Promoting Early & Effective Conflict Resolution in the Graduate Community: Conflict Resolution Centre (CRC) for Graduate Students Pilot Insights SUMMARY
January – June 2016

Heather McGhee Peggs
Manager, Graduate CRC
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Promoting Early & Effective Conflict Resolution in the Graduate Community: Conflict Resolution Centre (CRC) for Graduate Students Pilot January – June 2016

A brief history of the CRC

The School of Graduate Studies (SGS), the University of Toronto Graduate Students’ Union (UTGSU) and Student Life (SL) (the “Partners”) partnered to create and pilot a tri-campus conflict resolution support centre – the Conflict Resolution Centre (CRC) for Graduate Students. The pilot is to run from September 2015-August 2017 (2 years).

While various formal and informal conflict management initiatives and appeal mechanisms already exist at U of T, a dedicated conflict resolution office can provide informal support to graduate students to help them navigate conflict earlier and more effectively and also act as a resource for best practices for students, faculty and staff.

The creation of the CRC draws attention to key challenges facing graduate students and recommendations which have been raised in various surveys and reports¹ including:

Report of the Provostial Advisory Committee on Student Mental Health (October 2014)

3.3. Create programming for graduate students that will foster a greater sense of community within and across departments and faculties, and enhance support for graduate students in their interactions with their supervisors.

4.1 Enhance programming for students that has a focus on personal skill development, including individual resilience, coping skills, problem solving, and self-advocacy.

4.2 Expand peer support programs focused on mental health for students in which peer mentors are linked directly to mental health professionals for training, support and consultation; consider creating community-specific peer support, for example graduate student peer support, or peer support for students who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer (LGBTQ).

National Educational Association of Disabled Students (NEADS) Graduate Taskforce report (June 2016)

Recommendation 1: Strengthen the student-supervisor relationship for students with disabilities in graduate education.

¹ See also the results of the Canadian Graduate and Professional Survey (Fall 2013), the concerns raised in the Graduate Students’ Union Harassment, Discrimination & Abuse Report (2011), and the Report of the University Ombudsperson (2014-2015) which notes “As a proportion of their total number, graduate students continue to be the biggest student users of the Office.”
**What is “conflict” in the university context & why does it matter?**

Conflict can be a constructive and healthy part of the university experience (i.e. debate and academic rigor), however, unmanaged conflict in graduate studies can be destructive (i.e. time, energy, personal & professional resources expended).²

> “Conflict emerges when disagreements, differences, annoyances, competition or inequities threaten something important.”³

Among the issues that are the most difficult to resolve on university campuses are graduate student-supervisor issues.⁴ Common sources of supervisor / student conflict have been identified as: lack of openness; unclear communication; time; different expectations about responsibilities and different values about important graduate skills.⁵

Universities must be actively engaged in managing conflict because of the significant consequences of failing to do so.

**What is the CRC trying to do?**

The CRC aims to:

- Help graduate students better navigate the resolution of conflict within a large and complex university;
- Help the graduate community better understand and access best practices for managing, resolving and preventing conflict;
- Provide training to help students, faculty and staff to navigate conflict early and effectively;
- Provide informal and confidential support for the most challenging of conflicts within the university context - student/supervisor conflict; and
- Address feelings of isolation and fear among graduate students with respect to the resolution of conflict.⁶

One of the key CRC initiatives is a trained graduate-to-graduate peer support team (the “G2G Peer Advisors”). Graduate students don’t necessarily ask for help when they should and may feel that their “issue is too small” for more formal processes. Peer-to-peer programs which are confidential, informal and low-barrier may overcome these barriers to seeking help.⁷

