

Graduate Supervision Handbook

This Graduate Supervision Handbook will help you get the most out of the supervisor-graduate student relationship. It provides in-depth advice on roles and responsibilities, communications, learning styles, time management, and many other issues.

Preface

This document has been prepared in an attempt to provide principles and guidelines, which, if understood by both the student and supervisor at the start of the student-supervisor relationship, may help prevent break down of the relationship, or prevent the development of unresolvable situations if the relationship does break down. The document also attempts to provide guidance on the rights and responsibilities of the student, supervisor, and the graduate program in the event that the relationship between the student and the supervisor has broken down irretrievably. The document does not attempt to provide guidance for resolution of the conflict that has developed between student and supervisor, nor is it relevant to situations where our graduate program has determined that a student's academic performance is sufficiently inadequate that the student must withdraw because of lack of progress.

A. Principles

1. Importance of Clearly Identifying a Supervisor

In Geography and Environment, we require potential students to identify a potential supervisor as part of the application process. If no appropriate or willing supervisor is found, applicants are not admitted to our graduate program. Once granted admission, the student is expected to work with their identified and assigned supervisor. Continuity of supervision is an integral component of the program and is thus extremely important in all aspects of graduate student's work and progress. As a consequence, a change in supervisor is usually made only in exceptional circumstances, based upon strong and compelling reasons (e.g., major academic disagreements and/or interpersonal conflicts that are irreconcilable), following appropriate consultation by all parties involved. Should a new supervisor be necessary, the program is responsible to facilitate identifying one but cannot guarantee finding one. In such rare circumstances where no suitable supervisor can be identified, students may need to withdraw.

2. Importance of Continuity of Graduate Supervision

The relationship between the student and supervisor is one of the most important to the student's successful completion of the degree. Continuity of supervision is an integral component of this relationship, and is thus extremely important in all aspects of graduate work. As a consequence, a change in supervisor is usually made only in exceptional circumstances, based upon strong and compelling reasons (e.g., major academic disagreements and/or interpersonal conflicts that are irreconcilable), following appropriate consultation by all parties involved. It is further recognized, however, that some programs may place each new incoming student with an initial or temporary supervisor. In these cases, a subsequent timely change in supervisors, as the student clarifies research interests, is generally a routine matter.

3. Importance of Intellectual Debate and Challenge

Intellectual debate is a fundamental component of university activity. Thus, every effort should be made by both the student and supervisor to recognize and acknowledge that a robust element of academic challenge and questioning is a normal, and indeed, healthy aspect of the student-supervisor relationship. On occasion, however, fundamental differences in academic substance, style, or philosophy may emerge between student and supervisor, rendering further intellectual debate counter productive. Thus, reasons for supervisor change may involve substantial professional academic disagreements between a student and supervisor that, after reasonable attempts at resolution, remain unresolvable.

4. Importance of Maintaining an Academic Professional Student-Supervisor Relationship

The relationship between supervisors and students, however friendly and supportive it may become, should always be essentially an academic and professional relationship. Relationships which are at odds with an arm's length criterion (e.g., romantic, sexual, family ties), are unacceptable between supervisors and students. On occasion, major interpersonal conflicts may emerge between student and supervisor, or there may be a substantial conflict of interest (e.g., with supervisors involved in a dual role capacity, such as having financial and/or business arrangements with the student, as well as being the graduate supervisor). Thus, reasons for supervisor change may involve major interpersonal conflicts that are irreconcilable, or serious conflicts of interest situations that preclude the continuation of effective supervision.

5. Importance of Supervision

It is recognized that conflict between students and supervisors may be minimized if several steps are taken to promote good practices in graduate supervision. Such practices include the establishment and maintenance of open lines of communication between the student and supervisor, and an understanding of (and adherence to) the guidelines specifying the roles and responsibilities of the various parties involved in graduate supervision (i.e., students, supervisors, supervisory committees and graduate programs). Explicit discussions with new and continuing graduate students and faculty involving issues of authorship, intellectual property ownership, and clear expectations regarding academic performance and timelines for thesis progress and completion, may prove highly beneficial in minimizing the subsequent occurrence of conflict situations.

6. Importance of Resolving Conflicts at the Lowest Level Possible

Conflicts should be resolved, whenever viable, as close as possible to the source of the problem (i.e., at the lowest level of administration). Thus, in the first instance, the student and supervisor should discuss problems frankly and seek solutions. If need be, this level may also involve the supervisory committee. If the problem cannot be resolved at the student-supervisor level, it should be dealt with the graduate chair and/or department chair. At both the student-supervisor and program levels, assistance can also be sought through other sources, such as equity services, the ombudsperson, or other forms of mediation. Informal advice at each of these levels can also be obtained from the School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies, the Society of Graduate Students and the Teaching Assistant union. Each level should make sure all reasonable efforts have been exhausted, prior to moving to the next level. If no satisfactory resolution can be found at the program level, the problem may be referred to the School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies. In dealing with conflict issues, all parties should follow procedures congruent with established appeal policies.

