

**THE HARDEST PART IS THROUGH:  
SUPPORT SERVICES AND GRADUATE STUDENT PERSISTENCE IN THE  
SOCIAL SCIENCES AND HUMANITIES DISCIPLINES**

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## Abstract

Student development is an integral process of graduate education, requiring a delicate balance between challenge and support. While a lack of sufficient support has been identified as a contributing factor to non-persistence, there is an absence of literature that matches the provision of specific types of support services and programs with student and institutional outcomes at the graduate level. This study makes an original contribution to the study of graduate education in exploring the following question: What support services are available to assist graduate students and what effects, if any, do they have on persistence?

A mixed methods approach was taken, consisting of an online survey, interviews, document analysis, and informal observation to attain a better understanding of the role of formal, institutional-based support services in students' decisions to stay (persist) or to leave graduate studies at the master's or doctoral level. There were a total of 152 survey respondents. This included individuals who were currently or had been previously enrolled in a graduate degree program in the Faculty of Arts at Memorial University between 2005 and 2012. Twenty follow-up interviews were conducted from a sample of those who completed the survey.

Overall findings point to the need to make *transparent* to graduate students the role of institutional units and the support services they provide; and the need to *promote* and raise awareness of these services. Financial, departmental, and supervisory support were found to be the most important types of support having the most influence on students' decisions of whether or not to persist. Recommendations for policy, practice, and further research are presented.

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### **Dedication**

This dissertation is dedicated to all of the graduate students who have struggled and succeeded on their own terms – regardless of institutional outcome.

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## **List of Abbreviations and Symbols**

CAGS Canadian Association for Graduate Studies

CAUT Canadian Association of University Teachers

CCD Centre for Career Development

CDEL Career Development and Experiential Learning

CGPSS Canadian Graduate and Professional Student Survey

DELTS Distance Education, Learning and Teaching Support

EDGE Enhanced Development of the Graduate Experience

GPS Graduate Professional Skills

GPT Graduate Program in Teaching (Now TSEP- Teaching Skills Enhancement Program)

GradSWEP Graduate Student Work Experience Program

GRIP Graduate Student Integrity Program

GSPD Graduate Student Professional Development

GSU Graduate Students' Union

HEQCO Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario

IDO Instructional Development Office

ISA International Student Advising

PSDP Professional Skills Development Program

RA Research Assistant

SGS School of Graduate Studies

SAS Student Affairs and Services

SSHRC Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council

TA Teaching Assistant

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## **Chapter 1 Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to explore the following questions: What support services assist graduate students and what effects, if any, do they have on persistence? The examination of formal, institutional-based services was key to this research. While the importance of social and academic integration to graduate student retention has been acknowledged in the literature, very little research has explored the role of support services in students' decision to stay or to leave. This research makes a significant, original contribution to the existing literature on graduate student persistence and the role of student support services, while situated in the context of Canadian graduate education. It is anticipated that through the identification of key factors that influence persistence, Canadian institutions will be better able to assist students in their integration into, and transitions through, their graduate programs.

Despite the recognized importance of a graduate degree to those wishing to compete in today's knowledge economy, graduate students frequently do not complete their programs and leave at levels that often exceed graduation rates. Fewer than half of those who start a doctoral program in the arts and humanities and social sciences disciplines actually persist to graduation, and these faculties have the lowest completion rates at both the master's and doctoral degree levels (Elgar, 2003). According to data released by the Canadian Association of University Teachers [CAUT] (2011), doctoral students in these fields of study are also reported to have the longest times to completion, with averages hovering around 77 months. Yet, enrolments in graduate programs continue to increase. Between 2000 and 2009, enrolments in master's degree programs in Canada rose by 43%, while enrolments at the doctoral level rose by 70% (Canadian Association for Graduate Studies [CAGS], 2012c).

It has been suggested that the quality of the graduate experience and student success, while variable, is affected by the availability of effective academic and social support services (Polson, 2003). Tinto (1993) writes that the integration of graduate students into the university community and the academic culture has important implications for their persistence, success and degree completion, and attrition has economic, social and personal ramifications for students and institutions (Lovitts, 2001).

Much of the existing research on graduate education focuses on the doctoral level in North American institutions and is predominantly American-based. A number of publications on attrition and times to completion have resulted from government-supported initiatives in the United States (Golde & Dore, 2001; Walker, Golde, Jones, Bueschel & Hutchings, 2008; Zhao, Golde & McCormick, 2007). Several studies have also examined the role of demographics, student involvement, and other factors in student socialization (Gardner & Barnes, 2007; Lovitts, 2001). More recently, there has been a focus on student development that identifies key benefits through increased programmatic support (Gardner, 2009b; Sweitzer, 2009).

Despite extensive research on graduate education, inquiry into the role of support services on student experiences is sparse, especially research that matches the provision of specific types of support services with student outcomes at the graduate level. Few studies explore Canadian graduate education and surprisingly little is known about the graduate student experience in Canada in general. Some Canadian studies have focused on specific graduate education issues (Dwyer, 2008; Gonzalez, 1996; Lussier, 1995), with many focusing on broad demographics at the expense of detailed analyses within academic fields such as the social sciences and humanities.

While the extant literature identifies underlying concerns with graduate education, Cockrell and Shelley (2011) called for a comprehensive study across specific disciplines and at a programmatic level, including research on the development of specific strategies to address graduate issues and the effectiveness of, and student satisfaction with, support services. The present study seeks to explore the various forms of supports needed to assist graduate students in their integration into the university community and to determine the effects, if any, of these services on graduate student persistence.

The following questions were addressed in this study: (1) What are students' levels of awareness of, frequency of use, and satisfaction with, support services provided by the university?; (2) What is the role of institutional support in the persistence and success of graduate students?; (3) What do students feel are some of the biggest barriers to graduate student persistence?; (4) What do students feel are some of the factors that have a positive influence on persistence?; (5) What support services do graduate students need to succeed in their studies and their pursuit of an academic and/or professional career?; and (6) How do students' needs and levels of satisfaction with support services differ across graduate program level (master's and doctoral), year and phase of study, and enrolment status?

The theoretical framework guiding this study is student development, premised on the importance of the main components of challenge and support (Sanford, 1966). When students face a challenging new experience, they are prompted to respond, which results in development. If they do not receive the support needed to overcome these challenges, however, development may divagate (Gardner, 2009b). A balance must thus be maintained between these two components if development and growth is to occur. Within this context, a myriad of experiences,



shaped by socialization and transitional periods, are essential components of the developmental process.

Particularly relevant to gaining an understanding of graduate student development processes is socialization and the role of student support services. While student development theories have been applied to studies of attrition, retention and student satisfaction at the undergraduate level (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Evans et al., 1998; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Sanford, 1962; Strange, 2010), graduate students have, until recently, rarely been addressed in this literature. The current study was undertaken for the purposes of attaining a transitional understanding of graduate student development and to fill a noticeable gap in the literature.

This research maps graduate student support services, by surveying and exploring student perceptions to determine the extent of their effectiveness, identifies gaps in these services, and provides insight into the role of these services in student persistence and eventual graduation. It should have broad appeal to the post-secondary education sector, as graduate attrition affects the structure and organization of graduate education, and is an area of interest to educators, university administrators, and government policymakers.

Previous studies examining the graduate student experience have typically employed either qualitative methods (Gardner, 2005; Golde, 2000; Lovitts, 2001) or quantitative methods (Faghihi & Ethington, 1996; Golde & Dore, 2001). The current study utilizes a mixed methods approach, using both qualitative and quantitative methodologies (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011), allowing for a more comprehensive data analysis to map the awareness and use of student services.

Data collection for this research consisted of the administration of an online survey; semi-structured interviews; document analysis; and informal observations and interactions. This combination of methods allowed for a comprehensive exploration of graduate student experiences, as well as provided an effective means of triangulation of the data.

In *phase one* of the study, a survey was distributed electronically through the Office of the Registrar to all current and former graduate students at Memorial University of Newfoundland who were enrolled in a master's or doctoral program in the social sciences and humanities disciplines in the last seven years. The survey was used to gather student demographic and academic program information, as well as a means to map the level of awareness, use, and effectiveness of graduate student services.

In the second phase of the study, students were recruited from phase one to participate in follow-up in-depth interviews, for the purposes of exploring more fully the reasons students choose to persist or not, and how their experiences may relate to institutional-based support. The study captured data from students who completed their program as well as those who did not finish - those who withdrew or were dismissed.

It is important here to draw brief attention to the terminology considered essential to the questions asked in this research and an analysis of key findings. For the purposes of this study, 'graduate student' refers to those students enrolled in master's and doctoral (Ph.D.) degree programs with the exclusion of graduate diploma and certificate programs. As will be established in subsequent chapters, several concepts are relevant to a discussion of persistence, namely, retention, completion, and graduation. In order to establish a common level of understanding in the context of this study, each of these terms is discussed briefly below.

In the words of Lovitts (2001), “You can continue to persist, or you can stop persisting” (p. xiii). The Oxford Dictionary defines the act of persistence as “[to] continue firmly or obstinately especially despite obstacles, remonstrance, etc.” (p. 1019). Thus, persistence cannot occur or be present in the absence of challenges. This research is concerned with how the balance between challenge and support is attained and maintained, and how this process abets or hinders persistence, and the outcomes of that struggle, as told from students’ perspectives.

Tinto (2012) differentiates between the terms ‘persistence’ and ‘retention’. While the former refers to a “way of thinking about student progress which asks whether the student continues in higher education”, and ultimately offers a student view, retention offers an institutional perspective, asking whether students are progressing through the institution in which they are enrolled. Whereas persistence and completion both refer to the rate at which students who begin *higher education* at a given point in time eventually complete their degree, regardless of where they do so, retention and graduation refer to the rate at which an *institution* retains and graduates students who first enter the institution at a given point in time (pp. 127-128).

While Tinto (2012) was referring to undergraduate students, the same distinction may be used here for the context of graduate education. This study is primarily interested in the factors that influence graduate student *persistence and completion*, with an emphasis on the role of support services and programs, thus focusing on the students’ perspectives but not restricting its analysis to any one particular institution. Meanwhile, this research is situated in a single institution; and so, while students were encouraged to share their experiences in other graduate programs at other universities, and many did so, the *retention and graduation* of graduate students enrolled at Memorial was the focus.

Two other terms that are of particular relevance to this study are ‘success’ and ‘achievement.’ While success may be defined as “the accomplishment of an aim; a favourable outcome; the attainment of wealth, fame or position; a thing or person that turns out well” (The Oxford Dictionary, p. 1391), to achieve is to “reach or attain by effort; acquire, gain, earn; accomplish or carry out; be successful; attain a desired level of performance” (p. 11). Both of these terms may be considered from either the students’ perspective, or from an institutional standpoint. In this study, both terms and perspectives are considered, but achievement is considered to be more in line with the values of educational attainment, particularly with regards to persistence.

The next chapter outlines the context of the study, including the institution, the faculty and departments, disciplines, and graduate programs studied. Chapter three provides an overview of the literature considered relevant to understanding graduate student development and persistence within the context of student support services. Chapter four describes the research design and methodologies employed. The findings of the study are detailed in three chapters. Chapter five examines the results from phase one of the study, while chapter six looks at the findings that emerged from phase two of the study. Chapter seven presents an overview of the overall findings from the study, followed by chapter eight, which details the study’s conclusions and recommendations for future research and practice, as well as policy implications.

## **Chapter 2 The Context**

An understanding of the context of this study is essential to an analysis of the developmental and socialization processes that accompany and make up the graduate student experience, as well as in situating the environmental factors that may influence student satisfaction and success. Context helps in understanding the experiences of the students who participated in the study, and includes the university, structure of the institution and graduate education, support services and programs, disciplines and departments, and space, facilities and resources. The information presented in this chapter is based on data publically available about the institution under study, as well as the researcher's own interpretations based on research conducted, documents analyzed, and observations made over the course of this study.

### **2.1 The University**

This research was conducted at Memorial University, a public institution situated in the Atlantic Canadian province of Newfoundland and Labrador. The province is home to two publicly funded post-secondary institutions: Memorial and the College of the North Atlantic. Memorial is the only institution currently offering graduate level degree programs, across three of its four campuses. Memorial University College opened in 1925 and elevated to the full status of a university in 1949. Today, it is the largest university in Atlantic Canada. As the only university in Newfoundland and Labrador, Memorial has a special obligation to the people of this province. The institution is governed by its constitution, which is part of an Act of the House of Assembly of Newfoundland. Management, administration, and control of the property, revenue, business and affairs of the university are entrusted in the Board of Regents; academic matters are handled by the university Senate.

Classified as a comprehensive university (Orton, 2009), Memorial offers a diverse selection of undergraduate, graduate and professional programs across a wide range of disciplines, including extensive offerings through distance education. In the 2012-13 academic year, almost 18,000 students were enrolled in full and part-time studies at the undergraduate and graduate levels. At a time when rising tuition fees limit access to post-secondary education across Canada, Memorial is proud to boast the lowest undergraduate tuition in the country, with the exception of universities in Quebec, which have lower fees for residents of the province. Memorial has four campuses, with the main campus, as well as the Marine Institute, located in the capital city of St. John's. Marine Institute campus focuses specifically on three areas of education fisheries, maritime studies, and ocean technology. Grenfell Campus, located in Corner Brook, Newfoundland and Labrador, maintains a liberal arts focus. Harlow Campus is in Essex, UK, and is used to deliver special programs in a number of fields of study. All three provincial campuses offer graduate programs.

## **2.2 Institutional Structure and Trends in Graduate Education at Memorial**

In the fall of 2011, there were 3,119 graduate students enrolled at Memorial in over 100 graduate certificate, diploma, master's and doctoral programs across 13 faculties and schools (Memorial University, 2012b). About 3,000 of these students were enrolled in graduate programs on the St. John's campus. The School of Graduate Studies (SGS) is responsible for the collection, maintenance, and distribution of materials on graduate students. It administers applications, admissions, comprehensive examinations, thesis examinations and doctoral defences. The SGS is also responsible for graduate student registration, enrolment management and recruitment, and oversees graduate student funding. The school assists academic units in developing new program proposals and administers their approval. The Academic Council

consists of representation from all faculties, schools, and the Graduate Students' Union (GSU) and ensures the maintenance of standards across all graduate programs.

According to the SGS' 2011-2012 Progress Report, graduate student enrolment at Memorial University has increased by 35% over the past five years (2007-2011), with the biggest jump occurring in international student enrolment (58% increase), followed by out-of-province (42% increase) and Newfoundland and Labrador residents (26% increase). The majority of graduate students enrolled in the fall 2011 semester were residents of this province (1,734), followed by out-of-province Canadians (739), led by Ontario (228) and Nova Scotia (190); and international students (646) (Memorial University, 2012b). Overall, graduate students comprise 21% of Memorial's total enrolment.

Graduate programs have expanded beyond the St. John's campuses. In Fall 2012 the first graduate program was offered at the Grenfell campus in Corner Brook, a master of arts in environmental policy. New graduate programs at the St. John's campus are currently under development, including Ph.D. programs in nursing and philosophy, a master of health care ethics, and a graduate diploma in safety and risk engineering.

Graduate degrees awarded have also increased by 28% between 2007 (601) and 2011 (767). The majority of degrees conferred at both the master's and doctoral levels are in professional programs. In 2011, 103 graduate degrees (master's and doctoral) were awarded to students in the Faculty of Arts. The most significant increase in degrees conferred over the past five years has been in doctoral degrees in the Faculty of Arts (71% increases), followed by master's degrees in the Faculty of Science (52%) (Memorial University, 2012b).

## **2.3 Graduate Student Support Services and Programs at Memorial**

Memorial's SGS facilitates a number of student supports in collaboration with other institutional units on campus. An annual Graduate Orientation, organized in conjunction with the GSU, helps new graduate students in their transition to graduate school and Memorial. The EDGE newsletter is distributed electronically on a monthly basis to current graduate students to keep them informed of campus happenings, events, deadlines for scholarships and funding opportunities and links to helpful resources.

With regards to professional development, Memorial has a branded graduate student professional development (GSPD) program known as EDGE (Enhanced Development of the Graduate Experience), which has been classified as Category 1 (i.e, has a high level of campus activity), by the Canadian Association for Graduate Studies (Rose, 2012). A wide array of services is offered under the auspice of EDGE. It is organized into the areas of global competencies, teaching and learning, professional skills, and research. Global competencies includes services and programs geared towards students for whom English is a second language and international students. Language and writing skills are honed with the support of the Writing Centre, which offers individual tutorials and consultations for students working on papers, proposals and theses/dissertations. It also offers group workshops on graduate-level academic writing upon request. The English as a Second Language (ESL) Resource Centre also offers a course of language study to help bring students' English to a level expected of graduate students.

Teaching and learning opportunities include the Teaching Skills Enhancement Program (TSEP), formerly known as the Graduate Program in Teaching (GPT), which provides an introduction to teaching at the undergraduate level and is offered to graduate students over two semesters in both face-to-face and online formats. Those who successfully complete the program



receive an official transcript notation and a certificate of completion. Teaching workshops and seminars, as well as teaching dossier preparation, are also offered through the Instructional Development Office (IDO), a part of Distance Education, Learning and Teaching Support (DELTS).

The Centre for Career Development, housed in the Division of Student Affairs and Services (SAS), provides a number of workshops, online resources and professional development opportunities geared towards graduate students organized by a Senior Career Development Coordinator. Graduate Research Support series are provided via the Research Ethics Boards; and Yaffle is an online resource used to locate and connect with experts in the local university community.

Employment opportunities are offered through the Graduate Student Work Experience Program (GradSWEP) in which students have the opportunity to participate in 75-hour work placements in their area of study as well as through the Teaching Assistant's Union of MUN (TAUMUN). The latter offers employment as teaching assistants (TAs) and research assistants (RAs). Funding is available from a multitude of internal and external sources and applications are typically facilitated through SGS.

The Graduate Students' Union (GSU) offers a wide range of social and academic supports, hosting "GradFest" and "Winterfest"; the annual Aldrich interdisciplinary conference; weekly trivia night at Bitters, the GSU-run campus pub; and academic advocacy services. The GSU also provides scholarship and award opportunities, special project grants and travel funding for all graduate students. Graduate student health and dental plans are also facilitated through the GSU office, and it operates a housing unit designated for graduate students.

SAS offers a wide array of services and programs for the entire student body. This division is comprised of six departments: career development and experiential learning, the counseling centre, housing, food and conference services, student health services, student success programs, and the university bookstore. The only graduate student-specific services the division offers are those geared towards career and professional development, in conjunction with SGS.

Services and programs provided by the university (campus-wide services) are essential, and include the registrar and cashier's office, online services through computing and communications, offerings through Distance and Education, Learning and Teaching Support (DELTS), and library services.

## **2.4 The Faculty of Arts**

The Faculty of Arts at Memorial is home to the social sciences and humanities disciplines. This unit has the third largest enrolment of graduate students at the institution, behind the Faculty of Education and the Faculty of Science. In the fall of 2011, a total of 379 graduate students were enrolled in departments housed in the Faculty of Arts (Memorial University, 2012b). Between 2007 and 2010, enrolment increased slightly before declining in 2011. The focus of this study is on the 24 graduate degree programs housed solely in, and administered by, the Faculty of Arts.

In addition to these graduate degree programs, the Faculty of Arts also offers undergraduate degree programs in 24 disciplines, 16 interdisciplinary programs, and 8 diploma and certificate programs. A joint Bachelor of Arts/Bachelor of Commerce program and a Master of Employment Relations program are also offered in conjunction with the Faculty of Business Administration. Recently, the First Year Success Program was implemented to assist incoming

students who have been identified as being academically under-prepared for university studies, based on high school averages considered for admission. While this program is housed in the Faculty of Arts, it is also open to first year undeclared majors.

#### **2.4.1 The departments, disciplines and programs.**

Graduate programs in the Faculty of Arts encompass eighteen academic disciplines, organized into 16 departments, and one interdisciplinary graduate program in Humanities (see Table 1 below). Data in this table was compiled from information provided by the Office of the Registrar.

Table 1

*Graduate Degree Programs and Enrolments in the Faculty of Arts, Memorial University, as of Winter 2012 Semester*

<b>Department</b>	<b>Graduate Degree Options</b>	<b>Expected Duration</b>	<b>Enrolment full-time (FT); part-time (PT)</b>	<b>Total Enrolment</b>
Anthropology	MA (Thesis)	2 years	17 FT	37
	MA (Courses; Research Paper)	1 year		
	Ph.D.	5 years	20 FT	
Archaeology	MA (Thesis)	2 years	23 FT; 1 PT	35
	Ph.D.	4 years	11 FT	
Classics	MA (Courses; Research Paper)	1 year	3 FT	3
	MA (Translation Examination)	1 year		
Economics	MA (Thesis)	2 years	10 FT	10
	MA (Courses; Essay)	1 year		
English Language and Literature	MA (Thesis)	1 year	18 FT; 2 PT	31
	MA (Courses with Essay option)	2 years		
	Ph.D.	4 years	11	
Folklore	MA (Thesis)	2 years	32	60
	MA (Courses; Comprehensive exams)	2 years		
	MA (Courses; Co-op)	2 years		

	Ph.D.	4 years	28	
French and Spanish	MA (Thesis) in French	2 years	1 FT; 1 PT	2
*Gender Studies	MA (Thesis)	2 years	9 FT; 1 PT	10
	MA (Courses; Project)	2 years		
	MA (Courses; Internship)	2 years		
Geography	MA/MSci (Thesis)	2 years	15 FT; 4 PT	30
	Ph.D.		9 FT; 2 PT	
German and Russian	MA (Thesis)	1 year	1 FT	1
History	MA (Courses; Comprehensive exams)	1 year	1 FT 11 FT; 1 PT	1 21
	MA (Thesis)	1 year		
Interdisciplinary Program in Humanities	MA (Courses; Paper)	1 year	11 FT; 1 PT	21 unavailable
	Ph.D.	4 years	9 FT	
	MPhil	2 years	unavailable	
Linguistics	MA (Thesis)	2 years	13 FT; 5 PT	32
Philosophy	MA (Non-Thesis)	2 years	8 FT; 1 PT	
	Ph.D.	4 years	5 FT	21
	MA (Thesis)	1 year	21 FT	
Political Science	MA (Thesis)	1-2 years	23 FT; 6 PT	29
Religious Studies	MA (Courses; Paper)	1 year	23 FT; 6 PT	29
	MA (internship)	1 year	14 FT; 2 PT	16
	MA (Thesis)	2 years		
Sociology	MA (Thesis)	2years	20 FT; 1 PT	35
	MA (Courses; Research Paper)	1 year		
	Ph.D.	4 years	12 FT; 2 PT	

(Office of the Registrar, Memorial University, 2012c).

\* Formerly Women's Studies

Each of these disciplines offers an array of graduate programs, at the doctoral and/or master's levels. Similarities are evident between the structure of programs across disciplines, such as the organization of departments, processes and requirements for degree completion and program administration.

At the time this research was conducted, a number of departments offered programs only at the master's level. The majority of departments offer one or more non-thesis options for their master's programs, such as a research paper, essay, or project route, or a coursework with comprehensive exams option. Only two programs do not offer a thesis option at the master's

level: Classics and the Master of Philosophy in Humanities (MPhil). Three departments in the Faculty of Arts (folklore, gender studies, and political science) offer a co-op or internship option at the master's level.

Eight departments in the Faculty of Arts offer doctoral programs. These programs follow the traditional format of a Ph.D. in the social sciences and humanities; consisting of coursework, comprehensive exams and/or an oral defence of the research proposal, and completion of the dissertation. This process is facilitated by an advisor/supervisor, department chair, and a committee of faculty members in the discipline or area of study.

The expected duration of graduate degree programs in the Faculty of Arts range from three semesters (one year) to two years for master's programs; and between four and five years for Ph.D. programs. All graduate programs have a seven-year maximum time limit under SGS regulations. Average times to program completion at Memorial University are not known, but typically vary across programs and disciplines. While some courses are offered online, the majority of graduate courses are delivered on-campus, in a traditional face-to-face format; no graduate degree program in the Faculty of Arts is offered entirely online.

#### **2.4.2 Space, facilities, and resources.**

Services and programs available to graduate students enrolled in the Faculty of Arts are highly variable across disciplines, departments, and programs. Each of the departments listed in Table 1 has a graduate coordinator appointed, typically a faculty member, who is responsible for ensuring that students are informed of the policies and procedures for their specific course of study, and who may assist students in course and program selection in collaboration with other faculty members and SGS.

Where funding and space permits, graduate students typically have access to some sort of physical ‘space’ designated to them for social and/or academic use. In the majority of departments, graduate students have an office; this is usually a shared space. Access to resources, such as computers, photocopiers, fax machines, printers, and other technologies necessary for research is generally quite limited and extremely varied across departments. With the exception of six departments – folklore, French and Spanish, geography, German and Russian, linguistics, and political science – all other departments are housed in the Arts and Administration Building. Departments are located in relatively small areas of space, typically occupying sections of a floor or level of campus buildings. In annual reports, the majority of departments highlighted the inadequacy of space for graduate students as an ongoing issue and area of concern.

Departments undergo a periodic review; in some cases this constitutes what is referred to as a self-study; in other cases, an external review is conducted. Academic Program Review Reports were obtained for 14 departments in the Faculty of Arts (Memorial University, 2012a). A review of these reports indicates that departments have an overall sense of optimism for continued growth and success amidst acknowledged limitations with regards to funding, space and resources. While areas of success, as well as challenges, were noted in all departments, expressions of serious concern were expressed in the reviews of some graduate programs. Noted challenges typically spoke to the shortage of funding, inadequate space, and the need for faculty who are willing and able to supervise. A lack of enrolment growth was identified as an issue for some smaller graduate programs.

Baseline funding for incoming students is typically provided by SGS in the form of graduate student fellowships. Where available, supplementary funding is provided by the department in the form of fellowships or from faculty research grants. As is the case at many

institutions, budgetary constraints make the admissions process selective and the expansion and development of graduate programs is not always feasible, even where demand for such programs is evident. A common issue identified across departments is the inability to make competitive offers to prospective students because of the inadequate levels of funding available. At times, admissions have been suspended in some departments that have been in the unfortunate position of having no funding to offer to incoming students.

It has been stated, quite bluntly, that the funding packages available at Memorial are not competitive, and this acts as a deterrent to potential applicants and may hinder the institution's reputation at the graduate level (Memorial University, 2012a). A recent report released by CAGS states that the minimum funding policy set at many Canadian universities for students in doctoral programs is \$18,000 (Saliba, 2012). Memorial's minimal funding for most doctoral programs in the Faculty of Arts is often lower than this and typically in the \$11,000 to 18,000 range. Memorial's *Guidelines for the Awarding of SGS Fellowships and Graduate Student Support* indicates that the maximum allowed SGS fellowship is \$20,000 per annum (Memorial University, 2009). While student eligibility criteria for the awarding of these fellowships is clearly outlined in this report, policies with respect to how baseline graduate student funding at Memorial is determined are unclear.

The graduate programs in the Faculty of Arts at Memorial vary in size (determined by offerings and student enrolment), but generally range from small (less than 10 students in MA programs) to medium-large (20-60 students in MA and Ph.D. program). According to program review reports, some programs seem to be operating close to or even beyond capacity, while growth in other programs appears stagnant (Memorial University, 2012a). Based on conversations with graduate coordinators and faculty, the number of full-time faculty who are in

a position where they are able to supervise or provide guidance on graduate student research also varies by department, but generally faculty members carry a heavy workload in this respect and in some cases are severely over-burdened with supervisory duties on top of their teaching, research, and administrative duties. While a faculty-graduate student ratio of 1:2 is average, the ratio exceeds 1:4 in a few departments where it is not uncommon for a single faculty member to be responsible for the supervision of more than four graduate students (Memorial University, 2012a).

## **2.5 Summary**

An understanding of the context in which this study was conducted is important to exploring the experiences of the graduate students in this study. The institutional, disciplinary, and departmental settings, as well as the structure and requirements of the graduate programs themselves intertwine to have a profound influence on the graduate student experience, and, ultimately, persistence and success. This chapter provides an initial orientation to the various elements of context, which will be discussed in more detail throughout the remainder of this study.

The current study was conducted at a large publically funded comprehensive university in Atlantic Canada. Memorial has seen a significant increase in graduate student enrolment in recent years, and offers a wide range of services and programs inclusive of the entire student body, with an assortment of supports geared specifically towards graduate students. Most of these are facilitated, at least in part, by SGS. The Faculty of Arts, the focus of this research, offers doctoral and/or master's programs in 17 social sciences and humanities disciplines to approximately 400 graduate students. Space, facilities, and resources for these programs and students is highly variable across departments.



### **Chapter 3 Literature Review**

Research literature in the area of graduate education has expanded significantly in recent years. This chapter highlights several topics of relevance to the current study, and explores factors directly related to student support services that can potentially assist in a successful transition through a graduate program. A brief history of graduate education in Canada will be followed by an overview of the changing demographics of the current graduate student population. Transition models, the process of graduate student socialization, and issues of attrition and lengthy times to completion are then reviewed. Support services for graduate students and the role of student affairs and services units, as well as the influence of student development theory, particularly with regards to professional skills and career development, are explored in brief to help make sense of and gain a deeper understanding of Canadian graduate education and the experience of the contemporary graduate student. Research investigating graduate student satisfaction is then probed within this context.

#### **3.1 A Brief History of Graduate Education in Canada**

The history of graduate education in Canada is relatively short and spans just a little over 100 years. Oxford and Cambridge were the prime source of faculty members for Canadian universities well into the twentieth century and the “universities of choice” for talented Canadians (Pocklington & Tupper, 2002, p. 21). The University of Toronto awarded the first Ph.D. in Canada in 1900 (Williams, 2005).

Prior to the 1950's, graduate programs in Canada were small and few in number, producing “only a very modest stream of Ph.D. graduates” (Clark, 2003, p. 23). These were not sufficient to meet the demand for faculty. Canadian universities were not heavily engaged in scholarly research, with a few exceptions. During the 1950's and 1960's, institutions adopted the

practice of recruiting non-Canadian faculty members (Clark, 2003). In 1955, 266 doctoral degrees were awarded in Canada, mostly by Toronto and McGill, “less than half the number that would be required annually over the next decade just to meet the need for additional university faculty” (Cameron, 1991, p. 60).

By the 1960’s, graduate studies and research had “assumed greater significance” in Canada; “higher education was seen as a positive force in terms of economic development and personal development” (Pocklington & Tupper, 2002, p. 28). The postwar growth of universities in North America was largely the result of the recognized importance of scientific research and a rapid growth of demand for university education (Pocklington & Tupper, 2002). Around this time, universities became closely linked with government. The National Research Council (NRC) was founded in 1961, and became the first direct contact between the federal government and Canadian universities. According to Cameron (2005), two studies were released on federal public policy: the Macdonald report and a report headed by the Honourable Maurice Lamontagne, member of the Canadian parliament. Both reports argued for the expansion of federal support for research.

