workshops. Describing an event for graduate students in her department, a faculty graduate coordinator wrote: "The SGS counsellor ... created a really positive atmosphere for a solutions-oriented discussion of the imposter syndrome."

## 2. Dissertation Writing Supports for mind, body and spirit

Student surveys and focused groups indicate that support for dissertation writing is an area of high priority and over the last four years, we have created a comprehensive and high-impact suite of new dissertation supports: *Dissertation Boot camp* and *Re-boot, Dissertation on the Lake, Thesis Persistence 101*, Doctoral Thesis Support Group. All of these programs strive to create a community of writers, in part to address the isolation that may accompany dissertation-writing and to exchange fresh ideas. Shared meals are an integral part of generating this community. In *Dissertation Boot Camp*, fresh food (about 160 bananas are consumed in the week), catered local organic lunches and mid-week yoga sessions accentuate the whole mind/ body/spirit approach to dissertation writing and wellness. *Dissertation Re-boot* lunches enable past participants to reconnect with their writing community and share dissertation-writing strategies.

*I think I benefited from the boot camp in two ways. First, productivity. It was nice to just get a lot of words on the page. Second, I got a really good sense of what my writing barriers are and how I can actually break them down and get to the writing. In other words, I learned a lot about myself, about why I wasn't being productive.*



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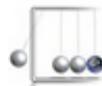
@queensgradstudy

Dissertation boot camp is over. What a week. Lots of bananas eaten and plenty of coffee and tea drunk. The best...

A holistic approach to student wellness is reflected in the relaxing and inspiring environment of *Dissertation on the Lake*. Writers are accommodated in cabins on the shores of Elbow Lake (30 minutes from Kingston). (The costs are largely subsidized by the SGS and donors so students are able participate.) Physical activity - canoeing, swimming, hiking - and fireside conversations follow a day of writing. Participants in *Dissertation on the Lake* collectively prepare the three meals and eat together, and families are invited to visit at the end of the day for a family swim or paddle.



All the writing programs provide dedicated, distraction-free environments to develop new strategies and habits and to make significant progress in productivity. The Dissertation Boot Camp in particular emphasizes the importance of disciplined writing habits. Persistence 101, a weekly half-day of writing time, runs year-round, especially valuable as a way of maintaining momentum and combatting isolation during the summer months when campus is quieter.



**Queen's Postdoc Office**  
@QueensOPDT

@queensgradstudy wonderful weather for Dissertation on the Lake!





*Queen's Gazette*

*Academia Top 10*

*Gradifying: your connection  
with grad studies at Queen's*

A sign of the impact of SGS dissertation events is the development of constellation of writing events at the local level across campus, most recently the *Ban Righ Writing Studio*, a space for female graduate students to write in a supportive environment.

SGS also highlights the importance of dissertation support in *Focus on Graduate Supervision*, a one day training program for supervisors.

### 3. Student Peer Advising Program

The *Student Peer Advising* program features confidential peer-to-peer counselling on academic and personal matters, provided by 3 trained graduate students and is managed by the Society of Graduate and Professional Students with funding support from the SGS. Advisors produce term reports three times a year and the program undergoes an annual review.

### 4. Transition to Careers: Career Week, Workshops and Alumni Mentors

Inaugurated in 2014, *Career Week for Graduate Students and Post-docs* recognizes the many challenges of transitioning out of graduate studies. A week of workshops, interactive sessions, panel discussions, keynote speakers (Paul Yachnin and Chad Gaffield in 2014) for both students and faculty mentors culminates in a large-scale networking event designed to expose students to a multiplicity of career options and marketing the skills acquired as graduate students .

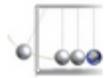
Workshops on all aspects of career building are an integral part of the *Expanding Horizons* workshop series and address, among other topics, the multiple dimensions of the career search, with the aim of creating an open, realistic conversation about the labour market and pragmatic strategies in finding one's career. Students who take twelve or more workshops in *Expanding Horizons* receive a certificate that offers formal validation of this co-curricular activity.

*Alumni members can provide insight, perspective and encouragement on career paths and options. Student members can ask questions in a secure and welcoming platform designed to facilitate interaction with alumni (e.g., asking about how to translate the value of experiences at Queen's for specific types of work).*

Alumni Mentoring is facilitated through the new *Queen's Connects*, an alumni-student career networking group on LinkedIn.

