



ALBERTA GRADUATE
COUNCIL

AGC AWARENESS

Vol 1 Issue 3

The Alberta Graduate Council represents over 12,000 graduate students at the University of Alberta, University of Calgary, and University of Lethbridge. It represents and promotes the interests of graduate students in Alberta to the provincial government and other interested stakeholders.

To accomplish this, the AGC seeks to:

- Communicate the concerns of its graduate student membership to the Alberta provincial government, and in particular to the Ministry of Advanced Education of the province of Alberta;
- Act as the primary point of contact for graduate students with the Alberta provincial government, and other provincial agencies and organizations;
- Provide a forum for the discussion of issues of specific interest to Alberta graduate students;
- Provide a medium of communication among its graduate student membership;
- Conduct research of relevance to its membership;
- Promote the interests and communicate the value of graduate students in Alberta in their varied roles as students, researchers, and teachers.

Once again it is my pleasure as Chair of AGC to introduce to you another addition of the AGC Awareness. To those of you that are new to this newsletter and our organization, the AGC represents over 12,000 graduate students in the province of Alberta. The AGC is the official representative of graduate students attending the Universities of Alberta, Calgary, and Lethbridge to the Government of Alberta. Just recently the AGC completed a week-long government lobby initiative in Edmonton in order to convey to members of the Legislative Assembly of Alberta the current issues facing graduate studies and research in the province of Alberta. The AGC is determined to ensure that Alberta's excellent post-secondary and public research system is able to make it through the global financial crisis intact. For those of you interested in how our lobbying in Edmonton turned out, keep an eye out in the future for a special article from the AGC detailing our lobby efforts.

In this issue of AGC Awareness we bring to you the struggles and barriers that two students have faced in their graduate career here in Alberta. The first article describes the struggle of Mireille St. Vincent, a graduate student forced to deal with the aspect of maternity leave in the final years of her PhD program. The second article is a first hand account of Ilona Berth, and her experience as an international graduate student in Alberta. Their stories outline important issues that are unfortunately occurring too often in our province. Finally we close this issue of AGC awareness with another segment of Profiling Alberta's Graduate Students. In this segment it is our pleasure to introduce to you Nduka Otiono, a PhD candidate from the University of Alberta. Nduka is a writer from Nigeria looking to shine light on "street stories" emerging from postcolonial Africa.

Finally I would like to wish you a happy holiday season, and thank you for the continued support of graduate studies and research.

Christopher | Chair, Alberta Graduate Council

More Information

For more information about the AGC, contact our chair at chair@albertagrads.ca.

To contact local representatives about any concerns or issues you wish to bring forward to the AGC, please contact:

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Maternity Issues Mothers in Academia

Maternity Issues - Mothers in Academia

By Mireille St. Vincent

My name is Mireille St. Vincent and I am a 6th year PhD student in the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Alberta (U of A). Having experienced motherhood while pursuing graduate studies, I hope to highlight some of the challenges posed as a student requesting a maternity leave, and to raise awareness on some of the disparities that exist in academia.

In 2003, I began my graduate studies in the department of Biochemistry at the U of A. The departments' solid reputation first attracted me to the program, and undoubtedly contributed to my being awarded an Alexander Graham Bell Scholarship by the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council (NSERC).

In my 5th year of the program, I received the exciting news that I was pregnant and due in October. To my relief, my supervisor was very supportive and directed me to contact the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research (FGSR), to allow sufficient time to complete all of the necessary forms for parental leave. The FGSR requires the completion of two forms; an NSERC interruption-of-award form and an FGSR leave-of-absence form. The FGSR is then responsible for notifying NSERC, whose policies state recipients are eligible for paid parental leave supplements at current stipend level for up to four months, pending approval of a leave-of-absence from the university prior to award interruption.

It soon became apparent, however, that a graduate student taking a paid maternity leave is a circumstance rarely encountered. I was required to indicate on both forms the period for which I was requesting a maternity leave or supplement. However, the FGSR form had only two options: Fall (September-December) or Winter (January-April) term.

I consulted with FGSR for clarification and was advised that all FGSR-approved absences, paid or unpaid, must coincide with the start of a semester owing to their inability to prorate tuition fees for partial terms.