Rising undergraduate enrolments justified the need for a “massive increase in university staff”; in Ontario the Advisory Committee on University Affairs estimated that an additional 2,400 faculty positions would be required by 1965 (Cameron, 1991, p.100). It was recommended that Ontario universities work to double graduate school enrolment. Graduate program review originated with the Spinks report of 1966; and the subsequent inauguration of the Ontario Council on Graduate Studies (OCGS), under the Committee of Presidents, now the Council of Ontario Universities (COU). In 1968, the OCGS formed an advisory committee on academic planning (ACAP) to oversee “appraisals” of graduate education in Ontario (Cameron, 1991).

Between 1960 and 1975, the number of universities offering graduate programs rose from 28 to 47, “with a dramatic increase in the number of graduate students and the scope of the offerings (Healy, 1978, as cited in Fisher et al, 2006, p. 25). By the 1980’s, the amount of university research being conducted in a wide variety of disciplines was extensive. Over the next two decades that work would come to receive recognition on an international scale. Clark (2003) claims that it was not until the late 1980’s and the 1990’s, however, that government recognized the research function of the university.

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, graduate student enrolments increased substantially. Between 2000 and 2009, enrolments in master’s degree programs in Canada rose by 43%, while enrolments at the doctoral level rose by 70% (CAGS, 2012c). In 2011, 47,779 master’s, and 5,961 doctorates were awarded in Canada (CAUT, 2013). These trends are expected to continue as more undergraduate students opt to enrol at the graduate level and working professionals return to school to upgrade their credentials in an increasingly competitive job market.

### **3.2 The Changing Demographic of the Contemporary Graduate Student**

The early traditional doctoral student could be described as a twenty-something affluent, single white male, studying full time (Gardner, 2009b; Offerman, 2011). Offerman (2011) writes that the contemporary doctoral student is more likely to meet the criteria of a non-traditional as opposed to the traditional student; in fact he makes the argument that perhaps this term may no longer be appropriate. While no standard definition of non-traditional students exists; several can be found in the existing literature on the subject (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011; Rendon, Jalomo & Nora, 2000). Characteristics of the non-traditional student include being older, a commuter, engaged in family and/or work life, financially independent, studies

part time, and may come from a lower socio-economic background and/or is a member of an ethnic minority.

The majority of contemporary graduate students, at both the doctoral and master's levels, can be classified as non-traditional students, aside from the fact that they are in receipt of further educational credentials. Gardner (2009b) notes that the median age of doctoral students in the United States in 2004 was 33.3 years; nearly 2 out of 3 was married or in a common-law type relationship, and almost a third were first generation students. Gender is also an important characteristic to consider when describing the contemporary graduate student, as the majority of graduate students today at the master's level and half at the doctoral level in both Canada and the United States are now female, (CAUT, 2012; Wendler et al. 2010).

While the challenges faced by non-traditional undergraduate students have been addressed extensively in the literature, very little research has explored the issues facing non-traditional students at the graduate level (Offerman, 2011). These concerns are exacerbated by the fact that the current university system does not seem to be equipped to meet the needs of this group and continues to maintain a system designed for the traditional type of student (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011).

Research has shown that non-traditional students at both the undergraduate and graduate level have a higher rate of attrition than traditional students (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011). These students face the challenge of finding a balance between their academic and external commitments that allows for them to sustain a sufficient level of engagement. It has been found that the most important variables in the retention of non-traditional students are an increased use of learning support services and higher levels of social integration as perceived by students (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011).

### 3.3 Student Transition Models

Transition is a key concept discussed in the literature on adult development, and is also an important aspect of the graduate student socialization process (Gardner, 2010a). According to Schlossberg, Lynch, and Chickering (1989), all adult learners experience educational transitions as a process over time. They define transition as an event or non-event that alters one's roles, relationships, routines, and assumptions; for adults, this is characterized by the three stages of moving in, moving through, and moving on.

This research study seeks to examine one central component of the graduate student transitions process: transitioning *through* graduate school, and aims to identify some of the factors that influence graduate student persistence in the social sciences and humanities. Nonetheless, the transitions into and out of graduate school are also central to this discussion, and cannot be fully separated from the transition through graduate school.

Undergraduate student retention and attrition have been explored in depth through the use of transition models (Bean, 1980; Bean & Metzner, 1985; Cabrera, Castaneda, Nora, & Hengstler, 1992; Cabrera, Nora, & Castaneda, 1993; Tinto, 1975; 1993). The challenges faced by non-traditional students have also received considerable attention in the literature (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011; Offerman, 2011). Despite the clear relevance of this work to graduate student persistence, transition models have not been adapted to this student population until very recently.

A theoretical 'Graduate Student Transition Model' was recently developed based on an amalgamation of pre-existing models of student persistence and attrition, which considers the current literature on graduate student characteristics and experiences (Greene, 2013). This model stands as a preliminary exploration into the graduate student experience, and gives considerable

attention to the factors thought to play a role in students' decisions to enroll and persist in graduate school. Further research, however, is needed to explore whether the factors identified are indeed influential in enrolment and persistence in graduate education, and to determine whether these factors differ by level of program and/or discipline.

Research has examined the role of background factors in the decision-making process of enrolling and persisting in graduate school. Tinto (1993) posits that personal attributes, along with educational experiences prior to entering graduate school, help to shape individual goals and commitments upon entry. The impact of these attributes may be indirect but important from a longitudinal standpoint. Factors that have been identified in previous models of undergraduate student attrition as influencing the decision to enroll in graduate school may include family background, personal attributes, financial resources, educational expectations, field of study, career values, family/significant others and friends, willingness to relocate, and enrolment status (Greene, 2013).

Previous research on the influence of family background on graduate school enrolment and persistence has presented mixed findings (Ethington & Smart, 1986; Mare, 1980; Mastekaasa, 2006; Moss, 2005; Mullen, Goyette & Soares, 2003; Stolzenberg, 1994). Zarifa (2012) recently conducted a study on who attends graduate and professional school in Canada, using data from the National Graduates Survey. His findings indicate that social origins influence attendance both directly through parent's level of education and indirectly through student performance, aspirations, and academic confidence, while field of study and region of the undergraduate institution are also thought to play a role in shaping educational outcomes at this level.

Undergraduate student attrition research theorizes that persistence is the product of a complex set of interactions among personal and institutional factors (Bean, 1980; Cabrera, Castaneda, Nora, and Hengstler, 1992; Tinto, 1975). Greene (2013) posits that the graduate student experience, and the decisions of whether to persist or not, is influenced by such factors as goal commitments, the job search, student development, internal and external factors, and psychological outcomes.

Thought to be particularly relevant to discussions of graduate level persistence is the influence of factors both internal and external to the program of study and the institution at large. Increased levels of student involvement have been found to be influential in persistence at the undergraduate level (Astin, 1984) and to play a key role in graduate student socialization and professional development (Gardner & Barnes, 2007). Academic and social integration have been addressed in the context of student attrition and persistence at the graduate level by several researchers (Ethington & Smart, 1986; Mullen et al., 2003; Tinto, 1993). Academic integration includes a students' level of formal and informal involvement in his or her institution; social integration refers to the extent of a students' involvement in relationships with peers and faculty (Mullen et al., 2003).

External influences, such as family and work, can also affect a students' integration into their program or institution, and may be influential in persistence decisions. These 'external communities' (Tinto, 1993) or 'environmental pull variables' (Bean, 1983; Titus, 2004) may be especially influential in the non-traditional students' experience (Bean & Metzner, 1985). Conversely, Sweitzer (2009) found that outside relationships may have a positive effect on professional identity development. Recent research has explored the school-work life balance of full-time doctoral students (Martinez, Ordu, Della Sala, & McFarlane, 2013).

Early departure from graduate school may result from a myriad of conditions and any number of outcomes may accompany this transition. Degree completion, the ideal end goal of those pursuing graduate school, is not as likely an outcome as one would hope or expect. Retention rates at the graduate level are quite low in both Canada and the United States (Elgar, 2003; Golde & Dore, 2001). Around half of those who start a graduate program will not finish the degree and are either academically dismissed or they withdraw from their program (Nettles & Millett, 2006). Students may also transfer programs, changing to a different discipline, department, institution, or academic degree program. Transition pathways after the completion of graduate school are just as variable and are not entirely dependent on student outcome. Former graduate students may seek further education or fill any number of academic or non-academic positions in the workforce.

### **3.4 Graduate Student Socialization**

Socialization is the process through which one learns to adopt the values, skills, attitudes, norms, and knowledge needed for membership in a given society, group, or organization (Merton, 1957). Several researchers have discussed the processes and phases of graduate school socialization, which Golde (1998) describes as the process in which a graduate student is made a member of an academic department in a particular discipline. Participants in Gardner's (2005) study described this socialization process as 'grooming.' Socialization theories pertinent to discussions of doctoral student development are addressed at length by Gardner (2009b). Tinto's (1993) earlier work and theory of undergraduate persistence implies that successful socialization results in persistence. A lack of, or an insufficient level of socialization may thus result in attrition.



The socialization of graduate students has been framed within theories of student development. Several stages or developmental phases have been proposed to characterize the graduate student experience. Tinto's (1993) theory of doctoral student persistence is comprised of three stages. The first of these, *Transition*, covers the first year of study and is influenced by social and academic interactions, particularly those in the department. Persistence at this stage is heavily dependent on the level of personal commitment to the goal of completion and the weighing of costs and benefits of continued involvement. Tinto's second stage, *Candidacy*, "entails the acquisition of knowledge and the development of competencies deemed necessary for doctoral research" (p. 236). Success at this stage is reliant on the individual's abilities and skills as well as the level and quality of interactions with faculty. The third and final stage, *Doctoral Completion*, covers the period of time from the gaining of candidacy all the way through to the defense of the dissertation.

Recognizing that one-third of doctoral students drop out within the first year of their program (Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992; Golde, 1996), Golde (1998) identifies four tasks of initial transition and socialization into graduate student life: (1) intellectual mastery, in which the student asks 'Can I do this?'; (2) realities of life as a graduate student ('Do I want to be a graduate student?'); (3) learning about the profession ('Do I want to do this work?') and (4) integrating into the department ('Do I belong here?').

Lovitts (2001) provides a four-stage model of doctoral student development. Stage Zero consists of anticipatory socialization into the academic program. The Entry and Adjustment stage occurs in the first year as students transition into the system. Stage two, the Development of Competence, corresponds to the second year of the students' program and continues through the completion of coursework and comprehensive examinations, or candidacy. The final stage, the

Research Stage, refers to the time period from the beginning to the completion of the dissertation.

Weidman, Twale, and Stein (2001) envisioned their own theory of graduate student socialization, which they defined as “the processes through which individuals gain the knowledge, skills, and values necessary for successful entry into a professional career requiring an advanced level of specialized knowledge and skills” (p. iii). They also saw this occurring in four developmental stages. The *Anticipatory Stage* occurs as students enter the program and learn the roles and expectations that are placed on them and other graduate students. In the *Formal Stage*, students observe their peers, both incumbent and more advanced students, and learn more about role expectations. Communication at this point is informative, regulative and integrative. In the *Informal Stage*, most interaction occurs between student cohorts; students learn informal role expectations, and begin to feel less student-like and more professional. The final stage, the *Personal Stage*, is characterized by the graduate student ‘breaking away’ from the department to forge his or her own professional identity.

Building on these models of graduate student development and socialization, Gardner (2005) proposed a three-phase model to define doctoral students’ experiences. Phase I *Admission* includes the period of application to initiation into the program; Phase II *Integration* corresponds to the time encompassing coursework and comprehensive examinations or candidacy; Phase III *Candidacy* includes the conducting of research and writing of the dissertation. Gardner (2010b) argues that critical to understanding graduate student socialization and attrition is Maslow’s (1970) hierarchy of needs, initially developed to describe human motivational factors and based on two types of needs: deficiency and growth. Gardner (2010b) sees her proposed three phases of doctoral student development as corresponding loosely to the structure of Maslow’s model to

“describe a progression of hierarchical needs at different phases in a typical doctoral students’ experience” (p. 11). Gardner’s graduate student hierarchy of needs is explored in more detail in chapters six and seven of this document, as it is highly relevant to an analysis of the role of student services on persistence.

Until recently, much of the research on the graduate student socialization experience has been theoretical in nature and focused on transitional stages or phases of development, while not giving sufficient attention to specific contexts and disciplinary differences. Several studies have since explored the role of departments and the academic environment in graduate student persistence and retention (Bieber & Morley, 2006; Golde & Dore, 2004; Golde, 2005; Gardner, 2005; 2009a; 2010a).

Golde and Dore (2004) emphasize the importance of considering the nature of the discipline when developing initiatives aimed at improving doctoral education. Golde (2005) found evidence to support the notion that a mismatch between student and choice of discipline was a cause of attrition, and mismatches between student and department were also evident. Six themes emerged to explain doctoral student attrition across four departments: (1) research practices that are not matched with students’ strengths; (2) poor fit of expectations between student and department; (3) mismatch between advisor and student; (4) student perception that research and university faculty life is incompatible; (5) student perception of a poor job market; and (6) structural isolation of the student.

Gardner (2005) found that the processes of socialization generally differ across disciplines, and while all processes were evident in both disciplines studied (chemistry and history), there were differences either in the order in which they were experienced or in the emphasis given to one process over another. In further research, Gardner (2009a) found that

disciplinary culture and context have a significant impact on faculty members' conceptualizations of success in doctoral education; furthermore, disciplinary and departmental contexts influence graduate students' experiences and ultimately have an impact on completion rates. Departments with higher attrition rates were found to have the least supportive environments (Gardner, 2010a).

### **3.5 Graduate Student Attrition and Times to Completion**

Concerns with issues such as the high rate of student attrition and lengthy times to completion has resulted in a number of government supported initiatives, numerous research projects, and publications in the United States (Golde & Dore, 2001; Walker, Golde, Jones, Bueschel & Hutchings, 2008; Zhao, Golde & McCormick, 2007). Several studies have examined the role of demographics, student involvement, and other factors in student socialization (Gardner & Barnes, 2007; Lovitts, 2001). More recently, there has been a focus on student development that identified key benefits in increased programmatic support (Gardner, 2009a; Sweitzer, 2009).

Recent research conducted by doctoral students themselves has explored the role of various factors on graduate student persistence and degree completion, such as student attributes and program characteristics (Gittings, 2010) and the inter-play between the two (referred to as person-environment fit) (Franco-Zamudio, 2010), as well as both institutional and non-institutionally-based support (Boulder, 2010; Williams-Tolliver, 2010). Key to these analyses was the role of student perceptions in determining the effect of such factors on persistence. A study of Ph.D. students in Quebec found that students who published papers and were prolific in their academic writing were more likely to graduate (Larivière, 2012).

Research on graduate education to date has focused almost exclusively on the doctoral level in American institutions. The Canadian graduate student experience has not been the focus of extensive inquiry. Some of the most recent known work to date include an edited volume that documents the ‘successful’ stories of doctoral graduates in their own words (Ryan, 2013); and an analysis of the socialization of doctoral students using Bourdieu’s theory of practice, focusing on the two disciplines of engineering and philosophy at one research-intensive institution in Ontario (Gopaul, 2012). Other Canadian studies have focused on graduate education issues such as completion rates and times to completion, and the challenges facing women (Dwyer, 2008; Gonzalez, 1996; Lussier, 1995). Many of these studies have focused on broad demographics at the expense of detailed analyses within particular fields such as the social sciences and humanities where there is a further paucity of research.

Most recently, attention has been drawn, particularly in the popular news media, to the need for revision and reform in doctoral education in Canada prompted by the release of exclusive data on completion rates and times to completion that have not been published elsewhere. While this data is not comprehensive, representing only 8 of the 15 top research-intensive universities- none of them identified- it helps to create a picture, of what has been termed elsewhere as the ‘crisis’ in doctoral education. This data, provided by a group of the country’s leading research-intensive universities, known as the U-15, was published in an article in *University Affairs*, and shows that of a 2001 Ph.D. cohort, 55.8% of those in humanities, and 65.1% of social science students completed their programs compared to 78.3% in the health sciences and 75.4% in the physical sciences. Times to completion were also highest in these disciplines, with humanities students taking, on average, 18.25 terms, or just over six years, and those in social science programs averaging 17 terms (Tamburri, 2013).

This data substantiates earlier research that found that fewer than half of those who start a doctoral program in the humanities and social sciences actually graduate; these faculties have the lowest completion rates at both the master's and doctoral degree levels (Elgar, 2003). According to statistics released by CAUT (2011), doctoral students in these fields of study are also reported to have the longest times to completion, with averages hovering around 77 months, or just under 6.5 years.

Prompted by efforts to improve doctoral retention and program completion rates in the United States, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation's Graduate Education Initiative (GEI) provided funding in the 1990's for humanities disciplines and related social sciences to improve their Ph.D. programs. A number of publications have resulted from data collected from this initiative, including the only book to date to focus exclusively on doctoral education in the humanities (Ehrenberg, Zuckerman, Groen, & Brucker, 2009; Ehrenberg, Groen, So, & Price, 2007; Groen, Jakubson, Ehrenberg, Condie, & Liu, 2008). Unfortunately, much of this work devotes attention to program characteristics to the exclusion of student experiences.

Meanwhile in Canada, efforts are being made to improve graduate education, but change is slow. In a 2003 report, CAGS made a number of recommendations for Ph.D. reform, but few of these have been put into practice (Tamburri, 2013). Much more remains to be done through conducting research, collecting data on completion rates and times to completion by discipline and institution, and disseminating this information to graduate school administrators and prospective graduate students. Graduate students, particularly at the master's level in the social sciences and humanities disciplines, remain an understudied group.

While the extant literature identifies underlying concerns with graduate education, Cockrell and Shelley (2011) have called for a comprehensive study across specific disciplines

and at a programmatic level, including research on the development of specific strategies to address graduate issues such as the effectiveness of, and student satisfaction with, support services.

### **3.6 Support Services for Graduate Students**

Academic inquiry on the role of support services on graduate student experiences is sparse. Limited research has focused on the provision of specific types of support services for graduate students, and the need for further research and expansion in areas such as professional-development (Gansemer-Topf, Ross, & Johnson, 2006; Holaday, Weaver, & Nilson, 2007; Lehker & Furlong, 2006); counselling services (Oswalt & Riddock, 2007); thesis writing support (Elgar, 1998); housing (Mills, 2006); orientation (Elgar, 1998; Polson, 2003) and the importance of establishing collaborative relationships across institutional units (Bair, Haworth & Sandfort, 2004).

The importance of providing adequate levels of financial support to graduate students, and its role in retention and attrition, has been discussed extensively in the literature (Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992; Strayhorn, 2010). Financial aid has also been shown to have a positive influence on retention at the undergraduate level and allows students more time to engage both socially and academically (Tinto, 2102). Recent research shows that at the graduate level, students who receive financial support in the form of loans have shorter times to completion than those who receive other forms of financial support or no financial support (Kim & Otts, 2010). In a recent Canadian study, Larivière (2013) found that funded students are more likely to graduate than unfunded students; funded students were more than two times more productive than unfunded students; and funded students also obtained higher citation rates for their publications.

Recently, attention has been drawn to building a sense of community for graduate students on university campuses and the need to create gathering places and spaces designed specifically for this student population where services can be accessed and support networks established (White & Nonnamaker, 2008). This would potentially provide an indication to students that they are valued by the institution (Brandes, 2006).

Alston et al (2005) demonstrated the connection between support networks and the retention of postgraduate students in Australia by outlining a model of support with an emphasis on student-to-student engagement that was developed at one university to assist those students most at risk of attrition. More recently, research has examined the roles of peers and social networking in graduate student development and persistence (Hildebrandt, 2011; Sweitzer, 2009). While a lack of adequate support has been acknowledged as an important consideration in explaining attrition (Lovitts, 2001), there is an absence of literature assessing the effectiveness of support services and programs (Boulder, 2010; Holaday, Weaver, & Nilson, 2007; Pooch, 2004). Furthermore, there is a lack of research that matches the provision of specific types of support services and programs with any type of outcome at the graduate level.

The recently formed *Graduate Student Life Initiative* at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario is a move forward in a positive direction. As the brainchild of the Graduate Student Services Committee comprised of individuals from Student Affairs, Graduate Studies and the Graduate Student Association, the goal of this initiative is to reach out to graduate students to determine their needs and develop a framework to meet those needs. In September 2012, the Student Success Centre distributed a survey at the Graduate Resource Fair. The goal was to find out what students are looking for at the Centre as part of the initiative. Graduate students identified time management, academic support (writing and research) and employment



and career advice (job searching) as areas in need of increased services. As a result of this feedback, the Student Success Centre plans to offer a series of workshops developed specifically for graduate students (Everest-Hill, 2012a; personal communication). The authors maintain that such innovative practices and reviews of existing services and programs should be implemented on other Canadian campuses.

Many universities offer services to address student stress and mental health. However, such services are typically geared to the undergraduate student. Oswalt and Riddock (2007) write that “determining how graduate students cope with stressors and, more importantly, how universities can assist graduate students with their stress is critical” (p. 26). It has been recommended that individualized health and counselling services at universities be specifically developed and geared towards graduate students. Counselling centres may also be an ideal place to hold thesis support groups for graduate students. Elgar (2003) conjectured that Canadian Ph.D. students may be at a relative disadvantage with regard to thesis support services when compared to the United States and the United Kingdom.

Little research has explored the housing needs of, and services for, graduate students. Many graduate students live on university campuses, however, there is a lack of information explaining how best to design an environment that is appropriate for them (Mills, 2006). Future research would do well to explore how to best accommodate the needs of graduate students living on campus. The availability of family units is also an important consideration as many graduate students are accompanied by their spouse and/or children while completing their studies. Off campus housing offices serve students who commute to campus, including those living in rental properties and those living at home; at some institutions the majority of graduate students may fit this criteria.

Orientation initiatives are of fundamental importance in easing student transitions into, through, and from their programs. It has been suggested that campus orientation activities provide a welcoming environment to incoming students and assists in the transition and socialization of graduate students (Poock, 2004). Elgar (1998) notes that “having a slow or difficult social and academic adjustment to graduate student life may put students at higher risk of continuing beyond the normal time frame of the graduate program, timing out, or even dropping out” (p. 9-10). This is verified by research that shows graduate students find the first year of graduate school stressful; one-third of doctoral students in the United States drop out early in their program (Golde, 1998).

As program offerings expand to the virtual classroom, and increasing numbers of students enrol in their studies part-time and commute to campus (Polson, 2003), consideration should be given to ways in which student services may be adapted to better serve students who may be geographically isolated from the services provided to students on campus.

In the 2010-2011 academic year, international students made up 17% of master’s and 24% of Ph.D. enrolments in Canada (CAUT, 2013). Expanding services for an increasingly diversified graduate student body, many of whom may have unique needs, must also be made a priority.

Lehker and Furlong (2006) note that graduate students will be drawn to services and resources they believe are designed for them. It has been recommended that student affairs professionals seek out students at the departmental level and not assume that they will seek support services at the institutional level (Gansemer-Topf et al., 2006; White & Nonnamaker, 2008). It is thus important for staff to be knowledgeable about the role and influence of disciplinary contexts, and differences between departments. Increased communication is needed

to send the message out to graduate students when they are to be included in student services, especially in cases where programs have been created specifically with them in mind.

Historically these units have catered to the needs of undergraduates, so graduates students may feel less inclined to seek out these services if they feel they may not be the best, or most appropriate, to meet their needs (Lehker & Furlong, 2006).

Further collaboration is also needed across the various academic and administrative units on university campuses to provide services and support to graduate students and to identify gaps and areas of overlap and duplication (Bair, Haworth, & Sandfort, 2004). Such an approach allows for an analysis of the offices and services across student affairs divisions that benefit or could benefit graduate students. Embedding a particular service within others is known to increase its use and effectiveness (Tinto, 2012). There are many opportunities for student affairs offices to increase communication and partake in collaborative initiatives with other administrative units and organizations, such as graduate schools, graduate student unions, and academic units.

A challenge facing university student services is ensuring staff have had a graduate education experience so they are in a better position to relate to and understand the students they serve (Sullivan, 2010). In this vein, graduate program offerings for student service professionals are being implemented; Memorial University was the first Canadian institution to offer a master's degree in post-secondary education aimed towards this demographic. The creation of new leadership positions in academic and administrative units to oversee the delivery of services to graduate students is also becoming more commonplace. Brandes (2006) reports that such positions at larger research-intensive universities in the United States are not new. The first

‘Assistant Dean of Graduate Student Life and Research’ position in Canada was created in 2010 (McMaster University, 2010).

### **3.6.1 The role of student affairs and services.**

Student affairs professionals have historically focused their work on undergraduate students (Bair, Haworth, & Sandfort, 2004). Due to both an expanding and diversified graduate student population, this is beginning to change; programs and services are now making efforts to become more inclusive of the entire student body. Research investigating this shifting culture is minimal, however, and many studies focus exclusively on doctoral students (Bair, Haworth, & Sandfort, 2004), or address student development outside of the context of student affairs (Gardner, 2009b; 2010b).

Graduate students have many needs, some of which may differ in numerous ways from those of undergraduate students, but may be effectively addressed by student affairs faculty, staff and administrators. Bair, Haworth, and Sandfort (2004) note that student affairs practitioners are seen to be “in key positions to influence doctoral student development and learning” (p. 711); doctoral students benefit from support services and learning opportunities both inside and outside of the classroom. It can be assumed that the same can be said of graduate students more generally.

Surprisingly, the role of student affairs professionals in meeting the needs of graduate students has not been the subject of extensive investigation, despite discussions surrounding their potential to provide assistance due to their knowledge of student development and experience helping undergraduates. In order to provide assistance to the students they serve, university personnel and educational administrators need to have a sound knowledge and understanding of

the theoretical viewpoints that guide both academic discourse and practice. The work of student affairs professionals exemplifies the application of theory to practice:

To merit consideration as a legitimate profession, student affairs must have a theoretical foundation to undergird, support, and justify the structure, content, and practice of the work. Thus, student affairs practice needs to be grounded in relevant theory and validated through assessment. (Dunn and Forney, 2004, p. 13)

A solid background in student development theory is one such way in which student affairs professionals, and other faculty and staff that hold responsibility for the success of graduate students, may gain some perspective into the lives and experiences of these individuals.

### **3.6.2 Student development theory.**

Student development has been described as “the ways that a student grows, progresses, or increases his or her developmental capabilities as a result of enrolment in an institution of higher education” (Rodgers, 1990, p. 27). Student development theories are inter-related, and stem from the seminal work of psychologist Erik Erikson, who envisioned individuals as moving through a chronological series of developmental stages from birth to old age (Gardner, 2009b).

Graduate students have, until recently, rarely been addressed in the literature on student development theory. While student development theories have been applied to studies of attrition, retention and student satisfaction at the undergraduate level (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Sanford, 1962; Strange, 2010), the same application to graduate students has not been considered. Susan Gardner (2009b; 2010) was one of the first to apply student development theories specifically to graduate doctoral students. She utilized McEwen’s (2005) categorization of student development theory, which focuses on three types of development: psychosocial, social identity, and

cognitive-structural. While acknowledging that many of these theories were created with the traditional university student in mind, ie. young adult, Gardner posits that their foundation in psychological understandings of development, and the expansion and adaptation to account for other phases of the lifespan, validate their applicability.

Psychosocial theories of development look at “the important issues people face as their lives progress, such as how to define themselves, their relationships with others, and what to do with their lives.” (Evans et al., 1998, p. 32). Chickering (1993) conceptualizes psychosocial development as occurring through seven ‘vectors of development’: developing competence, managing emotions, moving through autonomy toward interdependence, developing mature interpersonal relationships, establishing identity, developing purpose, and developing integrity. For post-secondary students, this is associated with the transition between two of Levinson and Levinson’s (1996) four age-linked eras, namely childhood and adulthood, and young adulthood. Environmental conditions such as the size of the institution and type, articulation and adherence to institutional mission, and teaching styles are also factors in psychosocial development (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Dunn & Forney, 2004).

While an analysis of higher education tends to limit its focus to two stages of psychosocial development and the transition between them, an examination of graduate education should account for middle adulthood as well, as many of these students return to university after years in the workforce. In that vein, Chickering’s work has extended to include an analysis of adult development on a broader scale (Chickering & Havighurst, 1981). Gardner (2009b) acknowledges that psychosocial development is at work throughout all phases of the graduate student experience as the student gains competence in the subject matter and establishes a professional identity.

Social identity development, according to McEwen (2005), looks at “*what* students think about their specific social identity and *how* they think about it” (p. 13), and includes notions of identity related to gender, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, social class, ability and disability, and religion, as well as how these identities intersect. Graduate students may also experience development in regard to their positionality as emerging scholars (Gardner, 2010b). Similarities can be found between social identity development and psychosocial development; indeed, the two have been combined in some discussions of student development theories (Evans et al., 1998). Furthermore, various theories of social identity have emerged as issues related to gender and race, and have influenced the inception of new, as well as the adaptation of existing, models.

Cognitive structural theories of development examine patterns of meaning-making that people bring to life experiences (Strange, 2010), and can credit their origin to the early work of Swiss developmental psychologist Jean Piaget (1952). According to these models, individuals progress through a “stepwise hierarchy of stages or positions, with each succeeding level reflecting greater complexity and different assumptions about how things work with respect to a given domain” (Strange, 2010, p.23). General assumptions are gradually replaced by more advanced assumptions as individuals seek out new and more sophisticated meanings for the events and experiences in their lives. Important in cognitive-structural development is the role of external power, authority, and expertise, and the ability for students to shift their understanding of ways of knowing from certainty to ambiguity. From this perspective, student success consists of the acquisition of advanced capacities, including critical thinking, decision-making, and conceptual understanding (Strange, 2010).

William Perry’s theory (1968) has also been influential in attempts to understand how students make sense of and unravel the learning process (Gardner, 2009b). The theory is

composed of nine static positions, described in four main areas: duality, multiplicity, relativism, and commitment. The nine positions are: basic duality, multiplicity pre-legitimate, multiplicity subordinate, multiplicity correlate or relativism subordinate, relativism correlate, competing or diffuse, commitment foreseen, initial commitment, orientation in implications of commitment, and developing commitments. Dualism here refers to a dichotomous viewpoint of right and wrong, disturbed in the learning process by cognitive dissonance, whereby the student discovers that authority figures, such as professors, may be incorrect, a transition Perry calls disequilibrium. Multiplicity occurs when the student is able to accept that there may be multiple views and there may not be a “right” answer. Relativism refers to the student’s need to substantiate knowledge and the requirement for evidence to support arguments. Commitment arises from the integrated knowledge that students acquire from others, their own experiences and reflection. It has been noted that graduate students experience cognitive development as they complete their coursework and gain research experience (Gardner, 2009b).