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² Robyn A. Jacobson, “Managing Conflicts and Resolving Disputes Involving Students on University Campuses: The Present and the Future” (January 2012 Dissertation, York University, Toronto, ON) at 3 and 7.
³ 1997, Friends Conflict Resolution Programs
⁴ Jacobson, supra at 3 and 7.
⁵ CITATION: [http://jsi.sagepub.com/content/11/1/90](http://jsi.sagepub.com/content/11/1/90)
⁶ Responding to concerns/suggestions flagged by U of T graduate students in the Mental Health Focus groups, and NCHA 2013 data. ⁷ Thank you to Libby Mahaffy, Assistant Director for Conflict Management at MIT for sharing her insights from the REFS (Resources for Easing Friction & Stress) program. MIT’s Conflict Management Office stated as a mediation centre in 1999, in response to a suicide of a graduate student at Harvard. REFS are graduate students who “provide
What makes the G2G program unique?

Students should be encouraged to seek out whatever support and guidance they wish in dealing with a difficult situation, for example, from friends, family members, colleagues, counsellors, departmental administrators or faculty members, SGS, or the U of T Ombudsperson.

In complement to these other sources of support, students can connect with a G2G to talk through an issue, get information (including referrals and tips/advice for resolving or managing conflict) and consider options before deciding which course of action is best for them or committing to any process.

G2G will not advocate or intervene. G2G help students to navigate their own way forward and gain momentum in resolving issues early and effectively - the graduate student remains at the centre of any informal conflict resolution process.

While university peer mentor programs are relatively common, peer-to-peer conflict management teams are far less so. I developed the 40-hour G2G conflict resolution training with standard ADR (alternative dispute resolution) training and MIT’s REFS team training (Resources for Easing Friction and Stress) in mind, with consideration of the policies, processes, procedures and resources available at U of T.

January 2016 - G2G Team

Left to Right:
UTM – Samer, UTSC Natalie; UTSG: Jonathan, Jacey, Michael
Front row:
UTSG: Debra, Keira

- Talking to a G2G is informal and confidential:
  - G2G do not keep written files about meetings. Talking to a G2G is “off the record” – no formal processes are started by meeting with a G2G.
  - G2G have weekly drop-ins / appointment slots available across all 3 campuses.

- G2G are non-judgmental:

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Ibid.

Subject to exceptions set out in the CRC Terms of Reference.

We record anonymous information about consultations for statistical purposes.
- G2G will listen without judgement; they have no vested interest in any outcome.
- Students can talk about issues they may not yet be comfortable sharing or have not yet had an opportunity to share with friends, family or department, or talk to a G2G to get a “2nd opinion” or a peer point of view.

- **G2G know what it is like to be a graduate student:**
  - Students can choose to talk to G2G who is not part of their graduate unit, or one that is in their graduate unit or in a similar academic environment (e.g. lab).
  - Students may be reluctant to talk about their issues because of competition, fear of retaliation or being seen as less than capable, or the nature of the issue.

- **G2G are knowledgeable:**
  - G2G are familiar with a wide range or graduate policies, resources and supports.

_In appreciation_

I would like to extend a warm thank you to the Partners and to the graduate community at U of T for their enthusiasm for, and continued thoughtful reflection on, the CRC services. In particular, I would like to thank David Newman (Student Life Senior Director, Student Experience) for his support and commitment to the pilot and Jesse Adigwe, our outstanding CRC Program Assistant.

Finally, without Debra, Jacey, Jonathan, Keira, Michael, Natalie and Samer, none of this would have been possible. Thank you for your energy, insight into the graduate experience and your commitment to being curious, kind, accurate, timely and above all, yourselves as members of the first G2G Peer Advisor team.

I look forward to continuing the pilot in 2016/2017!

_Heather McGhee Peggs, Manager, CRC_
SNAPSHOT of CRC Activities: Sept 2015 - June 2016

- **Building strong relationships across U of T & listening to the graduate community:**
  I met with 100+ staff/faculty/students on 3 campuses who are keenly interested in supporting graduate students and improving the experience of members of the graduate community in managing and resolving conflict.

