



MEMORANDUM

To: TST Graduate Students
From: Dr. Colleen Shantz, Director, Graduate Centre for Theological Studies
Date: June 2, 2020
Re: **Updates for Graduate Students (COVID-19)**

Dear GCTS students,

I last wrote to you in March, as we were all beginning the shift to social distancing including the closure of classroom spaces and libraries on campus. It feels like quite an accomplishment simply to have made it through the second semester. Since that time some of you have relocated. Some of you have become home-school teachers for your own children or caregivers for loved ones. In the GCTS the first fully remote doctoral defences have been arranged and we've held remote program examinations of various kinds. All of us are racking up screen time and learning new skills, from sourdough baking to Zoom breakout rooms.

The rapid and continuing change to so many parts of our lives eats up extra psychic (in the root sense of the word) energy from all of us. In such circumstances, individual stresses have a tendency to coalesce into one big ball of concern, so here are a couple of principles to keep in mind as you continue to find your bearings. These are things you can count on:

- Each part of your program is continuing, though sometimes through different means than before. The Pandemic will not prevent any of your requirements.
- Delays that are outside of a student's control are not counted against a student. So, for example, if you have submitted work for a course or other program element, you are not responsible for delays that may follow. You need to focus only on your part in the process.
- Personnel across TST and the whole University are busy creating avenues for academic continuity based on a range of possible futures. Although we cannot yet tell you what the immediate future will be—what provincial policies will be enacted, or how the COVID-19 epidemiology will evolve—we can assure you that we are continuously developing a suite of responses for each of those eventualities.
- Health and well-being remain the cardinal concern, both in our general planning and in accommodation of individual circumstances.

Since mid-March, the college Graduate Directors have been meeting together regularly to provide for student needs and academic continuity. I have also met a number of times with the new TGSA executive to discuss plans and concerns. Now as we shift into summer, the following information can guide you as you plan for the fall.

1. Residency, Coursework, Examinations.

A number of you who have left the city may be considering whether or when to return to Toronto. Of course, for some of you this decision depends on whether or not borders are open. For anyone with health concerns (particularly those in high risk categories) decisions about safety should guide your choices. For everyone, please keep in mind that, as levels of social distancing are adjusted, there will be corresponding advantages to being close to campus. However, you are in the best position to judge the relative merits of these options in your case and should choose accordingly.

Meanwhile, in the fall semester, all courses will be offered remotely (while a few may also include the option of limited in-person participation). Professors are adjusting their pedagogical design to facilitate continued academic excellence within altered delivery. These active adjustments will assist you in keeping pace in your studies.

As it states in the Handbooks, a vital element in our graduate programs is “the influence of a community of theological scholars and the opportunities for interdisciplinary interchange.” Obviously, we will all be building that theological community through remote means over the next months. As we approach the new academic year, watch for opportunities to participate in a variety of groups through video conferencing. Many people are considering how we will create places for conversation, inquiry, and support. Please do join in. These events will help to replace some of the structure of learning that has been displaced during the pandemic.

The options for completing examinations depend on local and provincial regulations. Do continue to contact the GCTS office when you are ready to fulfill any examination requirement and we will advise you on what options are available to you. We expect to be able to offer in-class examinations again soon, for one person at a time.

2. Research.

Since the closure of the libraries, continued research has been a concern for students and faculty alike. In this case there is good news. First, you will all be aware that the UTLibrary system increased its electronic offerings through the HathiTrust Digital Library. Librarians have also added many ebooks to the collection. Second, while the libraries are closed, the librarians remain on duty and they can often find resources that elude you. The **librarians welcome your research inquiries** and you may contact any of them for assistance:

Emmanuel College, [Emmanuel](#) librarian
Knox College email: joan.pries@utoronto.ca

Regis College email: regis.library@utoronto.ca

St. Augustine's College email: library@sastoronto.org

St. Michael's College email: noel.mcferran@utoronto.ca

Trinity College email: ask.grahamlibrary@utoronto.ca thomas.power@utoronto.ca

Wycliffe College email: ask.grahamlibrary@utoronto.ca thomas.power@utoronto.ca

TST Librarians are also planning a number of workshops about search skills that will make your research more effective. The first of these is **Finding Journal Articles in the ATLA Religion Database, Thursday, June 11, 3:00 - 4:00 p.m.** TST librarians Noel McFerran and Karen Wishart will demonstrate how to find the best full-text journal articles for theology papers.

