

***Report of The School of Graduate Studies on
Common Standards and Procedures for Master's/Magisteriate Programs***

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Preamble

In November 1994, the Dean of Graduate Studies established an advisory committee to study master's/magisteriate programs at Concordia University and make recommendations concerning university-wide standards related to them. This committee, The Advisory Committee to the Dean of Graduate Studies on Common Standards and Procedures for Master's/Magisteriate Programs, consulted across the university and submitted its draft report in the Fall of 1995. This report was tabled at the Assembly of Graduate Program Directors in October, 1995 and at the Council of the School of Graduate Studies in January 1996 and has been updated in light of comments from these two bodies, graduate program directors, interested faculty, etc.

Master's/magisteriate degree programs are much more diverse in their objectives, programs structure and requirements than doctoral programs. The contrast in objectives for example, is illustrated by comparing the M.A. in philosophy with the MBA, with the former directed explicitly toward further academic study and research, and the latter directed toward the achievement of managerial success, and there are several other program objectives which do not conform to these two. Difference in program structure is most obvious when one considers thesis-oriented programs and non-thesis (i.e., course based programs). Diversity also exists among course-based programs with some made up of only courses, and others having a variety of components ranging from three-credit special projects, such as the M.Eng. programs, to the 21 credit "Research Essay" in the M.A. in History.

The main focal point of this report is the thesis-oriented master's/magisteriate program and for the purpose of this report, an operational definition of 'thesis program' is in order. Thesis programs share the following characteristics:

- students are engaged in an individual research/creative project under the guidance of a thesis supervisor;
- projects involve the preparation of an original write-up, the thesis, which usually contains a literature review about the specific research topic, as well a critical assessment of the research findings;
- thesis programs normally culminate in an examination and defence of the thesis by a group of experts in the research topic.

Thesis-based master's/magisteriate programs are less diverse than course based programs in general. They have much in common with Ph.D. programs and this report borrows heavily from the existing report on common practices and standards in Ph.D. programs. It should always be remembered that the suggestions and recommendations which follow are regarded as a minimum for quality master's/magisteriate programs. Individual programs are encouraged to develop more stringent admission requirements in keeping with the needs and aspirations of the faculty.

An essential part of any research degree is the interaction between students and their thesis supervisors. The Task Force on Research Student/Supervisor Relations is currently addressing this topic.

The report is structured in the following way. First, we consider the faculty participation and resources required to start and maintain a master's/magisteriate program. This section also includes reference to thesis supervision. The second section addresses program management; the third deals with students, program requirements and recruitment; and the fourth, with program structure and academic regulations. There is a summary of all recommendations in section five. The Appendix contains a listing of all

master's/magisteriate programs offered at Concordia University. For each program, an indication is given as to whether the degree is thesis-based, course based, or contains a substantial part which is neither thesis nor course-work.

Recommendations

1. Faculty Participation in Master's/Magisteriate Programs

The most essential resource required for a successful master's/magisteriate program is a qualified and committed group of faculty members. For thesis master's/magisteriate programs, these faculty members must have substantial experience in research in the field because it is this group which will develop and maintain the program curriculum, develop research, oversee the admission of students, and ensure the maintenance of quality standards appropriate for the program.

Recommendation 1:

That all faculty who participate in master's/magisteriate programs have an earned master's/magisteriate or doctoral degree, or equivalent, relevant to the field.

To contribute to the research component of thesis-based programs, faculty members should have experience in research in the field. In most cases, such experience will have been obtained through their own graduate training and through continuing scholarly research. This is particularly important for those who participate in thesis supervision as principal supervisors, co-supervisors, and members of supervisory committees.

Recommendation 2:

That faculty who participate in thesis supervision be active in scholarly research; that this be evidenced by their own research, peer-reviewed publications, grants or other such expressions appropriate to the level and the discipline, and in keeping with the timeliness of the research to the discipline.