- **G2G training & team building:**
  Starting with 40 hours of conflict management training, the G2G developed together as a team – sharing successes and challenges. Their enthusiasm and commitment to this role has helped to shape the pilot. The comprehensive G2G training would not have been possible without the many individuals from SGS/SL/UTGSU (and beyond!) who shared their time and expertise – thank you!

- **Connecting with graduate students, staff & faculty:**
  We connected personally with 115 students and 8 faculty/staff across 3 campuses between February and June 2016. Most of the time, more than one issue was raised during a meeting (229 issues arose out of 123 connections).

- **Launch of CRC** [www.gradcrc.utoronto.ca](http://www.gradcrc.utoronto.ca):
  The CRC officially opened in January 2016. Our website provides information to students, staff and faculty about the CRC and the G2G team and how to connect with us, and also allows us to share best practices for conflict prevention, and news about events and training. (841 new website users between February and June\(^\text{11}\)).

- **@G2GUofT & Social Media:**
  We have an active Twitter account managed by the G2G: 78 followers (March-June\(^\text{12}\)) and one of the G2G was a guest blogger on the Gradlife blog. We use Twitter to provide tips and re-tweet information to promote early and effective conflict resolution, with a focus on positive messaging (you can resolve conflict!) and academic / higher education issues. We also advertise G2G drop-ins, CRC events and events/opportunities on campus of interest to graduate students.

- **Providing training for students, faculty and staff:**
  The CRC provides conflict resolution skills training to members of the graduate community. During this period I redeveloped a GPS seminar (now a 3 part- Conflict Resolution Fundamentals workshop series); co-facilitated Mental Wellness 101 workshops for students & faculty with SGS and Health & Wellness and Accessibility Services; and developed a number of other unique workshops and talks for students, staff and faculty.

\(^{11}\) 1800 new users as of October 19, 2016.

\(^{12}\) 115 followers as of October 19, 2016.
**Outreach**: We shared information about the CRC/G2G by engaging in 167 different types of outreach, from leaving posters and postcards in lobbies and libraries (48 buildings), to holding drop-in hours/information sessions (45 drop-in sessions), to attending events for graduate students (58 unique events) and arranging for departments to send out information about the CRC/G2G through email or newsletters (16 online initiatives). The G2G accepted the responsibility and challenge of doing outreach for this new program in different locations/ways with enthusiasm and professionalism, and having the current G2G share their “tips and tricks” for what worked or did not work as well will be part of the training for the new team members.

*Outreach on UTSG campus*
Who connected with the CRC/G2G?¹³

Connections by constituency

In total we connected with 123 individuals, including 104 graduate students, 8 faculty/staff and 11 other students, either 1:1 or in co-coaching¹⁴ sessions. In terms of percentages, we met with:

- 44% PhD students
- 35% Master’s students
- 6% Faculty / Staff
- 6% Grad Student (not specified or post-doc)
- 5% Undergraduate / Graduate Applicant
- 4% Other students (not specified)

10 interesting observations

1. The vast majority of our discussions were in-person, with very few over phone or email¹⁵.

2. 65% were first-time meetings; 13% were follow-up meetings; the remainder did not specify.

3. Just over 50% of the time we noted that the individual we were speaking with was visibly upset, at least “somewhat” or “at times”.

4. 10% of our connections were on UTSC campus.

5. Not surprisingly, many connections were made in the G2G’s home departments.

6. An average meeting time was 39 minutes, with 15% of meetings = 5 min or less, 45% = 5-30 min, 18% 30-60 min, and 22% over 1 hour in length.

7. We are making connections with students across all years of study.

¹³ Qualitative and quantitative data was collected from January to June 2016. We input anonymous data from our interactions into a secure CampusLabs survey form. We input our own data on meetings without identifying details about the student/staff/faculty member. This process has the benefit of ensuring anonymity of those we meet with, but it also means that we are not able to clarify descriptions after entry.