Zoom link for this meeting is: <https://zoom.us/j/99041077360>

Meeting ID: 990 4107 7360. Dial in numbers: <https://zoom.us/u/amI925MeP>

The final piece of good news is that the libraries are actively **working toward curbside pickup**. The libraries will use a hybrid model of physical materials combined with access to the HathiTrust Emergency Service material. Items that are part of the Hathi digital collection will remain available electronically but will not be accessible in print form. In turn, all materials not held by Hathi will be accessible for pickup. This compromise will allow students working outside of the Toronto area to retain remote access to the Hathi collection. All other electronic resources in the UTLibrary system will be available as usual. This phase of service requires a variety of approvals, but announcements will go out as soon as the plan is approved.

In the meantime, if you are experiencing impediments in your preparation for general exams or thesis preparation you should contact your supervisory committee or MRP Mentor to help you strategize about other materials and ways to tailor your work in helpful directions.

3. Dealing with Delays

As mentioned above and in my first letter, delays that are outside of a student's control are not counted against the student. If the adjustments to remote learning and research have delayed you in significant ways, please discuss your circumstances with your supervisor or College Graduate Director. Many doctoral students in the post-General Exams phase have already met with their committees or will do so in the next month. Those meetings provide an excellent opportunity to record significant delays and seek advice about your progress.

For now, if you require an extension to complete some portion of your program, please continue to submit the same Request Forms (available at <https://www.tst.edu/academic/resources-forms>) that you would normally use so that we can properly track your progress. We understand that those of you who are parents are likely facing significant additions to your responsibilities and that others may be working in less than ideal circumstances. All of these circumstances are recognized with due consideration. When completing an extension

request form, please be specific in your comments so that we can assess the kinds of impediments that you have been facing. For example, consider if you have experienced disruption to your progress in any of these areas due to COVID-19:

- Access to academic activities (e.g., courses)
- Access to research activities (e.g., fieldwork, special archives)
- Availability for academic work (e.g., caregiving demands, living situation)
- Interruptions to funding (e.g., lost household income, lost TA/RA income)

Please also remember that if you miss academic activities due to illness, you must record any absences on the Declaration of Absence tool on ACORN. (Non-conjoint students must instead inform their College Registrar.) This tool is temporarily replacing the Verification of Illness form.

In some cases, your circumstances may lead you to consider taking a leave of absence from your studies. Be assured that COVID-19 is an acceptable reason for personal leave and taking such a leave will not negatively impact time-to-completion or jeopardize future access to leaves of absence. Before you decide, please consider talking to your College Graduate Director or Supervisor, as well as College Registrar, to discuss what assistance might be available to you.

4. Other kinds of support.

Your college of registration offers various student services. Across TST, principals, deans, and administrators are considering ways to provide material assistance and support for wellbeing. Each college will do this in a slightly different way, so the best advice is to contact your college Registrar or Graduate Director to discuss your needs.

	Graduate Director	Registrar
Emmanuel	tom.reynolds@utoronto.ca	emmanuel.registrar@utoronto.ca
Knox	bhm.mclean@utoronto.ca	knox.registrar@utoronto.ca
Regis	jerry.skira@utoronto.ca	regis.registrar@utoronto.ca
St Michael's	darren.dias@utoronto.ca	usmctheology.registrar@utoronto.ca
Trinity	khanah@trinity.utoronto.ca	sydney.yeung@trinity.utoronto.ca
Wycliffe	mtaylor@wycliffe.utoronto.ca	wycliffe.registrar@wycliffe.utoronto.ca

In addition,

- Summer might be a time to develop skills that will support your academic success. For example, writing workshops continue throughout the summer at the [Graduate Centre for Academic Communication](#)
- Social isolation along with our focus on intellectual work can make it easy to neglect exercise and movement. For fitness motivation, take a look at the [YouTube channel UofT Fitness](#). They may not be fancy, but they get the job done.

- [Here](#) you will find some general and useful suggestions for maintaining balance and wellbeing.
- For inspiration take a look at these [brief accounts of TST alumni](#) who are providing support and care during the pandemic.

Our religious traditions are rich with resources for such challenges as these and the search for meaning, justice, and peace has taken on greater intensity in light of the circumstances of the last weeks. May we all be partners on the way.

Peace be with you,

Colleen Shantz

Director, Graduate Centre of Theological Studies