

## Graduate Supervision and Best Practices

*After only two years as a graduate student with the Religion and Diversity Project, I realized that now when I am doing research, I can often go down the reference list of key scholarly publications in my field and say that I have had the pleasure of meeting the authors either at a Religion and Diversity Project event or at an academic conference. I think I can now count at least a dozen such scholars who have significantly influenced my PhD experience (Christine Cusack, Graduate Student Member).*

This is the story of how graduate supervision and best practices involving graduate students has worked on the Religion and Diversity Project (RDP). What we offer here is like a toolkit of principles and practices that can be transferred and to other contexts and projects.

### Best Practices for Supervising and Supporting Graduate Students in the RDP

- Involvement—invited to observe the process, with limited expectations at the beginning;
- Engagement—expected to participate in the process, as experience and confidence grows;
- Mentorship—bidirectional links between graduate students and faculty that offer ample opportunity for skill expansion, encouragement and critical reflection and evaluation;
- Collaborating—opportunities for partnerships develop from the involvement, engagement and mentorship of graduate students; partnerships are between professors and graduate students as well as between graduate students;
- Capacity Building—developing, nurturing and expanding the skills and experience of a cohort of graduate students and post-doctoral fellows involved in the study of religion and diversity in Canada so that they in turn are equipped to pass on their knowledge to the next generation of students in the classroom and through their supervision of graduate students.

There are both *content* and *process* issues.

### Matters of Content

#### 1. RDP Events.

We provided an opportunity for a large number of graduate students to be part of an intense scholarly exchange that took place within RDP Events. Events included team meetings, workshops, public lectures, and conferences. These exchanges had a particular scholarly focus (e.g., Varieties of Religious Establishment; Sexual Diversity and Religious Diversity) that demonstrated to students the process of moving from an idea to the formulation of a research project, or a conference paper, or a publication. In this context there were both formal discussions (papers prepared and distributed in advance) and informal dialogue. There were

ample networking opportunities that occurred in-between sessions or at mealtime. Graduate students had the opportunity to develop professional relationships with senior scholars beyond their own supervisors and individual departments. Here is what we were told graduate students appreciated most:

- It was not an isolating experience like large conferences can be, but an experience of collaboration that was focused with a deliverable (like a research project, or a publication opportunity) at the end;
- The tying of scholarly events to a deliverable was very important. Working in this collaborative way, students could see how the process of intersecting various components (presentations, discussions and publications) and ideas into an integrated whole;
- There were multiple opportunities for students to take part in some deliverable whether it was a report to be written, co-authoring a publication or preparing a bibliography or video-recording for the website;
- The intense scholarly exchange was evident as scholars wrestled with concepts that were either new to them or being considered in new ways. The exchange offered emerging connections between graduate students and academics as they discussed ways that their work, and ideas, overlapped;
- Most of these contexts had 12-15 people present. This meant that individual students had an opportunity to meet and interact in a meaningful way with everyone present, both in the sessions and during meals.

Leo Van Arragon, Graduate Student Member: *During my PhD program I had opportunities to participate in a wide variety of events, many of them international. What I found was a remarkable willingness among the senior scholars to share their methodological expertise, their theoretical and research insights and their experience as academics. While I took this ongoing interaction as normal, conversations with graduate students outside the project led me to understand that the RDP has provided a unique situation which has been formative in my work but also my life as an academic, drawing me into an global network of scholars.*

Amélie Barras, Post-Doctoral Fellow: *Coming from the UK, I wasn't familiar with academia in Canada. RDP events were a fantastic opportunity to meet and develop relationships with scholars throughout Canada working on religion and diversity. It was also a way for me to have first-hand experience of how collaborative Canadian research projects are developed and carried out. As an assistant professor today, these experiences act as an invaluable roadmap.*

Peter Beyer, Team Member: *Giving graduate students practical experience in designing, conducting, and reporting research is a central aspect of graduate training. The RDP provides a rich context for this not only as a source of funding to engage students in the projects carried out under its auspices, but just as importantly through networking, specific training, and workshop opportunities. For the main RDP research project that I have been directing, four graduate students have been closely involved, and each one was able to take advantage of specific training seminars, graduate student workshops,*

