



UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES

Best Practices for Supervisors

The supervision of Graduate Students can be one of the most rewarding, and challenging, responsibilities of a faculty member. While each supervisor-student relationship is unique, there are best practices that can help ensure this relationship is productive and beneficial for everyone.

A. Effective Communication- Effective communication can help increase productivity and aid in the progress of the student in their training. Best practices in effective communication include:

- **Utilize the Checklist of Expectations for Graduate Student and Supervisor.** You are to meet with each of your students and discuss the items on the checklist within the first two months after being appointed their supervisor. The checklist outlines your primary roles and responsibilities as a supervisor, as well as those of your student, and helps both of you to have a common understanding of these roles and responsibilities. Each of you should keep a copy of the checklist and review it periodically.
- **Meet together often to discuss progress.** While the frequency of these meetings (e.g. weekly, bi-weekly, monthly) will depend on many factors, including the nature of the thesis work, the personalities of the student and supervisor, the progress being made, and how far the student has already progressed in their program, frequent meetings help to ensure that the student is making sufficient progress and has access to the resources that are needed for success.
- **Provide your student with feedback on their strengths, and areas that are in need of improvement.** For your graduate students to be continually developing as independent and successful researchers, they need to be aware of areas in which they need improvement. By giving them constructive criticism, and providing them with the opportunities and resources that they need to make improvement, you are helping them to become more independent and gain the skills and attributes necessary for future success.
- **Be honest and thorough when completing the Graduate Student Annual Progress Report.** The Annual Progress Report gives you a formal opportunity to evaluate your graduate students. Highlight their strengths and provide them with feedback on areas that need improvement. If the progress of a student is deficient, this should be explicitly stated to give an opportunity for the issue to be addressed, as well as to provide documentation for any needed action in the future.
- **Establish mutual expectations for your student's vacation time.** Both you and your graduate student should understand that Graduate Students are entitled to a minimum of two weeks of vacation time.

B. Develop a Professional Relationship with Your Student Conducive to Research and Intellectual Growth. Your relationship with your student should help them to grow intellectually and provide them with training and resources necessary to perform high quality research.

- **Keep your relationship collegial and professional.** Given the power imbalance that exists within the academy, any romantic or sexual relationship (perceived consensual or otherwise) with a student under your supervision is highly discouraged and should be avoided. ([Code of Conduct Policy](#) and [Graduate Student Supervision Policy](#).)
 - If such a relationship occurs, in the interests of all concerned, there is a strict obligation for the supervisor to **disclose** the relationship in writing to their Department Head or Dean and to **withdraw completely** from all supervisory and professional duties related to the student.
- **Engage your student in intellectual and critical discussions.** To help your students develop as critical and independent thinkers, engage them in intellectual discussions that give them an opportunity to test and expand these attributes.
- **Show genuine excitement for your students' research topics.** The enthusiasm that a student has for their research project is often influenced by their perception of how enthused their supervisor is of the project. Consider different ways that you can both directly and indirectly demonstrate your interest in their research topics and excitement for the progress that they are making.
- **Ensure that you foster a positive training environment within your research group.** Ensure that there is an absence of discrimination and harassment of and between students, consistent with the [University's Harassment Policy](#) and [Sexual and Gender-Based Violence Policy](#).
- **Ensure that your students have a clear understanding of University of Calgary Policies on Academic and Non-Academic Misconduct.** Do not assume that your students understand what constitutes academic or non-academic misconduct at this particular institution, especially if they are international students. Definitions and penalties pertaining to misconduct can be found in the University of Calgary [Calendar](#).
 - **Ensure that your students understand research integrity.** Review with your students the [Research Integrity Policy](#) and ensure that they understand their responsibilities.
- **Ensure that your students have a clear understanding of University of Calgary Policies on Intellectual Property.** Complete the [Intellectual Property Awareness Checklist](#) with your students at the beginning of their research training to promote early awareness of intellectual property issues.
- **Ensure that your students acknowledge the contributions of others in presentations and in published material, including joint authorship, if appropriate.**

C. Provide the Resources and Comments Necessary for Your Students to Complete their Degrees in a Timely Fashion.

- **Provide frequent and prompt comments on drafts of theses and other written material.** Since your students will be critically examined on the quality of their theses and other materials, it is important that you are also constructively critical in the draft stage. This helps the students to become more aware of the standards that will be expected when they defend their theses and helps them to think more critically of their own work. However, you should also ensure, whenever possible, that your comments are encouraging, helping your students to be excited about their ability to improve. Care should be taken when providing comments on thesis drafts to ensure that the final thesis is a product of the student.
- **Communicate with your student well in advance regarding leaves, and the arrangements that are being made for continued supervision.** Leaves that you may take during the training of your

graduate students should not hinder their progress in their degree program. Ensure that proper arrangements are made for supervision, and that your students are in agreement with these arrangements. Students should be made aware of any potential leaves as early as possible so that they can be involved in making supervisory or other arrangements.

- **Work with your student to develop a realistic timetable for completion.** Many students lack an accurate understanding of typical times needed to complete various elements of their training, such as preparing for a candidacy exam, causing them to be under prepared and unsuccessful in these elements. Additionally, they may become discouraged when their progress is not as rapid as they anticipated when their anticipated timeline is not realistic. Setting up a timetable for completion, which includes various milestones in their graduate education, will help your students organize their time and be more prepared, as well as allow them to measure their progress against a realistic expectation.
- **Help prepare your student for oral examinations.** Many students have not previously been tested in an oral exam; therefore, they may be unfamiliar with the format and expectations associated with candidacy and thesis exam, which could result in them being under-prepared. Discuss with your student how these exams normally proceed, and the standard expectations of an examination committee. Most students benefit from a practice exam, which you can participate in or help arrange.