While these three theories of student development have received considerable attention in the literature pertaining to graduate students, several other theories of student development are also quite useful in deciphering adult student transitions and experiences, particularly at the graduate level. These include theories of moral development (Gilligan, 1993; Kohlberg, 1984); personal preferences, styles, and typology theories (Evans et al., 1998; Strange, 2010); campus environment theory (Strange & Banning, 2001); adult learning theories (Kolb, 1984); self-directed and critically reflective learning (Knowles, 1975); transformational learning (Mezirow, 1991); the influence of communities of practice (Kasworm & Bowles, 2010).

Key to the analysis of the present study is the notion of striving towards attaining a balance between two components believed to be essential to development: challenge and



support. The role of student support services is integral to this discussion. This research study sought to understand how support services affect graduate student experiences, and ultimately, their persistence and success. Essential to this was the exploration of graduate student attitudes and beliefs about these support services, their programs, and how these perceptions may be shaped by internal influences at the departmental, faculty, or broader institutional level.

### **3.6.3 Professional skills and career development.**

Professional development occurs through the process of socialization and has been discussed within the context of psychosocial development and identity theory. Graduate students are said to represent the future development of their professions. Doctoral students in particular are seen as representing the future of the academy, but while graduate programs are designed to “promote and assess mastery of the discipline”, they are not always structured to meet the various non-academic needs of students (Gansemer-Topf et al., 2006, p.28). This is particularly alarming given that more than half of doctoral graduates in Canada work outside of academia (McAlpine & Norton, 2006). The expectations on graduate programs are beginning to shift, however, with an increased emphasis on the personal and professional development of graduates in support of their individual school-to-work transition (CAGS, 2008).

Graduate students go on to pursue a variety of careers both inside and outside of academia, and university departments and faculties play a key role in the development of those careers. Yet, professional development programs for graduate students- supplementary to academic programs, are relatively new, and little has been written about their evaluation (CAGS, 2008; Holaday, Weaver, & Nilson, 2007). There is also limited research addressing how university administrators and service providers can best attend to the professional development and career needs of graduate students.

To be competitive in the contemporary workplace, commonly referred to as the knowledge economy, graduate students need to engage in ongoing development of their skills in areas that complement their academic programs and enhance their employability (CAGS, 2008). Research indicates a need for better career services for doctoral students; in particular, a mismatch has been noted between students' academic training and potential career paths (Austin & McDaniels, 2006; Golde & Dore, 2001). As Lehker and Furlong (2006) note, when career goals do not match the norms of the graduate program, students may struggle with issues of professional identity. This situation is exacerbated by a tight academic job market and the challenges of transitioning into other fields of employment (Golde & Dore, 2001; Lehker & Furlong, 2006).

Graduate students are a diverse, heterogeneous population. They bring a number of factors to career decision-making that may not be as common for undergraduates (Golde & Dore, 2001; Lehker & Furlong, 2006). Therefore, their professional development needs are complex and may be influenced by varying concepts, age-related patterns, and developmental stages (Holaday, Weaver, & Nilson, 2007). Lehker and Furlong (2006) emphasize the importance of faculty and university staff having an understanding of models of graduate student development which may help in creating resources that are useful to students. Academic units must also acknowledge that there are different expectations for professional skills for different career contexts (CAGS, 2008).

Students who decide to take non-academic positions need to understand the kinds of career options that are possible and to know that these are respectable choices (Golde & Dore, 2001). For example, Lehker and Furlong (2006) suggest that non-academic career exploration be incorporated into academic programs; students should be given guidance on how to tailor their

skills and experiences to a non-academic audience, helping them to stand out to a diverse set of employers.

According to Lehker and Furlong (2006), academic units such as faculties, schools and departments are also responsible for providing students with an orientation to the profession. They often have ties to professional organizations, and faculty and administrators should encourage graduate students to become members and to participate in meetings and conferences held by these associations. It is also important for university departments/faculties to acknowledge that students enter graduate programs for various reasons, which have implications for the career services they seek (Anderson, 1998, as cited in Lehker & Furlong, 2006).

Departments are also responsible for ensuring that students are informed about the norms and expectations of the discipline, including its history, theories, and research methods used. Master's course-based programs are often quite comprehensive in this regard. Gardner (2008) and Lovitts (2008) report on the doctoral student transition to independent research and suggest that students are not adequately prepared for this phase. Further attention should be paid to the professional development of students prior to entering this phase of the program, since it is estimated that roughly 15-25% of attrition in American institutions occurs at this critical juncture (Lovitts, 2008).

A recent study of Ph.D. students in Quebec found that students who published papers and were prolific in their academic writing were more likely to graduate and completed their degrees faster (Larivière, 2012). Research has also shown that despite normalized assumptions about writing as a universal skill in academic practice, many doctoral students feel misguided and struggle to produce scholarly work (Starke-Meyerring, 2011).

Academically based career services may be offered by departments and faculties and can provide expertise on the career development process in the discipline. It has been noted, however, that faculty and staff may have a limited knowledge of current career options (Lehker & Furlong, 2006). Collaboration with other units, such as career services as well as graduate schools and unions, is thus essential. Student affairs practitioners, university faculty and staff can work together to provide job information and experience, mentoring and advising, professional development programs, workshops, and seminars for graduate students (Brandes, 2006).

Research indicates that doctoral students do not talk regularly with faculty members about their professional goals and the relationship between their career aspirations and employment opportunities; are given little opportunity for guided reflection and report that they are often left on their own to attend to the challenges of the graduate experience (Austin & McDaniels, 2006). It is recommended that more university-supported opportunities be provided for both formal and informal student-faculty interactions, particularly with regards to such discussions.

Career services professionals can offer a number of services to graduate students, such as providing career counseling and advising sessions, as well as offering workshops and seminars on developing a dossier or academic portfolio, conducting a job search, and preparing a job application. Participation in job fairs and on-campus recruiting initiatives is also recommended. Lehker and Furlong (2006) acknowledge the importance of academic units in developing relationships with potential employers of their graduates; academic units can also partner with university career services to develop employment opportunities for students and graduates. Collaboration can also help to mediate a shortage of resources. Centralized career services should work to actively promote their services, especially those that are geared towards graduate

students. Simply providing opportunities is not enough; they must be actively publicized, and students must feel encouraged to participate in them (Golde & Dore, 2001).

A focus on the professional skills and career development of graduate students has been emphasized in the most recent literature on graduate education, particularly in the Canadian context. Recently, CAGS, in conjunction with the Social Science and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC), released a report outlining recommendations for graduate level professional development programming based on extensive research and findings from a study conducted with graduate deans at universities across Canada (Rose, 2012). This report identifies a number of good ideas and best practices with regards to enhancing the quality and quantity of professional development opportunities available to graduate students attending various institutions that range in size and orientation towards research. While the acquisition of discipline-specific academic skills has always been a focus in graduate programs, as the report argues, the development of transferrable skills and competencies is becoming an increasingly emphasized component of graduate education.

A call to action has been spurred by comments and an ongoing online dialogue by and among academics in the popular media. Graham Carr (2012), president of the Canadian Federation for the Social Sciences and Humanities and vice-president, Research and Graduate Studies at Concordia University, in a recent post to the *Globe and Mail*, identified professional skills as a crucial piece in assisting graduate students in their transition into various career sectors.

Four types of structural approaches to graduate student professional development (GSPD) programming in Canada have been identified, ranging from those classified as Category 1 (have a high level of campus activity) to those that are not yet active in this area (Category 4).

Memorial University, which has a branded GSPD program known as EDGE (Enhanced Development of the Graduate Experience) falls under Category 1, and several best practices have been identified with regards to the services and programs this institution offers (Rose, 2012). The EDGE program will be explored in more detail in chapter four.

Student retention and professional development programs aimed at undergraduate students in the Arts disciplines have been promoted in recent years, in response to concerns with low completion rates and the employability of graduates (Adamuti-Trache, Hawkey, & Harron, 2008). As a result of a recent economic downturn, and an arguable over-supply of new Ph.D. graduates, the chances of these graduates actually securing a tenure-track faculty position are not as promising as they once were; in some disciplines, particularly the humanities, the situation is rather bleak (Benton; 2010; Conn, 2010; Leach, 2011; Maldonado, Wiggers, & Arnold, 2013). Rose (2012) notes that there is little professional development programming for graduate-level students in the social sciences and humanities fields.

### **3.7 Graduate Student Satisfaction**

Nettles and Millett (2006) define satisfaction as “the quality of the conditions, experiences, and socialization of the experience and the orientation into the profession” (as cited in Gardner, 2012, p. 4). While satisfaction is thought to be a key component in understanding student persistence, retention, and success, as a concept it has not garnered extensive attention in the literature on the graduate student experience to date. Satisfaction may relate to a number of variables, such as the institution, discipline, department, program, or relationships with faculty and peers. Within each of these, perceptions of the level and quality of support available to students are extremely relevant to discussions of satisfaction.

Gardner (2012) reports that early research on student satisfaction in relation to the

graduate school experience focused on ‘job’ satisfaction among graduate assistants (Levine & Weitz, 1968), and the role of academic and nonacademic satisfaction on retention and degree completion (Gregg, 1972). Generally, earlier explorations found that a high level of faculty-student interaction and collegiality at the departmental level can have a positive impact on graduate students’ experiences (Girves & Wemmerus, 1988; Gregg, 1972).

More recent research has explored graduate student satisfaction and success in relation to a number of factors, such as the stage of the program (Baird, 1992), program structure (Madden & Carli, 1981), persistence (Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012; Wilder & Baydar, 1991), interactions with peers and faculty (Girves & Wemmerus, 1988), the student-advisor relationship (Barnes, 2010; Golde, 1998; Zhao et al., 2007), departmental climate (Solem, Lee & Schlemper, 2009), discipline (Nettles & Millett, 2006), as well as background and individual factors, such as sense of social wellness (Witkowski, 2010) and construction of the academic identity (McAlpine, Paulson, Gonsalves, & Jazvac-Martek, 2012). Barnes and Randall (2010) have conducted the only known study to explore differences in levels of student satisfaction across disciplines, institutional types and enrolment status. No known studies have examined graduate student satisfaction with regards to the provision of support services and programs administered at various levels within the institution (i.e., student affairs and services units; schools of graduate studies; graduate student unions; departments, faculties, and institution).

According to findings from the 2000 National Doctoral Program Survey, conducted in the United States, areas identified as being of particular concern for doctoral students were “related to mentoring, career guidance, teaching, professional training, and program climate (Fagen & Suedkamp Wells, 2004, as cited in Gardner, 2012, p.5). Interestingly, most of these areas are typically considered to be the responsibility of the school of graduate studies and

student affairs and services, yet the role of these units are not often considered in research on the graduate student experience.

Gardner (2012) developed a model of doctoral student satisfaction inspired by Astin's (1970) input-environment-outcome (I-E-O) model. In this model, inputs consist of demographic factors and experiences that the student brings to the graduate program. Environment includes factors over which the program and institution have some control and may contribute to doctoral student satisfaction such as institutional type, academic discipline, and funding; outcomes consist of levels of satisfaction and retention. Each demographic variable interacts, either individually or collectively, with each of the environment factors to produce a level of satisfaction or dissatisfaction in the student's experience.

Gardner (2012) argues that we need to consider the relationship between independent variables, including students' demographics and transitions, and environmental conditions, when examining satisfaction. This again emphasizes the inter-relatedness between factors thought to influence graduate student persistence as demonstrated through student transition models, discussed above.

A recent report released by the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO) used data from the 2007 and 2010 Canadian Graduate and Professional Student Survey (CGPSS) to explore what influences graduate students' satisfaction with their universities, programs of study, academic experiences and faculty supervisors; what influences students' perceptions of the quality of teaching and learning; and how graduate student satisfaction levels differed between 2007 and 2010 (Zhao, 2012). This research also makes strides in filling a gap in the literature with regards to graduate students' experiences and level of satisfaction with research training and professional development initiatives, which had not been previously studied.



It was found that graduate students at Ontario universities remain satisfied with their education, although satisfaction dropped slightly since 2007. Findings indicate that students' characteristics and program-related factors have impacts on students' satisfaction levels or students' perceptions of their graduate school experience.

While the overall satisfaction levels of doctoral students have decreased slightly, the study showed they had greater satisfaction with the quality of professional skills development they received in 2010 compared to 2007. This may suggest the success of some institutions' initiatives – such as the Graduate Professional Skills (GPS) Program at the University of Toronto. Policy recommendations suggest that the government continue to work with universities and their graduate deans to promote and support initiatives and best practices that improve graduate student preparation for the labour market. A concern that today's graduate students' are ill-prepared for non-academic careers has recently been expressed by CAGS (Rose, 2012).

Previous research conducted with the CGPSS data at Western University points to a significant relationship between graduate students' satisfaction with their universities and program and the performance of the advisor (Spence, 2009). Systemic differences between departments and disciplines are also thought to influence student satisfaction (Zhao et al., 2007). It is not known what effects institutional size may have on graduate students' level of satisfaction (Zhao, 2012); further research is needed in this area.

### **3.8 Summary**

The contemporary graduate school experience is a challenging one, upheld by old traditions. This experience is mediated, however, by an array of support services aimed at mitigating the struggle, as well as minimizing the potential and sometimes devastating

consequences of those seemingly insurmountable challenges. Today's master's and doctoral students make up an ever changing and increasingly diverse demographic. Yet the theories and models of student retention and transition relied upon to help make sense of the journeys through post-secondary education do not always account for the wide range of experiences faced by graduate students as adult learners. Furthermore, there is a lack of informed literature to help guide faculty, staff, and student service professionals in their efforts to provide guidance and support to what is for many universities, the fastest growing segment of the student population.

Previous research has established that as a collective group, contemporary graduate students can be classified as non-traditional learners and, as such, may be considered to be at a greater risk of attrition, based on characteristics such as being a member of an ethnic minority or having external commitments that conflict with their school schedules that may set them up to experience challenges above and beyond what can be expected for the typical graduate student. This study acknowledges the diversity of today's graduate student population in seeking to explore differences in students' perceived needs with regards to support services and the role of these services in persistence.

Attrition and lengthy times to completion are arguably two of the most pressing areas of concern for institutions in graduate education today; this is reflected in the significant amount of research dedicated to the identification of factors thought to be most salient in explaining student persistence. Student transition models designed with the undergraduate student in mind are drawn upon in this study to inform our understanding of the factors thought to influence attrition and to expand upon theoretical models of graduate student persistence.

While much of the research on graduate students conducted to date has explored factors such as the individual attributes of students and characteristics specific to particular programs,

the role of support services on student experiences and outcomes has received little attention. Graduate education in the Canadian context remains under-investigated and largely unexplored in comparison to its American counterpart. This study sets out to build on the existing literature on graduate student attrition and attempts to fill several gaps.

An understanding of student development and socialization is thought to be essential to unraveling the mystery of graduate student persistence, and an increasing body of literature devoted to exploring these processes and phases supports this. Yet a drawback to this work is that many of the models that have been adapted to address the graduate student experience are theoretical in nature. It is anticipated that continued work in this area, and research that tests the relevance of the factors identified in these models will aid higher education administrators and policy makers in graduate program design and revision.

Student affairs practitioners have an important role to play in the provision and evaluation of graduate student support services, particularly with regards to addressing the professional development needs of those transitioning out of graduate school into the workforce. Satisfaction is also a critical piece in the persistence puzzle, yet as a concept it has been subject to limited examination. Student perceptions of the level and quality of support can provide valuable feedback on existing programs and services, as well as identify any gaps or areas in need of increased supports.

Consideration of the types of support services, the student affairs professionals delivering them, and insight into how students perceive the quality of these services is essential to addressing the key question that guides this research study: What support services assist graduate students and what effects, if any, do they have on persistence and academic success? Taking into account the history and structure of graduate education in Canada, as well as the diverse graduate

student demographic, this study draws on the existing literature to date in the areas of student transitions, attrition and retention, development and socialization, to explore the role of support services in graduate student persistence in the social sciences and humanities disciplines.

## **Chapter 4: Research Methodology**

To better understand graduate student persistence, this study is guided by the following research questions: (1) What are students' levels of awareness of, frequency of use, and satisfaction with, support services provided by the university?; (2) What is the role of institutional support in the persistence and success of graduate students?; (3) What do students feel are some of the biggest barriers to graduate student persistence?; (4) What do students feel are some of the factors that have a positive influence on persistence?; (5) What support services do graduate students need to succeed in their studies and their pursuit of an academic and/or professional career?; and (6) How do students' needs and levels of satisfaction with support services differ across graduate program level (master's and doctoral), year and phase of study, and enrolment status?

This chapter examines the research methods used to collect and analyze data to address these questions. The proposal for this research was reviewed by the Interdisciplinary committee on Ethics in Human Research (ICEHR) and found to be in compliance with Memorial University's ethics policy.

### **4.1 Methodological Framework**

This study utilizes a mixed methods approach, employing both qualitative and quantitative methods (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011) to allow for a more comprehensive data analysis to map student services through surveying and interviewing to determine the extent of their effectiveness, identify gaps, and provide insight into the role of these services in student persistence and eventual graduation. It was the view of the researcher that the research questions that guided the study could not be adequately addressed through one method alone. Several

definitions of mixed methods have emerged in recent years; it is felt that the following best describes the approach taken in this research:

As a method, it [mixed methods] focuses on collecting, analyzing, and mixing both quantitative and qualitative data in a single study or series of studies. Its central premise is that the use of quantitative and qualitative approaches, in combination, provides a better understanding of research problems than either approach alone. (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007, p. 5)

According to Creswell (2009), quantitative research is a means for testing objective theories by examining the relationship among variables. These variables can then be measured on instruments so that numbered data can be analyzed using statistical software. Numerous quantitative studies employing survey methodology have been conducted on graduate (mostly doctoral) education. For example, the *Survey on Doctoral Education and Career Preparation* was a large-scale national survey conducted in the United States in 1999 that was distributed to doctoral students at 27 institutions, representing 11 arts and science disciplines (Golde, 2001). Faghihi and Ethington (1996) conducted a quantitative study on doctoral student persistence in the United States, distributing a survey-questionnaire to examine the influence of such factors as student background, involvement and perception of growth on the intention to persist.

Quantitative research on graduate education, particularly in Canada, is ultimately lacking. Furthermore, the data and literature on completion rates for graduate programs, particularly, in Canada, is less extensive and comprehensive than other countries (Lussier, 1995). Studies that have been conducted are somewhat dated and typically focus exclusively on doctoral students. Lussier notes the lack of pre-existing “hard” data on the doctoral student population at her institution, and hence, the value of survey research in paving the way for further study. Likewise,

it was anticipated that a project employing quantitative methods may be a valuable starting point in the absence of institution-wide data on graduate students.

Qualitative research has been described as “...an effort to highlight the meanings people make and the actions they take, and to offer interpretations for how and why” (Luttrell, 2010, pp. 1-2). Creswell (2009) writes that a qualitative approach is useful when a concept or phenomenon needs to be understood because little work has been done on it. He elaborates on this by further noting that qualitative research is exploratory and useful when the researcher does not know the important variables to examine.

Social science and educational researchers interested in graduate education and student experiences have utilized qualitative approaches. Gardner (2005) writes that qualitative research is relevant to the study of graduate education, where the student role is characterized by a lack of agency, and by describing graduate student experiences through the voices of students themselves, the researcher may gain understanding and insight. This research is concerned with identifying the institutional factors most influential in graduate student persistence; it is believed that a qualitative element to the study may prove helpful in this regard.

## **4.2 Theoretical Perspective**

Theoretical perspectives offer a way of looking at the world, the assumptions people have about what is important, and what makes the world work. Theory works to inform the choice of methodology, and it is through research that theories are tested, as the relationships between and among variables are examined. Theoretical perspectives from several disciplines have influenced previous work on graduate education. Within sociology and the field of higher education, concepts and theories relating to identity, culture, and socialization have been shown to be highly relevant to an analysis of graduate student experiences.

While several key concepts guide this discussion, and helped to formulate the survey and interview questions, the main theoretical framework that guided this study is graduate student development. While several models of transition, socialization and student development were influential in framing the study, no one specific ‘model’ formed the framework; rather, the notion of *how* development occurs was used to characterize an understanding of the graduate student experience.

According to Sanford (1966), student development occurs through person-environment interaction and as the result of two conditions: challenge and support. When individuals are confronted by a challenging new experience, they are prompted to respond, which results in development. If the support is not available to surmount these challenges, however, development may digress, emphasizing the need for balance between the two (Gardner, 2009b). Within this context, a myriad of experiences, shaped by socialization and transitional periods, are essential components of this developmental process. It is this transitional understanding of student development and the need to fill a noticeable gap in the literature addressing graduate students that prompted this research study.

Student development is a useful framework from which to explore the elements of challenge and support that encompass the graduate student experience; it was felt that a fuller understanding of these processes would best be achieved through the use of both qualitative and quantitative methods. While a quantitative approach helps to examine the relationship between factors (including support services) felt to play a role in graduate student development and persistence, a qualitative approach explores the components of the graduate student experience that may help or hinder progression through the program.



## **4.3 Research Design & Methods**

### **4.3.1 Site selection and setting.**

This study was conducted at Memorial University of Newfoundland, the largest university in Atlantic Canada, classified as a comprehensive university, publically-funded, and offering over 100 graduate diploma and degree programs to over 3,000 graduate students. Memorial was chosen due to its proximity and access to the researcher, as well as its somewhat unique organization of the social science and humanities disciplines into a Faculty of Arts (these are usually organized into two separate faculties at other Canadian universities). It was estimated that this categorization would enable easier recruitment of participants, due to having a central ‘home’ unit from which to draw from, and would also aid in the analysis with regards to disciplinary context and departmental structure. The departments are listed in Table 1.

### **4.3.2 Participants and recruitment.**

Initial contact was made with departmental representatives with the Faculty of Arts, such as department chairs/heads, administrative staff, and graduate program co-ordinators to explain the details of the study, and for the purposes of gaining an understanding of the program structures and supports for graduate students in each department. These included the participants in the first phase of this study, described in more detail below, who were drawn from a population of all current and former graduate students at Memorial, who are or were enrolled in a master’s or doctoral program in the Faculty of Arts in the last seven years. As per the university calendar (2011-2012), section 2.4.3.5 Period of Study, seven years is the maximum amount of time that is given for students to complete a graduate program at Memorial (Memorial University, 2011, p. 509) without incurring continuance fees and in some cases, being required to obtain special permission to continue.

Participants for phase one of the study were recruited through email correspondence. Due to privacy restrictions, it was not possible to contact students directly. Letters of information and a link to an online survey were distributed electronically (see Appendix A) through the Office of the Registrar to all students currently or previously enrolled in a graduate program in one of the 18 departments in the Faculty of Arts. The total number of students who were contacted was 1,025. Participants in the second phase of the study initially consisted of a random sample of 15 students, selected from those survey respondents who volunteered to be interviewed based on a request on the survey whereby interested participants were asked to provide contact information. Random sampling is a method of selecting participants in which every member of the target group has an equal chance or probability of being selected to participate, ensuring that the sample will be representative of the population (Creswell, 2009; van den Hoonaard, 2012). Of 149 initial survey respondents, a total of 44 students indicated an interest in being interviewed; from this target group, a random sampling procedure was conducted using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 9.

An attempt was made to include students from various ‘phases’ or years of graduate programs, in order to identify key differences in development and how these may correspond to student support initiatives and the extent of student involvement. Of particular interest was a comparison of students enrolled in different programs (master’s- thesis and non-thesis, and doctoral) as well as differences between the experiences of part-time and full-time students. Due to the voluntary nature of participation, this was not always possible. Table 2, below, compares demographic and program information for each of the four study groups involved in this study: the total study population; survey respondents; potential interviewees; interview participants.

Data Set	Gender	Age	Program	Discipline	Enrolment	Province/Country
Study Population Surveyed (Total = 1,025)	599 (58.4%) female 422 (41.2%) male 4 (3.9%) Unknown <i>*Info missing for 4 people</i>	442 (43.1%) under 30 434 (42.3%) 30-40 94 (9.2%) 41-50 55 (5.4%) over 50 0 (0.0%) unknown	415 (40.5%) Master's (Thesis) 398 (38.8%) Master's (Non-Thesis) 196 (19.1%) Doctorate 16 (1.6%) Unknown <i>* Info missing for 16 people</i>	115 (11.2%) Political Science 109 (10.6%) Folklore 105 (10.2%) English Literature and Language 93 (9.1%) Sociology 91 (8.9%) Anthropology 90 (8.8%) History 66 (6.4%) Humanities 58 (5.7%) Geography 55 (5.4%) Archaeology 52 (5.1%) Philosophy 44 (4.3%) Religious Studies 40 (3.9%) Linguistics 37 (3.6%) Women's Studies 32 (3.1%) Economics 15 (1.5%) French Studies 5 (0.5%) Classics 4 (0.4%) German Language and Literature 9 (0.9%) Unknown <i>*Info missing for 9 people</i>	641 (62.5%) Not enrolled 333 (32.5%) Full time 23 (2.2%) Part time 28 (2.7%) Unknown <i>* This is student's status as reported by the Office of the Registrar for the Winter 2012 semester; info missing for 28 people</i>	891 (86.8%) Canada <b>Canadian Provincial Breakdown:</b> <b>532 (59.7%) NL</b> <b>149 (16.7%) Unspecified</b> <b>67 (7.5%) Nova Scotia</b> <b>41 (4.6%) Ontario</b> <b>33 (3.7%) New Brunswick</b> <b>30 (3.4%) Alberta</b> <b>26 (2.9%) British Columbia</b> <b>10 (1.1%) Manitoba</b> <b>1 (0.1%) Nunavut</b> 47 (4.6%) United States 14 (1.4%) China 7 (0.7%) Bangladesh 5 (0.5%) United Kingdom 4 (0.4%) Germany 4 (0.4%) Iran 4 (0.4%) South Korea 3 (0.3%) Italy 3 (0.3%) Japan 3 (0.3%) People's Republic of China 2 (0.2%) France 2 (0.2%) Greenland 2 (0.2%) India 2 (0.2%) Ireland 2 (0.2%) Jordan 2 (0.2%) Mexico 2 (0.2%) – Netherlands 2 (0.2%) Scotland 2 (0.2%) Taiwan 1 (0.1%) Aruba 1 (0.1%) Chile 1 (0.1%) Ghana 1 (0.1%) Greece

Data Set	Gender	Age	Program	Discipline	Enrolment	Province/Country
						1 (0.1%) Guatemala 1 (0.1%) Hong Kong 1 (0.1%) Iceland 1 (0.1%) Kenya 1 (0.1%) Malaysia 1 (0.1%) Morocco 1 (0.1%) Nepal 1 (0.1%) Nigeria 1 (0.1%) Pakistan 1 (0.1%) Portugal 1 (0.1%) Qatar 1 (0.1%) Russia 1 (0.1%) St. Pierre & Miquelon 1 (0.1%) Saudi Arabia 1 (0.1%) Sierra Leone 1 (0.1%) South Africa 1 (0.1%) Vietnam 1 (0.1%) Zimbabwe 0 (0.0%) unknown
Survey Respondents (Total = 152)	96 (63%) female 54 (36%) male 2 (1%) no answer	63 (41%) Under 30 67 (44%) 30-40 12 (8%) 41-50 9 (6%) Over 50 1 (1%) no answer	63 (41%) Master's (Thesis) 45 (30%) Master's (Non-Thesis) 43 (28%) Doctorate 1 (1%) no answer	23 (15%) Archaeology 18 (12%) Folklore 17 (11%) Political Science 17 (11%) Sociology 15 (10%) History 12 (8%) Anthropology 11 (7%) Geography 11 (7%) English Language and Literature 8 (5%) Humanities 5 (3%) Linguistics 4 (3%) Economics 4 (3%) Philosophy 4 (3%) Religious Studies 3 (2%) Women's Studies	82 (54%) not enrolled 59 (39%) full time 6 (4%) part time 5 (3%) applying to graduate 0 (0.0%) no answer	131 (86.2%) Canada <b>Canadian Provincial Breakdown:</b> <b>6 (4.6%) Alberta</b> <b>6 (4.6%) British Columbia</b> <b>7 (5.3%) Manitoba</b> <b>2 (1.5%) New Brunswick</b> <b>58 (44.3%) Newfoundland and Labrador</b> <b>12 (9.2%) Nova Scotia</b> <b>27 (20.6%) Ontario</b> <b>1 (0.8%) Prince Edward Island</b> <b>5 (3.3%) Quebec</b> <b>7 (5.3%) Canada – unspecified</b> 6 (3.9%) United States

Data Set	Gender	Age	Program	Discipline	Enrolment	Province/Country
				0 (0.0%) French Studies 0 (0.0%) German Language and Literature 0 (0.0%) Psychology 0 (0.0%) no answer	<i>* This is student's self-reported status for their current or last completed graduate program</i>	2 (1.3%) China 2 (1.3%) Germany 2 (1.3%) Iran 1 (0.7%) Bangladesh 1 (0.7%) Chile 1 (0.7%) England 1 (0.7%) Greece 1 (0.7%) Italy 1 (0.7%) Jordan 3 (2%) no Answer
Potential Interviewees (Total = 47)	30 (63.8%) female 17 (36.2%) male 0 (0.0%) no answer	20 (42.6%) 30-40 17 (36.2%) under 30 5 (10.6%) over 50 4 (8.5%) 41-50 1 (0.0%) no answer	18 (38.3%) Doctorate 16 (34%) Master's (Non-Thesis) 12 (25.5%) Master's (Thesis) 1 (2.1%) no answer	8 (17%) Anthropology 7 (14.9%) Archaeology 6 (12.8%) Folklore 6 (12.8%) Political Science 4 (8.5%) English 4 (8.5%) History 4 (8.5%) Sociology 2 (4.3%) Humanities 2 (4.3%) Women's Studies 1 (2.1%) Economics 1 (2.1%) Geography 1 (2.1%) Linguistics 1 (2.1%) Philosophy 0 (0.0%) no answer	27 (57.4%) not enrolled 16 (34%) full time 3 (6.4%) applying to graduate 1 (2.1%) part time 0 (0.0%) no answer	40 (85.1%) Canada <b>Canadian Provincial Breakdown</b> <b>22 (55%) NL</b> <b>8 (20%) Ontario</b> <b>2 (5%) Alberta</b> <b>2 (5%) Manitoba</b> <b>2 (5%) Nova Scotia</b> <b>2 (5%) Canada- unspecified</b> <b>1 (2.1%) British Columbia</b> <b>1 (2.1%) Quebec</b> 2 (4.3%) Italy 1 (2.1%) Germany 1 (2.1%) Greece 1 (2.1%) Jordan 1 (2.1%) United States 1 (2.1%) no answer
Interviewees (Total =20)	13 (65%) female 7 (35%) male 0 (0.0%) no answer	9 (45%) 30-40 6 (30%) under 30 2 (10%) 41-50 2 (10%) over 50 1 (5%) no answer	11 (55%) Doctorate 7 (35%) Master's (Non-Thesis) 2 (10%) Master's (Thesis) 0 (0.0%) no answer	4 (20%) Anthropology 3 (15%) Archaeology 3 (15%) Political Science 2 (10%) English 2 (10%) Folklore 2 (10%) History 1 (5%) Economics 1(5%) Sociology	12 (60%) not enrolled 6 (30%) full time 1 (5% part time)	14 (70%) Canada <b>Canadian Provincial Breakdown</b> <b>6 (42.6%) NL</b> <b>4 (28.6%) NS</b> <b>2 (14.3%) Ontario</b> <b>2 (14.3%) Quebec</b> 2 (10%) U.S.