The supervision of graduate students is of prime importance in graduate programs. The academic mentoring and leadership provided by supervisors may be supported by a supervisory committee or by the program itself, depending on the discipline traditions and availability of faculty. It is important in all thesis programs, that mechanisms be available to address concerns and solve problems which may occur in the student-supervisor relationship. These issues may relate to continuity and timeliness of ongoing research, academic standing, or they may arise because faculty leave the university, the interests and research of the student and faculty member diverge significantly, or they may be due to personality conflicts, or other similar matters. In certain areas, these matters are addressed by having a thesis supervisory committee. In others, they may be addressed by graduate program directors or program committees. In cases where programs do not use thesis committees, it is strongly advised that the graduate program director be mandated to address problem cases, and it would seem prudent that the program committee itself provide the GPD with support to resolve problem cases.

In order to insure quality and continuity in research supervision, supervisors should have the appropriate qualifications as well as a long-term commitment to the university. The role of the members of supervisory committees is to serve as an intellectual resource and to provide a wider range of ideas and expertise than would normally be provided by the principal supervisor alone. In addition, the members of supervisory committees provide a necessary back up in the event that the principal supervisor should be unavailable or otherwise unable to see the student through to completion. Thus, at least two members of such committees, including the supervisor, should have a permanent position with the University.

Recommendation 3:

That every Master's/Magisteriate thesis supervisor have tenure or be in a tenure-track position in the University; that they have expertise in the specialization of the research of the student.

Recommendation 4:

That Thesis Supervisory Committees consist of the supervisor and at least one other member in a tenure-track position in the University; that programs which do not use student thesis supervisory committees, establish mechanisms to assist the graduate program director in the resolution of difficulties which arise in the supervision of students (such a mechanism may be the graduate program committee itself).

Recommendation 5:

That tenured faculty who retire and who satisfy the other requirements given in recommendations 2, 3 and 4, may continue in these capacities in a manner consistent with the practices of their departments and with the terms and conditions set at retirement.

2. Program Management

It is the case now, and has long been, that each master's/magisteriate program in the University is administered primarily by a graduate program director. These program directors are called upon to manage all aspects of their programs. The criteria given in Recommendation 1 for faculty participation in master's/magisteriate programs should apply also in selecting a graduate program director. This would insure that the program management is guided by knowledge and academic experience in the discipline involved. It does not insure, however, that the program director is well-versed in academic management. To insure that programs are managed in a way which is consistent with university policies and procedures for graduate programs, the School of Graduate Studies should provide up-to-date information and training where appropriate.

Recommendation 6:

That each master's/magisteriate program have a graduate program director, qualified to participate in the program; that the School of Graduate Studies provide appropriate information and training to all graduate program directors to insure that program administration is consistent with University policies regarding graduate education.

In the past, the administration of programs has differed greatly across the University. Some programs had no program committee and others were administered by the graduate program director in consultation with the department chair. In order to insure fairness, consistency, broad consultation and consensus, appropriate cross-departmental input, distribution of administrative work, equity, academic and supervisory planning, and the like, the following recommendation should be seen as a rule for existing master's/magisteriate programs and as one which will also govern newly developed ones.

Recommendation 7:

That each master's/magisteriate program establish a master's/magisteriate program committee for administering all aspects of the program. (This committee may be a departmental graduate studies committee for all graduate programs in the department).

The membership of the program committee is best decided by the Department or Faculty in keeping with the university-wide standards set by the School of Graduate Studies. Departments having more than one graduate program may choose to have a single committee responsible for more than one program. The committee should include wide representation of the faculty involved in the program. Given its mandate to manage the program, this committee should be central in determining active faculty, admission committees and precise admission standards. For some programs, this committee may also be primarily responsible for the program's curriculum.

Recommendation 8:

That the master's/magisteriate program committee make decisions concerning which faculty satisfy the required qualifications to participate in the various activities of the program.

3. Students: Program Requirements and Recruiting

The admission of quality students is of paramount importance to graduate studies at Concordia. In order to ensure fairness and appropriate planning by the program, decisions on admission are best made by an admission committee. In many programs, the program committee will likely also serve as the admission committee. For those programs for which this is not the case, a separate committee should be established to address this matter.

