

# Best practices for reducing time to completion

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The University of Toronto has created a series of faculty development workshops to help improve the supervisor-student relationship.

By NANA LEE & ALLAN KAPLAN | MAY 23 2018

Graduate students have embraced professional development as an integral part of their education, but what about their supervisors and departments? As part of an initiative to reduce completion times the school of graduate studies at the University of Toronto hosted a series of faculty development workshops to optimize supervisory mentorship in graduate student research progress and professional development.

Content was targeted at faculty who currently have or are planning to train graduate students, faculty who are interested in establishing their own graduate professional development workshop series, course, or program for their department and graduate coordinators and department chairs.

## Participants and feedback summary

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The monthly workshop series consisted of nine two-hour workshops. Speakers were academic professors or industry professionals who were experts in the topic. Thirty-nine participants attended at least one workshop. Twenty-one participants attended more than one. Of those who attended at least one workshop and responded to the exit survey, 100 percent found the workshop helpful and would recommend to their peers.

## Content of the workshops

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Workshop I was “Why Professional Development for Graduate Students?” Discussion revolved around how PhD programs in the faculty of medicine are producing graduates who pursue both academic (~20 percent) and non-academic careers, and that the traditional apprenticeship model of PhD to professor may not be sufficient to produce well-rounded “whole scientists.” Best practices were discussed with interactive participation from the attendees, including the question “What are the core competencies to succeed as a graduate student and beyond?” with a comparison to the industry standard of [31 core competencies](#). Some resources in which students were to achieve these competencies were the following: graduate professional development workshops, MiTACs workshops, Life Sciences Ontario,

10,000 Coffees, Toastmaster's, miniMBA, Graduate Management Consulting Association, Enactus Canada, Biotalent, Ontario Centre of Excellence internship funding, and the individual development plan (IDP).

Workshop II outlined how IDPs have been shown to increase research productivity, fewer conflicts, and a higher satisfaction ([Hobin, CBE-Life SciEd, 2014](#)), and successful campus practices for implementing IDPs. In workshop III the faculty further discussed the implications of having an IDP at the University of Toronto with a recommendation that the Graduate life science and education office host a link to the science careers IDP and help introduce these concepts during departmental orientations; implemented this year.

Workshop IV "Helping Students with Effective Communications" highlighted the resources available to graduate students on campus for writing and presentation skills development, the three-minute thesis, the methods of storytelling at the job interview, and communicating to the lay public.

Workshop V discussed optimal approaches to crafting a job application with cover letter and résumé catered to the job description using CAR (challenge, action, result) statements.

In Workshop VI a discussion was led on helping students with creativity, leadership and entrepreneurship with insights from three graduate students who had started their own companies during or right after graduate school.

Workshop VII outlined the resources available to graduate students at the [Graduate Conflict Resolution Centre](#), the unique features of conflict in graduate school, and tools faculty can use in dealing with conflict prevention, management, and resolution.

Workshop VIII was on the logistics of experiential learning opportunities for PhD students who all had part-time internship opportunities during their graduate training. The last discussion included a guest speaker, Reinhart Reithmeier, who shared the findings of the 2016 10,000 PhDs Project and the implications of the outcome data for better preparing PhD graduates for careers in academia and beyond.

## Summary and next steps

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Based on the feedback and suggestions from the current year, our next steps for this program are to:

1. Continue with similar workshops for the upcoming year,
2. Raise awareness and create IDP forms for all of faculty of medicine graduate students and
3. Create online videos highlighting impactful ideas regarding optimizing supervisory mentorship.

Although the impact of these initiatives on time to completion have yet to be determined, creating such a forum for faculty discussion on graduate student professional development and IDPs will most likely result in an increased number of graduate students with IDPs and a sense of empowerment and motivation for them to complete their graduate training in a timely fashion, ready to move to the next step of their pathway to diverse careers.

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