Data Set	Gender	Age	Program	Discipline	Enrolment	Province/Country
				1(5%) M Phil. In Humanities 1 (5%) Women's Studies 0 (0.0%) no answer	1 (5%) applying to graduate 0 (0.0%) no answer	1 (5%) England 1 (5%) Chile 1 (5%) India 1 (5%) no answer

Program currently enrolled in or last completed at the time survey was complete

The 15 students who were initially randomly selected were contacted via email; asked to participate in a follow-up interview. A letter of information and consent form were attached to the email for their review (Appendices C and D). Ten students agreed to participate. Five were either unable to be reached or were no longer interested or available to participate. This prompted the need to conduct a second random sample to obtain five more participants, from which nine potential interviewees were identified and contacted. Five responded to this request to be interviewed.

At this stage, there was no representation from interview participants who had completed a Master of Arts (thesis), so further efforts were then made by contacting all remaining potential interviewees (from those survey participants who indicated an interest in being interviewed) who fit this criteria. From this selection of nine participants, three responded to the request and were interviewed. One of these participants, however, did not complete a thesis, (incorrect labelling in the survey), so only two interview participants represented the MA (thesis) route.

Every attempt was also made to maintain an equal balance of gender, and proportion by program, but due to the voluntary nature of participation, this was not possible. While a significant percentage (10.2%) of the total study population were enrolled in the department of English Language and Literature (105 students), only 8 of these students initially participated in the survey. Efforts were then made, via email and posters, to recruit further participants from this department; only one other student responded to this request, bringing the number of survey respondents to a total of 150. While two of the now nine survey respondents initially expressed an interest in participating in an interview, both were no longer interested or available at the time they

were contacted. At this point, snowball sampling was employed as a means to recruit students representing the department of English Language and Literature; through word of mouth, two participants completed the survey and were interviewed.

#### **4.3.3 Data collection.**

For this study, data collection techniques consisted of surveying, interviewing, document analysis, and informal observation. Creswell (2012) writes that surveys can be used to help identify the beliefs and attitudes of people, and may provide useful information to evaluate educational programs or services. Surveys enable the collection of large amounts of data cheaply and easily compared to other methods. Anonymity is guaranteed, which may result in more honest answers from respondents. In this way, survey research is well suited to determining people's opinions about issues. Furthermore, standardized questions make comparability between respondents and groups easier.

It has been noted that surveys do not allow the researcher to control for external or environmental factors; they are thus not an ideal method for determining causality. Furthermore, it is difficult to gain a deeper understanding of processes and context through standardized questionnaires, which are limited in length and depth of responses. A combination of survey and qualitative research is beneficial in this regard.

In phase one of the study, a survey was distributed electronically to all (N=1,025) current and former graduate students at one institution, who were currently or previously enrolled in a master's or doctoral program in the Faculty of Arts (social sciences and humanities disciplines) in the last seven years (between the 2004-05 and 2011-12 academic years). The survey was developed specifically for this study and consisted of 32



questions pertaining to student's perceptions of, and experiences with support services at Memorial. The survey was used to gather student demographic and academic program information, as well as a means to map the level of awareness, use, and effectiveness of graduate student services (see Appendix B). Ratings of student services were compared based on the demographic and academic program information provided.

Semi-structured, in-depth interviewing was chosen as a research method for the second phase of this study due to its applicability and relevance to qualitative analyses; a qualitative approach will allow for an opportunity to better understand the experiences and developmental processes of graduate students. Interviewing has been defined as a technique that "is used to gather descriptive data in the subjects' own words so that the researcher can develop insights on how subjects' interpret some piece of the world" (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003, p. 95). Seidman (2006) notes that the purpose of in-depth interviewing is to pursue an interest in understanding the lived experiences of other people and the meaning they make of that experience. Semi-structured interviews include "a series of predetermined but open-ended questions" and "use a variety of probes that elicit further information" (Ayres, 2008, as cited in van den Hoonaard, 2012, p. 79).

For the second phase of this research study, pilot interviews were conducted with two graduate students for the purposes of testing the interview protocol, with the possibility of revising and editing questions for clarification. Following the pilot, students were recruited from phase one to participate in follow-up in-depth interviews, for the purposes of exploring more fully the reasons students choose to persist or not, and how their experiences may relate to institutional-based support. The study intended to capture data from students who did not complete their programs as well and strategies to recruit

these students were used, such as snowball sampling (through word of mouth); posters were also used for recruitment purposes with limited success.

Twenty semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted. Participants were randomly selected, using SPSS software, from 44 survey respondents who indicated their interest in participating. This sample represented one-third of the pool of potential interviewees and was determined to be a sufficient number based on time and resource constraints as well as the possibility of saturation. Creswell and Plano Clark (2011) write that with regards to sampling procedures, in terms of the number of participants, rather than select a large number of people or sites, the qualitative researcher identifies and recruits a small number that will provide in-depth information about the central phenomenon or concept being explored in the study. The qualitative idea is not to generalize from the sample (as in quantitative research) but to develop an in-depth understanding of a few people.

Interviews were loosely structured around a script of 16 questions, with the use of several follow-up questions or prompts where necessary (see Appendix E). The questions pertained to student's perceptions of the supports and challenges faced in graduate school, and how these views relate to their own experiences with university services and programs. Interviews lasted approximately one hour in duration and were recorded for the purpose of analysis through the use of a digital audio recorder and were transcribed verbatim. While the preferred method was face-to-face, those who wished to participate but due to location were unable to participate in person were interviewed via telephone or through the use of telephony applications (i.e., Skype). A total of 10 interviews were conducted face-to-face; six interviews were conducted via Skype; three were phone

interviews; one participant responded to the questions via email. Pseudonyms were assigned to participants to ensure anonymity.

Document analysis involved the collection and analysis of institutional, faculty, and departmental handbooks and websites for graduate students, including information on program specific policies and procedures, as well as information on graduate student support initiatives that are considered supplementary to graduate student requirements. Where available, program and departmental review documents were also gathered and analyzed to gain an understanding of program structure, number of graduate students and faculty, resources, retention rates, and average times to completion. These documents were gathered before the study began, and were read closely and compared later for incorporation into the research analysis where applicable.

A fourth, although not final, but rather simultaneous component of data collection consisted of informal observations and interactions with graduate students, faculty, university staff and administrators, including graduate coordinators. These observations occurred during initial phases of the research, including the pilot study, and continued throughout the interview process. While not a primary method of analysis in this study, these observations and interactions served as a means through which an understanding of the graduate programs and disciplines under examination could be attained. This combination of methods allowed for a comprehensive exploration of graduate student experiences, as well as provided an effective means of triangulation of the data. Field notes were compiled based on these observations and interactions and used in the data analysis.

#### **4.3.4 Data analysis.**

Quantitative data was analyzed using SPSS. Frequency, cross-tabulation, and Pearson chi-square analyses were conducted, as well as a comparison of mean (M) scores. The threshold for statistical significance was set at  $p < .05$ . Differences between each of the groups was tested using ANOVAs.

Transcribed interview data was coded and analyzed using the constant comparative approach, “a research design for multi-data sources, which is like analytic induction in that the formal analysis begins early in the study and is nearly completed by the end of data collection” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003, p. 66). According to Glaser (1978), the steps of the constant comparative method are: (1) begin collecting data; (2) find key issues, events, or activities in the data that become main categories for focus; (3) collect data that provide many incidents of the categories of focus; (4) write about the categories explored, keeping in mind past incidents while searching for new; (5) work with the data and emerging model to discover relationships; and (6) sample, code, and write with the core categories in mind. These steps are followed concurrently during data collection until categories are ‘saturated.’ This process allowed for the identification of the salient themes that emerged from participant’s interview responses. Themes were reviewed and categories collapsed and/or expanded, depending on the findings, until a final set of themes was decided upon.

Analysis through the constant comparative method and the conceptual framework of student development resulted in a coding system, which was then compiled into a larger set of themes. Field notes from observations and document analyses were also compiled with the interview data. Descriptive data in the form of interview transcripts

was organized through the process of coding, according to concepts and categories that emerged. In order to triangulate, the interview data was compared with the survey data.

#### **4.4 A Note on Researcher's Positionality**

This study exemplifies insider researcher in that as researcher, I hold prior knowledge and understandings of the group I wish to study and am also a member of that group. I played two roles simultaneously: that of researcher and researched. Based on Banks (2008) typology, I would be classified as an indigenous-insider, and as a researcher, hold the values, perspectives, behaviours, beliefs, and knowledge of the indigenous/cultural community that is under study.

Taylor (2011) notes that when the researcher is already an insider in their field, it is likely that they have pre-established relationships with people in the field and it is virtually inevitable that such relationships “will shape the researcher’s work and influence their positioning within the field” (p. 8). Taylor uses the term ‘intimate insider’ to refer to such researchers whose pre-existing friendships evolve into informant relationships- friend-informants. Because this research was conducted at the higher education institution where the principal investigator is enrolled as a doctoral student, the research can be classified as what is known as ‘endogenous’ (Trowler, 2011).

Insider research is frequently portrayed of being inherently biased, as the researcher is considered to be too close to the culture under study to raise provocative questions (Merriam et al., 2001). Researcher bias in this context would refer to the process whereby the researcher’s personal beliefs, experiences, and values influence the study methodology, design, and/or results. Van Heugten (2004) writes that “The selection of a topic that clearly reflects a personal interest and the selection of colleagues as

subjects raise the spectre of insider ‘bias’” (p.207). The insider researcher must then be wary of projecting their own views onto participants, or the data analysis. In order to mediate any potential bias as a result of the researcher’s insider status, the researcher utilized several techniques to ensure trustworthiness of the data that was gathered (Lincoln & Guba, 1985); that it was as accurate as possible.

#### **4.5 Ensuring Trustworthiness of the Data**

Guba (1981) proposed the following criteria for establishing trustworthiness in research: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Lincoln and Guba (1985) describe credibility as being equivalent to the quantitative concept of internal validity and while several techniques have been proposed to establish this, three methods in particular were employed in this research. Triangulation refers to the researcher’s use of multiple sources, methods, investigators, and theories (Denzin 1978, as cited in Lincoln and Guba, 1985). The researcher employed various methods in this research, including a survey, interviews, informal observations, and document analysis. Several theoretical frameworks, primarily in the areas of sociology and psychology, influenced the interpretation of the findings.

Peer debriefing is a technique whereby the researcher shares findings and elements of the research with peers or colleagues. This allows the researcher to think critically about the research and to acknowledge any feelings that may affect judgment. A fellow graduate student peer was available to read over transcripts and conducted an independent assessment of the interview data to verify that the themes and constructs embedded within the data aligned with those of the researcher, and a fellow graduate student assisted with quantitative analyses. Member checking is the process of engaging

participants in data analysis for verification. Interview participants were given copies of the transcript, as well the researcher's own written analysis. They were provided with the opportunity to verify the study's findings and offer any suggested changes to be made. It should be noted that participants were very proactive in this regard, and played a significant role in assisting in this process.

Transferability is seen as being equivalent to external validity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Guba (1981) recommends thick description to facilitate transferability. This refers to detailed note taking to help understand the research setting and context. In this study, thick description was used to give voice to graduate students as well as to provide a contextualized account of their experiences. Dependability is considered to be related to reliability; confirmability as equivalent to objectivity in quantitative research. The chief means of establishing dependability and confirmability that Guba (1981) discusses is maintaining an audit trail. A paper trail was kept of all records resulting from the research, including raw data, field notes, findings and reports, process and methodological notes, personal notes and instrument development information. Paper as well as electronic copies of all material related to the research project were kept and stored on an encrypted computer.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) also go into more detail to describe several measures that may be employed to build trustworthiness in a more general sense. They recommend that in addition to field notes, researchers keep at least three other forms of notes. Throughout the collection and analysis of data, field notes were kept, as well as a daily activity log of observations, interactions and any planning or conducting of research that occurred; a personal reflection log of experiences and perceptions; and a methodological

log, in which methods of data collection and analysis were recorded.

Both informal and formal interactions should also be facilitated between all members of the research team on a continuous basis. The researcher corresponded with the doctoral supervisor usually on a weekly or bi-weekly basis, either via email or in person. These discussions typically consisted of casual chats about how the research was going; the doctoral committee was apprised of research progress through formal documentation.

Finally, Lincoln and Guba (1985) recommend that materials be gathered that may not be used in the initial analysis but are to be archived and later compared against data analyses to test their adequacy. Prior to the commencement of data collection, department offices were visited and graduate coordinators met with, for the purposes of gathering pamphlets, handbooks, and informational material on programs.

#### **4.6 Limitations**

As in any study, it was anticipated that there would be limitations that may restrict data collection and/or the analysis and interpretation of the findings. As this study was conducted at only one institution, the findings are not generalizable to the larger Canadian graduate student population. The purpose of this study was to explore and describe the experiences of individual students in an individual setting. While every effort was made to ensure that each department and program in the Faculty of Arts was represented, due to the voluntary nature of participation, this was not always possible.

There were no survey respondents from the following departments: Classics, French Studies, and German Language and Literature. Only nine departments out of a possible sixteen were represented through interview participants; an additional participant



represented the Master of Philosophy (Humanities) program. Only two students who were enrolled in a master's (thesis) program participated in the interview phase of the study; it is unfortunate that more perspectives from this student group were not heard or included in the qualitative analysis. Although composing 10% of the total study population, there was little representation from the department of English Language and Literature, despite extensive recruitment efforts. There were also no interview participants from western Canada, although these provinces comprised approximately 7% of the total study population.

Unfortunately, due to circumstances beyond the control of the researcher, complete demographic and program information for the total study population was not available; some data for this group is incomplete or missing. This was partly the result of the changing nature of this information as it is generated electronically by the Office of the Registrar; students' status may have changed over the period of time from which the survey was distributed and when this data was compiled for analysis.

Analysis of the data was limited to individual interpretation and may not be an actual representation of students' experiences, though an attempt to counter this effect was made through member checks, peer debriefing, and triangulation, as discussed above. As the focus of the study was on the role of institutional supports on student persistence, student's individual agency to develop their own supports, whether in conjunction with, or due to the absence of institutional supports, was not examined in depth. The exclusion of faculty and staff limited the scope of this study, as the absence of these individual's perspectives give an unbalanced account of the graduate student experience at Memorial. Differences in departmental representation may have affected

the findings that emerged from this research, and major themes may have thus been overlooked.

## **Chapter 5: Results from Phase One**

This chapter details the findings of phase one of the study, which consisted of an online survey administered electronically to the study population of 1,025 current and former graduate students in the Faculty of Arts at Memorial University. One hundred and fifty-two people completed the survey, constituting approximately a 15% response rate. Survey respondents were generally fairly representative of the study population with regards to demographic and graduate program characteristics, with a few exceptions; most notably a slight under-representation of respondents from the department of English Language and Literature, and a significant over-representation of respondents from the provinces of Ontario and Manitoba. Complete comparisons between the study population and survey respondents, based on demographic and graduate program information, can be found in Table 2 in chapter four.

### **5.1 Demographic Information**

*Gender.* The majority of survey respondents (63%) were female; 36% were male.

*Age.* The larger group of respondents (44%) indicated they were between 30-40 years of age; 41% were under 30; 8% were between 41-50 years of age; 6% were over 50.

*Province or Country of Origin.* The majority of survey respondents (86%) indicated Canada as their country of origin. Just under half of these indicated Newfoundland and Labrador as their province of origin (44%). The largest group of domestic students from outside of the Atlantic region were from Ontario (21%). No survey respondents indicated the provinces or territories of Saskatchewan, the Northwest Territories, Nunavut, or the Yukon as their place of origin. A complete provincial breakdown of Canadian respondents is found in Table 3 below. International students were represented by a

minority 14% of respondents; six of these (4%) indicated the United States as their country of origin.

Table 3

*Provincial Breakdown of Survey Respondents who Indicated Canada as their Country of Origin*

<b>Province</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent (%)</b>
Newfoundland and Labrador	58	44
Nova Scotia	12	9
New Brunswick	2	2
Prince Edward Island	1	1
Ontario	27	21
Quebec	5	3
Manitoba	7	5
Alberta	6	5
British Columbia	6	5
Unspecified	7	5.3

## **5.2 Graduate Program Information**

*Graduate Program:* The largest number of survey respondents (41%) was currently or had most recently been enrolled in a master's (thesis-route) graduate program; 30% were or had been enrolled in a master's (non-thesis) program; 29% were or had been enrolled in a doctoral program.

*Department:* Most respondents (15%) indicated that they were either currently or most recently enrolled in the department of Archaeology. Folklore was represented by 12% of

respondents; followed by Political Science and Sociology (11% each). Survey respondents were least likely to come from the departments of Economics, Linguistics, Philosophy, and Religious Studies (3% each), and Women's Studies (2%). No respondents came from the departments of Classics, French Studies, German Language and Literature, or Psychology. A complete departmental breakdown of survey respondents is found in Table 4 below.

Table 4

*Departmental Breakdown of Survey Respondents*

<b>Department</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent (%)</b>
Anthropology	12	8
Archaeology	23	15
Economics	4	3
English Language and Literature	11	7
Folklore	18	12
Geography	11	7
History	15	10
Humanities	8	5
Linguistics	5	3
Philosophy	4	3
Political Science	17	11
Religious Studies	4	3
Sociology	17	11
Women's Studies	3	2

*Enrolment Status:* Slightly more than half of respondents (54%) were *not* currently enrolled in a graduate program at the time the survey was completed. Thirty-nine percent (39%) indicated that they were enrolled full-time; 4% were part-time students; 3% were applying to graduate.

*Student Outcomes:* Of those respondents who indicated that they were not currently enrolled, 45% had graduated from their program; 7% had left their program of study (withdrew); 2% were on a leave of absence; 2% transferred to another institution; 1% were terminated from their program (academic dismissal). No students had transferred to a program in another faculty at Memorial.

*Program Delivery:* The majority of respondents (93%) specified that the delivery of their program was entirely on-campus; 1% indicated distance delivery; 6% specified a blended approach (both on-campus and distance delivery).

*Year of Study:* Of those respondents who were currently enrolled in a graduate program at Memorial at the time the survey was completed, most indicated that they were in the first year of their program (35%). At the doctoral level, most were in either year three or year four of their program (19% and 22% respectively). One respondent was in year nine (4%). At the master's (non-thesis) level, 50% of respondents were in year one of their program; at the master's (thesis) level, 48% were in year one.

*Time to Completion:* Respondents who were no longer enrolled in a graduate program at Memorial were asked to indicate the total number of years it took them to complete their degree program. Details on expected durations for graduate programs across departments are provided in Table 1. Overall, over half (62.5%) of survey respondents exceeded the

expected time to completion for their program. Sixty-seven percent (67%) of students who had been enrolled in a doctoral program took longer than the expected four years to complete. It is important to note that none of these participants had been enrolled in an anthropology program, which has an expected five-year time to completion. The average time to completion for doctoral students in this study, 6 years, comes close to the national average for doctoral students in the social sciences and humanities disciplines, which is reported as 6.5 years (CAUT, 2011). Half (50%) of master's (non-thesis) students took more than the expected one-year to complete; and 59% of master's (thesis) graduates took longer than the expected two years to complete. Complete data for survey respondents' times to completion is found below in Table 5.

Table 5

*Survey Respondents' Times to Completion*

<b>Graduate Program</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Standard Deviation</b>	<b>Minimum</b>	<b>Maximum</b>
Doctorate	6.00	9	2.86	2.50	10.00
Master's (Non-Thesis)	1.99	14	1.56	1.00	6.00
Master's (Thesis)	2.89	22	1.50	1.00	7.00
Total	3.23	45	2.33	1.00	10.00

A significant majority of respondents (79%) indicated that they had never interrupted their studies while enrolled (took a leave of absence, left for an extended period, etc.), while 20% indicated that they had.

### **5.3 Graduate Student Support Services**

Overall, survey respondents were generally ‘somewhat familiar’ with programs and services provided by various units at Memorial University. Most indicated that they had never availed of the wide array of programs and services offered through the division of Student Affairs and Services (SAS), the School of Graduate Studies (SGS), the Graduate Students’ Union (GSU), and the Faculty of Arts. At the university (campus-wide services) and the departmental levels, most respondents indicated that they ‘sometimes’ availed of programs and services. When asked to indicate their level of satisfaction with various programs and services, respondents most often selected ‘not applicable’ for those support services provided by SAS, SGS, and the GSU. At the university and Faculty of Arts levels, most respondents were ‘somewhat satisfied’, while at the departmental level, most respondents were ‘very satisfied’ with programs and services.

#### **5.3.1 Student affairs and services (SAS).**

*Level of Familiarity:* Respondents were generally not very familiar with the programs and services provided by SAS. Students were least familiar (with most indicating they were not at all familiar) with Student Success Programs (78%), followed by Housing, Food and Conference Services (61%); Career Development and Experiential Learning (CDEL) (49%). Respondents were most familiar (indicating they were very familiar) with the University Bookstore (66%). Most respondents selected ‘somewhat familiar’ for the Counselling Centre (43%); Student Health Services (41%).



*Frequency of Use:* When asked to specify how frequently they availed of the programs and services provided by SAS, most respondents indicated ‘never’ for all areas with the exception of the University Bookstore, for which 45% chose ‘sometimes.’

*Level of Satisfaction:* When asked to indicate their level of satisfaction with SAS programs and services, most respondents selected ‘not applicable’ for all areas except the University Bookstore, where 53% indicated they were somewhat satisfied.

### **5.3.2 School of graduate studies (SGS).**

*Level of Familiarity:* Respondents were generally ‘somewhat familiar’ with most of the programs and services provided by SGS. Of these, respondents were most familiar with administration (63%), scholarships and awards (60%), and information and news (58%). Respondents were least familiar (with the majority indicating they were not at all familiar) with Global Competencies (86%), Student Recruitment and Retention (64%), and Professional Skills (61%).

*Frequency of Use:* Most respondents selected ‘never’ when asked to indicate how frequently they availed of the programs and services provided by SGS, with the exception of Administration, for which 38% chose ‘seldom’, and Scholarships and Awards, for which 36% indicated ‘sometimes’. Most respondents selected ‘not applicable’ for most areas when asked to indicate their level of satisfaction with SGS programs and services. Students most frequently chose ‘somewhat satisfied’ for Administration (43%); Research (42%), and Scholarships and Awards (41%). The highest number of respondents was most satisfied (choosing ‘very satisfied’) with Scholarships and Awards (27%).

### **5.3.3 Graduate students' union (GSU).**

*Level of Familiarity:* Respondents were generally 'somewhat familiar' with the programs and services provided by the GSU. Only in the area of social supports did most indicate that they were not at all familiar (43%). Respondents were most familiar with 'Funding and Awards', followed by 'Other Services.'

*Frequency of Use:* In all areas, most respondents indicated that they 'never' availed of the programs and services provided by the GSU. Just over half (55%) indicated that they had never availed of academic supports, 54% had never used social supports, 40% never utilized funding or awards, and 38% never used other services. Respondents most frequently used 'Other Services', with 19% selecting 'often.'

*Level of Satisfaction:* Most students selected 'not applicable' for most areas when asked to indicate their level of satisfaction with GSU programs and services, with the exception of 'Other Services', in which 36% indicated that they were 'somewhat satisfied.'

### **5.3.4 University (campus-wide services).**

Respondents were generally 'somewhat familiar' with the programs and services provided at the university level (49%). Forty-one percent (41%) indicated that they 'sometimes' availed of university programs and services; 49% were 'somewhat satisfied.'

### **5.3.5 Faculty of arts.**

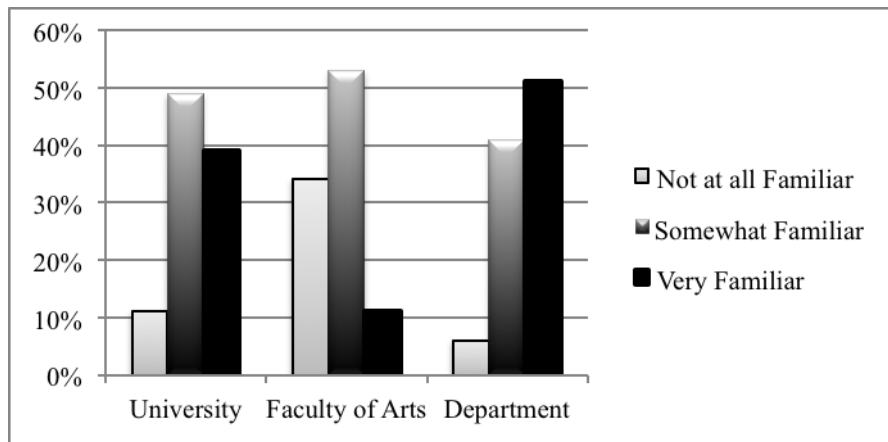
The majority of respondents (53%) were somewhat familiar with the programs and services provided by the Faculty of Arts, although 38% indicated that they had never availed of them; 41% were 'somewhat satisfied.'

### 5.3.6 Departments.

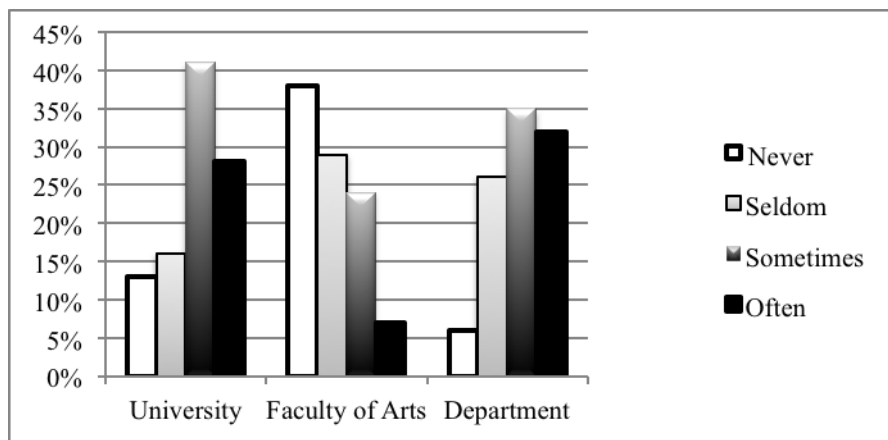
At the departmental level, the majority of respondents (51%) were 'very familiar' with programs and services; 35% 'sometimes' availed of them; 41% were very satisfied.

Graphs 1, 2 and 3 below detail respondents' overall levels of familiarity, use and satisfaction with programs and services provided by the university, the Faculty of Arts, and at the departmental level.

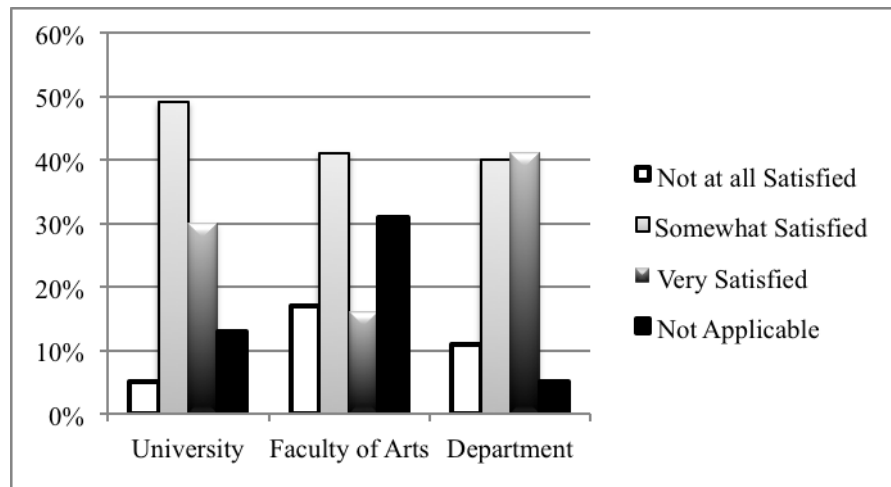
Graph 1 Survey Respondents' Level of Familiarity with Support Services Provided by the University, Faculty of Arts and Department



Graph 2 Survey Respondents' Frequency of Use of Support Services Provided by the University, Faculty of Arts and Department



Graph 3 Survey Respondents' Level of Satisfaction with Support Services Provided by the University, Faculty of Arts and Department



### 5.3.7 Experiences as a graduate student.

*Overall experience.* Most respondents (45%) indicated that they were 'very satisfied' with their overall experience as a graduate student at Memorial University; 42% were 'somewhat satisfied'.

*Academic Program.* Almost half of respondents (49%) were 'very satisfied' with their academic program; 38% were 'somewhat satisfied'.

*Supervisor/Advisor and Committee.* A significant majority (71%) said they were 'very satisfied' with their supervisor/advisor. When asked to rate their experience with their graduate or doctoral committee, 37% selected 'not applicable'; 36% were 'very satisfied'.

*Funding and Employment.* With regards to funding, 39% were 'somewhat satisfied'; 38% were 'very satisfied.' Most respondents (36%) were 'somewhat satisfied' with employment opportunities.

Generally, few statistically significant differences were found between respondents' perceptions of graduate student support services based on graduate program, enrolment status, and year of study.

*Graduate Program:* Statistically significant differences were found with respect to a number of services provided through SGS. Master's (non-thesis) students were significantly less familiar with scholarships and awards than doctoral and master's (thesis) students, and doctoral students were more likely to use these services than both groups of master's students. In comparison to doctoral and master's (thesis) students, master's (non-thesis) students were significantly less familiar with, and less likely to use travel funding, and thus, were more likely to choose 'not applicable' when asked to indicate their level of satisfaction with this service. It is important to note, however, that a number of doctoral and master's (thesis) students also selected 'not applicable' for this question.

The majority of master's students enrolled in both the thesis and non-thesis routes indicated that they never used SGS' teaching and learning services, and most chose 'not applicable' when asked to indicate their level of satisfaction with these services, as well as with their doctoral or graduate committee. This latter finding is not surprising, given that master's students are rarely assigned a committee. Lastly, doctoral students were much more likely to be 'somewhat familiar' with professional skills services provided through SGS, and doctoral and master's (non-thesis) students were more likely to be satisfied with these services than master's (thesis) students.

With regards to services provided through the GSU, doctoral and master's (thesis) students were more likely to be 'somewhat familiar' with academic supports than

master's (non-thesis) students. Overall, the majority of master's students indicated that they were not at all familiar with these services. The majority of master's students also indicated that they 'never' used funding and awards.

*Enrolment Status:* A few statistically significant differences were found between respondents' perceptions of graduate student support services based on enrolment status. With regards to services provided by SAS, full-time students and those respondents who were no longer enrolled were more familiar with housing, food and conference services than those studying part-time or those applying to graduate. With regards to SGS services, those applying to graduate indicated that they used travel funding more frequently than those students who were either enrolled full or part-time or not currently enrolled. Full-time students had higher levels of satisfaction with scholarships and awards than respondents who indicated any other enrolment status.

