Navigating the Student-Supervisor Relationship

Delivered in collaboration between the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Student Wellness Services.

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We would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge the traditional territories of the people of the Treaty 7 region in Southern Alberta, which includes the Blackfoot Confederacy (comprising the Siksika, Piikani, and Kainai First Nations), as well as the Tsuut’ina First Nation, and the Stoney Nakoda (including the Chiniki, Bearspaw, and Goodstoney First Nations). The City of Calgary is also home to Métis Nation of Alberta, Region 3.
Agenda

Introductions – Who are we and what can we do to support you?

The Supervisor-Student Relationship
  Responsibilities
  Expectations
  Best practices

Scenario Discussions

When things aren't going smoothly...
  Resolution strategies
  Taking care of you
  Who can help
Learning Outcomes

• Develop effective communication skills for navigating challenging interactions with supervisors

• Develop strategies for managing the inherent power imbalance within the student-supervisor relationship

• Learn about resources that can help address problems within the supervisory relationship
FGS Student Team

Dr. Clifton Cunningham
Associate Dean (Student)

Michelle Drefs
Associate Dean (Student Experience)

Yan Zhang
Graduate Academic and International Specialist

Marisa Norona
Graduate Academic and International Specialist

Graduate Student Services
FGS Student Team

What we can help with:

- Supervisor conflict
- Policies and responsibilities regarding supervision
- Issues impacting Graduate students
- Failed first attempt at candidacy or thesis defense
- Barriers to timely completion
- Procedures for leave of absence or extension requests
- Your rights as a student

https://grad.ucalgary.ca/services/student-services/student-support
SWS Mental Health Team

Student Wellness Services seeks to support students in navigating their mental health, at all sections of the Mental Health Continuum. The SWS mental health team consists of Counsellors, Sessional Counsellors, and Student Support Advisors.

As our team is quite large, I invite you to explore this link to learn more about specific team members and their roles!

https://www.ucalgary.ca/wellness-services/services/mental-health-services/meet-our-team
SWS Mental Health Team

Mental Health Supports:

- Counselling
- Coordinated Care
- Events
- Self-Help
- Peer Support
- Student at Risk Team

https://www.ucalgary.ca/wellness-services/services/mental-health-services
What is a supervisor?

Supervisors help graduate students:

- Navigate hurdles
- Develop skills

Supervisors act as a:

- Mentor
- Evaluator
- Advocate
- Recommender

Supervisors are NOT:

- Your romantic partner
- Your employer

What do supervisors appreciate in a graduate student?

- Self-motivation
- Excitement about the research
- Eagerness to learn and improve
- Responsive to feedback
- Organizational skills
- Good collaboration with others

Driving on track...

- Meetings, agendas and minutes
- Timeline/work plan
- Supervisory committee meetings
- Annual Progress Report
- Student-Supervisor Checklist
Scheduling regular progress meetings

1. Agenda/Objectives
2. Agree to an action plan
3. Keep and share meeting notes
4. Follow-up/Report
5. *Question/Concern
Asking for specific feedback

“...e-mailing a chapter to an advisor and saying ‘Give me feedback’ is like walking into a restaurant and saying ‘Give me food.’ You need to be a bit more specific. When handing over your work, identify the type of feedback you are looking for.”

-Kearns & Gardiner, 2011
Supervisors: humans after all!

5/6/2016

Your Graduate Adviser May Have Impostor Syndrome, Too - The Chronicle of Higher Education

By Jay Daniel Thompson | APRIL 10, 2019

I’m sitting in the university cafe, playing with my phone, when my graduate-student advisee appears. My heart begins pounding wildly as she weaves through the tables. She’s going to want my advice on something. Is this the moment when I’ll be revealed as a know-nothing?

Impostor syndrome is, by now, a well-known term used to describe that feeling many scholars get that we are frauds in our particular field and about to be exposed at any moment. This "syndrome" has been known to affect researchers of all ages and ranks, from graduate students to department chairs.

At its mildest, impostor syndrome can entail persistent and discomforting feelings of self-doubt. At its worst, it can cripple careers.

https://www.chronicle.com/article/Your-Graduate-Adviser-May-Have/246086
Top five student concerns related to supervisors

1. Unclear expectations: feedback, timelines, milestones
2. Difficult circumstances: personal or academic
3. Intellectual property or authorship issues
4. Difficult interpersonal student-supervisor rapport
5. Lack of engagement or access to supervisor
Realities of student-supervisor relationships

- Power imbalance
- Everybody is busy
- Cultural differences
- Individual communication preferences and styles
- Every relationship is unique
- Bound to be some degree of conflict
Scenario discussions

- Read the scenario
- Comment
- Propose possible strategies

Notes:
- For some cases, the context might not be sufficient.
- You can question the scenarios and make them specific.
- There may be more than one approach to solve the problem.
Yoona submitted a draft of her thesis to her supervisor months ago. As always, her supervisor was late in reviewing the draft. When they finally provided feedback, they commented that Yoona’s writing was not clear and asked her to do more research and resubmit. Yoona feels discouraged and doesn’t know what to do.