*and various RDP sponsored meetings and conferences, all of which allowed them to broaden their experience, to escape the isolation in which such work is usually done, and perfect their abilities in the networked context of many other graduate students doing likewise in other and connected projects. Whether it was to participate in research design meetings, take training seminars in conducting interviews, participate in graduate seminars to which they could carry their experience, or carry the main responsibility for reporting the results of the research that they played a central role in conducting, at each phase of the training these students were able to do so in a rich and supportive context where they could learn not only from their own direct practice, but also from that of others in similar training situations. The result has been more capable, more confident, and more accomplished students and researchers.*

## 2. RDP Sponsored Graduate Student Workshops

Through graduate student workshops, the RDP deliberately created opportunities for graduate students from different universities and different academic traditions (sociology, religious studies, law) to come together and to get to know one another and to share their scholarship. For students who were in departments, programs or universities where there were few or no graduate students in the field of religion, this offered an opportunity to experience support from others—to feel part of a “cohort” and to experience the advantages of the support, advice and constructive comments on their work from other students. As a result, when the students who participated in these workshops go to large conferences, like Congress, they do not feel isolated. Having connected through the workshop experience, graduate student cohorts supported one another through email and social media, marking milestones such as completing comprehensive exams, turning in a completed dissertation, getting an article published, and a successful doctoral defense.

*Heather Shipley, Project Manager: The Graduate Student Workshop series offered a unique and intensive training opportunity for graduate students, through a competitive application process. With a limited number of spots for student participation, we were able to provide a series of training modules on research design, knowledge dissemination, teaching and community engagement. Each module was held over the course of two days and each workshop series created an engaged cohort of students, whose connections to one another continued long after the workshops ended.*

*Pamela Dickey Young, Team Member/Workshop Leader: As leader of one of the graduate workshop sessions on research dissemination, I was very impressed by how eager and involved the student participants were in taking responsibility for developing their own research plans and in honing their skills in presenting the CVs and preparing for job interviews.*

*Alyshea Cummins, Graduate Student Member: The RDP has given me numerous opportunities and resources necessary for developing as a graduate student. I was awarded the RDP Research Grant for my thesis work, "Redefining Islam in Canada: an Ismaili Muslim Movement"; awarded the opportunity to take part in the Graduate Student Workshop Series facilitated by renowned scholars like Kim Knott, Teemu Taira, Grace Davie, and Pamela Dickey Young; and, finally, am now working with my*

*supervisor, Peter Beyer, on presenting some preliminary findings on our research on Cultural and Religious Diversity in Canada (18-45 year olds) at Congress 2015.*

### 3. Opportunities to Exercise Leadership

The RDP offered many graduate students an opportunity to exercise leadership. One prime example included the organization of a workshop for their university, or region. Working together with professors, students were encouraged to take on various responsibilities and offered mentorship to assist them in completing them. While not all students were engaged in leadership roles, there were opportunities for those who wished to participate and support in the performance of them.

*Catherine Holtmann, Graduate Student Member and co-organizer of the Workshop on the Study of Religion in Atlantic Canada: I was surprised by “the disconnect” amongst universities and scholars of religion in the Atlantic Region, a relatively compact geographical area with several universities. The workshop posed a great opportunity for me as a graduate student to exercise leadership by bringing together graduate students and scholars studying religion for two days of reflection and dialogue. All of the feedback was enthusiastic and positive and there was a strong desire for this kind of collaboration to continue.*

*Nancy Nason-Clark, Team Member and co-organizer of the Workshop on the Study of Religion in Atlantic Canada: Working together under the banner of the RDP opened doors to do things in the Atlantic Region. With the financial support of the Project, Cathy and I were able to harness enthusiasm amongst graduate students, faculty, and other RDP Team Members in our region for networking and collaboration. Meeting together was such a positive experience for everyone.*

There was also encouragement for graduate students to organize a special session at a conference where RDP graduate students and faculty were invited to submit a paper. This provided initial exposure to planning and proposing an academic session at a conference to the Program Chair, or Conference Organizing Committee. The sessions proposed included a mix of graduate students and established scholars.

The SSHRC mid-term review was another opportunity for graduate students to develop their leadership skills. Together with the project director and project manager, the graduate students came up with the content and structure for their presentation, which included examples from their participation in particular Project events and contexts. Students learned to frame their individual experiences in light of the larger goals of the *Religion and Diversity Project*. The process of preparing for the presentation involved collaboration between graduate students, each of whom are leaders either at their own university or within a particular field of religious research. During the midterm review students had to speak within short time limits and respond to the reviewers' questions. This was an example of a collaborative approach to project evaluation.