*Year of Study:* Students were less likely to seek out services under the SAS division of career development and experiential learning (CDEL) in later years, with the majority of respondents in years 4 and 6 selecting 'seldom' when asked to indicate their frequency of use. Students in the early years of their program, particularly years 1 and 2, gave higher ratings to the counselling centre, selecting 'somewhat satisfied' or 'very satisfied', though students in these years were also more likely to choose 'not applicable' for this question than students in later years. Students in the first year of their program were least familiar with 'other services' provided by the GSU, with none choosing 'very familiar' compared to students in year 4 of their program- all of who selected 'very familiar.' First year graduate students were also less likely to use services and programs provided by the

Faculty of Arts, with the majority selecting ‘never’, and were thus more likely to choose ‘not applicable’ when asked to indicate their level of satisfaction.

### **5.3.8 Recommendations for programs and services.**

When students were asked to indicate which units they would like to see provide more programs and services for graduate students (respondents could select multiple responses), the majority chose Departments (65%); followed by the Faculty of Arts (56%); SGS (49%). Respondents were also asked to specify what types of programs and services they would like to see more of offered *specifically* for graduate students (they could select all that apply from a list of options). A full list of these programs and services is provided below in Table 6. Funding (scholarships, fellowships, grants and bursaries) was the top choice (82%), followed by graduate student space (64%), awards (58%); and employment opportunities (56%). Least commonly selected options were services for on-campus residents (5%); other services and programs (5%); services for distance students (8%).

Table 6

*Types of Programs and Services Respondents Would Like to See More of Offered Specifically for Graduate Students*

<b>Service or Program</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent (%)</b>
Funding (Scholarships, fellowships, grants, bursaries)	125	82
Awards	88	58
Resources	68	45
Graduate Student Space	98	64
Opportunities for Career and Professional Development	67	44
Health Services	39	26
Counselling Services	24	16
Housing	31	20
Services for On-Campus Residents	7	5
Services for Off-Campus Residents	29	19
Services for Distance Students	12	8
Services for Travel (Conferences, Research)	69	45
Social Supports and Events	22	14
Employment Opportunities	85	56
Opportunities for Teaching and Learning Development	64	42
Opportunities for Research Development	63	41
Services and Programs for New Graduate Students	41	27
Academic Supports (writing, research skills, library, studying, etc.)	46	30
Program or Discipline Specific Services and Programs	33	22
Specific Services and Programs (Aboriginal, International, Part-time, etc.)	19	13
Online Services and Programs (forum, D2L, workshops/webinars)	14	9
Faculty Development Initiatives for Supervisors; Committee Members	30	20
Other Programs and Services (Please specify)	8	5

Other programs and services that respondents indicated they would like to see more of offered *specifically* for graduate students included the following:

- Graduate student lecture bank- searchable database of students interested in providing guest lectures;
- More interdisciplinary supports and opportunities, especially between schools/faculties;
- Specific programs for international students who are new to the system;
- Training programs for supervisors;



- Mature student supports and program completion flexibility;
- Teaching opportunities; and
- Healthy, inexpensive food provided by students, for students.

#### **5.3.9 Other suggestions and comments.**

Students were asked if they had any further suggestions for graduate student support services. Forty-three students responded to this question. Common themes that emerged from an analysis of these responses are organized into the following categories: a) funding, b) student specific services, c) professional development, d) advising, e) student space and community, f) housing, and g) library services.

With regards to funding, a significant number of respondents indicated that they would like to see more funding available to graduate students for the purposes of conferences and travel, as well as general funding for their program of study. Student specific services geared towards the following student groups were emphasized: students with children, mature students, international students, part-time students, and those enrolled in distance courses. The need for professional development, particularly being able to seek out advice post-degree, and help in the job search, was mentioned by a number of respondents.

An equal number of current and former students cited the importance of ensuring a good fit with the supervisor, and in particular, the need for an external counselor or mediator, ideally someone from outside the department to intervene where necessary.

Providing student space and the need to foster and build a sense of community on campus and within departments was also a common suggestion from respondents.

Housing services for both on and off-campus students was mentioned by a few respondents, and extending library access to alumni was also suggested.

Students were also asked to share their general comments. Thirty-five students responded to this question. Several of these responses addressed methodological questions and comments with regards to the survey itself. Aside from these, comments revealed a mix of positive and negative experiences shared by students. Several themes emerged and are organized into the following categories (in order of most frequently cited): a) departmental comments, b) experiences with and suggestions for support and services, c) supervisor experiences, d) administrative gaps, and e) the need for student specific services.

Respondents cited a number of negative issues and problems they experienced within their department; these pointed to inadequate levels of support and guidance beyond academic matters, political divisions among and between faculty members and theoretical camps, and the need for a “*watchdog system*” to keep supervisors in line. A few respondents also cited positive experiences with regards to support and resources provided by their department.

Students frequently commented on support services. The majority of these comments spoke to positive experiences, but a number of gaps were identified, such as the need for the GSU to engage students, issues of eligibility for, and awareness of ,services for graduate students, and the need for increased funding.

Respondents shared a number of both positive and negative experiences with respect to their relationship with their supervisors. While positive comments were quite varied, the power imbalance between students and supervisors was frequently mentioned.

Gaps in administration was mentioned by a few respondents, such as the length of the process and poor communication; other respondents spoke to the need for student specific services, and groups mentioned included mature students, those enrolled part-time, and single parents.

A number of miscellaneous comments were also made by respondents, such as the need for programs to be more selective, and the need to assist students post-coursework and avoid lengthy times to completion. Positive feedback was provided on TOGA, a now defunct professional development program once offered through SGS, as well as on services offered through the GSU, the Counselling Centre, Health Services, and the Library. Negative feedback related to a lack of environmental awareness on campus, limited healthy food options, computing services, and the organization of comprehensive examinations. A few respondents noted speculated ageism with regards to RA opportunities, and highlighted the importance of considering that student experiences may be context-specific. The examples given were of students who may have switched supervisors and that some students are much more involved in graduate and university life.

#### **5.4 Conclusion**

The purpose of this chapter was to provide a summary of the main findings of phase one of the study. Survey respondents were generally representative of the study population with regards to demographic and graduate program characteristics.

Respondents represented thirteen departments in the Faculty of Arts and included students from the Master of Philosophy (Humanities) program. Most respondents had graduated from their most recent graduate program on-campus at Memorial. The majority

of those who graduated exceeded the expected times to completion for their program. Of those students who were currently enrolled at the time of the survey most were in the first year of their program, most of them at the master's level.

Overall, survey respondents were generally 'somewhat familiar' with programs and services provided by various units at Memorial University, yet most indicated that they had never availed of many of the programs and services offered through SAS, SGS, the GSU, and the Faculty of Arts. At the university and the departmental levels, most participants indicated that they 'sometimes' availed of programs and services.

Respondents most often selected 'not applicable' for those support services provided by SAS, SGS, and the GSU when asked to indicate their level of satisfaction with various programs and services. Most survey respondents were 'somewhat satisfied' with services and programs offered at the university and Faculty of Arts levels, while at the departmental level, most respondents were 'very satisfied' with programs and services.

Few statistically significant differences were found between respondents' perceptions of graduate student support services based on graduate program, enrolment status, and year of study, and most of these differences occurred with regards to supports provided by SGS, as well as funding across various units. Generally, respondents were satisfied with their experiences as a graduate student at Memorial; but many would like to see more programs and services provided for graduate students, particularly by departments, the Faculty of Arts, and SGS. When asked to specify what types of programs and services they would like to see offered *specifically* for graduate students,

respondents most frequently cited funding, graduate student space, awards, and employment opportunities.

When asked if they had any further suggestions for graduate student support services, respondents spoke to the need for increased funding, student specific services, professional development opportunities, and student space and community building. Comments were also made on experiences with the supervisor, as well as feedback provided on housing and library services.

## **Chapter 6: Results from Phase Two**

This chapter details the findings of phase two of the study, which consisted of follow-up interviews with a sample of survey respondents. An emphasis is placed on students' experiences, factors that might influence persistence, and perceptions of the role of institutional support services across academic and administrative units.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 study participants, recruited from those who completed the online survey and indicated an interest in participating in phase two of the study. At the time of the interview, seven participants were currently enrolled in a graduate program: five doctorate and two master's (non-thesis). Two had graduated from a master's (non-thesis) program at Memorial and were currently enrolled in a doctoral program at another institution. Eleven participants had graduated from a graduate program at Memorial and were no longer enrolled as students- five master's (non-thesis), two master's (thesis), and four doctorates. Two participants were not currently enrolled and did not complete their most recent graduate program at Memorial- a doctoral program in both cases. One of these participants chose to withdraw from their program; the other was terminated (academically dismissed).

Of those participants who were currently enrolled at the time the interviews were conducted, both master's (non-thesis) students were in the latter stages of their programs- years four and seven respectively. One of these students was enrolled part-time; the other full-time. Unfortunately, there were no participants representing master's students at earlier stages in their programs. The five participants who were currently enrolled in a doctoral program at Memorial represented a wider range of study phases; while there

were no first year doctoral students, one student was beginning year two of their program, two were in year three, and two were in year four. All were enrolled full time.

Of those participants who indicated that they graduated from their graduate program at Memorial, the average time to completion varied widely across both master's and doctoral programs. At the master's level, both students who completed the thesis route (two year programs) took three years to finish. Both of these students were enrolled full time. Of the five graduates who completed master's (non-thesis) programs, three of these students finished 'on time', with two graduating within a year of starting their program, and one student taking two years to complete a two-year program. All had been enrolled full time.

Two other master's (non-thesis) students exceeded the expected time to completion for their programs, finishing within two years and three years respectively, but both of these students had been enrolled part-time. At the doctoral level, all four participants indicated that they had been enrolled full time. One student took only two and a half years to complete; the three others exceeded the expected four or five years for completion. One student took six years; the other two took seven years, one of which took a paid leave from their program (SSHRC funded).

Of the two participants who did not finish their most recent graduate program at Memorial, one left in year three (after successful completion of the comprehensive exams), and one left after year seven (after completion of fieldwork). Complete comparisons between the study population, survey respondents, and interview participants, based on demographic and graduate program information, can be found in Table 2.

## **6.1 A Note on Non-Participants**

It is worth noting that several potential interviewees who were contacted after indicating an interest in being interviewed later decided not to participate. Some of these people contacted me directly to explain why they chose not to participate. Two of these were former students who indicated that they chose not to participate as a result of the personal turmoil they had undergone while enrolled as a graduate student and not wanting to reflect on those experiences. One of these former students initially declined, but later decided to share their experience in the hopes that it would help other graduate students and promote further research on the topic. Furthermore, three survey respondents, all of them former students, declined the invitation to participate in an interview but left detailed comments at the end of the online survey, sharing similarly negative experiences. It is important to consider this reluctance on the part of potential interviewees to re-visit the graduate student experience, as it indicates a need to probe more deeply into the factors that influence retention and attrition.

## **6.2 Enrolment Decision-Making**

Participants were asked to identify some of the factors that influenced their decision to attend graduate school and, more specifically, at Memorial University. Participants pointed to a combination of factors that influenced their enrolment decisions, such as academic considerations, connections to the program or institution, the influence of a supervisor or faculty member, the encouragement or recommendation of others, reputation of the program or institution, or particular attributes of the program or institution. Most commonly cited reasons were: personal interest, location, and financial considerations. For the majority of participants, a personal interest or desire to pursue a



subject or study a particular discipline was the most important factor that influenced their decision to enrol in graduate studies. In the words of Terri, a former PhD student:

*[I had a] desire for the discipline... I knew I'd found my calling.*

Several participants who cited personal reasons for enrolling also mentioned being encouraged by faculty members. One participant, a master's student, whose research was influenced by personal experiences, was encouraged to apply to the graduate program by a professor who felt the topic was interesting. As Helen, a master's (non-thesis) student explained, *"It sort of fell into my lap."* Similarly, Harry, a former doctoral student, described the decision as having arisen from a connection with a professor, stating, *"I didn't really go searching for it, it kind of searched for me."*

Many participants gave the geographical location of Memorial as an incentive to enrol in a graduate program there, while some indicated having personal ties or connections to either the institution or the province that inhibited considerations of re-locating to complete graduate studies. For John, a fourth year doctoral student, it was faculty that were working in his area of interest that drew him to Memorial:

*...it was really the people I would be working with that brought me here.*

Others mentioned institutional reputation or specific program offerings as a significant factor in their decision to attend Memorial. For Joanna, a part-time master's student who was working full-time, it was the flexibility of the department in offering a non-thesis route:

*Personally, it was the availability of the program that could meet my needs...I could fit it in part-time and do a research paper as opposed to a thesis, which would have been a bigger endeavor working full time.*

Financial considerations, often intermingled with other factors, also played a significant role in shaping participant's decisions of whether or not to enroll in a graduate program. Many cited Memorial's lower tuition fees as an incentive, especially in comparison to other universities, and often in conjunction with other factors. Typical of such responses is the following offered by Lise, an international student who completed a master's (non-thesis) degree at Memorial:

*I think it was a combination of the cost of living and the opportunities that personally opened for me living in St. John's and the fact that they offered a competitive financial package. It made the package more attractive compared to other places.*

Interestingly, participants enrolled in master's programs mentioned financial considerations more frequently than those enrolled in doctoral programs.

### **6.3 Experiences in Graduate School**

Participants were asked a series of questions around their own decision-making process of whether or not to persist through their graduate program and to identify some of the factors that influenced that decision. Participants pointed to a multitude of factors that influenced their persistence decisions, such as financial and personal considerations, as well as the role of support, particularly at the supervisory and departmental levels.

#### **6.3.1 To stay or to go?**

Participants were asked whether they had ever considered leaving their graduate program at Memorial, and to explain their response. Almost half of the students interviewed indicated that they had *not* at any point thought about not finishing.

Characteristic of these responses are the following:

*No. Not at all...I think for many reasons I was very lucky to have a very smooth transition...It's a very small program... I think people were very welcoming... Of*

*course it was challenging...The fact that it's a short program though...I never really reached a point where I felt, oh no I can't handle this. – Lise*

*Never. I always wanted to keep going, and I knew I would complete it... I've always enjoyed education in general, and [discipline] in particular, so I never even contemplated leaving. - Terri*

This finding corroborates previous research conducted with doctoral students, in which a lack of mention of quitting was seen to point to the notion of student wellness as having a positive influence on attrition rates (Witkowsky, 2010). Yet, a significant number of participants in this study indicated that they *did* consider leaving their studies. While the level of seriousness given to this consideration was quite variable, students on the high end may be considered to be students 'at risk' of departing. A number of participants indicated that while they did not give *serious* thought to leaving graduate school, they admitted that it had at some point crossed their minds.

*[There were] late nights crying over an unfinished paper but I never really seriously considered leaving...even when it got hard, it wasn't that bad.*  
- Lindsey, master's (thesis) graduate

*I think that there have been a number of times when I've said I'm not doing this anymore and gone home, had a few beers and gone to bed and then got up the next day and said, 'Okay, I'm going to continue.' But yeah, of course; at least once a semester [laughs]. I think I probably experience a crisis of some nature or other and question why I'm here. - James, third year PhD student*

James offered an interesting perspective on the notion of quitting:

*I've always been ready to quit, and I think that that's important. I think that you've got to be ready to walk away from something, and if you're not prepared to quit something, then I don't know that you can be authentically prepared to give yourself to it, you know?*

A few participants indicated that they had, at times, considered leaving a former graduate program, either at Memorial or at another institution; and several students had in fact previously withdrawn from studies at the graduate level. Tim, a fourth year doctoral

student, drew a clear distinction between his experiences at the master's and doctoral levels.

*I think the master's and Ph.D. are very different. In my first semester of the master's, I did actually think, 'What am I doing here?' but I think that was because there was a significant jump in the workload, from an [undergrad program] the format of seminar classes can be frustrating, people difficult to talk to. I never really considered quitting the Ph.D. ...I didn't really seriously consider quitting either one, but it was definitely a discussion in my mind at some point.*

Harry, who graduated with a doctorate but had previously dropped out of two graduate programs at other institutions, indicated that he had never considered leaving Memorial.

*"There was never a moment at Memorial when I thought I would quit...not once when I was there."*

A few participants indicated that they had given serious consideration to dropping out of their graduate program at Memorial. Some of these students were still enrolled at the time they were interviewed, and others had ended up leaving their program. Despite, or perhaps in spite of, facing seemingly insurmountable challenges, these students continued to persist for a considerable amount of time, often years, which speaks to a high level of resilience and personal fortitude, as well as perhaps a level of misguidance.

Interestingly, the comments from these students reflect difficulties felt at three different transitional periods: the transition *into* graduate school; the transition *back* into academia; and the transition to *independent* work. All of these participants appeared to have faced the biggest challenge when it came to doing independent work- conducting research and/or writing the thesis or dissertation. While both master's and doctoral students experienced these transitional struggles, they were found to correspond well with Gardner's (2010b) doctoral student hierarchy of needs. Whereas the transition from Phase I 'Entry' to Phase II 'Integration' is characterized by the establishment of faculty and

peer networks considered important to graduate student socialization, the transition into Phase III ‘Establishment’ of doctoral studies is characterized by the move to scholarly independence as the student begins dissertation research, typically a period of isolation in the social sciences and humanities fields.

Helen responded that she had considered leaving “*80 thousand million times.*” She indicated that she had found the transition to graduate work, particularly the transition from Phase I ‘Entry’ into Phase II ‘Integration’ incredibly difficult, and had struggled to overcome a feeling of inadequacy amongst her peers. In her words:

*I think I always felt a little bit inadequate, like there were other people going in there that had done their Bachelors degree and they’d worked in the field and they had papers under their belts and conferences and everything – I had nothing. I didn’t have any experience, it was really new to me. I felt like I needed people to actually show me how to do it. I didn’t get it. I really felt like, for the first two years in that program, that I was really – I didn’t belong.*

Similarly, Jim, a mature student who returned to school to pursue a doctorate, emphasized the struggle of transitioning back into academia after having been away for a considerable amount of time.

*Absolutely, yes, several times [considered leaving] ...it was kind of difficult. I had been away for a long time from academics, so I basically had to relearn everything.*

For this student, department politics, a poor relationship with the supervisor and a lack of social support were factors influencing his consideration of leaving his graduate program.

Samantha, a doctoral student who did end up leaving her program at Memorial indicated that, while she also struggled with feelings of inadequacy at the entry phase of graduate school, it was the transition from coursework to conducting independent research that she struggled with the most; she faced this challenge at both the master’s and doctoral levels.

*I really love, love, love loved academia, but I really hated it...I honestly think that daily for a while I was thinking about leaving...I loved the coursework in both programs but when it comes to...following your own trail of ideas and sifting through all the literature, doing all that by yourself, that was a challenge for me. I don't think I quite knew how to be an independent learner.*

Samantha overcame this struggle, and persisted through a master's program and then a doctoral program, before finally reaching a breaking point with regards to her physical and mental health.

Comments from participants- both those who considered leaving graduate school, as well as those who did not, often reflected on the culture of academia as a deterrent and a determining factor in students' decision-making process with regards to persistence. In Helen's words:

*I honestly feel like grad school, in a lot of ways, is like the military. They beat you down and build you back up again...there's this way that academia just shuts out private personal lives and just goes, 'who cares. You're not special. You still have to produce.' And I couldn't. So it was hard.*

Helen, who admitted that she considered leaving in the later stages of her master's program, ended up switching from a thesis to a non-thesis route because of the difficulties she encountered at the writing phase.

For Samantha, who withdrew from her doctoral program, her love/hate relationship with academia acted as a push-pull factor that prevented her from making a decision for a long time. It was a culmination of factors, including the academic struggle, issues with the supervisor, and financial concerns which ultimately led to her decision to withdraw from the doctoral program. She felt that so much of academic work is dependent on the approval of others, and she wanted more say in the direction of a career. Reflecting on the rigid structure of academia, Samantha came to the conclusion that

*“...ultimately, academia is really freeing, but at the same time it seems kind of restrictive as well.”*

### **6.3.2 Factors influencing persistence.**

When asked to identify some of the factors that influenced their decision to persist through their graduate program, participants cited a wide range of circumstances and considerations that played a role in keeping them moving forward towards the completion of the degree. The most frequently cited factor was an interest in the topic or subject matter under study, which was the case for Maggie, who graduated from a doctoral program:

*I just loved what I was studying and what I was doing. My interest in that sustained itself all the way through. I really loved doing it.*

Participants also spoke of the high level of investment- both they themselves had put into the program, and of those who assisted and supported them in the process, as a motivating factor. As Lindsey explained:

*I figured the people in the department-they had given me funding, they put a bit of faith in me that I guess I would be one of the ones that finished.*

A significant number of participants identified a fear of failure, and of letting others down, as an important influence pushing them to persist. This was particularly salient for those students who had previously withdrawn or left a graduate program without finishing.

*I feel like I would really be letting myself and a lot of other people down...I feel like that would be a huge failure. – Helen*

*...Well, no one likes to fail, and having not succeeded twice I simply decided that come hell or high water I was going to get it done...It's a matter of sticking to a task until it's completed. I didn't want to be a three-time loser... - Harry*

Several participants mentioned they felt a high level of faculty and supervisory support was an important factor that influenced their decision to persist.

In some cases, the level of support received from faculty members seemed to go above and beyond what would be expected of someone in this role; several participants expressed this sentiment. As James put it:

*[support from faculty] helped reel things back in. I think it was more a case of needing to feel assured that the work I was doing was valuable and... that people were paying attention.*

A few participants who had been enrolled in a doctoral program cited financial support as a factor that had a positive influence on persistence.

Participants also identified several factors that inhibited persistence and led to considerations of or the decision to withdraw from their graduate program. These responses typically came from students who were or had been enrolled in a doctoral program. A range of reasons were given by participants for their consideration of withdrawing, including department politics, academic challenges, particularly around the large workload, comprehensive exams, and project complications; and personal strain and disenchantment with the discipline.

When asked to identify the *most* important factor that influenced their decision to persist, participants often indicated that it was a culmination of factors that led to their decision to continue. The most frequently cited factor was the level of support received from both those within the program, such as faculty and supervisors, and those outside—namely, family and loved ones. Several participants noted being both challenged and supported by faculty, in a way that pushed them past seemingly insurmountable barriers.



Nalita, a student who had graduated from a master's program recalled being given a second chance by the department head, who allowed her to resubmit a paper after receiving a low grade due to a misunderstanding about the assignment. Similarly, John, a doctoral student, remembered his supervisor applying "*just enough pressure to keep the project progressing without being overbearing.*" Another participant mentioned the support of colleagues, who felt her work was important and interesting.

Doctoral students more frequently cited the support of family and loved ones as a motivating factor. One participant indicated that her drive came from a promise she had kept to her deceased father to finish the program. Others mentioned financial responsibility to their families as a push factor. Students who were funded felt that that financial support helped to get them through.

Another commonly cited factor that participants identified was personal drive and the commitment to finish. A sense of commitment or obligation to the people or the topic they were studying also played a significant role for some participants.

*It really was a deep-rooted personal goal. I had a lot of psyche invested in this thing. So I just wasn't going to give up.* - Harry

*...you develop a bond with the people you are studying...they've kind of co-produced it with you and you have an obligation to see it to the end...* - Jim

### **6.3.3 Barriers to persistence.**

Participants were asked to identify what they felt were the biggest barriers to graduate student persistence. Financial reasons were most often mentioned, followed by the struggle of independent research, the structure of academia, and personal characteristics.

Financial hardship was usually attributed to a lack of or inadequate levels of funding, which often results in students having to work in order to sustain themselves and thus taking time from their studies and delaying progress with research. Samantha noted that:

*There was an almost complete lack of financial support... I had to work 2 jobs on top of my full time studies just to avoid further debt. I was not the only person who had to do this. Working almost full time extends our program and increases our stress levels beyond a bearable level. This creates a situation in which it is almost impossible to learn, and it removes the joy from any learning that does take place.*

James recalled having encountered financial difficulties “*right from the outset*”. This student, who moved to Memorial from another province, was offered a funding package which “*didn’t materialize in the first semester*”, leading to frustration with the program and financial hardship in the first semester.

The problems that accompany, and the subsequent implications of, financial barriers are many and students noted that these are not often considered in reflections on the causes of attrition. Participants noted the difficulties in trying to achieve a work-study balance, trying to provide for dependents, and balancing family responsibilities on top of other commitments. Suzanne, a second year doctoral student, drew a connection between financial support and retention:

*...supporting people with different financial and more significant family responsibilities...a lack of this may result in attrition.*

These challenges seem to be exacerbated for part-time students, such as Joanna:

*For part-timers the biggest challenge is probably working and doing it part time. If I could just take off work and just do it, I’d love it. But I need to earn a living. That’s a challenge...*

Participants also indicated the difficulties students often face in adjusting and learning to be independent researchers. This struggle was mentioned previously by

students who considered leaving, and has been emphasized in the literature. In Harry's words:

*I think a big impediment is trying to learn the maturity it takes to become a genuine scholar.*

For those students who were switching to a new discipline at the graduate level, which was the case for several participants, including Lise, this transition proved particularly challenging:

*...I think sometimes for people who come from other backgrounds, it's really hard to get the rhythm in a different discipline.*

Participants emphasized the importance of being interested in the topic under study, and highlighted procrastination and simply 'not being done' as a barrier in and of itself to persisting until completion.

*I guess I didn't really love my topic. I probably shouldn't have chosen it, but I think that is the biggest factor; how much you enjoy or you're interested in your topic.* - Susan, former master's (non-thesis) student

*Not being done is the biggest hurdle for graduate students, and the fact that everybody around you keeps asking, 'Are you done? If not, when are you going to be done? I thought you were done already. Didn't you finish that like last year?'*  
- Lindsey

A number of participants commented on the structure of academia, and expressed a sense of disillusionment or disappointment with the profession, despite recognizing its merits and appealing allure. Jim, a former doctoral student who ultimately ended up being academically dismissed from his graduate program, experienced difficulties at the writing stage of his dissertation work. He did not feel that he received timely feedback from his supervisor, which slowed his progress and resulted in feelings of incompetence and bitterness. Similarly, Samantha, a doctoral student who withdrew from her program

felt that academic research was too limiting in its capacity to reach out to those it is trying to reach.

*You work and you work and you work to publish something...in an academic journal, and it may be very meaningful and it may be very intelligent and it may be revolutionary, but if no one sees it besides a few academics, then what's the point?*

Participants frequently noted the systemic nature of attrition and lengthy times to completion. The culture of the institution, and a lack of 'perceived' support was seen as impediments to progress.

*The pressures and the standards that are set, it's just...those expectations are set for a certain kind of person. Everybody doesn't fit that mold. I think that there should just be a lot more consideration and flexibility in there. Give people what they need, so they can be independent and successful. – Helen*

Participants also pointed to the management structure as being responsible for the demands being placed on faculty to supervise students. Several students mentioned the important role of the supervisor, and how when that relationship goes wrong, it can impact negatively on the students' experience and ultimately, whether or not they persist to graduation. In some cases, participants shared quite horrific tales of poor supervisor/student relationships, which led to personal feelings of inadequacy and shame.

*I would speak to people who had the same supervisor as myself, and they told me very similar stories and really, quite frankly, they were relationships of abuse. – Jim*

*It was very difficult and he had very strange standards for the level of work that he expected. He knew I was working part-time and things like that, but I still feel like his expectations were very unreasonable. I felt like he was pushing me beyond my limit, in terms of the work that he wanted me to do. – Samantha*

Many students spoke of what was described as a 'suck it up' mentality they saw from supervisors and faculty members, which they felt was unsupportive, and symptomatic of the structure of academia itself. As James described:

*There's this heroic narrative that goes with graduate students that you must overcome these obstacles, just as supervisor X or Y did. And that if you don't struggle in the same sort of way they did, or in the way they remember having struggled, that it's not [an] authentic graduate student experience... - James*

Several responses spoke to the need to feel a part of the department or academic culture as an essential piece in the persistence puzzle.

*I think everybody's got imposter syndrome really, really bad. 'I don't belong here, I'm not smart enough...why am I here?' And then all of a sudden you realize everybody is struggling and everybody is making it up as they go along, and that you're no different from the rest of them. – Lindsey*

*I think that if there was a culture of collaboration, more so than a hierarchy or more so than thinking about 'I'm the supervisor, you're the student' kind of thing...I think students would be happier and I think more would finish... - James*

Participants also emphasized the role of the individual student in needing to push through and find their own drive and motivation to succeed and to finish. While some students did not consider this to be a challenge for them personally, others found this extremely difficult.

*It comes down to individual willpower in graduate school and the character of who you are as a person. And I hate when people tell me this but it's kind of the truth. They're like, 'Just buckle down and get it done.' It comes down to your work ethic...sometimes it's very hard to organize yourself because it's independent work...you're working for yourself. I have huge troubles motivating myself, punching in the hours that I need. - Elizabeth*

#### **6.3.4 The role of support services.**

Participants were asked, through a number of questions, to describe their level of awareness, use and satisfaction with student services for graduate students offered through various units on campus. The most dominant theme that arose from these discussions was the apparent disconnect between the availability of services and the level of outreach being done to promote awareness of these services.

*I think there is a huge, big gap...between the availability of services and the outreach that those services are able to do. – Lise*

*Sometimes it turns into white noise. There might be great services available, but if they're not communicated to us in some way that is clear, then it doesn't matter whether they're there. - Tim*

Generally, participants' responses spoke to a low level of knowledge or awareness about the support services available to them at Memorial. Students were least knowledgeable about programs and services offered through the Faculty of Arts and the School of Graduate Studies. Responses also indicated that students are very unclear as to what the roles of these various units are with regards to supporting graduate students and the provision of services to assist them through their programs. This perception was most evident with regards to programs and services offered through the Faculty of Arts and with respect to the role of the supervisor.

Participants were asked what they feel the role of support services is with respect to graduate student persistence and success. This was a broad question which sought to determine what first comes to mind for participants. Several participants admitted, sometimes quite bluntly, that they are not clear on the role of support services. Typical of such responses is the following:

*I don't know. What is support services? I never use them. - Peter, former master's thesis student*

Others claimed to have never felt a need to utilize the services available to assist graduate students; these comments came from a wide range of participants, and both 'traditional' and 'non-traditional' students alike.

*I never had recourse to them... I didn't feel a need, and maybe that reflects that I was very comfortable in what I was doing and I had a vision of where I wanted to go. - Harry*

Comments made by other participants reflected a noticeable gap in the services offered, especially in terms of providing students with a sense of support and belonging as a member of the graduate student population and the wider university community.

