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## Background

The EDI committee had a round table with the Graduate Advisor committee in July 2021. The Inclusion Self-Assessment Tool questionnaire was used as a starting point for the conversation.

We first discussed the purview and responsibilities of the committee, and then delved into a discussion of various issues and actionable steps towards improving community and graduate student well-being. The outcomes and format of these discussions were very much “grassroots” in nature. We believe addressing some of the topics that came up will be a reasonable first step in improving EDI through improved community buy-in. We plan to check back within one year to follow up on this discussion and assess progress towards implementation.

## Grad Advising Duties

The grad advisors explained that these are what they see as their current duties:

- Welcome students into the department in BOTA 501
- Provide students with a general overview of degree progression and requirements towards degree (i.e., key milestones and deadlines as in the botany quick guide)
- Serve as a 3<sup>rd</sup> party point of contact (essentially, a departmental ombudsperson) to aid when a student is experiencing negative interactions with their peers, colleagues, or supervisor. The ethos of this resembles a security “net” that catches and protects students from inequitable and unfair actions they may experience during their degree.
- Chair thesis defences to ensure procedural fairness

## **Grad advisor / grad student points of contact**

Currently, grad students interact with their grad advisors at these points:

- Advisors meet with incoming gradient students for ~ 30 mins during the first or second class of BOTA 501
- Advisors act as Chair for student defences (but note that, based on availability, the defence is sometimes chaired by a different grad advisor than the one initially assigned)
- Advisors and students meet as students request (students must initiate these meetings)

## **Areas advisors consider to be currently working well**

Our discussion identified some areas where the current system is seen to be effective:

- All incoming students are given consistent information from their grad advisors during the initial cohort meeting within Botany 501. It was seen as positive that students are treated equally at the outset.
- Some advisors felt that infrequent use by students of the grad advising system indicates that things are generally going smoothly for most students.

## **Areas for improvement / recommendations for change**

The round table group identified several challenges facing the grad advising program. [Potential actions that came up during the meeting are shown in blue text.](#)

### *1. Focusing on equality instead of moving towards equity*

The reality is that students do come from different backgrounds with different barriers that may create challenges to their academic advancement. An equity-minded approach strives to address these differing needs so that each graduate student is given the resources and support to succeed. Adopting a “one size fits all” approach could leave some students without resources and support appropriate to their circumstances. For example, our international students might need additional guidance to ease their transition into the Canadian academic system, but it was stressed during the meeting that this should be done in a sensitive and non-isolating way. [This issue merits further consideration](#)

and discussion, though perhaps after implementing some of the barrier-reduction ideas below.

## 2. *Grad advisors are an under-utilized resource*

An informal poll measured ~1 discussion per advisor per year, although most grad advisors are assigned at least 6 (and often more) graduate students in any given year. This demonstrates that students rarely access the resource that is their graduate advisor (a 3<sup>rd</sup> party individual who advises, most obviously, during academic or workplace hardships). Ideally, students are progressing well through their degree without issues and therefore would not need to access their graduate advisors. However, it is unclear if the low rate at which students reach out to their graduate advisors is because they are not having issues or because there is some form of barrier to accessing their advisor.

- The Wellness Initiative will be surveying students in November 2021 about their uptake and interactions with grad advisors – we should consult the results of this survey to learn more about how students view the advising program and why they do or don't use it.

## 3. *Possible barriers to participation*

**Potential barrier #1** Students are unaware of their graduate advisor. For example, after meeting their advisor within the first couple of weeks of starting their program, students may forget that they have a graduate advisor or what roles the graduate advisors could play as they progress towards their degree.

- (Alice) Email students once a year to let them know who their graduate advisor is.
- (Alice) Email graduate advisors once a year to let them know which students they are responsible for.
- Create accessible information about the grad advising resource on the botany website.
- Improve student/departmental awareness of resources like the graduate advisors through mini-marketing campaigns (i.e., on the peer mentoring coffee voucher, write “\*You can also meet with your graduate advisor ...”
- Some procedural changes could be considered that loop Grad Advisors in when their advisees raise issues with Alice, to whom many students' questions are directed initially. Alice often directly communicates with Patrick Martone (current Senior Grad Advisor) instead of the assigned Grad Advisor. Patrick does a fantastic job, but

this puts unfair additional labour onto him while graduate advisors remain unaware of their students' needs.

- Consider adding additional opportunities for introducing and promoting the grad advisors. For example, we could ask the BGSA to help by setting an example (e.g., experienced students meeting with Grad Advisors and explaining the benefits of it to newer students) or inviting Grad Advisors to talk for a few minutes at the BGSA meetings. We could also encourage PIs to explain and promote use of grad advisors.
- While the above are all voluntary and informal measures, a more extreme option would be to require annual meetings between advisors and advisees.

**Potential barrier #2** Students may not feel comfortable (socially/professionally) approaching their graduate advisors with issues or concerns.

- Once a year, advisors could reach out to students for an (optional?) “cup of coffee” as a cohesive community-building activity. This would primarily be a socializing activity to familiarize students with their graduate advisor. This would also include a quick introduction to the graduate advisor and their role. Funding for this activity would come from the department. Optional facilitation points or guidelines could be given to graduate advisors for the yearly “cup of coffee”. Though one interaction may not be enough it may be sufficient. Given the GA’s time constraints and limitations, this ongoing yearly informal meeting is an immediately implementable action that could benefit the students.
- Another consideration is that students and Grad Advisors often work in different buildings, so they don't "see" each other. Advisors who work in a similar field or building may better understand, anticipate, and respond to slightly more specific issues. Similarly, students might be uncomfortable bringing a certain issue to their assigned grad advisor but might be more comfortable doing so with a different grad advisor. While respecting the need to maintain equity of advising loads, it could be helpful to add a mechanism by which a student might request a change in assigned advisor.

#### 4. *Resources for advisors*

The number of “indirect” or less obvious issues that could come up is innumerable. As such, it is impossible for graduate advisors to be expected to know every solution, nor is it their purview to solve most problems directly. Instead, they would typically be a point of redirection towards an appropriate resource, but at this time it would be up to the advisor to figure out what those pathways and resources are. The

suggestions below could be incredibly valuable, but probably require some paid labor and/or involvement of the BGSA to implement.

- Some sort of flowchart with regards to directing a situation or resources available could be helpful. This could also be available on our botany website.
- On the botany website add a frequently asked questions section, including definitions of confidentiality and consent for information sharing so that students know what will happen when they do raise a concern.
- On the botany website add a list of example questions people ask graduate advisors. This illustrates how students could applicably and better utilize graduate advisors.
- Provide incoming grad advisors with a handbook or, minimally, a written description of their role, expectations, and guidelines. This would help grad advisors understand their position and give them more resources with which to implement it, while fostering continuity of grad advising as membership changes.