

The SFU Thesis Boot Camp: Empowering students to “make serious progress”

By Caitlin Bakker.

The SFU Thesis Boot Camp Team has been selected as the recipients of the ALPS Award for Outstanding Service 2014. Led by Nicole White, Head, Research Commons, the Thesis Boot Camp team also includes Research Commons & Liaison Librarians Heather De Forest and Andre Iwanchuk, Writing Services Coordinator Renée McCallum, Research Commons Assistant Catherine Louie, and Graduate Peer Writing Facilitators Kelly Brennan, Lisa Poole, and Megan Robertson. The ALPS Award for Outstanding Service is presented to a librarian or team whose outstanding service has made a real difference to students, faculty, or colleagues in British Columbia.

Adapted from similar services offered by Stanford University and Cornell University, the SFU Thesis Boot Camp is a three-day event designed to provide graduate students with the space and resources to “make serious progress” — the event’s tagline — in the completion of their theses and dissertations.

The completion of a thesis or dissertation can prove an overwhelming challenge for many students. As noted by Dr. Mary-Ellen Kelm, Associate Dean, Graduate Studies, “Graduate students often find the dissertation phase of their experience daunting. Often working in isolation, struggling with a task that they alone can complete, building analytic and writing skills as they go along, an alarming number of our students drop out or simply ‘time out’ as they fade away from their graduate programs during this phase.” The Thesis Boot Camp aims to alleviate this stress and empower graduate students.

The Thesis Boot Camp creates a space conducive to productivity by minimizing distractions while offering food, beverages, and writing and research support. A typical day begins with a goal setting opening

activity and includes up to six hours of dedicated writing time, followed by a reflection and wrap-up session. The students have the option of attending workshops or participating in individual consultations with members of the SFU community from various departments, both from within and outside the library.

Approximately 100 graduate students have participated in the four boot camps that have been held at SFU’s three campuses since April 2013. A fifth boot camp is planned for April 2014 in Burnaby. The boot camps are strategically scheduled during breaks or after the end of term so as to minimize potential conflicts with the other duties and responsibilities of graduate students.

Students from a wide variety of disciplines, from Science to Humanities to Business to Social Sciences, have been attracted to these events. Composition has been approximately two-thirds Masters students and one-third PhD candidates. The boot camp’s waiting list has twice exceeded capacity, and, in response to this demand, a lottery style enrollment has been implemented.

These efforts to engage and energize graduate students have proven successful. In the words of Julia Lane, PhD candidate and Coordinating External Relations Officer for SFU’s Graduate Student Society, “the core of the Thesis Boot Camp was its demonstration that, as graduate students at SFU, we are part of a community that cares about our ability to accomplish our goals with our work.”

Caitlin Bakker is the Digital Initiatives Librarian at the University of Northern British Columbia.