*I just never felt any kind of sense of involvement in the department or being a graduate student...I never felt like a part of that sense of belonging that I did as an undergrad... - Susan*

Participants most frequently cited support services in the areas of writing and administration, followed by funding, health services, and career development. Interestingly, master's students most commonly cited writing support. Students enrolled at both the master's and doctoral levels both commonly credited the administrative staff, in their department and SGS, as being incredibly helpful towards, and supportive of, graduate students. A number of participants also emphasized the role of the department as a supportive unit in terms of providing programs and services.

*...in terms of graduate student support I think it's at the departmental level that you get the most as a graduate student. - Elizabeth*

A few participants made the comparison to support services offered at the undergraduate level and indicated a gap in servicing at the graduate level.

*In terms of student support, I think the university does a pretty good job looking after undergraduates... but I'm not sure, I don't get the same sense that that's there for post-graduates. - James*

### **6.3.5 The role of the university.**

Participants were asked what they think universities can do to help graduate students persist and succeed in their programs. The most frequently cited support services at the broad institutional level were those related to funding, followed by ensuring quality supervision, providing career development opportunities, and housing. Interestingly, master's students mentioned social supports such as orientations more frequently than

financial supports. Funding was nonetheless mentioned by two-thirds of participants and was seen to be an essential support. As William, a former master's (non-thesis) student emphasized:

*Money is scarce; there's not much of it, and students need to have that in place if they're going to pay attention to their studies and if they're going to take them seriously and if they're going to commit themselves to it. That's number one.*

Students also mentioned a number of gaps in several areas of support that they felt were the responsibility of the university, such as a needs assessment to determine what graduate students needs are, as well as evaluations of existing services and programs.

*I don't think there's any kind of needs assessment going on...How could those support services even be there if they don't even know what they're addressing? - Helen*

*Talk to their students and listen to them. I have a feeling that there's a huge disconnect between what Grad Studies thinks happens at the graduate student level and then what students think happen at the graduate student level.*  
- Samantha

Participants also highlighted the need to acknowledge and attend to the varying needs of a diverse student body, and the importance of fostering a collaborative, supportive environment.

*I think you could produce a much better, a much stronger, a more robust, more productive community by being much more collectively oriented and mutually supportive. - James*

Participants also mentioned the need for the university to be informed of, and concerned about attrition and lengthy times to completion.

*I think MUN has an obligation to steward them through in a timely fashion. From what I've heard, and from previous experience with other graduate students, sometimes timeliness, it can go on endless because they probably don't have clear direction and support. - Joanna*

*I don't know what the drop out rate is like- but maybe someone should be collecting this data and looking at it and saying, "Okay, whoa. These people are*



*dropping out. What's going on?" So maybe it needs to be studied a bit and prioritized. - Samantha*

### **6.3.6 The role of the supervisor.**

Participants were asked what they think or believe the role of the supervisor/advisor and/or committee is with regards to graduate student persistence and success. Most students consider the student-supervisor relationship to be extremely important, as exemplified by the following comments.

*From my experience at least, this was an incredibly important relationship...it gave me my greatest sense of my own place in the field at large. – Terri*

*I think your core faculty, and especially your supervisor will make or break your success in the grad program, I really do...If you don't have your supervisor backing you up, especially when you're doing your thesis, you pretty much have nothing... you're not going anywhere. - Lindsey*

Participants listed a wide variety of traits they felt were characteristic of a good supervisor and the roles they should play; these included the following: providing guidance, advice and moral support, being knowledgeable in their area of expertise, advocating for their students, being collegial, offering help with research and timely feedback on writing, showing interest in the students' work, and providing or helping to secure funding.

A number of participants emphasized the importance of ensuring a good 'fit' between the student and the supervisor, in terms of personality, and work style, in particular.

*If you don't have a good relationship with your supervisor, first thing is you're not going to progress. You're not going to be able to talk to your supervisor about the stuff that you need to talk about, like the questions you have about your work or other cultural things that are going on... you're really on your own and you have to find your own resources within yourself to keep going, and that can be a huge challenge... - Samantha*

A few participants expressed feelings of being unclear as to what the ‘role’ of the supervisor actually is, particularly with regards to what duties were expected or required, and how to determine when the supervisor was either falling short or going above and beyond the call of duty.

*I got all this support ...but I wasn't sure if that was what he was supposed to do, or if he went beyond. I was never really sure...but I guess it would have been nice to have a clear, this is the role of your supervisor; this is what is expected.*

- Susan

### **6.3.7 The role of the department.**

Participants’ comments in this study indicate that for many students, the department is ‘home base’. Administrators in particular stood out as essential pillars of support. As James acknowledged:

*[The] admin assistants are the most important people in the department... they're not considered authentic parts of departments sometimes, when, to me, they most certainly are. They're vital parts of the department.*

Previous research has emphasized the positive influence that the programmatic, social and physical structures of a department can have on students’ social and academic integration and the level of involvement (Franco-Zamudio, 2009; Lovitts, 2000).

Participants in this study saw socialization as an essential, but often missing element of particular departments. Students spoke to the need for more organized social activities to promote student involvement and interaction and merging of academic and social integration was seen as a key role of the department.

*...just promoting sort of a sense of belonging or camaraderie...provide opportunities for students to meet outside the classroom...we need more student involvement...This is something that we don't really have. I think it makes a big difference in how people interact with each other... they're sort of missed opportunities just by the fact that people won't talk to each other. – John*

*Their role, ideally, would be to interact more with the students and to expose students to all different sorts of conversations that are going on within the discipline, different debates that are happening, and give us a bit more broad education about the discipline in general. - Maggie*

One means of invoking a sense of belonging is creating or allocating some physical space in which graduate students can convene, utilize services and resources, and feel a part of the larger university community. This sentiment is validated by the following comment from a participant:

*I think when you give graduate students space, you're saying, 'Well, I think your work is important and I think you're valuable in our department' ... - Elizabeth*

For some, support at the departmental level was hampered by tension between faculty members and in some cases this created an unwelcoming environment.

*I don't feel like I had a very good connection with anyone...doors are closed. - Helen*

*The department itself was fractured...the level of hostility was astonishing to witness. - Jim*

Several participants mentioned the need for a neutral 'go to' person to provide guidance and to intervene when problems arise.

*...a second person who... provides some protection and gives students a space to express their concerns and see what can be done, whether at the department level or more broadly, liberating the chair of the program from that pressure. - Lise*

*It would be really awesome, honestly, if there was just a third party, more of an advocate sort of a person there. - Helen*

### **6.3.8 The role of the Faculty of Arts.**

Participants were very unclear as to what the role of the Faculty of Arts is or should be with regards to providing support to graduate students at Memorial. When questioned, students frequently admitted to not really knowing anything about the

administrative unit of which their department was a part. Many were then interested to learn what their role was and what services they offered. This speaks to the need to make their roles transparent for the students they serve. Typical of such a response is that provided by Jim:

*I really have no idea what their role is supposed to be in terms of an administrative body...I literally can't think of how I have interacted with the faculty since I've been here, or the Arts faculty. What do they do?*

Participants did mention a number of services and programs they would like to see offered for graduate students in the Faculty of Arts, such as more funding and career development opportunities. Several participants indicated that they would like to see an expansion of 'ArtsWorks' to attend more to the needs of graduate students. A program that helps Arts students prepare for the job market, ArtsWorks is conducted over one semester. Students attend interactive sessions and workshops and gain experience working in a community organization. While this program is open to graduate students, it is geared specifically towards undergraduate students.

Graduate students would also like to see the Faculty of Arts work more towards promoting a sense of belonging amongst its students across disciplines, and organizing academic and social events where inter-disciplinarity in the Arts is celebrated, such as lectures and opportunities to engage with the broader community.

#### **6.3.9 Most important services and identified gaps.**

Participants identified a wide range of support services they consider to be the *most* important to graduate students at Memorial, as well as areas in need of further support. In terms of the most important services, students most frequently cited financial support, followed by social events; support provided by the supervisor, and health care

provided by the GSU. Similarly, students also felt that these same types of support could be expanded upon and the level of service ‘upped’ to better attend to the needs of an increasingly diversified graduate student body.

Funding was seen as both an incentive and a barrier to graduate student progress and time to completion. Students would like to see more financial support at all levels, and several participants mentioned the lack of funding opportunities available to part-time and international students in particular. The need for services and programs geared *specifically* towards graduate students was also highlighted, as it was acknowledged that this group often has unique and much more varied needs than undergraduate students. As Elizabeth admitted:

*...it can be hard being a grad student sometimes...I find services at MUN are for all students. And it's really different being a grad student than an undergrad.*

Social supports were most frequently cited when participants were asked to identify the types of support services and programs they would like to see offered *specifically* for graduate students at Memorial, and this was seen to be an especially important resource for students who come from other provinces and countries. As Jim remarked:

*Any university has to understand that people that come to them to study don't have this huge social network. I think people brought up in that milieu sort of take it for granted, but for people from away it's a huge challenge and it can make a very big difference in the outcomes. You kind of have to create the opportunities for people to meet socially.*

Participants frequently spoke to the sense of isolation and loneliness they felt, particularly at the research or writing phase of their program. Participants rarely mentioned the importance of peer support- emphasized in the literature as an important component of socialization, which is indicative of an absence of social networking opportunities for Arts graduate students at Memorial.

*It would have been nice to have felt like I was a graduate student at MUN, because I didn't really. – Susan*

*I wish there was more culture on campus...The community is, in some ways, fragmented. I think it could be helpful for graduate students if that community seemed more solid...I would like to see more of a sense of solidarity among graduate students. – James*

It is clear from participants' responses that a supportive supervisor is absolutely crucial to graduate student persistence and success. Glen, a former master's (non-thesis) student noted that

*An interested and engaged supervisor is really helpful, especially at the research portion.*

Several students, mostly those enrolled in master's programs, also mentioned the importance of the writing centre, especially for international students, while several doctoral students cited career development as an essential service. Participants were of the opinion that the university and the academic community as a whole needs to look beyond the academy in terms of helping graduate students to transition out of school into the workforce. Samantha noted:

*I think having a really strong sort of forward-looking view on academia would be really great: helping students to see where it is they could end up when they finish their degrees.*

Participants also felt that mental health should be prioritized and that counseling services at Memorial are an important support for graduate students. As Peter acknowledged:

*I think graduate school...can be very stressful in a lot of people and one shouldn't underestimate the realities of mental health.*

A few participants also emphasized the important role of the department in providing graduate students with a supportive and collegial environment in which to work.

*Having a cohesive, either department as a whole or a group of graduate students work together. I find that was really helpful, that we had a cohort of students that were really supportive of each other and that worked. A lot of us worked in the same sort of areas and we could bounce ideas off each other, and really help each other that way. - Maggie*

*...the kind of conversations that I needed to have, there was no venue to take them...I think the real leap forwards come from that informal exchange of ideas. - Jim*

The importance of graduate student space cannot be underestimated in this respect, what Suzanne described as: *“A place to settle down for a few hours; a third space away from the office; home...[a place to have] informal run-ins, [build] social support networks, generate friendships.”*

#### **6.4 Professional Development**

Participants were asked whether they felt their professional development needs were addressed in their graduate program, particularly with regards to transitioning out of graduate school and into a career. The slight majority of informants indicated that they felt that these needs were addressed.

*I think the university provides lots of support, helping people to transition to their professional life... I know they are really proactive providing those services... - Lise*

*Personally, I felt both well-prepared and well-positioned for future employment. - Terri*

A number of participants, however, felt that their professional development needs were not addressed over the course of their graduate program.

*No, there was none of that...I feel like there wasn't a lot of real-world-on-the-job training. But then again, I opted to do a thesis-based MA, which usually your next natural step is your Ph.D. ....so all I can say is they didn't offer much in the way of career mentoring. - Lindsey*

*It was a great general background, but in terms of professional development, as with all Arts-core programs, it could use a real shot in the arm. - William*

Regardless of whether or not they felt their professional needs were met in the duration of their graduate program, participants mentioned several gaps and a number of recommendations for universities and departments in particular, to consider when developing and revising the curriculum of their graduate programs. Most of these comments spoke to a continued focus on preparing students for careers only in academia and the need to acknowledge the reality of the job market. Participants indicated that students must be both informed about these realities, as well as prepared to enter both academic and non-academic careers.

*I think perhaps departments could do a better job from a different perspective, which is a perspective for people who want to continue in academia...I didn't feel in my department at the time I was there [that this] was so prevalent. I think that could be something that would certainly make a difference. – Lise*

*...it seems like it's just the assumption that you go into academia. Not much support is given for thinking outside that path. So it falls back to the individual to figure that out for ourselves. - Maggie*

Career development workshops, offered at both the university and departmental levels, were frequently mentioned. A number of participants also praised work and teaching opportunities as essential and appreciated components of graduate student professional development, but their direct applicability to non-academic careers was called into question.



## 6.5 Advice for other graduate students.

At the end of the interview, participants were asked if they had any advice to offer to other graduate students, or those considering enrolling in graduate studies. Participants offered words of wisdom and suggested a number of personality traits they saw as important to succeeding at the graduate level, such as being tough and resilient; committed to the program and willing to work hard. In the words of Elizabeth, a current PhD student,

*You have to take it seriously, treat it like a job...*

Samantha offered the following advice to her peers: *“Try not to take things personally, because you’re going to get beat up a lot. Just be tough.”* Participants also highlighted the need to have a positive attitude, and be forward-looking, particularly with regards to career goals and the job market. And Tim suggested:

*If you frame things in a positive way, you tend to be more happy while you’re doing them. So maybe you’ll have a better chance of actually completing whatever the task is that you set out for yourself.*

The majority of participants emphasized the importance of being both independent and proactive with regards to seeking out the help and support one needs. As Lise put it, you have to *“realize that people are not going to be there to tell you what you need to know, that you need to be a lot more proactive.”*

The importance of finding a topic that is of interest enough to sustain a high level of continued devotion all the way through was also emphasized, while a significant number of participants mentioned the importance of ensuring a good fit with the supervisor, as well as the institution and the department.

Several participants took this opportunity to reflect again on the structure of academia. Comments spoke of the need for students to realize the realities of an academic lifestyle so as to be prepared and ready to face the challenges that will await them. James offered the following advice:

*I would say that it might be helpful for people to understand that the system, or the culture of the university, is where the resistance that you're going to encounter is coming from. That it's not necessarily the people... recognize the feudal nature of the university and the way it operates out of dominance...then your path might be an easier one to walk.*

Other participants focused on the important role students have to play in making universities more accountable for, and to, the people they admit, particularly with respect to providing students with the services they need to get through their programs in a timely manner. In the words of Joanna: *"We need to advocate. I think we have a responsibility to."*

Participants also felt that students have a role to play in changing the structure of academia for the better. Connections were made between academia and games of chance, such as gambling or racehorse betting, indicating that participants saw students as having less agency in the academic game, which ultimately limits their role in determining their own outcomes in graduate school. While such analogies are certainly interesting, and warrant further analysis, it is beyond the scope of this study. Future research should explore student perceptions of academia, and how these views play into students' decision-making processes as they transition into, through, and out of graduate school.

## **6.6 Conclusion**

The purpose of this chapter was to provide a broad overview of the main findings of phase two of the study. The focus in this phase was on the transitions *through* graduate

school, highlighting students' individual and shared experiences, identifying factors students believe to be influential to persistence, and summarizing student perceptions of the role of institutional support services across various academic and administrative units.

Interview participants were fairly representative of the study population and survey respondents. Thirteen of the twenty interviewees were not currently enrolled as students; most of these (11 students) had graduated from a graduate program at Memorial. Participants represented a wide range of demographic and program characteristics. With regards to transitioning into graduate school, a number of factors were identified as being influential in the decision to enrol in a graduate program and at Memorial specifically, such as personal interest, location, and financial considerations.

Transitions through graduate school appear to be shaped by a combination of influences that both promote and inhibit persistence. While the majority of participants indicated that they did not consider leaving graduate school, or at least had not given serious thought to it, responses reveal that many push and pull factors seem to weigh into that decision. Many participants, both current and former, admitted to questioning the point of graduate school and what they were doing. A distinction was sometimes drawn between experiences at different institutions and between master's and doctoral programs. Responses from those participants who indicated that they *had* considered leaving their program speak to the difficulties students face transitioning into graduate school and through the independent research phase of a master's (thesis) or doctoral program.

The most dominant factors that participants identified as having a positive influence on persistence were personal interest and commitment, and a high level of

faculty support. For students at the master's level, internal supports, such as those provided by peers and faculty, were seen to be most important, while doctoral students most often cited external influences such as family and friends. The biggest barriers to persistence were seen to be financial, the structure of academia, the struggle of independent research, and personal characteristics.

The most dominant theme that arose from discussions on support services was the apparent disconnect between the availability of services and the level of outreach being done to promote awareness of these services. Participants were generally not very aware of or knowledgeable about the support services available to graduate students at Memorial. Participants were least knowledgeable about programs and services offered through the Faculty of Arts and SGS. Responses also indicate that students are not clear on the roles of various administrative and academic units on campus in terms of providing graduate student support services. This perception was most evident with regards to programs and services offered through the Faculty of Arts and with respect to the role of the supervisor.

Participants consider funding, social and writing supports, professional development, and health and counseling services as the most important support services for graduate students. Participants would also like to see more of these supports offered, as well as efforts to ensure good student/supervisor relationships, and to promote and raise awareness of graduate student support services. Students are generally satisfied with Memorial's professional development initiatives, but would like to see more support at the departmental level for those seeking both academic and non-academic careers. When asked to offer their advice to other graduate students, participants emphasized the

importance of being tough and resilient, independent and proactive, and having a positive attitude. Ensuring a good institutional and program fit and having an understanding of the structure of academia before enrolling was also encouraged.

## **Chapter 7 Overall Findings and Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to explore the following question: What support services assist graduate students and what effects, if any, do they have on persistence and academic success? While it became clear early on in the process of data collection that the experience of participants were quite varied and context-specific, depending on such factors as the discipline and/or department of study, structure and organization of the graduate program, and phase of study - several predominant themes emerged from students' survey responses and interview accounts. In this chapter, the research questions that guided this study are revisited and overall findings are explored in the context of existing literature and research.

### **7.1 Levels of Awareness, Frequency of Use, and Satisfaction with Support Services**

The findings from both the survey and interviews reveal a low level of awareness and knowledge about support services available to graduate students at Memorial University. Study participants indicated that they are generally not very familiar with programs and services offered by the various academic and administrative units; furthermore, they are not very clear on what the role of each of these specific divisions is. There is an evident disconnect between the quantity and quality of services available and graduate student awareness of, use and satisfaction with these services. This speaks to two distinct, yet inter-related issues of importance to university administrators and student services practitioners: 1) the need to make the role of these units and the services they provide *transparent* to graduate students; 2) the need to *promote* and raise awareness of the institutional programs and services available to assist graduate students.

Survey respondents indicated that they were not overly familiar with the services and programs offered by various units on campus, with most selecting ‘somewhat familiar’ for supports provided by SGS, the GSU, the university, and the Faculty of Arts. Respondents were least familiar (with most indicating they were ‘not familiar’) with career development; housing, food and conferences services; and student success programs provided by SAS, as well as global competencies, recruitment and retention, and professional skills programming offered by SGS; and social supports offered through the GSU.

When asked to comment on the role of various units in providing support services to graduate students, interview participants indicated that they were generally not very familiar with support services available to graduate students at Memorial. Participants were least knowledgeable about programs and services offered through the Faculty of Arts and SGS. Responses also indicate that students are not clear on the roles of various administrative and academic units on campus in the provision of graduate student support services. This perception was most evident with regards to programs and services offered through the Faculty of Arts and with respect to the role of the supervisor.

Most survey respondents indicated that they rarely if ever used many of the programs and services offered through SAS, SGS, and the GSU. Given this lack of familiarity, it was not surprising that respondents most often selected ‘not applicable’ when asked to indicate their level of satisfaction with those support services provided by SAS, SGS, and the GSU. Most survey respondents indicated that they were ‘somewhat familiar’ with, ‘sometimes’ used and were ‘somewhat satisfied’ with services and programs offered at the university level, while at the Faculty of Arts level, most were

‘somewhat familiar’ with, ‘never’ used, and were ‘somewhat satisfied’ with programs and services. At the departmental level, most respondents were ‘very familiar’ with, ‘sometimes’ used and were ‘very satisfied’ with programs and services.

As there is a lack of research exploring the overall role of support services on graduate student persistence, or what graduate students *perceive* that role to be, it is not known whether the low level of awareness and knowledge about student services reported by participants in this study is typical of graduate students in general, specific to the social sciences and humanities disciplines or this institution in particular, or common across various types of institutions. Further research on the evaluation of support services, in multiple contexts and across student populations, is thus needed.

## **7.2 The Role of Institutional Support**

How participants *perceive* the level and quality of support services for graduate students is seen as very different from the actual level and quality of support services available, and this distinction is considered to be extremely important to this analysis, as participants indicated having a low level of awareness and knowledge of these supports. The less aware and less knowledgeable one is, the less one is able to make informed judgments or evaluations.

When asked what they thought the role of various institutional units, programs and services were with regards to providing support to graduate students, interview participants frequently indicated that they were generally not very familiar with these units, particularly the School of Graduate Studies and the Faculty of Arts. Thus, their role in graduate student success and persistence was unclear to them.



Once prompted (the interviewer would prompt by listing some examples of services and programs offered), participants frequently indicated their awareness and, where applicable, their use and level of satisfaction with these supports. It appears that participants are less familiar with the units under which these services are provided, than they are with the services themselves. For example, participants were typically quite familiar with the writing centre and health care, but were less likely to know that these services fell under university (campus-wide) services and the GSU.

Further research is needed to explore more fully the role played by institutional supports in graduate student persistence and success. It is suggested that administrative and academic units conduct regular evaluations of their services and programs. As many of these units offer support to the entire student body, it would be a good idea to begin tracking students' use and to differentiate between undergraduate and graduate students.

### **7.3 Barriers to Persistence**

*Recruitment means nothing if you can't retain the students you have, and offer them competitive funding and training packages.* – Survey respondent

When asked to identify what they feel are some of the biggest barriers to graduate student persistence, interview participants mentioned a wide range of factors they consider to be important in the decision-making process of whether or not to persist with their studies. Financial constraints, as well as the consequences of being inadequately funded appear to play a vital role in graduate student attrition. Participants also frequently cited the culture and structure of academia as a de-motivating factor in decisions around persistence. Mention was also given to factors such as the relationship with the supervisor, and individual characteristics and responsibilities that may impede progress.

### **7.3.1 Financial constraints.**

*I see the financial struggles of many people that I know, the impact that it can have. I still think that financial constraints are one of the main reasons why people leave their studies. – Lise*

While many survey respondents ranked the services and programs provided for graduate students at Memorial quite highly, a lack of adequate funding was mentioned as the most evident area of weakness. When asked if they had any further suggestions or comments regarding support services for graduate students at Memorial, survey respondents frequently spoke to the need for the university to be more financially accountable to the students they admit.

Survey respondents also spoke to the undesirable consequences of financial constraints, such as having to work while enrolled in full-time studies. In the most extreme cases, frustrated participants indicated that the lack of funding and employment opportunities forced them to either abandon their studies, change to part-time status, or to move out of province to accept a job offer.

The most common types of financial support that survey respondents mentioned as being vital were entrance fellowships or funding packages for incoming students and travel funding. While respondents often stated that they were very appreciative of the funding they did receive, many claimed it was often not enough to cover the high costs of traveling outside of the province to attend conferences or conduct necessary research. Respondents indicated that they typically have to cover the remaining costs themselves, or in many cases, are not able to take advantage of these opportunities.

Interview participants frequently cited financial factors as a barrier to both their own persistence, as well as that of other graduate students' persistence. Much like

responses given on the survey, most comments made by interview participants with regards to financial constraints referred to the struggle of balancing coursework and research with work-related responsibilities. Students must frequently hold a part- or full-time job in order to earn a living and support themselves, their studies, and in some cases, other dependents. Lengthy times to completion and delayed progress in programs was frequently mentioned as a consequence of inadequate funding and having to work while enrolled full-time as a graduate student. Similar findings have been found in previous research (Martinez, Ordu, Della Sala, & McFarlane, 2013). Participants also spoke to the level of financial and personal sacrifice necessary to persevere and get through.

Study participants indicated that they would like to see universities take more responsibility in providing financial support to graduate students, and that financial matters be taken more seriously. These concerns are exemplified by the following comment from Samantha, a former doctoral student:

*I think there is an avoidance of acknowledging the financial struggles of students. They don't want to hear if you're having financial problems. They think that's not their problem, and I think that needs to change.*

### **7.3.2 Culture and structure of academia.**

*I think that the problem that a lot of students face is systematic, that it's part of the culture of the institution. – James*

The structure of academia came up as another barrier to graduate student persistence, with participants noting the systemic nature of attrition and lengthy times to completion. The culture of the institution and a lack of 'perceived' support was seen as an impediment to progress. Again, this points to the importance of promoting and raising awareness of services available and enhancing what services students feel to be most important, as well as addressing any significant gaps.

This lack of perceived support may be at least partially responsible for some students' perception of a poor fit between their own expectations and those of the institution, graduate school in general or the department. In a study of attrited doctoral students at one midwestern university in the United States, Golde (2005) found that students' inaccurate expectations as well as academic under-preparedness were responsible for much of the attrition in her study population.

Participants in this study also mentioned the management structure of the institution as being responsible for the demands being placed on faculty to gain students and increase graduate student enrolment. Many students spoke of what was described as a 'suck it up' mentality they saw from supervisors and faculty members, which they felt was unsupportive, and symptomatic of the structure of academia itself.

The belief held by faculty that only a select few students have what it takes to make it through graduate school has been referred to in the literature as the 'survival of the fittest' mentality (Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992; Gardner, 2005; Lovitts, 2001). Gardner (2005) questions whether the ambiguity and lack of clarity doctoral students experience is somewhat intentional, as scholars see this as part of preparing the next generation for the uncertainty they can expect in the academic profession. Bieber and Morley (2006) note that the socialization process that occurs in graduate school is in fact incomplete, and for socialization to be effective, student views and constructs of faculty life must be considered and compared to the schemas held by faculty, as a misalignment may impede communication and prohibit positive socialization for the student.

### **7.3.3 Relationship with the supervisor.**

*The thesis supervisor strongly influences a student's academic and professional development. Through the choice of a supervisor, a student also chooses a work*

*environment and often financial support as well. The value and success of the thesis depend to a very large degree on the quality of the relationship that develops between supervisor and student* (Memorial University, 2013).

Interview participants described the relationship between student and supervisor as absolutely pivotal to feedback and timely progress. Many saw this role as being filled by such responsibilities as providing assistance with research and program requirements, offering advice and guidance, and promoting social networking and building collegiality.

Several participants noted that when the relationship with the supervisor goes wrong, it can impact negatively on the students' experience and ultimately, whether or not they persist to graduation. While interview participants who had encountered, or were having a negative experience with their supervisor were a minority, in some cases participants shared quite horrific tales of student-supervisor mismatches, which led to personal feelings of inadequacy and shame. Several others indicated that they knew of such experiences happening with other graduate students. McAlpine et al. (2012) highlight the ambiguity that surrounds the doctoral supervisor role and the need for standard policies and procedures to prevent what has been termed a culture of neglect.

Golde (2005) found that a mismatch between advisor and student was a cause of much of the doctoral attrition in science departments at one American institution; conversely, students who had dropped out of humanities doctoral programs did not identify this as a factor. Zhao et al. (2007) found that both the strategies doctoral students use to select advisors, as well as the advisors' behaviour, influenced students' satisfaction with the relationship. In a recent qualitative study, Barnes (2010) found that the advisor's expectations with regards to academic engagement and professional socialization may be most influential to student persistence. Further research is needed to examine the

perceived role of the supervisor/advisor and the extent to which the student-supervisor relationship influences persistence at both the master's and doctoral levels and across disciplines.

#### **7.3.4 Individual characteristics**

Participants also noted the role of individual characteristics that may inhibit persistence or delay progress. Many spoke to the need to be mature, committed and willing to work hard. There was speculation that those without a good work ethic may struggle more. As Glen surmised:

*It's a big workload. Maybe some people aren't quite willing to put the effort in.*

Procrastination was seen to be significant barrier to pushing onwards, and many students mentioned the difficulties they encountered in motivating themselves to work independently and put in the hours necessary to be successful. This independent mindset is considered to be particularly salient at the candidacy or final stage of doctoral studies (Tinto, 1993; Weidman et al., 2001); given that this trait was cited in this study by master's students as well points to the need for further research that explores the role of personal characteristics on graduate student persistence.

#### **7.4 Positive Influences on Persistence**

Study participants cited a number of factors they saw as incentives to persist in graduate studies. Financial support, intrinsic interest for the discipline or topic under study, and the support of others were most frequently mentioned as having a positive influence on persistence.

#### **7.4.1 Financial support.**

Survey respondents most frequently cited funding when asked to specify what types of programs and services they would like to see more of offered specifically for graduate students, and when asked if they had any further suggestions for graduate student support services. Interview participants mentioned financial support most often when they were asked to identify the following: 1) what universities can do for graduate students; 2) the most important services and programs for graduate students at Memorial; 3) types of support services and programs they would like to see offered specifically for graduate students at Memorial.

Financial support was the third most frequently cited factor considered to be *most* important to interview participants' own persistence, behind a high level of support and a personal commitment to finish. In all but one of these cases, the participant had received a significant amount of external funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC).

#### **7.4.2 Intrinsic interest.**

Most of the interview participants indicated a high level of personal commitment and interest in the topic or subject under study as an important factor that influenced their decision to persist through graduate school; master's students were more likely to identify it as the *most* important factor influencing their persistence. One participant, Jim, a former PhD student, classified this personal interest as 'intrinsic motivation.' Lovitts (2008) found that intellectual curiosity or 'intrinsic interest' was the most important characteristic of doctoral students for ease in the transition to independent research and for high-quality performance in the program.

While personal or intrinsic interest may be considered a factor external to the university, it is certainly susceptible to significant influence by the institutional, departmental and disciplinary environment or culture. In many cases it seems, a deep-rooted passion for the subject under study is enough for students to persevere despite facing significant challenges. This is an interesting finding that warrants further research.

#### **7.4.3 Support of others.**

Participants frequently cited the support of others- those both internal and external to the university as having a positive influence on their persistence through graduate studies. Department support, including the assistance of supervisors, faculty and staff, was discussed extensively by participants who were or had been enrolled in a master's program, and was also mentioned by both current and former doctoral students. In the words of Terri:

*...support from the department and from my peers. I genuinely felt a part of my larger academic community.*

Interestingly, the support of peers, as well as family and friends outside of the university, was cited as an important factor in persistence by those enrolled in doctoral studies, but was absent from master's student responses. The positive influence of external sources of support such as family and peers has been demonstrated in previous research (Boulder, 2010; Williams-Tolliver, 2010). Further research should explore the role of different types of both internal and external supports among master's and doctoral students in more depth.



## 7.5 Most Important Support Services

*I think the things that could help the experience are not necessarily organized, formal programs. They're more just ways of doing things, or having things in place... - Maggie*

When asked to specify what types of programs and services they would like to see offered *specifically* for graduate students, survey respondents mentioned funding, graduate student space, awards, and employment opportunities as important services. When asked if they had any further suggestions for graduate student support services, respondents spoke to the need for increased funding, student specific services, professional development opportunities, and student space and community building.