### 4. Opportunities to Apply for Funding

Within the larger RDP, there were ample opportunities for graduate students to apply for internal funding, research grants, travel grants and workshop grants. The fact that there was funding available to assist graduate students in going to workshops and meetings led to a high degree of graduate student involvement and engagement. The Graduate Research Grants offered a maximum of \$1000 (CAD) to graduate student team members to support fieldwork or archival research related to Project objectives. Each year saw the award of up to 5 Graduate Research Grants, facilitating travel and research in Canada, the US, Europe and China. In many instances during the application process, there was feedback provided to improve the applications, if a submission was found to be in need of further development, rather than rejection. In the case of the Workshop on the Study of Religion in Atlantic Canada, we mirrored this technique by offering constructive feedback on the abstract submissions of graduate students whether or not they participated in the event. The required report due shortly after completion of a grant was important in helping students to learn all the components of a typical grant process. Graduate students were held accountable for monies received.

Paul Gareau, Graduate Student Member: *I received a research travel grant from the Religion and Diversity Project. Without it, I would not have been able to travel to 3 key research sites where I gathered half of my data. It was absolutely instrumental. The Religion and Diversity Project allowed me access to many resources in order to organize an international workshop on youth, religion, and identity. These opportunities are extremely rare and they are essential in building an academic career.*

#### 5. Opportunities for Dialogue Between Students and Leading Scholars in the Field

In the team research nodes (Ottawa, Montreal, Victoria), regular meetings between students and scholars offered a value-added opportunity for ongoing dialogue and engagement with leading scholars.

In some locations, RDP-linked faculty members were able to offer research assistantships to graduate students across multiple universities, nodes and disciplines. These students were then able to incorporate what they were learning about religious diversity into their own fields of expertise and undergraduate teaching. In addition to expanding the influence of the *Religion and Diversity Project*, this showed these graduate students the potential of large research collaborations, something they may not have had the opportunity to experience during graduate school.

The graduate student involvement in *Religion and Diversity Project* events, referred to earlier, facilitated meeting scholars and graduate students beyond the limits of the RDP team. This helped to increase graduate student confidence by showing that such networking is both possible and valued. In this way, many students were able to harness some of the skills they learned and experienced in the smaller contexts when they participated in a large conference (perhaps for the first time ever).

RDP networking and mentoring enhanced students' ability to talk deliberately about their research (and their thesis or dissertation) to scholars besides their supervisors and to determine how to integrate and respond to the feedback they are given and questions being asked of them. These opportunities, in particular, help graduate students to figure out where they fit in the field.

Learning how to talk about your research is extremely important. Many students noted how much they appreciated the way that RDP-linked scholars solicited student opinions and took seriously student questions and feedback. This encouraged students to offer their point of view and ensured that they felt that they were a vital part of the research team, in this way contributing positively to their professional development.

Another benefit of the RDP for graduate students was the first-hand experience of how scholars from different parts of Canada, or different locations around the world, understand and interpret questions of religious diversity. For example, the negotiation between different religious groups in England is very different than in France, or in Québec. Not only do students get to listen and participate in discussions with these diverse scholars and the varying approaches that they adopt in their research, but they also get to think about their own work in light of the work of others from various places around Canada and the world.

*Donald Boisvert, Team Member: I've had a number of graduate students participate in RDP events, and their experience has always been a positive one. There seems to have been two things they most appreciated. First was the fact that they could learn from each other and network. The graduate student experience can often be a lonely and isolating one. Coming together to work on common projects, or even simply to present papers and listen to those prepared by their student colleagues, can be a source of inspiration for them. Second was the scholarly modelling. They liked the fact that they could get a real-life, hands-on sense of how the academic process unfolds: from paper to presentation to published article. This allowed them to develop a deeper and much finer appreciation for the creative excitement of scholarly work.*