D. Resolve Conflicts in the Supervisor-Student Relationship. Difficulties can arise in the Supervisor-Student working relationship that can be detrimental to the progress of the student, as well as to the overall quality of the research environment.

- **Resolve issues quickly.** It is important to resolve those issues as soon as possible so that they do not continue to escalate. It is the tendency of some supervisors to ignore signs of a relationship breakdown in order to avoid conflict. However, this can result in the issue becoming more complex and difficult to resolve, as well as hinder the progress of the student during the time of the breakdown.
- **First try to resolve the problem yourselves.** Many problems in the Supervisor-Student relationship can be resolved through open, honest and respectful discussions between the Student and the Supervisor. Try to emphasize the student's overall goals (e.g. graduation, obtaining a faculty position, etc.), and what each of you can do to help reach those goals. Avoid being overly accusatory during these discussions. Remember that the overall goal is not to 'win' an argument, or to be recognized as being 'right', but rather to build a relationship that will be beneficial to both of you.
- **If needed, seek assistance in resolving conflict.** Others may be able to help resolve differences between you and your student. The student's supervisory committee can often provide excellent guidance, and can meet with you and your student together and/or separately to help resolve the conflict. If the conflict persists, guidance can next be sought from the Graduate Program Director and the Department Head or equivalent. If none of these avenues resolve the issue, please contact the [Faculty of Graduate Studies](#) for assistance.
- **Access resources on campus to resolve conflicts.** There are many resources on campus that may assist you and your student in improving your working relationship. These include, but are not limited to, the [Faculty of Graduate Studies \(FGS\)](#), the [Student Success Centre \(SSC\)](#), the [SU Wellness Centre](#), the [Staff Wellness Centre](#), the [Graduate Students' Association](#), the [University of Calgary International office](#) and the [Ombudsperson](#). As a Supervisor you are a Mental Health Advocate, which includes being aware of the [signs](#) that a student or colleague may need assistance, and helping them access [resources](#) on and off campus.

E. Be a Wellness Advocate for your Students. Progressing through a graduate program can be stressful for many students, and some students may experience difficulty effectively coping with this level of stress. Additionally, other factors outside of school may also negatively impact a student's overall wellness, which can have negative impacts on their ability to make appropriate progress towards their degree. UCalgary has many [resources](#) that can support students. As a wellness advocate you can help students access the resources that they may need, with early intervention providing them the best opportunity to improve their wellness, and be successful in their graduate education. You are not expected to have the professional skills needed to directly resolve these issues, nor may it be appropriate to become too involved in difficult personal issues. However, you may be able to help your students access appropriate, and sometimes critical, resources.

- **Consider yourself a wellness advocate.** You will have significant contact with your students over an extended period of time; therefore, you may be in the best position to notice changes in attitude and behaviour that could be indicators of a wellness issue. Familiarize yourself with possible [indicators](#) of distress, as well as on-campus [resources](#) that can help you if you are unsure as to the seriousness of what you are observing.
- **Familiarize yourself with the University of Calgary Campus Mental Health Strategy.** The University of Calgary is committed 'to the mental health and well-being of its university family'. As such, it has implemented a [strategy](#) to create a 'campus culture where students, faculty, staff and post-doctoral scholars feel supported and valued'. By familiarizing yourself with this strategy, you can determine your role in creating this culture.
- **Know who to contact for advice or support for the student and/or yourself.** Supervising a student who is managing complex issues (health-related or otherwise) can be demanding (<https://www.ucalgary.ca/staffwellness/>).

F. Help Train Graduate Students for Future Careers. Both Graduate Students and Supervisors can sometimes focus on the importance of the Graduate Student's research to the extent that they neglect the development of attributes and skills in the student that could help them progress in their graduate program and be successful in their future careers.

- **Encourage your students to attend [My GradSkills](#) workshops.** These workshops offered through the Faculty of Graduate Studies cover topics designed to directly aid students in completing their degrees, such as learning to format their theses, as well as to learn skills that will help them in their graduate program and beyond, such as time management.
- **Encourage and assist your students in applying for external funding.** External funding not only reduces the strain on your resources and those of the institution, it improves the quality of the students CV. You may want to consider 'topping up' the scholarship award as an incentive for students to apply for external funding.
- **Provide students with the opportunity to attend regional, national or international conferences.** Attending these meetings helps students to hone their networking skills, give them a more accurate understanding of the quality of work taking place in their field of study, and allows them to receive feedback on their research from experts in the field

G. Continually Strive to Improve Your Own Supervisory Skills. Each student you supervise may require or benefit from a somewhat unique Supervisor-Student relationship; therefore, you must continually strive to improve your own supervisory skills to ensure that you are providing the highest level of Graduate Supervision

- **Stay updated on the Faculty of Graduate Studies and departmental rules and regulations.** These regulations may change over time and may affect certain aspects of how you train your student.
- **Take advantage of workshops and resources.** The Faculty of Graduate Studies offers workshops and resources on various aspects of Graduate Supervision. Other groups on campus, as well as in the academic community, also have resources that can assist you in improving your skills as a Graduate Supervisor. You can find [a list of supervisor resources](#) on the Faculty of Graduate Studies website

Last Updated: June 11, 2024