Recommendation 9:

That each master's/magisteriate program establish an admissions committee consisting of a minimum of three members and that all admission recommendations be made by this committee. (This committee may also be the graduate program committee).

It is of paramount importance that prospective students be given as complete and accurate information as possible with respect to all aspects of the program and any other matters related to their potential enrollment at Concordia. This includes information regarding faculty members' research interests and publications, actual (as opposed to possible) course offerings, financial support, as well as tuition fees, and for students from outside Montreal, the cost of living. Some of this information could be made available to potential applicants to assist in recruiting, but all of it should be available for potential students to assist them in making decisions regarding where to pursue graduate studies.

Recommendation 10:

That each thesis-based master's/magisteriate program compile a complete list of faculty members involved in the program along with a full list of their specific fields of expertise as expressed in recent peer-reviewed publications, etc., and that this documentation be made available to all prospective students.

Recommendation 11:

That each master's/magisteriate program outline in detail the sources of possible funding from within the program itself, such as research and teaching assistantships; and that criteria for teaching assistantships be stated clearly in the program literature; and that information concerning costs related to the program be transmitted to all potential students.

It is the responsibility of each thesis-based master's/magisteriate program to ensure that there should be faculty members who are willing and able to supervise the research of admitted students. This may be accomplished by circulating applicant dossiers to faculty members participating in the program, where appropriate and feasible, or by some other means. This availability should be a criterion in the admission recommendations emanating from the admission committee.

Recommendation 12:

That thesis based master's/magisteriate programs take into account in the admission process, the areas of expertise of faculty and the numbers of faculty normally available for supervision, and manage admissions in accordance with such considerations.

Students admitted to master's/magisteriate programs must be qualified and capable of carrying out graduate work. It is as important to insure that high standards for admissions be established and maintained, as it is to insure that potential students be properly informed, and that faculty members be available to supervise their research. To this end, uniform minimum standards for admissions are required. These regulations should be regarded as a minimum for quality master's/magisteriate programs. Individual programs are encouraged to develop more stringent admission requirements in keeping with the needs and aspirations of the faculty. These regulations address basic academic standards and linguistic abilities.

Recommendation 13:

That master's/magisteriate programs require candidates for admission to have completed a bachelor's/baccalaureate (or equivalent) with high standing (e.g., with honours, or a GPA of at least 3.00);

that where previous academic work is not considered wholly reflective of the applicants' abilities relative to the program of study (such as directly related work experience) this should be articulated in such a way as to ensure equitable treatment of applicants.

Recommendation 14:

That international students whose first language or language of previous instruction is not English or French be required to obtain a score of at least 550 on the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), or the equivalent on another acceptable standardized proficiency test.

4. Program Structure And Academic Regulations

4.1 Courses

There are occasions when potentially well-qualified candidates who are missing basic pre-requisite preparation, present themselves for possible admission. This is often the case when such applicants have pursued undergraduate studies in another discipline. In such cases, students may be required to complete pre-requisite courses as part of a conditional admission, in addition to regular program requirements. These courses should be subject to all program regulations, e.g., GPA rules, minimum and maximum course load requirements, etc.

Recommendation 15:

That any pre-requisite courses required for students in addition to regular program requirements be subject to all program regulations.

It is the responsibility of the program to develop and maintain up-to-date curricula appropriate for its program. Related to this, programs should insure that up-to-date course descriptions appear in the graduate calendar and that courses which are not offered on a regular basis are deleted from the graduate calendar. Curriculum review should be on-going and should also be a part of the university's periodic appraisal process for academic units. The graduate program committee should initiate regular review of curriculum and ensure that it is current and explicitly stated in the calendar.

Courses are sometimes shared between programs. In an environment of shrinking resources, this will become more common. When such sharing is possible between programs with students working at the same level, it is indeed to be encouraged. On the other hand, some sharing of courses via cross-listing, also exists between master's/magisteriate programs and undergraduate programs. Where such cross-listing is necessary, it should be kept to a minimum, and additional requirements for master's/magisteriate students should be clearly spelled out.