### Matters of Process

#### 1. The process of faculty mentorship of graduate students:

- Graduate student confidence is developed, in part, through the mastery of skills. Breaking this down into component parts graduate students need to learn how to situate their work within the broader framework of other scholars studying religion in contemporary Canada or around the world. Involvement in the RDP initiative played a crucial role in making this happen. For instance, a graduate student attends a plenary address. Before the address, a mentoring professor suggests that the graduate student come up with one or two questions before the lecture begins that attempt to find something that relates to the students' own research. These could be questions of clarification, or of methodology, or of theory, or of analysis. The mentoring professor helps the student to see that there is indeed a link between their emerging project and the broader field. Whether or not the student actually asks the question is far less important than developing it and then later discussing it with the mentoring faculty member over coffee. Faculty members need to take initiative where they model how a student can enter conversation about their work, ask strategic questions and harness the feedback that is received. These are some of the activities that happened regularly throughout the years of the RDP as both faculty members took initiative in mentoring students, beyond those that they were supervising, and students took advantage of the opportunities before them.

- How do you mentor students into service? Give them appropriate, academically-enriching, tasks to fulfil. Some suggestions include serving on committees, reading proposed abstracts, and writing drafts for small grants. This has the advantage of both teaching students how to write abstracts and grants that are award winning and also to see the processes at work as student submissions are evaluated.
- Publication Pitfalls and Possibilities—If there is one thing that graduate students really need it is an opportunity to participate in and learn from the process of publication. The RDP offered students a variety of ways that they could learn how to publish, understanding the process of feedback, and then engage with other RDP-linked faculty in actually publishing opportunities. Appropriate rewards, like publication, for scholarly work, or research assistance tasks, ensure that students feel a part of the academic enterprise and that they are adding to their scholarly career path.
- Teaching—Through the creation of a variety of web-based resources, graduate students and faculty were involved in presenting their work in creative ways that could be used for teaching students in undergraduate classes. A few students had the opportunity to work on other resources that could be used for teaching, such as data bases and bibliographies. Some students used the results of a Teaching Assistantship or Research Assistantship assignment in their own teaching. Opportunities to visualize concepts related to religious diversity helped to offer graduate students examples of how to translate difficult concepts from text to images.
- Informal Social Interactions: Informal social interactions over food and drink within the context of the scholarly community (such as at conferences or workshops) help to reinforce the bidirectional nature of the mentor-student relationship. Students report that this enhances both the academic and social nature of their career building.

Steven Tomlins, Graduate Student Member: *The RDP has been significant toward my gaining publication experience, particularly by contributing to a workshop I held with my supervisor, Lori Beaman, that resulted in a published edited volume, but also through the contacts I have made. I am currently working on an edited volume that includes international scholars I have met through the RDP. Moreover, the opportunity to meet with some of Canada's leading scholars in my field, and the respect with which I have always been treated, has been invaluable in terms of increasing both my knowledge and my confidence.*

## 2. The process of peer support amongst graduate students.

- The support and accountability that students in the cohort offered each other should not be underestimated. This occurred despite the fact that programs at different universities had slightly different requirements and the support for graduate student progress varied. Some students took the accountability to the next level by sharing their goals and timelines and invited others to ask about their progress.

- Confidence is built through the mastery of skills. Part of mastering skills is observing those skills being put into practice. Graduate student cohorts can use social media to share news about their publications, calls for papers for sessions they are organizing, and completion of milestones in their program of study. After observation of their peers' accomplishments, they too have opportunities to put into practice those skills.
- Networking is more than meeting different people. It is a deliberate process of two way interaction that involves dialogue and feedback. Initiating contact and responding to invitations or opportunities is bi-directional as well. Effective networking moves toward deliverables.
- Informal social interactions between students are an important component for professional development and personal support. Friendships are formed. Listening to student's struggles to find work/life balance or find employment can alleviate feelings of isolation.

Jordan Palmer, Graduate Student Member: *Working with the Religion and Diversity Project has been an unqualifiedly positive experience. Whether it is being exposed to activities geared towards students (such as the very helpful Student Workshop which featured professors from Britain, Canada, and Finland, or the camaraderie between researchers at the same level of study) or activities for all levels of academia, the Religion and Diversity Project is run professionally and as a constant resource for students. In addition to structured events as described above, some of my fondest memories involve informal mentoring: for example, borrowing a newly-authored book from its author, discussing new methodologies or theoretical frameworks over coffee, and being given advice from those who have been in my position. I have found the Religion and Diversity Project to be diverse and accommodating, and I know it has enriched my academic experience.*

By Catherine Holtmann and Nancy Nason-Clark