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...This was confirmed by the Alberta Human Rights & Citizenship Commission (AHRCC), who advised me that my circumstances may be considered a violation under the Gender Act. ”

Following consultation with the office of the Assistant Dean of Graduate Student Services and further evaluation of NSERCs' paid parental leave regulations, FGSRs' position was that the Winter term was to be the only appropriate period for a leave on the basis that NSERC regulations stipulate a paid parental leave must be following the birth of the child (after October in my case). I was therefore ineligible for a Fall term leave-of-absence. FGSR suggested the most financially advantageous arrangement would be to register for the Fall term and receive regular NSERC payments until the end of December. Subsequently, an official leave would be granted for the Winter term, while receiving the maternity supplement from NSERC. Both my supervisor and I were concerned with the ethical issues of a leave-of-absence while continuing to receive regular scholarship payments. Moreover, the father of my son would be unable to take his EI-paid parental leave as I would be considered the primary caregiver for the period for which he was eligible.

It was also suggested that under the circumstances, I take either an Employment Insurance (EI)-paid maternity leave, or alternatively, an unpaid medical leave. Unfortunately, students are not eligible for EI-paid maternity leaves, since we do not contribute to these benefits, and like most graduate students, scholarships are our only source of income, making an unpaid leave an unsuitable solution. Upon consultation with representatives from NSERC, I was advised they do not intervene in university affairs regarding the methods whereby institutions administer and distribute NSERC funds as long as their regulations are respected. I discontinued further consultations with NSERC, less than a month before my due-date.

In the meantime, I had contacted several other organizations for information on the provincial laws regulating maternity leaves. The provincial Employment Standards Code states that “Employers are expected to make sincere efforts to the point of undue hardship to accommodate..”. However, the Policy Unit at Alberta Human Resources and Employment advised me they would be unable to assist, as students are not covered by this legislation since we do not qualify for EI benefits. A publication entitled “Becoming a parent in Alberta”, discussing certain aspects of Government of Canada Employment Insurance legislation, Alberta Employment Standards Code, and Alberta human rights legislation, also stated that the latest a woman may begin a maternity leave is the child's date of the birth. This was confirmed by the Alberta Human Rights & Citizenship Commission (AHRCC), who advised me that my circum-

Maternity Issues Mothers in Academia

stances may be considered a violation under the Gender Act. Their office suggested I file an official complaint, but was later informed that my case falls under federal jurisdiction. Following further research on the Canadian human rights website, I discovered that human rights concerns with a university organization do in fact come under provincial jurisdiction. Unfortunately, the current wait period at AHRCC was up to two years, and I had only a matter of months to resolve the situation.

Realizing the enormity of the obstacles I was facing, I turned to the U of A's student legal services (SLS) who offered me immediate access to a caseworker. By the end of summer, the dedicated persistence by SLS resulted in the presence of an Ombudperson at a meeting to discuss my gender rights. The Ombudperson clearly stated that it is rare for their office to consult with lawyers, even SLS, since they are neutral third parties who work within university policies. Furthermore, they stated it would be unethical for them to participate in any discussions of a human rights complaint or lawsuit against the university. The outcome was to arrange a meeting with the U of A's Human Rights Office. Unfortunately, this was my last meeting with SLS, as their office was closing until the end of September.

Near the end of August I met with a representative from the Human Rights Office. He confirmed the U of A's responsibility to accommodate in the case of maternity leaves. Following his suggestions, I responded to the FGSR that a January 1st start-date for maternity leave would not be suitable for childcare arrangement from October until January, or following my return to the program. He also personally arranged a meeting with the Associate Dean of the FGSR to find a solution suitable to all parties.