¹⁴ I co-coached with many of the G2G, and they also coached with each other in pairs.

¹⁵ In order to ensure confidentiality, we normally do not discuss issues over email; email is used to provide links to university resources/services and/or to provide information about the CRC/G2G service.
8. Of the master’s students we connected with, 67% identified as 1st year graduate students. Of the PhD students, 44% were in 4th or 5th year.

9. We made referrals 55% of the time (where and when appropriate).

10. The top 5 referrals were made to: (1) Department / Supervisor (2) Graduate Supervision Guidelines (3) CRC website/workshops (4) Career Centre and (5) ELWS.

**Issues discussed**

It was common for individuals to raise more than one issue in a discussion and a wide range of issues were discussed. In total, 229 issues\(^{16}\) were identified during 123 connections.

The most common issue raised was “Supervisory issues”, making up 24%\(^{17}\) of the total. The top 5 issues (not including “Other”\(^{18}\)), detailed below, make up 55% of all the issues discussed.

Overall the issues that we encountered were consistent with what we had expected and what the research and surveys have told us about the graduate concerns and issues.

**Supervisory Issues**\(^{19}\) (24%)

Some of the more common supervisory issues raised were:

- Concerns about communication/relationship/conflict with supervisor(s)
- Discussions about past poor experiences with supervisors
- Challenges and questions about selecting supervisors
- Challenges and questions about changing supervisors or setting up committees
- Concerns about feedback from supervisors & behaviour of supervisor

**Challenges as a grad student (9%)**

- Includes general discussions about how difficult/challenging it can be to be a grad student; office / space issues; research topic; feeling unwelcome or like an imposter; dealing with comps/placement/project; starting program; quitting grad school

**CRC/G2G Service (7%)**

- Answering questions about confidentiality; wait-lists; how to book appointment; what G2G Peer Advisors can/can’t do

\(^{16}\) I have assigned issues to one of 25 categories, and I have not distinguished faculty/staff issues from those raised by students.

\(^{17}\) 54 issues out of total of 229 (in 123 connections) related to supervision.

\(^{18}\) The “Other” category includes issues that did not fit into any of the other categories because they were unique issues or described in very little detail.

\(^{19}\) I kept all supervisor-related issues together in one category; I will revisit this when we have more data.
Life after grad school (5%)
- General discussions of what life will look like after graduate school; alumni benefits; career options/non-academic careers

Communication & conflict resolution strategies (5%)
- Tips, advice, strategies for starting difficult conversations; options for resolving conflict; role playing

Graduate student supports (5%)
- Discussions about supports for writing, resume/cover letters; mental wellness; international students; counselling services; accessibility; housing

The remaining issues included: personal issues; stress/anxiety; finances; departmental issues; colleague/classmate/labmate issues; instructor issues; completion; changing programs, academics (appeals; grades; standing; leaves); undergraduate issues; training & assistance for personal issues; publishing; equity concerns; lab issues; funding; escalating complaints and CRC training for graduate units.

What did people say about the pilot?

There were several themes which emerged from my discussions with members of the graduate community:

- “Finally!” There seemed to be a sense of relieved gratitude that SGS, UTGSU, and SL had partnered on the CRC/G2G pilot and are supporting a service for graduate students that can help them to better navigate conflict at U of T and provide training and share best practices in conflict resolution with all members of the graduate community.

- “Will you give us a map?” What I heard from many people is while they may want to support students and make meaningful referrals, they don’t know where to start. U of T is big and there are many resources, policies, and processes which can be challenging to navigate in a crisis. People want an easy to follow map or step-by-step checklist to help them navigate through challenging issues. The reality is that resolving conflict can be time consuming and complex, involving different people with different perspectives of a problem.