7. Importance of the Program Attempting to Secure Alternative Supervision in Cases where Student Performance is Satisfactory

In cases of unresolvable conflict, and providing that the student is continuing to meet all program requirements and is making satisfactory academic progress, it is the program's responsibility to make its best

efforts to attempt to secure alternative supervision for the student, and to help the student complete the program in as timely a fashion as possible. As one illustration, a change in research interests on the part of the student can sometimes be accommodated by a program finding another supervisor willing to take on this responsibility. If, however, the new area of research interest is outside of the areas of expertise of available members of the program available to supervise, it may not be possible for the program to accommodate this requested change. In attempting to secure alternative supervision for a student, the program will also consider and resolve, to the satisfaction of all parties involved, a number of key issues, including (1) a clear specification of remaining program and thesis requirements, (2) a revised schedule for the timely completion of these requirements, (3) new funding arrangements for the student where applicable, (4) intellectual property and publication/authorship issues, and (5) continuity of the former supervisor's research program. If, however, during a conflict situation, the student withdraws from the program for any reason, such as failure to register, or to pay fees, etc., then it is not the responsibility of the department to attempt to secure alternative supervision.

8. Importance of Minimizing any Negative Consequence of Conflict on the Student's Career

Every effort should be made both during and following the conflict resolution process to ensure that a change of supervision has a minimal negative effect on the student's career. Thus, any possible negative effects relating to a change in supervisor(s) should not be reflected in subsequent evaluations of coursework, student evaluations for awards, letters of recommendation, etc., for potential employment opportunities, or in the assignment of teaching assistantships, etc.

B. Guidelines

Program Responsibilities in the Department of Geography and Environment

- Geography and Environment will implement and follow the policies of the School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies.
- We will provide sufficient information in the letter of offer of admission to new graduate students. This will include, for example, details about means of support (e.g., TA, scholarship, supervisor funding), amount of funding, time of funding, and any initial program expectations. Information will also be provided regarding supervisor arrangements, including the assignment of the supervisor(s).
- The department will provide orientation information sessions for new graduate students. Both the department's Fall Orientation Sessions and the Graduate Retreat are the primary forums for doing so. Information conveyed in these sessions include: overviews of program policies and requirements, expected performance and time-lines for completion of degree requirements, publication and authorship issues, scholarship and funding information, TA information (and for international students, information about visa requirements and employment regulations), information on policies regarding the proper conduct of research, sexual harassment and race relations, AIDS policies, information about safety and work place regulations, procedures for complaints and appeals, and information on help lines, advisory offices, and counseling services. Continuing students will be invited to various information seminars during the fall and winter terms regarding such topics as scholarship applications, comprehensive examinations, and strategies for completing the thesis in the final term of their program.

- We shall ensure that arrangements are made for an alternate supervisor if the regular supervisor(s) either departs or is absent for an extended period.
- The department will provide students with written guidelines of program policies and notification of any changes, all of which are available on the department's website.
- The department will assess and review each student's academic and research progress on an annual basis. This 'diagnostic' is normally held at the end of the Winter Term for first-year students, and subsequently in the Fall Term thereafter. This review will include such factors as performance on coursework and Ph.D. comprehensive examinations, thesis progress, and other program milestone requirements. Constructive feedback may include specific goals and timelines for completion of various components of degree requirements. Areas of concern and lack of progress must be clearly identified for the student.
- The department will identify paths/resources available to students if they wish to raise concerns about their program, supervisor, etc.
- The department will encourage open communication and feedback between students and supervisors on all issues, including supervisory practices.
- The department will strive to maintain an atmosphere conducive to scholarly work by graduate students and help enhance their creativity and productivity.
- The department will provide a safe working environment for students and inform them of all relevant safety and work regulations.

Supervisor(s): Role & Responsibilities

- The supervisor(s) should make and maintain a strong commitment to devote the required time and energy needed to successfully engage in graduate student supervision. As part of this commitment, the supervisor should display the highest ethical standards of behavior at all times.
- Potential supervisors should have sufficient familiarity with the field of research to provide appropriate guidance and supervision or indicate a willingness to gain that familiarity before agreeing to act as supervisor.
- The supervisor(s) should discuss with the student, very early on, any expectations and the relevant policies concerning authorship on publications, and issues surrounding ownership of intellectual property. This may result in written agreements or contracts between the supervisor and student covering these issues.
- The nature of any financial support provided by the supervisor should be communicated clearly to the student, in writing, including such details as the amount of financial support, the length of time of such support, and any specific conditions pertaining to this financial support.
- The supervisor(s) should, very early on, discuss and formulate with the student a plan of study for completion of degree requirements and thesis work, with clear milestones denoting progress. This would include, for example, assisting the student in selecting and planning a suitable and manageable research project, as well as setting a viable time schedule and adhering to it for thesis progress and completion.