Interview participants were also asked to identify the services and programs they consider to be the most important for graduate students at Memorial, as well as the types of support services and programs they would you like to see offered specifically for graduate students at Memorial. Participants identified a wide range of support services they consider to be the most important to graduate students at Memorial, as well as areas in need of further support. For both questions, however, financial, social, and supervisory support emerged as the most essential.

### 7.5.1 Financial support.

As was the case with regards to the identification of the factors thought to be most influential factors to graduate student attrition and retention, financial support was considered to be an important ingredient in graduate student success. As Maggie explained:

*[Funding] ...it's such a big issue. It's so stressful and there's no funding. Having the money and having the time (because you have the money to work on it) is like central to all of this. I know I'm supposed to say it's all because you love what*

*you do but if you don't have the means to actually focus on it, then it doesn't really matter.*

The importance of providing adequate levels of financial support to graduate students, and its role in retention and attrition has been discussed extensively in the research literature (Strayhorn, 2010).

A recent study conducted in the United States found that students who receive financial support in the form of loans have shorter times to completion than those who receive other forms of financial support or no financial support. Important to note, however, is that while doctoral students in the social sciences and humanities disciplines were twice as likely to borrow to finance their studies as compared to students in engineering, physical sciences, and biological sciences, they also had the longest times to completion (Kim & Otts, 2010). This study did not explore in great detail the *types* of financial support student received. It is recommended that future research consider the role of loans versus merit-based fellowships, scholarships, and grants, as well as paid employment, such as research and teaching assistantships.

Interestingly, previous research has shown that graduate students with research assistantships (RA) are twice as likely to persist in their programs than those who do not hold RA positions (Lovitts, 2001), and have shorter times to completion than those students who hold a teaching assistantship (TA). Yet participants in this study frequently pointed to employment as a barrier to persistence and a cause of lengthy times to completion, as working takes time away from hours that could be spent researching and writing, and appears to be physically, mentally and emotionally exhausting for some students. Similarly, Boulder (2010) has speculated that employment could have detrimental effects on students' progress and times to completion, while conversely,

Gittings (2010) found a significant positive relationship between full-time employment and degree completion. Future research would do well to examine more closely the effects of on and off campus employment, such as holding an RA position, or a full-time professional job, on graduate student socialization, level of engagement and involvement, and persistence.

### **7.5.2 Social support.**

*Relationships in learning-they make learning fun. Learning is fun on your own, but I see it more as a social process. I think the quality of learning is better when you do it with other people and it's more fun. You just get better outcomes, I think. – Samantha*

Participants frequently spoke to the sense of isolation and loneliness they felt, particularly at the research phase of their program. The importance of peer support, emphasized in the literature as an important component of socialization (Hildebrandt, 2011, Lovitts, 2001, Sweitzer, 2009), was rarely mentioned by participants, which is indicative of an absence of social networking opportunities for Arts graduate students at Memorial.

This finding is not unexpected, as the social sciences and humanities disciplines are characterized by a high level of autonomous, independent work as opposed to the collaborative or lab-based approach that is typical of research in the sciences. Yet it is particularly interesting in light of the current literature on social and academic integration. While participants most frequently cited the need for further social supports, little mention was given to the need to boost efforts aimed at increasing academic integration. In a recent study that examined persistence factors associated with the successful completion of a doctoral degree in the field of education, students identified factors associated with both social and academic integration (Spaulding & Rockinson-

Szapkiw, 2012); likewise, Gilardi and Guglielmetti (2011) found that the most important variables in the retention of non-traditional students are an increased use of academic support services and higher levels of perceived social integration. Conversely, previous work, namely that of Tinto (1993), and later Lovitts (2001), point to an increased emphasis on academic integration at the doctoral level. Further research should explore further the role of social and academic supports in various disciplines at the master's and doctoral levels.

### **7.5.3 Supervisory support.**

Several participants in this study highlighted the important role of the supervisor, which is consistent with previous research that has emphasized the role of the advisor in student success and satisfaction with the graduate experience (Barnes, 2010; Golde, 1998; Zhao et al., 2007). One master's student was quite blunt in crediting her supervisor for her persistence, stating that if it was not for a high level of support, she would not have finished the program. More frequently, however, participants pointed to the need for increased levels of supervisory and faculty support and the desire to see a mediator role created to give students a safe space to go to when problems arise. As Samantha urged,

*[We need] more opportunities to talk about your experiences with your supervisors, with other students, and sort of connect with other students on that... because then maybe that's a way that the administration can become aware of continued and ongoing problems with certain specific people... those conversations need to be had.*

### **7.5.4 Professional development.**

Most interview participants felt their professional development needs were at least somewhat addressed in their graduate program, particularly with regards to transitioning out of graduate school and into a career. A significant number of participants, however,

felt that their professional development needs were *not* addressed over the course of their graduate program. Participants did offer several recommendations for universities and departments in particular to consider when implementing professional development initiatives, with students at both the master's and doctoral levels indicating that they would like to see enhanced support in preparing for both academic and non-academic careers.

Given that the majority of Ph.D. graduates will work outside of academia, the lack of support from faculty to pursue a non-academic path is an issue that requires more attention (Maldonado et al., 2013), and this was a reality that participants both acknowledged as well as considered to be a difficult issue to address. In the words of Lindsey:

*We can't keep churning out academics. There's nowhere in the work force for them. Now every time somebody's like, "I'm thinking of applying for an M.A. in English", I just want to be like, "No! [laughs]. Don't do it, do welding." How many Philosophy Ph.D.s do we need? But on the other hand, why would we discourage people from learning?*

Barnes and Randall (2010), in a study of doctoral student satisfaction across different disciplines and institutional types, found that both former and current students were generally less satisfied with support provided to those wishing to pursue careers outside academia, while those at research intensive institutions were less satisfied with guidance provided in preparing for academic careers. Further research is thus needed to examine satisfaction levels with professional development opportunities between and among graduate programs, disciplines, and institutional types.

### **7.6 Students' Needs and Levels of Satisfaction with Support Services by Graduate Program Level, Year of Study, and Enrolment Status**

There were few statistically significant differences between survey respondents' perceptions of graduate student support services based on graduate program, enrolment status, and year of study. Doctoral and master's (non-thesis) students were more satisfied with professional skills services provided through SGS than master's (thesis) students. Full-time students had higher levels of satisfaction with scholarships and awards than respondents who indicated any other enrolment status. Students in the early years of their program gave higher ratings to the counseling centre, though these students were also more likely to choose 'not applicable' for this question.

Qualitative findings from this research revealed no noticeable differences between master's and doctoral students in terms of identified needs with regards to support services and programs. Current and former students at both program levels mentioned financial support most frequently, followed by counselling services. Participants who were currently or had previously been enrolled in a doctoral program also mentioned the importance of career development resources, ensuring a good institutional and departmental environment and providing adequate resources, and the need for enhanced social supports. Master's students cited writing support most frequently.

Also with regards to phase two, findings from this study correspond well with Gardner's (2010b) doctoral student hierarchy of needs. Students at both the master's and doctoral levels indicated experiencing difficulty at several transitional periods, but particularly at the entry point into Phase III 'Establishment', defined by conducting independent scholarly research. There were no prominent differences between interview participant's responses based on year of study, but the majority of students were in the

latter phases of their programs, and none were first year enrolments. Further research should explore how students' needs at various phases and years of study compare and differ between types of graduate programs.

With respect to the most important services and programs provided to graduate students at Memorial, no real differences were found among responses given by interview participants based on enrolment status. The majority of master's students had graduated from their program, and those who had been or were enrolled part-time identified supports that full-time students also identified, such as counseling services, financial support, and a supportive relationship with their supervisor. Most participants who had been or were currently enrolled in a doctoral program had or were doing so full-time. Current students mentioned the importance of support at the departmental level and social supports in particular, as well as other supports that students who had either graduated or did not complete their program also mentioned, such as financial support, career development opportunities, and health services. Interestingly, only a doctoral student who did not complete their program mentioned writing support.

## **7.7 Conclusion**

This chapter has examined the major findings of this study as they relate to the current literature and the research questions that guided this study. While the experiences of study participants varied considerably, several key themes emerged from the data and have been summarized as they correspond to the research questions. Overall findings suggest a low level of awareness and knowledge about support services available to graduate students at Memorial University, with study participants indicating that they are not very familiar with programs and services offered, nor are they very clear on the role

of each of the specific divisions that offer these supports. It is uncertain whether these perceptions are typical of graduate students in general, specific to certain disciplines or this institution in particular, or common across various institutional types. Further research is needed to explore graduate student perceptions of support services and the role played by institutional supports in graduate student persistence and success.

Qualitative findings from this study indicate that a range of factors may act as barriers to graduate student persistence. Participants most frequently cited financial constraints, the culture and structure of academia, strained relationships with the supervisor, and individual characteristics and responsibilities. Findings were consistent with previous research in suggesting that lengthy times to completion is an unfortunate consequence of students having to work on top of their studies due to inadequate levels of funding. The culture of the institution and a lack of ‘perceived’ support were seen as barriers to persistence. Students’ perception of a poor fit between their own expectations and those of the institution, graduate school in general or the department has been found to be a cause of attrition in previous research. This points to the importance of promoting and raising awareness of support services. Participants mentioned the possible ill effects of a poor student-supervisor relationship, and this corroborates existing literature.

Participants most frequently cited financial support, intrinsic interest, and the support of others as factors thought to have a positive influence on persistence. Differences were found between the responses of doctoral and master’s students with regards to internal and external support networks; further research should explore the role of these supports more fully. A wide range of support services are considered to be important to graduate students at Memorial. Financial, social, and supervisory support



were identified as the most essential by interview participants. While previous research has highlighted the importance of academic support, social supports were emphasized over the former in the responses of participants in this study. This finding warrants further research.

Survey respondents mentioned funding, graduate student space, awards, and employment opportunities as important services, and indicated a need for increased funding, student specific services, professional development opportunities, and student space and community building. Interview participants cited financial, social and supervisory support as the most important services, as well as the areas in need of further support. Students were generally satisfied with the professional development opportunities available through their graduate programs, but a number of recommendations for universities and departments were mentioned, with an emphasis on the need for enhanced support in preparing for both academic and non-academic careers.

There were few statistically significant differences between survey respondents' perceptions of graduate student support services based on graduate program, enrolment status, and year of study. Likewise, qualitative findings from this research revealed few differences between participants in terms of identified needs with regards to support services and programs based on graduate program level, phase of study, and enrolment status.

## **Chapter 8 Conclusions and Recommendations**

The purpose of this study was to explore the various forms of supports needed to assist graduate students in their integration into the university community and to determine the effects, if any, of these services on graduate student persistence. The following questions were addressed in this study: (1) What are students' levels of awareness of, frequency of use, and satisfaction with, support services provided by the university?; (2) What is the role of institutional support in the persistence and success of graduate students?; (3) What do students feel are some of the biggest barriers to graduate student persistence?; (4) What do students feel are some of the factors that have a positive influence on persistence?; (5) What support services do graduate students need to succeed in their studies and their pursuit of an academic and/or professional career?; and (6) How do students' needs and levels of satisfaction with support services differ across graduate program level (master's and doctoral), year and phase of study, and enrolment status?

The framework that guided this study is the theory of student development, which emphasizes maintaining a balance between the essential components of challenge and support. When individuals are challenged, they must be adequately supported in order for growth and development to occur (Gardner, 2009b). A mixed methods approach was taken to examine the role of formal, institutional-based support services in students' decisions to stay (persist) or to leave graduate studies at the master's or doctoral level in the social sciences and humanities disciplines. The study population totaled 1,025. This included individuals who were currently or had been previously enrolled in a graduate degree program in the Faculty of Arts at Memorial University between 2005 and 2012.

Data collection consisted of the administration of an online survey; semi-structured interviews; document analysis; and informal observations and interactions. In *phase one* of the study, a survey was distributed electronically. There were a total of 152 survey respondents. For *phase two* of the study, twenty follow-up interviews were conducted from a sample of those who completed the survey.

Considerable insight has been gained in this study from participants' accounts of the role of support services in graduate student persistence and success. It is clear that institutional support services play a key role in enabling students' personal and professional growth in overcoming challenges. This research makes a significant contribution to the existing literature on graduate education by focusing on the role of specific supports on student persistence. The finding that a number of factors have been identified as both challenges and/or supports emphasizes the importance of achieving a delicate balance between the two in order for development to occur.

Five key themes emerged with regards to graduate student persistence 1) the unclear role of institutional support; 2) financial considerations; 3) the culture and structure of academia; 4) the important role of the supervisor; and 5) professional development initiatives. The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the overall conclusions from this study that speak to these themes. Recommendations for policy, practice, and further research are also presented.

### **8.1 The Role of Institutional Support**

The findings from this study suggest a low level of awareness and knowledge about support services available to graduate students at Memorial University. Participants indicated that they are generally not very familiar with programs and services offered by

the various academic and administrative units, nor are they very clear on what the role of each of these specific divisions is. A disconnect between the quantity and quality of services available and graduate student awareness of, use and satisfaction with these services is evident. Furthermore, the frequency with which student-initiated persistence strategies were mentioned – a finding that is substantiated by previous research (Franco-Zamudio, 2009) – points to the need for structural change at the administrative level.

It is recommended that university units- and institutions as a whole- make clear their roles to students, staff and faculty and the broader community, and make known to graduate students what supports they provide to assist them, both academically and socially. University websites should clearly list and outline services and programs for graduate students, and provide links to outside resources. Promoting and raising awareness of support services is critical to fostering a sense of community and belonging. It would be helpful if levels of awareness, frequency of use, and satisfaction with current supports were tracked by university staff and administrators in order to determine whether further efforts at promotion, development, and revision would be of benefit.

Research should continue to investigate the role of various types of institutional support on the graduate student experience, and persistence and success in particular. A number of current and former doctoral student participants in this study pointed to the positive influence of external sources of support such as family and peers, which corroborates previous research (Boulder, 2010). Future research would do well to compare the use and influence of support networks external to the university with institutional supports, and across types of graduate programs.

Tinto recently suggested that graduate student attrition may be less easily amenable to institutional support than undergraduate attrition (Memorial University, 2011). While further research is needed to explore the role of institutional support services and programs on graduate student success and persistence, it may be possible that perhaps a lack of awareness and knowledge of what support is available is more responsible for this apparent disconnect between support service and persistence in this study than is a lack of, or poor quality of, services. Further research is needed in this area since it is unknown whether a low level of awareness of available support is unique to Memorial, characteristic of particular institutional *types* (e.g., comprehensive or non-research intensive), or common across graduate student populations, regardless of their institutional setting. It is recommended that graduate programs and schools conduct their own assessments to gain a better understanding of students' experiences and satisfaction with the services provided through various academic and administrative units.

## **8.2 Financial Considerations**

Financial support was found to be both a motivating factor towards, as well as a barrier to, persistence. While circumstances and experiences varied substantially across departments, programs and enrolment status, financial support came across clearly as a deciding factor for students with regards to persistence. Survey respondents and interview participants who were or had been enrolled in graduate studies, either full or part-time, and at both the master's and doctoral levels, indicated that financial matters need to be considered by institutions and graduate schools as essential components of the graduate student experience, and as a determining factor in persistence, graduation, and times to completion.

While participants who were funded – typically externally – cited financial support as a factor influencing their decisions to persist, those participants who were poorly funded or received little to no financial support frequently cited financial hardship as a barrier to persistence; these students usually had lengthy times to completion or withdrew; others spoke of similar outcomes for their peers who struggled financially. These findings substantiate previous research that demonstrates the important role of financial support in graduate student persistence (Kim & Otts, 2010; Larivière, 2013; Strayhorn, 2010; Tinto, 2012).

It is recommended that graduate program administrators regularly monitor and review the type of work and the numbers of hours that full-time graduate students are working to ensure that these tasks are not taking excessive time away from the students' studies and impeding progress. Funding opportunities could also be made available to part-time students so that they can choose to take a leave from paid work or reduce their hours to work on coursework, research and writing, which participants indicated would be particularly appreciated at the later stages of master's and doctoral programs that require a thesis or research paper.

It is suggested that information on available financial support and other funding opportunities be provided to potential students so that they can make informed decisions with regards to applying to and enrolling in graduate studies. Details about fellowships and other forms of funding should be included in writing with offers of admission, and new incoming students should be made aware of the various scholarships and awards for which they may be eligible to apply. Graduate programs should avoid admitting new graduate students when they are unable to provide minimal baseline funding. It is also

suggested that Memorial review its policies on baseline funding, particularly with regards to the minimum levels suggested by CAGS (Saliba, 2012).

Considering the relative geographic isolation of Memorial University, the cost of travel for students to conduct research or attend conferences out-of-province is substantially higher than for students in other provinces with more than one university and those not needing to commute by plane or by boat. These are invaluable opportunities for graduate students, and necessary, it might be argued, to their socialization and professional development. Financial constraints limit these opportunities for students to network and collaborate. While it is understood that the institution, like many others, is subject to budget restrictions and immovable funding allocations, it is suggested that departments, the Faculty of Arts, SAS, SGS, the GSU, and, where applicable, other academic and administrative units, make every effort to increase the allocation of travel funding available to its graduate students.

### **8.3 Culture and Structure of Academia**

Previous research has explored the effect of perceptions on person-environment fit on graduate student persistence and found that identification with academia and the integration of social group identities and academic identity enhanced students' perceptions of fit in academia and was associated with increased levels of commitment to persistence (Franco-Zamudio, 2009). Findings from phase two of this study reveal that participants recognized the potential mismatches between their personal and career goals and the structure of academia, and for some, a perceived ill fit between personal identity and the academic lifestyle was seen as a significant barrier or 'risk factor' to persistence.

In a study exploring the causes and consequences of departure from doctoral study across various disciplines and institutions, Lovitts (2001) found that interestingly, prior professionalization to the academic profession is not a good predictor of success in graduate school; this is thought to be the case due to the shift from a high level of academic integration with faculty and the discipline at the undergraduate level to a lower level of integration at the graduate level. Meanwhile, students' prior socialization to the graduate school experience does appear to have a positive influence on persistence.

Doctoral students in this study indicated that they had begun to learn the graduate school 'code' at the master's level, and those at later stages of their programs appeared to be more informed and socialized to the graduate student experience compared to those at the master's level, where participants rarely mentioned structural barriers as a factor having an influence on persistence. Comments on the academic profession tended to coincide with comments on the graduate student experience.

It is suggested that university and graduate program administrators make graduate program expectations and requirements clear early on to prospective students. At the undergraduate level, students rarely have the opportunity to explore what the academic profession is really like; indeed, it is often idealized without recognition of the high level of dedication, hard work, and commitment that is necessary for success. While there are certainly many perks to being a professor or academic researcher, students are often not prepared for the amount of independent work and lack of organized formal structure that they face in graduate school, particularly at the research phase of master's theses and doctoral programs. On top of a high level of academic rigour, demands placed on them by coursework, and the extra responsibilities of being a TA or RA, entering graduate



students also encounter the power structure of academia- many for the first time- where they are pitted against their peers, and sometimes their supervisors, and must learn to navigate the hierarchical system in order to make it through.

Incoming students should have the opportunity to be mentored by senior graduate students and/or faculty members who can guide them through the processes of graduate level study, and provide advice on academic or personal issues- or at least point them in the right direction for the appropriate supports. Gopaul (2012) highlighted that such relationships are critical to doctoral student socialization. Given the findings from this research that master's students do not always experience this mentorship to a degree deemed to be beneficial, it is suggested that such opportunities be made available in the form of formalized faculty-student and peer mentoring programs.

In the Faculty of Arts at Memorial, each department has an individual who is designated as a 'graduate coordinator.' This position is an excellent idea, but feedback from participants suggests that the person fulfilling these duties is not always available and is typically an over-worked faculty member who is often unable, or unwilling, to assist the graduate students they serve. One recommendation would be to ensure that departments and faculties have people to whom graduate students can turn, whether this be the graduate coordinator, a faculty member, or peer mentor.

Several participants mentioned the need for a 'mediator,' a 'go-to' person that students can turn to for advice, who acts as supplementary support or an alternative to the supervisor. Based on their findings from research conducted with doctoral students in the social sciences who struggled with persistence, McAlpine et al. (2012) argued the need for a faculty or departmental ombudsperson to provide support to students experiencing

troubling relationships with their supervisor. Likewise, Acker and Haque (2010) suggest that an ‘arm’s length support person’ be appointed in each faculty or department; such a position could be housed in student services or counseling.

Students should also not be thrown into graduate school without some preparation for the type and level of academic writing and research that is to be expected of them at the master’s and doctoral levels. Perhaps in senior level undergraduate courses, students could be introduced to graduate studies, through a seminar series or mentorship program. Some departments even allow honours students to audit or enrol in graduate level courses to gain experience and learn the ropes so to speak. Likewise, at the graduate level programs should provide coursework and seminars focused on dissertation writing, as has been suggested based on previous research findings (Gittings, 2010).

#### **8.4 The Role of the Supervisor**

Findings from this research reveal that the role of the supervisor is an extremely important one and that a good working professional relationship is vital to the students’ persistence and academic success. Yet, participants also indicated that the role of the supervisor as well as what constitutes ‘reasonable’ expectations from a department or with respect to program requirements is sometimes unclear. Previous research on the doctoral experience provides evidence to support the notion that “devoting extensive time and energy to their academics and not knowing if they are progressing appropriately” causes “undue stress” on students, which calls for the need for programs to provide clear requirements and effective lines of communication (Witkowsky, 2010, p.180).

The importance of ensuring that graduate students have the best experience possible and receive necessary academic guidance with the research component of their

program- whether this be a final paper, research report, thesis or dissertation, from a person that matches them in personality and/or work style, as well as research interest and expertise- cannot be underestimated. It is suggested that graduate programs advise and assist incoming students in taking a more active role in choosing the supervisor, and where this is not possible, program administrators make informed decisions with regards to this selection process and monitor how the relationship develops. It is necessary for department and program chairs to take responsibility for the graduate students they admit and serve, and an important part of this is ensuring a good ‘fit’ between students and supervisors. When it is discovered that the relationship is not a good fit, measures must be taken to assist in re-assignments and to determine if other actions must be taken.

Universities typically have guidelines and/or handbooks on graduate education supervision available for review; Memorial provides a document entitled, “Responsibilities of Supervisors and Graduate Students.” Similar material is also available from the Canadian Association of Graduate Studies (CAGS). Of particular relevance are the documents titled “Graduate studies: A practical guide for advisors, supervisors and graduate students” (CAGS, 2012b) and “Creating a letter of understanding for advisors/supervisors and graduate students” (CAGS, 2012a).

It is also recommended that new faculty members and those new to supervising graduate students participate in some sort of supervisor training. Such opportunities could be provided on a regular basis through departments and/or schools of graduate studies. Topics covered could include ‘choosing students and projects to supervise’, ‘keeping students on track and developing timelines’, ‘providing feedback on the dissertation’, ‘effective communication’, etc.

Finally, effective supervisors should be rewarded for excellence in providing guidance and mentorship to the graduate students they support and teach. Many universities offer incentives or awards. Memorial offers the President's Award for Outstanding Graduate and Postgraduate Supervision, as well as the Dean of Arts Award for Graduate Supervision. It is recommended that other faculties and departments make similar efforts to recognize excellent supervisors in the academic community. Such acknowledgement raises the profile of academic units, entices prospective students to enrol in these disciplines and to study with these individuals, and sets an example for other faculty members to emulate.

### **8.5 Professional Development**

Study participants shared mixed views with regards to the professional development opportunities available through their graduate program at Memorial. Survey respondents were not overly familiar with professional skills services offered through SGS, nor did they frequently avail of them. Respondents did indicate that they would like to see more of these services offered specifically for graduate students. While most interview participants felt that efforts were made to address their own professional development needs, many offered a number of recommendations to be considered by university and graduate school administrators, as well as those in faculty and department leadership roles. Participants at the master's and doctoral levels indicated that they would like to see more support for those interested in pursuing both academic and non-academic careers.

Several interview participants admitted to facing significant challenges when transitioning to the independent research phase of their graduate programs; this

corroborates previous research, which found that students are not adequately prepared and in fact struggle to produce scholarly work (Gardner, 2008; Lovitts, 2008; Starke-Meyerring, 2011). This reiterates the importance of providing discipline-specific professional development for students, particularly in the areas of academic writing and conducting research, as this seems to be a barrier to persistence for students pursuing thesis-based degrees.

Given a recent economic downturn, as well as the ever-changing face of academia and the academic profession, attention is increasingly drawn to the need for graduate programs to be cognizant of the importance of preparing students for a global job market where a diverse set of skills and not specialized knowledge, is valued. A number of Canadian reports have noted a lack of relevant and applied skills training in graduate programs and have emphasized that students set realistic goals for themselves and that they consider non-academic career options upon graduation (CAGS, 2008; Maldonado et al., 2013; Rose, 2012; Zhao, 2012).

Based on these findings, as well as a focus in the literature on professional development, it is recommended that university and graduate program administrators conduct regular evaluations of career-oriented services, as well as needs assessments with current and former graduate students to determine what works, what doesn't, and what is needed. Faculty members should work to incorporate academic and non-academic career mentoring into the course and program curriculum. Brown bag lunches, seminar series and workshops that address job preparation specific to the discipline are invaluable learning and networking opportunities for graduate students. It is also never too early to discuss career questions and concerns with students; in fact, such discussions should

begin well before graduate school and continue as students progress throughout their programs.

## **8.6 Recommendations for Further Research**

This study examined the role of support services in graduate student persistence in the social sciences and humanities disciplines at one comprehensive university in Atlantic Canada. A number of factors, including those both internal and external to the institution; informal support networks; and individual characteristics, such as personal commitment, have been identified as being influential in students' decision-making process of whether or not to persist in their studies, which corroborates previous research (Greene, 2013).

This research is situated in an existing body of literature on graduate student development, socialization and attrition (Gardner, 2005; Golde, 1998; Lovitts, 2001), and takes this work further by drawing a direct link between student services and graduate student persistence. This study also extends research on the graduate student experience beyond doctoral students in American institutions of higher education, and focuses on the social sciences and humanities disciplines, known to have higher levels of attrition. Findings from this study indicate that the role of support services in graduate student persistence is, at best, ambiguous, and this points to the need for university and graduate program administrators to make their roles transparent to the student they serve, and the need to promote and raise awareness of the services they offer.

Despite a growing interest in graduate education and rising concerns about a diminishing academic job market, much is still unknown about the graduate student experience and the reasons why so many struggle to succeed. Further research would do

well to explore the experiences of master's students in particular, as this student population remains understudied relative to doctoral students. Findings from this study suggest that master's (thesis) students experience significant challenges at the independent research or writing phase that mirror those experiences of the doctoral student; furthermore, these challenges are typically absent from the experiences relayed by those students enrolled in master's (non-thesis) programs.

Research investigating the role of support services in student persistence and retention needs to be conducted at other institutions across Canada and across institutional types and graduate programs to identify differences that institutional and disciplinary contexts and cultures have on the student experience. For example, are there differences in the role of support services (or how they are perceived by students) at larger, research-intensive universities compared to small, primarily-undergraduate universities?

While this study included both male and female participants, as well as both full-time and part-time students from a range of ages, ethnicities and nationalities, individual student characteristics was not a focus of this research, thus, future research should explore the graduate student experience across different student populations. Research should work towards enhancing our understandings of the structure and culture of graduate education and how its organization and the social processes that occur within it affect the experiences of the students it is set up to serve. The growth and development of tomorrow's leaders in the knowledge economy is dependent on how well today's emerging scholars are challenged and supported.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Survey Email Template**

Dear Memorial graduate student,

If you have already completed the survey please disregard this email.

I am conducting a research study entitled: Student Support Services and Graduate Student Persistence in the Social Sciences and Humanities Disciplines. As you are or were previously enrolled in graduate studies in the Faculty of Arts at Memorial, I would like to invite your participation in the study. Your participation is completely voluntary and all information and results will be treated in confidence and remain anonymous in any report of the research findings.

The study, should you agree to participate, will involve a quantitative survey that should take approximately fifteen minutes for you to complete. You may refuse to answer any questions or may at any time choose to discontinue your participation in this survey without any penalty. Should you choose to participate you can complete the survey on line and submit it electronically to me. Completion of the survey implies consent. At the end of the survey, you will be asked if you are willing to participate in a follow-up interview. Should you wish to participate, you will be asked to provide your contact information. This study is NOT connected in any way with your academic program.

Should you agree to participate you can access the on line survey at  
<http://channels.mun.ca/survey/entry.jsp?id=1328889516450>

The proposal for this research has been reviewed by the Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research (ICEHR) and found to be in compliance with Memorial University's ethics policy. If you have ethical concerns about the research (such as the way you have been treated or your rights as a participant), you may contact the Chairperson of ICEHR at [icehr@mun.ca](mailto:icehr@mun.ca) or by telephone at 864-2861.

If you have any questions, concerns or require additional information about the study please contact me directly at 709-864-6928 or via email at [melaniejg@mun.ca](mailto:melaniejg@mun.ca), or my Supervisor, Dr. Dennis Sharpe at [dsharpe@mun.ca](mailto:dsharpe@mun.ca) or 709-864-7549.

Thank you,

Melanie Greene, Candidate for the Doctor of Philosophy Degree, Faculty of Education,  
Memorial University

## **Appendix B**

### **Faculty of Arts Graduate Student Services Survey**

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this research study is to explore graduate students' awareness, use, and the effectiveness of support services that are available to assist them on campus and what effects, if any, they have on persistence and academic success. It is hoped that through the identification of key factors that influence persistence, Canadian institutions will be better able to assist students in their integration into, and transitions through, their graduate programs. This research aims to contribute to the existing literature on graduate education persistence and the role of student support services.

This survey will be used to gather student demographic and academic program information, as well as means to map students' level of awareness, use, and the effectiveness of graduate student services at Memorial University. It will take approximately 15 minutes to complete. Completion of the survey implies consent. At the end of the survey, you will be asked if you are interested in participating in a follow-up interview. If you are interested, you may submit your name and contact information. This study is NOT connected in any way with your academic program.

We thank you in advance for taking the time to complete this survey and would appreciate your response by **April 30, 2012**. Participation in this survey is voluntary. Your responses are anonymous and will only be used for research purposes. The information obtained by me will be kept in a locked office and will only be available to myself and my supervisor. All data will be destroyed five years after the final report. E-data, e-documentations, data analysis and the final report will be kept on an encrypted computer on campus that only the researcher has access to. Data will be reported in a form of quantitative conclusions, therefore, prohibiting the identification of individual participant data. Although the data from this research study may be published and presented at conferences, it will be reported in aggregate form, with no identifying information included. You may withdraw from the survey and study at any time. Any data collected from you up to the point of your withdrawal will be destroyed by the researcher and will not be used in the research.