Recommendation 16:

That where cross-listing of courses between master's/magisteriate programs and senior undergraduate programs is academically necessary and appropriate, the requirements for master's/magisteriate students in such courses be over and above those for undergraduate students; and that these requirements be clearly outlined for students.

As stated above, whenever possible and appropriate, courses should be shared by students in different programs, both within and outside the university, so long as they are all working at the same level. This sharing of courses becomes difficult when different programs have courses with different credit values. To facilitate students' taking courses in other programs, wherever possible, one-semester courses should be of similar credit value.

Recommendation 17:

That one-term courses normally be worth three credits.

As for any program in the university, students should be provided with appropriate information regarding the content, expectations and evaluation methods for courses in which they are registered.

Recommendation 18:

That course outlines be provided at the beginning of the session; and that the outline include course objectives, requirements, milestones, and methods of evaluation.

In research-based programs, it is often desirable to offer courses which are very specific to the interests of a small number of students. In such cases, reading courses can be made available. It is not desirable that such courses dominate the program. A predominance of readings courses adversely affects the work-loads of faculty members and restricts the pedagogical experiences available to students.

Recommendation 19:

That the number of reading courses taken by any single master's/magisteriate student be limited; and that programs make clear the maximum number of such courses permitted within the program.

4.2 Thesis

The feature which distinguishes research master's/magisteriate programs from other master's/magisteriate programs is the thesis. It is the main achievement of graduates from these programs. It can also be the most problematic portion of a graduate student's university experience. Procedures and regulations should be designed so as to ensure the quality of accepted theses, the attainment of the pedagogical goals of the research component, as well as the fair and equitable treatment of graduate students. The current university guidelines go a long way towards achieving these goals but there is still room for improvement. The first step would be to insure that all students and supervising faculty have a copy of the existing guidelines.

Over and above the general university guidelines and regulations, the faculty participating in each individual program have differing expectations regarding master's/magisteriate theses. So that these expectations are communicated to students as clearly as possible, faculty participating in the supervision of master's/magisteriate students should engage in discussions about their expectations regarding extent of contribution, length, etc. for master's/magisteriate theses with the aim of formulating program-specific guidelines for inclusion in program handbooks.

Currently, master's/magisteriate thesis defenses are managed by the various programs. While this is probably the best policy given the volume, the School of Graduate Studies should undertake to insure that guidelines for the examination of theses are followed.

Recommendation 20:

That master's/magisteriate thesis examining committees be made up of a minimum of three and a maximum of five members; that the candidate's supervisor be a member of the examining committee and that any member of the supervisory committee may be a member of the examining committee; that in the case of Creative Writing, the examining committee consist of at least two readers (excluding the supervisor).

Recommendation 21:

That the examining committee include at least one individual who is not a member of the supervisory committee; that this external may be a qualified examiner from outside the university.

The advisory committee noted the tremendous variety across the university in the number of credits assigned to the thesis. This credit value varies from 12 credits for the MA in Art Education to 36 credits for the MSc in Biology. This wide range is in addition to a range of credit values assigned to major projects in non-thesis degrees. For example, the thesis in the thesis option of the MA in History is worth 29 credits while the original essay in the non-thesis option (in History) is worth 21 credits. This compares with the 15 credit thesis required in many similar programs in the humanities such as the MA programs in Geography, History and Philosophy of Religion, and Judaic Studies. (See the Appendix.) Such extreme variation in credit values for programs with similar orientations can only cause confusion for students and faculty alike. In

addition, one wonders if the variation in expectations regarding effort required to complete the various thesis options is consistent with the variation in credit values.

Recommendation 22:

That the School of Graduate Studies set up a Task Force to study the variation in theses, major projects, creative writing, reports and papers of master's/Magisteriate programs in the university and the changing nature of master's/magisteriate programs in North America.