Two weeks later, less than one month before my due date, my supervisor, a representative from the Human Rights Office, a representative from the Associate Dean's office, the Associate Dean and I met for what was to be the last meeting regarding my maternity leave. I pleaded for an exception to the U of A's absence policy, to allow me to begin my maternity leave on the date my son was born. I was again reminded that the problem arose from the U of A's inability to prorate tuition fees for partial terms. The Associate Dean's office stated that I could continue to receive regular NSERC payments until January and subsequently, maternity leave supplements until May. Unfortunately, the technicality of this solution would leave me with the challenge of finding childcare for my son,

as his father would thus be unable to take parental leave. My supervisor clarified that I would likely be in Manitoba for a majority of the period in question, to receive support from my family following the birth of my son. The Associate Dean's office agreed to these terms.

During my experience of requesting an FGSR-approved paid parental leave, I was disappointed by the U of A's inflexibility in supporting the need and right to a maternity leave coinciding with date of birth of my son. This was cause of unnecessary stress and additional challenges during my pregnancy. The major obstacle appears to be that the U of A is accommodating leave-of-absences for parenthood using a system poorly designed for maternity leaves. I do hope that in sharing my experience, the need for a more appropriate policy regarding parental leaves will be highlighted. I wish to spare other pregnant students from having to spend their energy on anything else other than preparing for the joy and responsibilities of becoming a parent.

Article written by Mireille St. Vincent, 6th yr PhD at U of A

Challenges of Studying Abroad By Ilona Berth

My name is Ilona Berth and I am an international student from Germany. I am currently completing a M.Sc. in Management with a major in Organizational Behavior at the University of Lethbridge. My first contact with the University of Lethbridge was as an exchange student during my undergraduate program. During this time, I was offered connections and experiences that I would not have been able to receive at a larger institution. The one-on-one interactions with professors, small class sizes, and a constant exchange with the faculty were key factors in my decision to return to Lethbridge for my Masters.



Working on my Masters in Alberta has been an enriching experience both personally and professionally. However, it has also meant that I had to overcome various challenges such as cultural differences, language barriers, immigration issues, and isolation.

Challenges of Studying Abroad

Talking to other international students, I found that these challenges are very common. I also noticed that there are a number of financial issues that constitute a major concern among international students such as:

- increased tuition fees
- higher costs of living compared to their home country
- limited work opportunities (e.g., study program and visa restrictions)
- limited funding opportunities

In my case, living costs in Alberta are similar to those in Germany but tuition fees are much higher. For instance, the tuition for an entire two-year Masters program in Germany is approximately \$3,000. As tuition fees are much lower in Germany, student loans are minimal and scholarships and awards are few. This leads to a large discrepancy between the funding available to me from my home country and the financial demands of my graduate studies in Canada. Fortunately, the tuition fees of \$19,200 in the first year of my Masters are covered by the program's fellowship and tuition fees are significantly less in the second year. However, the remaining tuition, as well as research and living costs total an additional \$28,000 for which I have no funding.

As an international student I am not eligible for most of the awards and scholarships offered in Canada because they require applicants to be either Canadian Citizen or Permanent Resident. In addition, I am restricted in how much and where I may work. My study visa allows me to work only on the campus of the institution at which I am registered in full-time studies. In order to work off-campus, I have to first study full-time at a post-secondary institution for at least six months before I can apply for an off-campus work permit. Furthermore, my study program restricts me to a maximum of 10 hours per week of employment. However, given the program's intense workload, I am only able to work 3 to 4 hours per week. Thus, my decision to complete my Masters in Canada meant that I had to rely on the support of my family and friends who were kind enough to lend me the money I needed.

Most of my fellow international students are in a similar situation. In fact, without the recently introduced 100% tuition coverage in the first year many of us would have not been able to afford the program. International students should be advised to research issues such as potential funding barriers or work restrictions when choosing an international graduate school. They will also need to carefully consider all potential costs (e.g., immigration expenses,

research costs, administrative fees) before committing to a program to avoid having to quit it later on. It is also advisable to look for funding opportunities in one's home country prior to coming to Canada. For example, institutions that foster international exchange such as the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade may be potential sources.

At the same time, it is vital that academic institutions as well as the provincial and federal government are aware of these challenges and act accordingly. High quality international students who enrich Canada's research and economical platform can only be attracted if an adequate support system is in place. At the institutional level, this could mean decreasing differential tuition or by giving international students additional time and opportunities to work (e.g. as a research or teaching assistant). By opening up scholarships to all students and providing loans to international students, the Government of Alberta will draw highly competitive applications from top students around the world to help grow the knowledge-base and economy of this province.