If you have any questions about the survey, please contact:

Ms. Melanie Greene  
Ph.D. Candidate  
Faculty of Education, Memorial University  
Ph. (709) 864-6928  
Email: [melaniejg@mun.ca](mailto:melaniejg@mun.ca)

### **Demographic Questions**

1) Please specify your gender

Male \_\_\_\_\_ Female \_\_\_\_\_

2) Please specify your age category

Under 30 \_\_\_\_\_ 30-40 \_\_\_\_\_ 41-50 \_\_\_\_\_ Over 50 \_\_\_\_\_

3) What is your province or country of origin?

\_\_\_\_\_

### **Graduate Program Information**

4) Please specify what graduate degree program you are currently **or** were most recently enrolled in:

Master's (Thesis) \_\_\_\_\_ Master's (Non-Thesis) \_\_\_\_\_ Doctorate \_\_\_\_\_

5) Please specify what department you are currently **or** were most recently enrolled in the Faculty of Arts:

Anthropology \_\_\_\_\_

Archaeology \_\_\_\_\_

Classics \_\_\_\_\_

Economics \_\_\_\_\_

English Language and Literature \_\_\_\_\_

Folklore \_\_\_\_\_

French Studies \_\_\_\_\_

Geography \_\_\_\_\_

German Language and Literature \_\_\_\_\_

History \_\_\_\_\_

Humanities \_\_\_\_\_

Linguistics \_\_\_\_\_

Philosophy \_\_\_\_\_

Political Science \_\_\_\_\_

Psychology \_\_\_\_\_

Religious Studies \_\_\_\_\_

Sociology \_\_\_\_\_

Women's Studies \_\_\_\_\_



6) What is your current enrolment status:

Full-time \_\_\_\_\_

Part-time \_\_\_\_\_

Applying to Graduate \_\_\_\_\_

Not currently enrolled \_\_\_\_\_

7) If you are not currently enrolled as a graduate student in the Faculty of Arts at Memorial University, which best describes your situation:

You graduated from your degree program \_\_\_\_\_

You are on a leave of absence \_\_\_\_\_

You were terminated from your degree program (academic dismissal) \_\_\_\_\_

You left your program without completing the degree (withdrew) \_\_\_\_\_

You transferred to a program in another faculty at Memorial \_\_\_\_\_

You transferred to a program at another institution \_\_\_\_\_

8) Please specify the method of delivery of your current, or most recent, graduate program:

On Campus \_\_\_\_\_

Distance \_\_\_\_\_

Both \_\_\_\_\_

9) If you are currently enrolled as a graduate student in the Faculty of Arts at Memorial University, please specify your year of study. If you have graduated from your program, please specify the number of years you took to complete \_\_\_\_\_

10) Have you ever interrupted your studies while enrolled in your current graduate program (ie. took a leave of absence, left for an extended period, etc.)?

Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

If you have transferred to a different program, please specify the institution, degree program, and discipline.

---

### **Graduate Student Support Services**

The next series of questions asks about your degree of familiarity, frequency of use, and level of satisfaction with a range of services and programs provided to graduate students at Memorial University.

\* Please note that not all of these programs and services are specifically geared towards graduate students; some are inclusive of the entire university (student) community, Programs and services offered exclusively for undergraduate students are not listed here.

The first series of questions asks about your degree of familiarity, frequency of use, and level of satisfaction with a range of services and programs provided to graduate students through the division of Student Affairs and Services (SAS):

Career Development and Experiential Learning

\*This department includes the Centre for Career Development (CCD) and is also home to the Student Volunteer Bureau and the Co-operative Education Services Centre.

Counselling Centre

\* This department includes the Glenn Roy Blundon; Campus Ministries; Wellness Education; General Counselling Services.

Housing, Food and Conference Service

\* This department includes Paton College; Off-Campus Housing; Conference Services; Burton's Pond Apartments.

Student Health Services

\* This department includes the Student Health Centre.

Student Success Programs

\* This department includes Answers; International Student Advising (ISA); Native Liaison Office.

University Bookstore

\*The University Bookstore is the on-campus site for text, reference and general reading. The Bookstore carries stationery, school supplies, crested clothing, backpacks and memorabilia. Distance Education students are to order textbooks through the Bookstore website.

11) Please indicate how familiar are you with the services and programs provided by the following departments within the division of Student Affairs and Services:

a) Career Development and Experiential Learning

Not at all Familiar \_\_\_\_

Somewhat Familiar \_\_\_\_

Very Familiar \_\_\_\_

b) Counselling Centre

Not at all Familiar \_\_\_\_

Somewhat Familiar \_\_\_\_

Very Familiar \_\_\_\_

c) Housing, Food and Conference Service

Not at all Familiar \_\_\_\_  
Somewhat Familiar \_\_\_\_  
Very Familiar \_\_\_\_

d) Student Health Services

Not at all Familiar \_\_\_\_  
Somewhat Familiar \_\_\_\_  
Very Familiar \_\_\_\_

e) Student Success Programs

Not at all Familiar \_\_\_\_  
Somewhat Familiar \_\_\_\_  
Very Familiar \_\_\_\_

f) University Bookstore

Not at all Familiar \_\_\_\_  
Somewhat Familiar \_\_\_\_  
Very Familiar \_\_\_\_

12) How frequently do you/have you availed of the following services and programs provided by Student Affairs and Services?

a) Career Development and Experiential Learning

Never \_\_\_\_  
Seldom \_\_\_\_  
Sometimes \_\_\_\_  
Often \_\_\_\_

b) Counselling Centre

Never \_\_\_\_  
Seldom \_\_\_\_  
Sometimes \_\_\_\_  
Often \_\_\_\_

c) Housing, Food and Conference Services

Never \_\_\_\_  
Seldom \_\_\_\_  
Sometimes \_\_\_\_  
Often \_\_\_\_

d) Student Health Services

Never \_\_\_\_  
Seldom \_\_\_\_  
Sometimes \_\_\_\_  
Often \_\_\_\_

e) Student Success Programs

Never \_\_\_\_  
Seldom \_\_\_\_  
Sometimes \_\_\_\_  
Often \_\_\_\_

f) University Bookstore

Never \_\_\_\_  
Seldom \_\_\_\_  
Sometimes \_\_\_\_  
Often \_\_\_\_

13) What is your level of satisfaction with each of the following services, programs and events provides/offered by Student Affairs and Services?

a) Career Development and Experiential Learning

Not at all Satisfied \_\_\_\_  
Somewhat Satisfied \_\_\_\_  
Very Satisfied \_\_\_\_  
Not Applicable \_\_\_\_

b) Counselling Centre

Not at all Satisfied \_\_\_\_  
Somewhat Satisfied \_\_\_\_  
Very Satisfied \_\_\_\_  
Not Applicable \_\_\_\_

c) Housing, Food and Conference Services

Not at all Satisfied \_\_\_\_  
Somewhat Satisfied \_\_\_\_  
Very Satisfied \_\_\_\_  
Not Applicable \_\_\_\_

d) Student Health Services

Not at all Satisfied \_\_\_\_\_  
Somewhat Satisfied \_\_\_\_\_  
Very Satisfied \_\_\_\_\_  
Not Applicable \_\_\_\_\_

e) Student Success Programs

Not at all Satisfied \_\_\_\_\_  
Somewhat Satisfied \_\_\_\_\_  
Very Satisfied \_\_\_\_\_  
Not Applicable \_\_\_\_\_

f) University Bookstore

Not at all Satisfied \_\_\_\_\_  
Somewhat Satisfied \_\_\_\_\_  
Very Satisfied \_\_\_\_\_  
Not Applicable \_\_\_\_\_

The next series of questions asks about your degree of familiarity, frequency of use, and level of satisfaction with a range of services and programs provided to graduate students by the School of Graduate Studies (SGS):

Graduate Student Administration:

\* This includes enrolment and strategic initiatives, admissions, records, programs, and student outreach.

Graduate Student Recruitment and Retention:

\* This includes recruitment initiatives, marketing, graduate prospect management, statistical data, information sessions and webinars

Graduate Orientation

\* Offered in conjunction with Student Affairs and Services, this annual event for new graduate students includes a keynote address from the Dean of Graduate Studies, information sessions, booth presentations, free food and giveaways.

Information and News

\* This includes The Guide for New Graduate Students; Responsibilities of Supervisors and Graduate Students; the Dean's blog, Postcards from the Edge; EDGE newsletter.

Scholarships and Awards

\* This includes internal and external scholarships and awards administered through the School of Graduate Studies.

Travel Funding

\* This includes travel assistance provided by the School of Graduate Studies to graduate students who are presenting papers/posters at conferences.

### Global Competencies

\* This includes English as a Second Language Support Programs; ISA Family Program; Orientation for International Students; Transition Services; Welcoming Support and Writing Support for International Students; Professional Skills Development Program (PSDP) for International Students.

### Teaching and Learning

\* This includes the Graduate Program in Teaching (IDO); Teaching Consultation; Graduate Programs offered via Distance Education; Teaching Dossier Preparation; Teaching workshops and Seminars; Library and Literacy Information Sessions; Writing Centre Support and Instruction.

### Professional Skills

\* This includes Career Development Resources (CCD); Memorial Ambassador Program; Leader Forum.

### Research

\* This includes the Graduate Research Integrity Program (GRIP); Graduate Research Support Series; Graduate Student Research Colloquia Series; Library Research; Thesis Completion (Writing Centre); Yaffle (Harris Centre)

14) Please indicate how familiar are you with each of the following services, programs, and events provided/offered by the School of Graduate Studies (SGS):

#### a) Graduate Orientation

Not at all Familiar \_\_\_\_  
Somewhat Familiar \_\_\_\_  
Very Familiar \_\_\_\_

#### b) Information and news

Not at all Familiar \_\_\_\_  
Somewhat Familiar \_\_\_\_  
Very Familiar \_\_\_\_

#### c) Scholarships and Awards

Not at all Familiar \_\_\_\_  
Somewhat Familiar \_\_\_\_  
Very Familiar \_\_\_\_

#### d) Travel Funding

Not at all Familiar \_\_\_\_  
Somewhat Familiar \_\_\_\_

Very Familiar \_\_\_\_

Enhanced Development of the Graduate Experience (EDGE)

e) Global Competencies

Not at all Familiar \_\_\_\_

Somewhat Familiar \_\_\_\_

Very Familiar \_\_\_\_

f) Teaching and Learning

Not at all Familiar \_\_\_\_

Somewhat Familiar \_\_\_\_

Very Familiar \_\_\_\_

g) Professional Skills

Not at all Familiar \_\_\_\_

Somewhat Familiar \_\_\_\_

Very Familiar \_\_\_\_

h) Research

Not at all Familiar \_\_\_\_

Somewhat Familiar \_\_\_\_

Very Familiar \_\_\_\_

15) How frequently do you/have you availed of the following services and programs provided by the School of Graduate Studies (SGS)?

a) Graduate Orientation

Never \_\_\_\_

Seldom \_\_\_\_

Sometimes \_\_\_\_

Often \_\_\_\_

b) Information and News

Never \_\_\_\_

Seldom \_\_\_\_

Sometimes \_\_\_\_

Often \_\_\_\_

c) Scholarships and Awards

Never \_\_\_\_  
Seldom \_\_\_\_  
Sometimes \_\_\_\_  
Often \_\_\_\_

d) Travel funding

Never \_\_\_\_  
Seldom \_\_\_\_  
Sometimes \_\_\_\_  
Often \_\_\_\_

Enhanced Development of the Graduate Experience (EDGE)

e) Global competencies

Never \_\_\_\_  
Seldom \_\_\_\_  
Sometimes \_\_\_\_  
Often \_\_\_\_

f) Teaching and Learning

Never \_\_\_\_  
Seldom \_\_\_\_  
Sometimes \_\_\_\_  
Often \_\_\_\_

g) Professional Skills

Never \_\_\_\_  
Seldom \_\_\_\_  
Sometimes \_\_\_\_  
Often \_\_\_\_

h) Research

Never \_\_\_\_  
Seldom \_\_\_\_  
Sometimes \_\_\_\_  
Often \_\_\_\_



16) What is your level of satisfaction with each of the following services, programs and events provides/offered by the School of Graduate Studies (SGS)?

a) Graduate Orientation

Not at all Satisfied \_\_\_\_\_  
Somewhat Satisfied \_\_\_\_\_  
Very Satisfied \_\_\_\_\_  
Not Applicable \_\_\_\_\_

b) Information and News

Not at all Satisfied \_\_\_\_\_  
Somewhat Satisfied \_\_\_\_\_  
Very Satisfied \_\_\_\_\_  
Not Applicable \_\_\_\_\_

c) Scholarships and Awards

Not at all Satisfied \_\_\_\_\_  
Somewhat Satisfied \_\_\_\_\_  
Very Satisfied \_\_\_\_\_  
Not Applicable \_\_\_\_\_

d) Travel Funding

Not at all Satisfied \_\_\_\_\_  
Somewhat Satisfied \_\_\_\_\_  
Very Satisfied \_\_\_\_\_  
Not Applicable \_\_\_\_\_

Enhanced Development of the Graduate Student Experience (EDGE)

e) Global Competencies

Not at all Satisfied \_\_\_\_\_  
Somewhat Satisfied \_\_\_\_\_  
Very Satisfied \_\_\_\_\_  
Not Applicable \_\_\_\_\_

f) Teaching and Learning

Not at all Satisfied \_\_\_\_\_  
Somewhat Satisfied \_\_\_\_\_  
Very Satisfied \_\_\_\_\_  
Not Applicable \_\_\_\_\_

g) Professional Skills

Not at all Satisfied \_\_\_\_\_  
Somewhat Satisfied \_\_\_\_\_  
Very Satisfied \_\_\_\_\_  
Not Applicable \_\_\_\_\_

h) Research

Not at all Satisfied \_\_\_\_\_  
Somewhat Satisfied \_\_\_\_\_  
Very Satisfied \_\_\_\_\_  
Not Applicable \_\_\_\_\_

The next series of questions asks about your degree of familiarity, frequency of use, and level of satisfaction with a range of services and programs provided to graduate students through the Graduate Students' Union (GSU):

Social Supports

\* This includes GradFest; the Grad House Forum, Trivia Night at Bitters.

Academic Supports

\* This includes Aldrich Conference; Academic Advocacy Services

Funding and Awards

\* This includes the GSU Awards in Excellence; GSU Scholarships; Conference funding

Other Services

\* This includes the Health and Dental Plan; Special Project Grant; Student Forms; Student Housing; Bitters Restaurant and Lounge; Other Services (Campus Food Bank, Emergency Student Loans, International Student Identity Card, Legal Services, Student Handbook, Studentsaver Discount Cards, TravelCuts)

17) Please indicate how familiar are you with each of the following services and programs provided by the Graduate Students' Union (GSU):

a) Social Supports

Not at all Familiar \_\_\_\_\_  
Somewhat Familiar \_\_\_\_\_  
Very Familiar \_\_\_\_\_

b) Academic Supports

Not at all Familiar \_\_\_\_\_  
Somewhat Familiar \_\_\_\_\_  
Very Familiar \_\_\_\_\_

c) Funding and Awards

Not at all Familiar \_\_\_\_\_

Somewhat Familiar \_\_\_\_\_

Very Familiar \_\_\_\_\_

d) Other Services

Not at all Familiar \_\_\_\_\_

Somewhat Familiar \_\_\_\_\_

Very Familiar \_\_\_\_\_

18) How frequently do you/have you availed of the following services and programs provided by the Graduate Students' Union (GSU)?

a) Social Supports

Never \_\_\_\_\_

Seldom \_\_\_\_\_

Sometimes \_\_\_\_\_

Often \_\_\_\_\_

b) Academic Supports

Never \_\_\_\_\_

Seldom \_\_\_\_\_

Sometimes \_\_\_\_\_

Often \_\_\_\_\_

c) Funding and Awards

Never \_\_\_\_\_

Seldom \_\_\_\_\_

Sometimes \_\_\_\_\_

Often \_\_\_\_\_

d) Other Services

Never \_\_\_\_\_

Seldom \_\_\_\_\_

Sometimes \_\_\_\_\_

Often \_\_\_\_\_

19) What is your level of satisfaction with each of the following services, programs and events provides/offered by the Graduate Students' Union (GSU)?

a) Social Supports

Not at all Satisfied \_\_\_\_\_  
Somewhat Satisfied \_\_\_\_\_  
Very Satisfied \_\_\_\_\_  
Not Applicable \_\_\_\_\_

b) Academic Supports

Not at all Satisfied \_\_\_\_\_  
Somewhat Satisfied \_\_\_\_\_  
Very Satisfied \_\_\_\_\_  
Not Applicable \_\_\_\_\_

c) Funding and Awards

Not at all Satisfied \_\_\_\_\_  
Somewhat Satisfied \_\_\_\_\_  
Very Satisfied \_\_\_\_\_  
Not Applicable \_\_\_\_\_

d) Other Services

Not at all Satisfied \_\_\_\_\_  
Somewhat Satisfied \_\_\_\_\_  
Very Satisfied \_\_\_\_\_  
Not Applicable \_\_\_\_\_

The next series of questions asks about your degree of familiarity, frequency of use, and level of satisfaction with a range of services and programs provided to graduate students through the university (campus-wide services), the Faculty of Arts, and your department.

University (Campus-Wide Services):

\* This includes the University Calendar/Diary; Office of the Registrar; Cashier's Office; Self Service; my.mun; Memorial@Home (DELTS); Library services

Faculty of Arts:

\* This includes services and programs that are organized and administered for students through the Faculty of Arts.

Department:

\* This includes services and programs that are organized and administered for students through your own department.

20) Please indicate how familiar are you with the services and programs provided by the university (Campus-Wide Services):

Not at all Familiar \_\_\_\_  
Somewhat Familiar \_\_\_\_  
Very Familiar \_\_\_\_

21) How frequently do you/have you availed of the following services and programs provided by the university (campus-wide services)?

Never \_\_\_\_  
Seldom \_\_\_\_  
Sometimes \_\_\_\_  
Often \_\_\_\_

22) What is your level of satisfaction with each of the following services, programs and events provides/offered by the university (campus-wide services)?

Not at all Satisfied \_\_\_\_  
Somewhat Satisfied \_\_\_\_  
Very Satisfied \_\_\_\_  
Not Applicable \_\_\_\_

23) Please indicate how familiar are you with services and programs provided by the Faculty of Arts:

Not at all Familiar \_\_\_\_  
Somewhat Familiar \_\_\_\_  
Very Familiar \_\_\_\_

24) How frequently do you/have you availed of services and programs provided by the Faculty of Arts?

Never \_\_\_\_  
Seldom \_\_\_\_  
Sometimes \_\_\_\_  
Often \_\_\_\_

25) What is your level of satisfaction with each of the following services, programs and events provides/offered by the Faculty of Arts?

Not at all Satisfied \_\_\_\_  
Somewhat Satisfied \_\_\_\_  
Very Satisfied \_\_\_\_  
Not Applicable \_\_\_\_

26) Please indicate how familiar are you with services and programs provided by your department:

Not at all Familiar \_\_\_\_  
Somewhat Familiar \_\_\_\_  
Very Familiar \_\_\_\_

27) How frequently do you/have you availed of the following services and programs provided by your department?

Never \_\_\_\_  
Seldom \_\_\_\_  
Sometimes \_\_\_\_  
Often \_\_\_\_

28) What is your level of satisfaction with services and programs provided by your department?

Not at all Satisfied \_\_\_\_  
Somewhat Satisfied \_\_\_\_  
Very Satisfied \_\_\_\_  
Not Applicable \_\_\_\_

29) Based on your experiences as a graduate student at Memorial, please indicate your level of satisfaction with the following:

a) Your overall experience as a graduate student at Memorial

Not at all Satisfied \_\_\_\_  
Somewhat Satisfied \_\_\_\_  
Very Satisfied \_\_\_\_  
Not Applicable \_\_\_\_

b) Your Academic Program

Not at all Satisfied \_\_\_\_  
Somewhat Satisfied \_\_\_\_  
Very Satisfied \_\_\_\_  
Not Applicable \_\_\_\_

c) Your Program Supervisor/Advisor

Not at all Satisfied \_\_\_\_\_  
Somewhat Satisfied \_\_\_\_\_  
Very Satisfied \_\_\_\_\_  
Not Applicable \_\_\_\_\_

d) Your Graduate or Doctoral Committee

Not at all Satisfied \_\_\_\_\_  
Somewhat Satisfied \_\_\_\_\_  
Very Satisfied \_\_\_\_\_  
Not Applicable \_\_\_\_\_

e) Funding and Financial Support

Not at all Satisfied \_\_\_\_\_  
Somewhat Satisfied \_\_\_\_\_  
Very Satisfied \_\_\_\_\_  
Not Applicable \_\_\_\_\_

f) On-Campus Employment Opportunities

Not at all Satisfied \_\_\_\_\_  
Somewhat Satisfied \_\_\_\_\_  
Very Satisfied \_\_\_\_\_  
Not Applicable \_\_\_\_\_

30) Which units would you like to see provide more programs and services specifically for graduate students? (Select all that apply)

- a) Student Affairs and Services \_\_\_\_\_
- b) School of Graduate Studies (SGS) \_\_\_\_\_
- c) Graduate Students' Union (GSU) \_\_\_\_\_
- d) University (campus-wide) \_\_\_\_\_
- e) The Faculty of Arts \_\_\_\_\_
- f) Departments \_\_\_\_\_

31) What (other) types of programs and services would you like to see offered (specifically) for graduate students? (Select all that apply)

Funding (Scholarships, Fellowships, Grants, Bursaries) \_\_\_\_\_  
Awards \_\_\_\_\_  
Resources \_\_\_\_\_  
Graduate Student Space \_\_\_\_\_  
Opportunities for Career and Professional Development \_\_\_\_\_  
Health and Counselling Services \_\_\_\_\_

Housing \_\_\_\_\_  
Services for on-campus residents \_\_\_\_\_  
Services for off-campus residents \_\_\_\_\_  
Services for Distance Students \_\_\_\_\_  
Services for Travel (Conferences, Research) \_\_\_\_\_  
Social Supports and events \_\_\_\_\_  
Employment Opportunities \_\_\_\_\_  
Opportunities for Teaching and Learning Development \_\_\_\_\_  
Opportunities for Research Development \_\_\_\_\_  
Services and Programs for New Graduate Students \_\_\_\_\_  
Academic Supports (writing, research skills, library, studying, etc.) \_\_\_\_\_  
Program or discipline specific services and programs \_\_\_\_\_  
Student specific services and programs (Aboriginal, International students, Women, Part-time, etc.) \_\_\_\_\_  
Online Services and Programs (forums, D2L, workshops/webinars) \_\_\_\_\_  
Faculty Development Initiatives for Supervisors; Committee Members \_\_\_\_\_  
Other Services and Programs \_\_\_\_\_  
Please Specify: \_\_\_\_\_

32) Do you have any further suggestions for graduate student support services at Memorial University?

\_\_\_\_\_

33) General Comments:

\_\_\_\_\_

34) Would you be willing to participate in a follow-up interview?  
Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_

If you are interested in participating in a follow-up interview, please contact the principal investigator directly or provide contact information below:

\_\_\_\_\_

Thank you!



## **Appendix C**

### **Letter of Information for Interview Participants**

#### **Research Study: Student Support Services and Graduate Student Persistence in the Social Sciences and Humanities Disciplines**

**Principal Investigator:** Melanie Greene  
Doctoral Candidate  
Faculty of Education  
Memorial University  
St. John's, NL A1B 3X8  
(709) 864-6928  
[melaniejg@mun.ca](mailto:melaniejg@mun.ca)

**Supervisor:** Dr. Dennis Sharpe  
(709) 864-7549  
[dsharpe@mun.ca](mailto:dsharpe@mun.ca)

#### **Introduction:**

My name is Melanie Greene and I am a doctoral student in the Faculty of Education at Memorial University. As part of my Doctoral thesis, I am conducting research under the supervision of Dr. Dennis Sharpe. In this study, I will be exploring the experiences of graduate students in the Faculty of Arts at Memorial University. I am hoping to learn what social and academic supports graduate students feel are important to their persistence and success.

#### **Purpose of the Study:**

The purpose of my doctoral research is to explore the following question: What support services are available to assist graduate students and what effects, if any, do they have on persistence and academic success? It is hoped that through the identification of key factors that influence persistence, Canadian institutions will be better able to assist students in their integration into, and transitions through, their graduate programs. This research aims to contribute to the existing literature on graduate education persistence and the role of student support services.

#### **Procedures Involved in the Research:**

You are invited to participate in an individual interview at your convenience, during which you will be asked to answer a series of questions about yourself and experiences as a graduate student. Shortly after the interview has been completed, I will send a copy of the transcript to give you an opportunity to confirm the accuracy of our conversation and to add or clarify any points that you wish. All information you provide is considered

completely confidential. Your name will not appear in publications resulting from this study, however, with your permission, anonymous quotations may be used.

**Length of Time:**

The interview will take about 60 minutes to complete.

**Withdrawal from the Study:**

Your participation in this study is voluntary. It is your choice to be part of the study or not. If you decide to participate, you can decide to stop at any time, even after signing the consent form or part-way through the study. If you decide to stop participating, there will be no consequences to you. In cases of withdrawal, any data you have provided to that point will be destroyed by the researcher unless you indicate otherwise. If you do not want to answer some of the questions you do not have to, but you can still be in the study.

**Potential Benefits:**

Through this study, the researcher may learn more about the struggles of graduate students and what services may help students to succeed in their studies. This research could be of help to students, professors, educational staff and administrators. The research may not benefit you directly.

**Potential Harms, Risks, or Discomforts:**

It is not likely that there will be any harms or discomforts associated with this study. You may feel uncomfortable with some questions. You do not need to answer questions that make you uncomfortable or that you do not want to answer.

**Confidentiality vs. Anonymity:**

Anything that you say or do in the study will not be told to anyone else. Anything that we find out about you that could identify you will not be published or told to anyone else, unless we obtain your permission. Your privacy will be respected. You will not be asked to provide your name or any personal information.

**Confidentiality and Storage of Data:**

The information obtained by me will be kept in a locked office and will only be available to myself and my supervisor. The audiotapes and transcripts will be kept for approximately five years following the study. All data will be destroyed five years after the final report. The analysis and final report will be prepared on a password protected computer on campus that only the researcher has access to. Data will be reported in a form of qualitative conclusions, therefore, prohibiting the identification of individual participant data. The tapes will be coded numerically so that the researcher will not be able to identify any individual participants.

**Anonymity:**

Every reasonable effort will be made to assure your anonymity, and you will not be identified in any reports or publications without your explicit permission. As participants for this research project have been selected from a small group of people, many of whom are known to each other, it is possible that participants may be identifiable to other people on the basis of what they have said.

**Recording of Data:**

With your permission, the interview will be audio recorded and transcribed to allow for the accurate collection of information, and later transcribed for analysis.

**Reporting of Results:**

The data from this research project will be used in the writing of a thesis, as well as published in academic journals and presented at conferences; however, the identity of participants will be kept confidential. Although direct quotes from the interviews will be reported, pseudonyms will be used in written reports, publications and oral presentations based on the research findings; all identifying information will be removed.

**Sharing of Results with Participants:**

You may obtain information about the results of the study by contacting the principal investigator, Melanie Greene, contact information provided above.

**Questions:**

You are welcome to ask questions at any time during your participation in this research. If you would like more information about this study, please contact me, Melanie Greene, contact information provided above.

The proposal for this research has been reviewed by the Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research (ICEHR) and found to be in compliance with Memorial University's ethics policy. If you have ethical concerns about the research (such as the way you have been treated or your rights as a participant), you may contact the Chairperson of ICEHR at [icehr@mun.ca](mailto:icehr@mun.ca) or by telephone at 864-2861.

## Appendix D

### Interview Participant Consent Form

Your signature on this form means that:

- You have read the information about the research.
- You have had the opportunity to ask questions about this study.
- You are satisfied with the answers to all your questions.
- You understand what the study is about and what you will be doing.
- You understand that you are free to withdraw from the study at any time, without having to give a reason, and that doing so will not affect you now or in the future.
- You understand that any data collected from you up to the point of your withdrawal will be destroyed by the researcher and will not be used in the research study.

If you sign this form, you do not give up your legal rights and do not release the researchers from their professional responsibilities.

**Your signature:**

I have read and understood what this study is about and appreciate the risks and benefits. I have had adequate time to think about this and had the opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered.

\_\_\_\_\_ I agree to participate in the research project understanding the risks and contributions of my participation, that my participation is voluntary, and that I may end my participation at any time.

\_\_\_\_\_ I agree to be audio-recorded during the interview.

\_\_\_\_\_ I agree to the use of quotations but do not want my name to be identified in any publications resulting from this study.

A copy of this Informed Consent Form has been given to me for my records.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

**Researcher's Signature:**

I have explained this study to the best of my ability. I invited questions and gave answers. I believe that the participant fully understands what is involved in being in the study, any potential risks of the study and that he or she has freely chosen to be in the study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Principal Investigator

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

The proposal for this research has been reviewed by the Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research (ICEHR) and found to be in compliance with Memorial University's ethics policy. If you have ethical concerns about the research (such as the way you have been treated or your rights as a participant), you may contact the Chairperson of ICEHR at [icehr@mun.ca](mailto:icehr@mun.ca) or by telephone at 864-2861.

## Appendix E

### Interview Questions

- 1) Please tell me a bit about yourself as a graduate student (Prompt: educational background, academic program, year of study, enrolment status, etc.)
- 2) What are some of the factors that influenced your decision to enroll in graduate studies (Prompt: What about at Memorial specifically)?
- 3) What is the **most** important factor that influenced your decision to enroll in graduate studies {Prompt: What about at Memorial specifically}?
- 4) Have you ever considered leaving/not completing your graduate program? (If yes, please talk a bit about this experience; if no, please explain).
- 5) What are some of the factors that influenced your decision to persist/leave your graduate program at Memorial?
- 6) What is the **most** important factor that influenced your decision to persist/leave your graduate program at Memorial?
- 7) In your experience/opinion, what are some of the biggest barriers to graduate student persistence?
- 8) What do you believe/think is the role of support services in graduate student persistence and success? (Prompt: What about Schools of Graduate Studies; Graduate Student Unions, and Student Affairs and Services units in particular?)
- 9) What do you think universities can do to help students persist and succeed in their graduate programs?
- 10) What do you believe/think is the role of a supervisor/advisor/committee in graduate student persistence and success?
- 11) What do you believe/think is the role of a department in graduate student persistence and success?
- 12) What do you believe/think is the role of the Faculty {of Arts} in graduate student persistence and success?
- 13) Could you please identify what you consider to be the most important services and programs provided for graduate students at Memorial?
- 14) What types of support services and programs would you like to see offered specifically for graduate students at Memorial?

15) Do you feel that your personal and professional development needs were addressed in your graduate program, particularly with regards to transitioning out of graduate school and into a career? Are there ways in which your personal and professional development in your graduate program could have been enhanced to aid in this transition?

16) What advice would you offer to future graduate students?