What problem(s) do you see from this scenario?
If you were Yoona, what could you do?
Scenario discussion

After three years in his Master's program, Luke thinks his thesis is finalized and he is ready to prepare for defense, but his supervisor insists that he needs to publish at least one more paper before graduation. However, Luke does not have much time to write the paper because he is assigned too much work to finish in his supervisor’s lab.

What problem(s) do you see from this scenario?

If you were Luke, what could you do?
When things are not going smoothly

- Identifying shared interests
- Shifting from assumptions to information
- Communication, communication, communication!

Also don't forget!
- Seeking help
- Managing mental health
Identify your shared interests!

**Student**
- Finish my degree
- Get a job

**Supervisor**
- Shared interest
  - Publish a paper!
- Grow my research program
Shifting from assumptions to information

How to read a Professor's door

Closed: "I may or may not be on this continent."

Half-open: "I'm probably in a meeting."

Wide Open: "I just walked in to get a few things before I have to run to my next meeting."

Slightly ajar: "Proceed with caution."

PhDcomics.com
Some Words on Effective Communication

• Assumptions prevent clear communication.
• Increase your self-awareness.
• Practice taking others' perspectives.
• Build assertiveness skills (polite, respectful).
  • "I'm okay, you're okay."
• Demonstrate willingness to compromise and negotiate.
• Practice responding to criticism with curiosity.
• Act according to your values and morals.

Source: https://www.getselfhelp.co.uk/docs/Assertiveness.pdf
DEARMAN: Objective Effectiveness for Making Requests

- **Describe** the situation
- **Express** your emotions and thoughts
- **Assert** by asking for what you want/need (or saying "no")
- **Reinforce** through rewarding
- **Mindful** – focus on the present issue
- **Appear** confident
- **Negotiate** – Offer or ask for alternatives

Source: DBT Skills Training for Mental Health Professionals – Facilitated by Dr. Eboni Webb
Communication Strategy: "I Statements"

- Describes how one is feeling, while tactfully explaining the problem.

- Step #1: I feel ____ (use a feeling word)
- Step #2: when ____ (you do or don't do)
- Step #3: because (explain why this matters)
- Step #4: How can we solve this? (you could invite a discussion about compromise)

- Very different from "blaming" (you statements).
Communication Strategy: Use Descriptions

1. Decide on your priorities.
2. Describe the situation non-judgementally.
   • Use facts.
   • Note the need to problem-solve.
3. Describe your thoughts and feelings about the situation.
4. Clearly ask for what you need/hope for.

Communication Strategy:
"Assertiveness Sandwich"

• [Positive -> "Negative" -> Positive]

1. Thank you so much for reading the draft of chapter #3. I know you are very busy, and I appreciate you taking time to offer feedback.

2. I am just confused about your comments on page 10. I did not understand what you meant by ___. Could you please explain this further.

3. I look forward to incorporating your feedback and continuing to prepare for my defense.
Pillars of Mental Health and Resilience

• Practice self-care (not always things you enjoy)
• Be mindful of your thinking
• Remember your values – What are your priorities and goals? Your "WHY"?
• Good nutrition
• Adequate hydration
• Quality sleep
• Regular physical movement
• Social connection
• Self-awareness – What is the purpose of the thought/feeling?
Stress and Mindset

“Stress is Harmful”
- Stress depletes my health and vitality
- Stress debilitates my performance and productivity
- Stress inhibits my learning and growth
- Stress effects are negative and should be avoided

V/S

“Stress is Enhancing”
- Stress improves my health and vitality
- Stress enhances my performance and productivity
- Stress facilitates my learning and growth
- Stress effects are positive and should be utilized

McGonigal, K. 2015. The Upside of Stress
“What man actually needs is not a tensionless state but rather the striving and struggling for some goal worthy of him. What he needs is not the discharge of tension at any cost, but the call of a potential meaning waiting to be fulfilled by him.”

-Viktor Frankl
Reconnect with What Matters

What is one small "toward" move that you can do today?

(Something important that fits with your values)

Recap: Do vs. Don’t

• Replace assumptions with information
• Delay communicating/submitting work until things are “perfect”
• Document: agendas, minutes, progress updates
• Be transparent re: setbacks, challenges
• Lose sight of your strengths, motivations
• Seek advice whenever needed
• Remain curious
• Strive for open communication
• Enhance your mental health and resilience

True or False: You are expected to solve any challenges or misunderstandings with your supervisor on your own.
What can be done? Who can help?

- FGS Advising
- Access Advisors
- Counsellors & Support Advisors
- Academic Development Specialist
- Protected Disclosure & Research Integrity Office
- Int’l/Immigration Advisors
- Student Ombuds
- Graduate Program
Thank you!

Questions or comments? Reach out if you need help. We are here to support you!

Contact FGS:
• grad.advisor@ucalgary.ca or
• grad.ucalgary.ca/services/student-services/student-support

Contact Student Wellness:
• kaitlin.vangeel@ucalgary.ca
• SWSMentalHealth@ucalgary.ca