4.3 Regulations

Timely completion of graduate studies is important from several points of view, such as currency of knowledge and thereby the pertinence of the degree, or the increased likelihood of success for students. In addition there are increasing demands from various levels of government to shorten time spent on studies and to be integrate time in studies with funding to universities. The average time to graduation varies greatly from student to student and from program to program at Concordia. Some programs minimize the time to completion while others may require an extended period to complete thesis research and preparation. Four years should be considered the maximum permissible time for students pursuing their studies on a full-time basis. The current regulations for master's/magisteriate degree state that the maximum allowable time is five years, making no distinction between full- and part-time students. It seems reasonable that the regulations for full-time students should be made more stringent while still allowing part-time students enough time to complete their studies in a timely manner. It should also be emphasized that programs must insure sufficient course offerings so that students may finish their programs within the stated time limits.

Recommendation 23:

That the time limit for full-time students in master's/magisteriate programs be no more than four calendar years from the initial registration in the program at Concordia University; that students pursuing their studies on a part-time basis be limited to five calendar years; that individual programs may adopt shorter time limits consistent with their own needs; that such differences should be noted in the graduate calendar.

All master's/magisteriate programs in the university have academic regulations specifying minimum standards regarding grades obtained for courses taken in the program. For example, all graduate programs are subject to the university's failure regulation which states that any student receiving a fail grade in any course in her/his program is subject to dismissal from the program and may only continue upon the recommendation of the graduate program director.

Such regulations generally have two purposes. First, they are designed to insure that graduates from the program have an acceptable level of performance in courses leading to the degree. Second, they are designed to monitor students' academic progress so that appropriate action may be taken whenever the student's performance is not up to the expectations of the program. The failure regulation is designed primarily for the first purpose.

Another regulation primarily designed for the first purpose is a C-Rule. The graduate calendar states that individual master's/magisteriate programs have rules which limit the number of C grades a student may obtain and still meet the degree requirements of the programs. (See regulation 1, page 359, 1995-96 Graduate Calendar.) Some programs allow no C's, some allow two or more C's, and most allow only one C. Contrary to the general statement in the calendar, some master's/magisteriate programs have no regulations regarding limits on the number of C's. For example, the MBA and the MSc in Administration rely completely on a term by term GPA rule and have no stated limits regarding the number of C's which may be obtained.

For course-work master's/magisteriate programs having sometimes as many as 60 credits, the absence of a C-rule may be acceptable if appropriate GPA rules are in effect to determine good academic standing. For research master's/magisteriate programs, however, a more uniform standard regarding C grades should be adopted.

Recommendation 24:

That students in research master's/magisteriate programs be allowed to receive no more than one C grade to remain in good standing in the University; that individual programs may establish stricter policies in keeping with their own needs; that such differences must be noted in the graduate calendar.

Recommendation 25:

That each graduate program state clearly in the Calendar, its limit on C-rules for students to remain in good standing, if this limit differs from the university wide rule as stated in Recommendation 24.

In addition to insuring minimum standards for academic performance, GPA rules are sometimes used to monitor a student's progress along the way in order to advise students who are experiencing academic difficulties. Most Canadian universities have some variation on a minimum GPA requirement, and it is recommended that Concordia adopt some minimum regulations for all master's/magisteriate programs. Programs have different approaches to appraising the ongoing status of students because academic requirements, regulations and traditions vary. These differences should be respected, but programs should recognize the importance of reviewing the academic standing of students on a regular basis, whether by term or academic year, for example. There is a graduation requirement of good standing which must be met and programs should be aware of this in order to forestall last minute difficulties which may jeopardize students' graduation.

Recommendation 26:

That students academic progress be monitored on a systematic basis and the time frames for this be spelled out in the graduate calendar and in program literature (e.g., each academic year after the winter term, at the end of each term, etc.); that to be permitted to continue in the program, students must obtain a cumulative Grade Point Average (GPA) of 3.00 or better based on a minimum of 12 credits; that students whose GPA falls below 3.00 be considered on academic probation during the following review period; that students whose GPA falls below 3.00 for two consecutive review periods be dismissed from the program; that students' cumulative GPA (from the first registration in the program) be at least 3.00 to graduate; that individual programs may adopt more stringent GPA regulations in keeping with their own needs; that such differences must be noted in the graduate calendar.