- “So, you’ll be able to resolve my conflict for me right?” In my view, many people do not realize that it is critically important that they play an active and personal role in any conflict resolution process. This may be connected to a lack of understanding of how both informal and formal processes work as well as a normal response to the discomfort of conflict. Frequently I was asked if I was going to mediate and resolve the conflict for them, whereas mediation is simply a facilitated negotiation where the parties are still the ones negotiating!
What did people say about our service?

We also provided students, staff and faculty who made use of our services with the opportunity to provide us with their feedback via an anonymous Campuslabs survey: http://uoft.me/crcsurvey. There were few responses to this voluntary survey however, we note the following:

- Of the 8 responses, 3 identified as masters students and 5 as PhD students
- All of the respondents were looking for “advice on how to handle a situation”
- 5 out of 8 respondents mentioned “supervisor” as the main issue talked about with the CRC/G2G
- All respondents indicated that they felt “at ease/comfortable talking with CRC/G2G”, and would be “likely to contact the CRC or a G2G” in the future if they had a concern

We also heard that they would like to see future training on dispute resolution/conflict resolution offered through informal group discussion, in-person workshops/seminars, case studies and online.

What did the G2G say about their experience?

Training

Consensus among the team\(^{20}\) was that the training benefited them in their role and personally as graduate students, most notably the elements of the training which focussed on active listening, managing expectations and self-reflection and care.

“While I came into this position knowing the importance of listening for resolving conflict, I have been consistently struck by the positive impact that our service provides to people struggling to improve their University experience. I am surprised to have gained the skill to impact people in unexpected ways.”

The 40+ hours of training for 2016 included:

- Conflict Resolution & Communication GPS module (SL)
- Communication / Active listening (CRC)
- SGS Essential Policies (SGS)
- Power Imbalances/Imposter Phenomenon (Academic Success SL)
- Intercultural Communication (CIE)
- Bias/Equity/Harassment (SGDO/Multi-Faith/Sexual Harassment Office)
- Referrals/Health & Wellness (CRC / Health & Wellness)

\(^{20}\) I sought feedback from the G2G team immediately after their January training, and again in June, after 5 months in the role, and in particular, asked them to reflect on what they had learned over the past 6 months as G2G Peer Advisors.
• 1:1 Coaching/Managing boundaries and expectations/Respectful communication (CRC)
• Fairness & Referral to Ombuds (U of T Ombuds)
• Safetalk (U of T)
• Trauma awareness (519 Centre)
• Advanced Conflict Resolution – Getting people “unstuck” (Ryerson Ombudsperson)
• AODA/Health & Safety training (U of T)

**Teamwork**

I am extraordinarily proud of the G2G Peer Advisors for their work as a team. With such a diverse group with academic and personal commitments (and wildly different schedules) they prioritized making connections with one another and with fellow graduate students. Working with one another was a highlight of the past 6 months for the G2G:

“`The most surprising aspect of the work with the rest of my team has by far been everybody’s understanding, acceptance, and ability to see each other’s perspectives. I think this is in part due to the nature of the work, the types of people that are attracted to this type of work, and the skills that those individuals possess. However, I still found it quite refreshing that people from such different backgrounds, with fundamentally different skill sets had a relatively easy time communicating amongst each other, planning and coordinating work together, and the ability to generally get along really well, even in challenging situations.”`

**Getting to know U of T**

One of my priorities in developing the G2G Peer Advisor training was making sure that the team was aware of the essential graduate policies and the resources available to support graduate students. The team commented that meeting the individuals who provide the services (academic advising; career advice; sexual harassment; equity services etc.) was invaluable, and they benefited personally and as a G2G from getting to know U of T a bit better:

“`I feel that being a G2G has enhanced my grad school experience…While it is true that having such information about the university’s resources allowed me to help other grad students in navigating their way through issues and challenges, I also gained immensely from this valuable knowledge in my own grad experience. I realized that knowing where to turn to for help is half the battle when problems arise.”`