- The supervisor(s) should be available for regular consultation with the student. The supervisor(s) and student should discuss and agree on an appropriate schedule for supervision meetings, and the supervisor should provide constructive and timely feedback to the student. More generally, the supervisor should maintain open communication and feedback with the student on all issues, including supervisory practices.
- The supervisor(s) should provide regular evaluations and assessments of the student's progress and academic performance.
- The supervisor(s) should make reasonable arrangements to ensure that adequate and appropriate research resources are available for the student's thesis project.
- The supervisor(s) should help ensure that the research environment is safe, healthy, and free from harassment, discrimination, and conflict. To this end, the supervisor should be aware of all pertinent regulations and policies covering these issues.
- The supervisor(s) should provide guidance, instruction, and encouragement regarding the research activities of the student.
- The supervisor(s) should help ensure that the student has access to intellectual resources and research opportunities and should also encourage the dissemination of research results by publications and conferences.
- The supervisor(s) should monitor any major discrepancies in the advice given to the student by members of the supervisory committee and/or supervisor, and attempt to achieve resolution and consensus on the issue(s) involved.
- Supervisors should be familiar with all program, School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies, and University policies and procedures pertaining to graduate students and supervision, along with information on graduate student financial support.
- Supervisors should make satisfactory alternative supervisor arrangements if away for a prolonged period of time.
- Supervisors should inform the program (i.e., graduate chair or chair), in a timely fashion, of any serious difficulties which may arise in supervision. These might include major professional academic disagreements, interpersonal conflicts, or potential conflict of interest situations.

Supervisory Committee: Role & Responsibilities

- In conjunction with the supervisor(s), the supervisory committee should help the student develop a program of study, and also report on the progress of the student's work during the annual diagnostic. Members of the supervisory committee thus serve to broaden and deepen the range of expertise and experience available for providing advice and for assessment of the student. As such, membership on this committee should be determined by consultation between the supervisor, student, and program (e.g., graduate chair).
- Members of the supervisory committee may provide additional guidance and advice on the student's thesis research project, thus complementing the expertise of the supervisor(s). The supervisory

committee members should be available to provide other sources of information to the student, and also provide constructive criticism and discussion of the student's ideas as they develop.

- Members of the supervisory committee should be reasonably accessible to the student when called upon for discussion of the student's academic progress, consultation on issues related to the thesis research project, and for general guidance. Supervisory committee members should be reasonably available to meet at the request of the student or supervisor.

Student: Role & Responsibilities

- The student should make and maintain a strong commitment to devote the required time and energy needed to engage successfully in graduate work and research, write a thesis, and contribute fully to the scholarly and intellectual life of the University. The student should show dedicated efforts to gain the background knowledge and skills needed to pursue graduate work successfully and adhere to the highest standards of ethical behavior to assure academic integrity and professionalism.
- The student should discuss with the supervisor(s), very early on, any expectations concerning authorship on publications, and issues surrounding ownership of intellectual property. This may result in written agreements or contracts between the student and supervisor covering these issues. In this regard, the student should become familiar with relevant policies in these domains.
- The student should become aware of, very early on, all program requirements and deadlines, information about various sources of funding, and university policies covering the proper conduct of research, race relations, sexual harassment, AIDs, appeals, and any other relevant safety and/or workplace policies and regulations.
- The student should, very early on, discuss and formulate with their supervisor(s) a plan of study for completion of degree requirements and thesis work, with clear milestones denoting progress. This would include, for example, setting a viable time schedule and adhering to it for all graduate work, including thesis progress and completion. Any variations to this schedule, including prolonged absences by the student, should be discussed. More generally, the student should maintain open communication and feedback with the supervisor on all issues, including supervisory practices.
- The student and supervisor(s) should discuss and agree on an appropriate schedule for supervision meetings. This discussion should also include an agreement regarding appropriate timeframes for the submission of student materials to be reviewed by the supervisor, and the supervisor providing feedback. The student should be reasonably available to meet with the supervisor(s) and supervisory committee when requested and be able to report fully and regularly on thesis progress and results.
- The student should give serious consideration and response to comments and advice from the supervisor(s) and committee members.
- The student should maintain registration throughout the program, unless a leave of absence is formally granted, and ensure, that where required, visas and employment authorization documents are kept up to date.
- The student should be aware of and conform to program, School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies, and University requirements relating to deadlines, thesis style, award applications, and other graduate requirements, etc.

- The student should pay due attention to the need to maintain a workplace which is safe, tidy, and healthy.
- The student should respect the work and equipment of others and show tolerance and respect for others sharing the same facilities. This would include, for example, cleaning up workspace when finished, and complying with all safety and work regulations of the program/university.
- The student should be thoughtful and reasonable in using resources and assist in obtaining resources for the research of other group members, when applicable. Where applicable, the student should comply with all ethical policies and procedures governing human or animal research.
- The student should meet agreed performance standards and deadlines of funding organizations, to the extent possible, when financing has been provided under a contract or grant. This would include adherence to any contractual terms under which the thesis research is conducted. The student should meet the terms and conditions of any financial contractual agreements, such as a TA position.
- The student should inform the program (i.e., graduate chair or department chair), in a timely fashion, of any serious difficulties which may arise in supervision. These might include major professional academic disagreements, interpersonal conflicts, or potential conflict of interest situations.

C. Resources for Supervisors

The Centre for Teaching and Learning provides a vast selection of [Resources for Supervisors](#).