PDF

[Queen's Connects Tip Sheet](#) (0.2 MB)



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@queensgradstudy

"The employable you" panel at Career Week. #SGSCareers



**Chad Gaffield**

@ChadGaffield

Great discussion #SGSCareers esp how to integrate and demonstrate knowledge and competencies - Many thx @queensgradstudy @FromPhdtoLife

## 5. Online Modules: MyGradSkills.ca: Find Your Future

Queen's produced three online interactive modules that are directly connected to student wellness for [MyGradSkills.ca](#) an initiative the Ontario Consortium for Graduate Professional Skills.

*"I was actually able to come up with ways to get unstuck, which worked for me! I was very productive today!"*

*Mental Health and Well-being: Skills for Graduate Students*, for which Queen's was the primary author, provides valuable tools to increase understanding of health and wellness and to help manage well-being in graduate life and during transition to a career. Videos of current graduate students speaking about how they strive to achieve balance are included.

*Intercultural Competency* introduces participants to key aspects of interacting in an intercultural community, including scenarios and quizzes that apply the new material to experiences in graduate school. The module addresses community-building, healthy relationships and effective communication that is so critical to graduate well-being, and gives graduate students the tools to create a positive space in universities and work-settings.

*The Versatile Graduate: Exploring Diverse Career Paths for PhDs* responds to an area of uncertainty for graduate students, especially for PhD students transitioning from graduate program to career. The module provides concrete ideas about how to use networks to explore career paths and to entertain a wide range of possibilities. Videos of graduate alumni reflecting on these decisions are featured.

## 6. Workshops – Expanding Horizons and Student Wellness Services workshops

Numerous workshops relevant to wellness and balance are offered including:

Psychological Wellbeing	Managing the Supervisor-Student Relationship
Managing Presentation Anxiety	Financial Literacy
Living in the Present Moment	Time Management
Getting Un-Stuck	10 Strategies for Degree Completion
Dealing with Adversity	

Registration has grown in *Expanding Horizons* workshops from 680 in 2011/12 to 1700 in 2014-2015, reflecting the strong impact and connection with graduate students.

In addition to graduate-specific workshops, numerous health and well-being workshops are offered by **Student Wellness Services** (formerly *HCDS*). Recognized as a leader in mental health, Dr. Michael Condra has developed high-impact training programs, videos and online modules for the Queen's community and for the Council of Ontario Universities.

## 7. Cross-Cultural Advising

A *clinical psychologist* offers specialized support for graduate students in adjusting and transitioning across cultures and in navigating the supervisory relationship, offering individual consultations as well as workshops on these and other areas.

## Measuring Outcomes

Annual review of participant feedback on services and workshops, participant rates, and focus groups on key programs are essential to determine the impact and relevance of programs for students. Learning outcomes are defined for many workshops and events, including Career Week, and this has facilitated more effective program evaluation. For example, 444 responses to a survey of Career Week 2014 generated invaluable data on the event and on future priorities. Running focus groups with graduate students after events produces a more finely-grained review of programs.

*I FINISHED my dissertation! Defense date is scheduled and I am so very very grateful to the SGS and to you for the amazing opportunities you've provided. Your energy and enthusiasm and approachability are a key piece of the success of these events.*

## Initiatives in Progress

A three to four minute video on graduate student wellness is in planning. This short video will be shown at Graduate Orientation 2015 and a link to it included in the welcome email from the SGS Vice-Provost and Dean to all incoming students in early September. This serves as a visual reminder of the centrality of wellness and balance from the start of graduate studies.

An alumni mentoring program is underway to launch in tandem with the 175<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Queen's University. 175 graduate alumni mentors in multiple branches of public life are being recruited to provide guidance/mentorship to current graduate students on matters including career transition and pathways, relevance of the graduate experience, and issues of importance to students.

Promoting the use of the E-portfolio is a priority for 2015-2016. It enables graduate students to articulate with confidence the skills and capacities acquired in their graduate programs and reflect on their successes and accomplishments.

## Application of Prize Money

Funds from the prize money would be used to support a campus-wide graduate challenge. Students will be asked to make submissions in various creative forms – podcasts, blog entries, videos, articles – to display ways of staying well and balanced in graduate school. This is to encourage a continued conversation on holistic wellbeing among Queen’s graduate students and the wider community on campus.



In this video, students speak about managing stress in graduate school.

Click the play button to open the video or follow the link below. Opens browser window.

[\*Watch Video\*](#)