

Memo to Graduate Faculty
From Colleen Shantz, Director, GCTS
March 20, 2020

Dear Graduate Supervisors and Members of Supervisory Committees,

Over the next few weeks students and faculty alike will have to make a number of decisions about how to adapt to the evolving COVID-19 pandemic. A message to all GCTS graduate students was sent this afternoon through the TST-GCTS-L listserv to inform them about how graduate activities are affected by the pandemic and how the GCTS is responding. Most doctoral supervisors are on this list and will have seen the memo. For those who are not, you are welcome to contact gcts.office@utoronto.ca to be added to this list. The memo will also be posted at <https://www.tst.edu/about/covid-19>.

What follows here serves as a supplement to the student memo to help you address questions from your supervisees.

Guiding Principles

Given the fluidity of the situation, our decisions related to graduate supervision should be guided by the following principles, which are shared by graduate units throughout the University:

- Chief among our concerns are the health, safety, and overall wellbeing of all students, faculty and staff;
- Academic requirements remain in place and academic integrity must be maintained;
- Students should be enabled to meet their academic requirements and progress to the extent possible;
- In-person interactions should be minimized and guidance about social distancing followed;
- Students should feel confident that supervisors support their right to choose from among available options (especially remote access), in the interests of preserving their health and wellbeing.

Please communicate this set of values to students whenever possible. In particular, they should know that we are open to finding ways to accommodate specific cases as long as that is possible within the existing standards of academic excellence and integrity. That combination of principles means that we cannot implement every idea that might seem like a good idea on its own terms. I am sure there will be times that you wonder “why don’t they just...?”. Feel free to suggest such good ideas to me or to your college grad director who will pass them on. At the same time, I hope that in this challenging time you will trust that if we don’t implement a good idea there’s an equally good/essential reason that we cannot.

Continued Research and Teaching

One of the most important things we can do for students is to continue to offer the elements of their programs—scheduled courses, supervision, program examinations and the like—and to encourage them to keep working toward their academic goals. The libraries are working with cooperative publishers to increase the number of ebooks and other resources. JSTOR announced that it has eliminated passwords for access to more than 6,000 ebooks and 150 journals.

Despite these developments, for courses in the intersession, we may still need to be creative in our selection of assigned readings and in our modes of delivery. You can find some assistance for assessment options here:

<https://q.utoronto.ca/courses/156214/pages/assessment-options-ctsi> and for general teaching support here <https://teaching.utoronto.ca/teaching-support/strategies/continuity-planning> . For the interim period only, courses may be converted to online delivery format without the usual approval requirements.

Arrangements for Program Examinations

Today the University of Toronto announced that for the next several weeks there will be no provisions for in-person examinations, whether in-class general exams or doctoral defences. We are following the rest of the UofT community in this restriction and are implementing two sets of corresponding accommodations:

- 1) For doctoral examinations we are waiving the restriction on the number of people who can participate remotely and allowing for fully remote examinations. Currently we have only one scheduled doctoral defence, which will be postponed. However, we have prepared a full set of procedures and protocols for wholly remote defences should these restrictions continue for several months.

If a student prefers to wait for an in-person examination, we are allowing postponements.

- 2) For general examinations/comprehensives a number of provisions are in place.
 - Scheduled take-home exams can proceed as planned. The final oral examination will have to be conducted remotely. Graduate Directors at each college have information about the various means of creating a remote meeting for such purposes.
 - Scheduled in-class exams cannot proceed at this time. Students have the option of postponing these exams until later in April to see where things stand then or, with the approval of their committee, switching the format to the take-home format. Obviously, the situation is changing daily and we will revise/expand the options as soon as we are able.

Forms

As you know, the various forms for extensions and approvals are pdf-fillable but don't support e-signatures very well (<https://www.tst.edu/academic/resources-forms>). In lieu of a signature you may submit forms electronically and use the email itself to verify your approval. Please use the following text, in the body of your email, when you are not able to sign and scan the form:

Attached here is the form [insert name of form]. Please accept this email as indication of my signature.

For the sake of academic integrity and fairness we'll need to track things like extensions carefully during this period and thank you in advance for attending to this burden of documentation.

Annual Report Forms (Conjoint PhD students)

Next week we will distribute the new Annual Report Form for conjoint PhD students who are in the writing phase of the doctoral program, i.e. they have completed their general exams. Along with it, we will send instructions to students, including the direction that they should contact their committee to arrange for a meeting. These supervisory meetings may be held partially or entirely by remote means; however, they are meant to include the full committee. In this case, too, the protocols for email signatures will be in place to facilitate the ease of submitting the forms. If you are the supervisor, you may have to assist the student in making arrangements for a virtual meeting. Graduate Directors at each college can advise you about the means available at your college to conduct remote meetings.

College Graduate Directors

This morning the graduate directors from the TST colleges held a virtual meeting, which we will continue to do weekly while the situation remains in flux. These meetings will ensure that someone at each

college is up to date on any changes in procedures or routine accommodations that might be available to students. In addition, these meetings allow the GCTS to draw on the collective wisdom of an excellent set of colleagues. This memo and the one to students benefit from the advice and experience of the graduate directors. Like many other people they are carrying an extra burden of work responsibility right now and I, for one, am deeply grateful for all they contribute to our programs and especially our students.

And thanks to you, too, for your care for the students whom you are mentoring. The support of supervisors and committees has significant positive effect on the experience and wellbeing of graduate students. Many of them are feeling a double share of stress in the current conditions. If students are in financial straits you may wish to check with your college about possible resources for them. TST Director, Pam Couture, has been attending to some of these questions. It will be especially important to check in on international students during this time since they will be separated from either their home community or their academic one. Please also be kind to yourself and to hard-working support staff.

Peace to you,

Colleen Shantz
Director, Graduate Centre for Theological Studies