“ **International Students should... research issues such as potential funding barriers or work restrictions when choosing an international graduate school.** ”

Students in Alberta are already getting involved in helping to support their international colleagues. For example, the Graduate Students Association at the University of Lethbridge has created 6 travel awards to help promote the excellent research done by international students. This is a good start but further help is needed to address the challenges of studying abroad.

Concluding, I would like to stress that despite all difficulties, one can only benefit from completing a degree abroad as it is crucial in today's globalized world to gain foreign language skills and international experience. In my case, having a Canadian degree not only enhances my international profile but also provides me with greater flexibility. Canadian degrees are well recognized internationally and will facilitate my transition to the PhD level.

Article written by Ilona Berth, German Exchange Student,

Profiling Alberta's Graduate Students

The Value of Rumors

Rumor has it that the University of Alberta Ph.D candidate, Nduka Otiono, has piqued the curiosity of many with his unusual research interest on "street stories" which focuses on the reason people believe stories told by a friend. As Nduka describes it, "these 'street stories' are oral texts produced and circulated by ordinary citizens and serve as impromptu 'mock trials' of rulers and traducers of human rights. Coming from the context of postcolonial tyranny in Africa, these unofficial narratives open up alternative imaginaries of civic belonging, justice, and individual rights that instigates forums for communication in pubs, bus stations, around public newspaper vending stands, and other arenas of socialization in the public sphere."

"Our desire to believe makes people believe these stories," he says. "There are people who wish the worst for these evil politicians. They are only too happy to hear stories like that and to circulate them."

Through his research, Nduka hopes to reveal what the less privileged think of the political elite and the impact that the channels through which they 'speak,' have on the government and on the public sphere. His interest in this field of research was sparked by his background in oral literature, and his experience working as a journalist for 15 years in Nigeria against the backdrop of military dictatorships. The Nigerian born writer's roots are deeper still, having served as General Secretary of the Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA) and as a joint winner of the maiden ANA/Spectrum Fiction Prize.

So how does one so strongly embedded in the roots of Nigerian popular culture find himself in a country that provides such a contrast as Canada? Nduka explains that Canada's anti-dictatorship stance aligned with his pro-democratic values, and that "coming to Canada was like going to meet a friend". Nduka has also found parallels between the social context underlining his research in Nigeria and Alberta, where he observes that the devastating exploitation of oil-rich regions by multinational corporations has unleashed resistance by youths. His latest collection of poems, *Love in a Time of Nightmares*, has poems that reflect how much Edmonton has already captured his poetic sensibilities.

More directly, the University of Alberta, which heavily recruits superior foreign students through the support of the FS Chia Doctoral Scholarship, provided Nduka with a strong incentive to find his niche at the U of A's Department of English and Film Studies. With a guaranteed \$24 000 per year for two years plus tuition and fees, and additional funding from a combination of sources for two more years, Nduka considers himself quite fortunate. Since then, Nduka has also been awarded the Izaak Walton Killam Memorial Scholar-



University of Alberta Ph.D candidate, Nduka Otiono, shares the value of "street stories" in Nigeria

ship, the William Rea Scholarship, the Sarah Nettie Christie Research Award, and the Andrew Stewart Memorial Graduate Prize for Research. He was also a University nominee for the Trudeau Foundation Scholarship in 2007. Nduka says that the U of A not only supports him financially, but that the department also encourages him to pursue his unusual research using an interdisciplinary approach, combining oral literature with popular culture and postcolonial studies in a politically charged environment. When asked, what he would do with an Alberta PhD, Nduka professed a desire to pursue a higher academic career as a professor. "This," he says, "appeals to my love for research, writing, teaching, and functioning as a public intellectual".

Nduka hopes his research will empower people with the use of street stories to voice their protests against injustice. By demonstrating the value of street stories in the context of civil rights, he will prove that it is more than just rumors. "My research should be able to inspire others. It should demonstrate the possibility of using mass culture as a tool for political resistance. Society should not underestimate the strength of the people's voice."