**Impact beyond U of T**

The expectation is that graduate students will graduate, so I anticipate some turn-over year-to-year on the G2G Peer Advisor team. I asked the current team to tell me what they thought they might bring with them from the role into their next experience:

“`I’ll bring this on-the-ground experience back to my other official and personal roles at the university and beyond. I feel privileged to have shared in the joys and anxieties of fellow students, and I’ve learnt from every encounter about myself, about others, about our relationships, about our worlds, and about empathy. I got to see grad students’ ‘everyday’s – the minutiae that make up our experiences; the things we notice; the things we have; the things we want. It’s been a pleasure to serve the grad community in this way.”`
SNAPSHOT of WHERE WE ARE HEADED in 2016/2017

G2G Peer Advisor Recruitment & Training

We have had an even more enthusiastic response from graduate students to the August 2016 posting of positions for the 2016-2017 G2G Peer Advisor team. I am excited to have the opportunity to meet and work with more incredible graduate students who will be joining a number of members of the original team who are remaining in their roles for 2016-2017 (5 of the original team will remain until December, and 3 into 2017).

Based on feedback from the G2G and this review, there will be only minor changes to the training content, and I am looking forward to having many of the wonderful facilitators returning, as well as possibly a few new ones. The challenge will be coordinating schedules to ensure that we are providing the same high-quality training as we did this year. There is in my view, a need for ongoing development of active listening skills, and the emphasis in in-service learning will likely be on listening, as well as the boundaries of the G2G role.

We will continue to draw upon the expertise of many individuals and departments within the U of T community to provide training for the G2G.

G2G Peer Advisor Role

Based on feedback from the team I will also be providing earlier opportunities for team-building and co-coaching. In addition, the senior G2G will be involved as mentors for the new G2G team members for outreach initiatives and coaching and as facilitators for training. We will:

- Work to make some of the more time-consuming administrative elements of the G2G role (booking appointments, data entry) simpler for the peer advisors.
- Continue to develop G2G participation in social media in collaboration with Student Life Communications / Gradlife; and
- Ensure that G2G are supported in doing informal outreach at the graduate unit level, and work toward expanding opportunities for G2G to connect with graduate students across all campuses both within and outside of their departments.

Training & outreach

We will continue to work with Student Life Communication to ensure that website is fully AODA compliant and mobile friendly and all printed materials meet AODA standards.

We are looking forward to participating in Orientation activities in August/September to let students, staff and faculty know about the G2G service and CRC workshops/training.

We want to make sure that we are doing all that we can to reach all graduate students, including considering alternative ways of reaching graduate students and we will be working toward developing and providing conflict management content on the website that will be useful for

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21 7 new members joined the team in September 2016 and will complete their training/onboarding the week of October 19, 2016. I am delighted to have an even greater diversity of voices and experiences reflected in the G2G Peer Advisor team.
students after hours – focus on getting information that students want to them WHEN they need it (24/7).

We will continue to develop workshops and facilitate discussion groups for graduate students on dispute revolution and conflict prevention skills, including facilitating GPS Conflict, Communication and Negotiation workshops – working with G2G and SL and SGS facilitators to offer them on all campuses.

Expectations & Focus

In the upcoming year I hope to deepen connections with graduate units across UTM, UTSC and UTSG and facilitate more/deeper connections with campus resources and services, including for example, strengthening connections with First Nation’s House (FNH) as part of developing an understanding of the principles and values of restorative justice and the Truth & Reconciliation recommendations.

We will look at how the undergraduate community might benefit from this service, and how an undergraduate conflict resolution centre might differ from the model established for the graduate pilot.

From our limited survey results it appears that the majority of users came to the CRC/G2G looking for “advice on how to handle a situation.” We need to make sure that we are seen as a credible resource not aligned with any one partner or constituency. We will continue to try to manage expectations of the graduate community about what our service can do to support them in conflict resolution (you put the U in conflict resolUtion!), and to ensure that we are providing quality services on all campuses.