

Introduction

Following the by-election of November 6 – 7, 2018, I assumed the office of DAGS Vice President, Academic Affairs (VPA), with the tenure ending on April 30, 2019. Uppermost on my priority list was how to integrate the graduate student community across Dal's faculties and campuses. Other objectives include designing a policy/structure for supervisor – supervisee relationship and conflict resolution and facilitating the establishment of a graduate student centric mental health framework. In my six months in office, I have focused on the 'integration agenda'. The latter objectives (supervisor – supervisee relationship and mental health) were, however, catered to by the President (Kaitlyne Lowe) in conjunction with the FGS and other institutional partners.

My focus on integration is informed by my persuasion that DAGS' functionality (as an advocacy and enabling association) and sustainability are dependent on how integrated and involved the graduate community is. Again, community is a very crucial component in the mental health toolkit, given the isolation graduate students feel. Put simply, we are stronger, together! While the integration-objective is, necessarily, iterative and should colour everything DAGS does, it has been driven via two key events – the Graduate Students Climate Change Round Table and the Dalhousie Graduate Students Conference. Both initiatives are described below, with lessons teased out.

Programs

Graduate Students Climate Change Round Table

The round table was held on January 31, 2019 at the MacEachen Institute of Public Policy and Governance (MIPP). It was informed by the realization that climate change is inherently interdisciplinary with interest across virtually all faculties at the University. Despite, its interdisciplinarity, there has been no platform for graduate students to collaborate. Collaborating with the MIPP, about 18 graduate researchers involved or interested in climate change research were brought together on January 31 to discuss 'the Canadian Climate Policy and the Turnover Problem'. The event was facilitated by Prof. Jerry Bannister of the Department of History and had Andrew Bergel (Instructor, College of Sustainability) and Stephen Thomas (Energy Campaign Coordinator, Ecology Action Centre) as presenters. It took a brainstorming format, with a briefing note containing a summary of issues discussed and findings made drafted after the Round Table. Importantly, a database of graduate students involved in climate change research was developed.

The Round table is adjudged as successful. Collaborating with the MIPP was central to the success. The MIPP did not only help with the planning of the event, but also funded and provided a venue. Leveraging on a known brand at the university was also very helpful. The rallying potential of a subject like climate change should also be highlighted. A downside is, however, the lack of a follow-up event or project after the January event. This is even more important as the round table was expected to inspire research collaborations. While it is not unlikely that there have been such collaborations, there is none known to us. If the platform will remain, it is important to consciously integrate a medium to encourage interdisciplinary research collaborations.

Dalhousie Graduate Students Conference (DGSC)

The DGSC was designed as a more elaborate version of the graduate round table on climate change. The objectives of the maiden conference were to celebrate the diversity of the Dal graduate community, showcase non-traditional research and provide a platform for grad students networking. The conference held on April 4, 2019 with the theme – *Global Solutions to Global Problems: Expanding the Bounds of Knowledge*. Following the

identification of sustainability, food security and health as the major challenges of the next century, we resolved to focus on these sub-themes. A call for interested graduate presenters was issued and about 10 graduate students submitted to present on the various themes with health attracting more than 50% of the overall submission. Three student presenters were eventually shortlisted to present at the health break-out session, while two student presenters were invited to present at the sustainability/food security session (only one presenter was, however, available to present). Debbie Martin, Tier II Canada Research Chair, Indigenous Peoples Health and Well-being gave the keynote address, while Barbara-Ann Hamilton Hinch, Kate Sherren, Steven Mannell and Patricia Doyle-Bedwell, who are all professors at the university, presented at various sessions and subsequently served on a panel of discussants (Patricia only featured during the panel discussion). PhD candidate Tari Ajadi moderated the panel session. The provost (Teri Balsler), Dean, FGS (Marty Leonard) and Director of the International Centre also addressed the conference. A reception hosted by and at the International Centre was held after the conference. The Graduate Students Appreciation night held afterwards at the university club.

The maiden conference is adjudged as successful. While there were very few graduate students in attendance (average of 30 attendees as against the projected 70 – 100 participants), the attendees were very involved, the conversation was robust, and participants connected afterwards. The involvement of non-DAGS board members on the ad-hoc planning committee, and financial support of the FGS, President's Office and International Centre were essential to the success of the conference. Worth highlighting is the support of the Director of the International Centre. Importantly, with the careful steering of the DAGS President (Kaitlynn Lowe), the conference (less the appreciation night) held at a very negligible (direct) cost to DAGS.

No doubt, the DGSC could have been more successful, particularly, as per the number of attendees. The short planning period (February – April), slow publicity roll-out and narrow theme(s) are, in part, responsible for the low participation. Planning for future conferences should start earlier (4-6 months before the conference), publicity should be more strategic and deliberate and conference theme must be more inclusive given that it is a graduate student conference. Importantly, the relationships built with other bodies and departments at the university must be consolidated and fostered.

General Recommendations

More could have been done during my six-months tenure. Ideas including having a more research driven approach to student advocacy and a graduate students peer research review and support structure were not implemented. These initiatives can be developed and implemented by the incoming regime.

The office of VP, Academic Affairs should also seek to engage the Office of the Vice President, Research and Innovation, Dalhousie University, to have more access to information about opportunities for graduate students and to represent the research interest of graduate researchers more effectively.

More generally, it is important that DAGS board works in a more concerted way. The current 'individual mandate' approach, where executives design and implement their agenda individually, is inefficient and sub-optimal. Agenda should be integrated and pursued as a team.

Getting graduate students more interested and involved in DAGS is vital. Apart from academic-themed programs, DAGS should provide a platform for 'decompression'. The DAGS common room provides such opportunity. For example, a once in a month games evening can be held.

In all, although it is yet to come fully into its own, DAGS has the potentials to make the experience of graduate students at Dal more worthwhile, and the position of VP, Academic is central to such objective. Hopefully, the incoming tenure will be able to consolidate on projects which have been implemented to achieve the objective.