GRADUATE SUPERVISION GUIDELINES
Faculty Edition

Section 6: Creating Equality and Equity When Working with Students

Students and faculty at the University of Toronto come from a diversity of backgrounds, abilities, and life experiences, and these differences can impact the graduate student-supervisor relationship. Effective supervision requires faculty to learn to work across differences and help students integrate into the social and academic culture of their department and program. In doing so, faculty supervisors must consider issues of both **equality** and **equity** when supervising their graduate students and find the right balance.

Equality means that all students are given equal opportunities to succeed. At the same time, supervisors must recognize that each student is unique and thus must also work to treat their students equitably. Equity means that a student's personal or social circumstances, as well as gender, race, ethnicity, or socio-economic background, should not stand as roadblocks to the student achieving their educational potential.[1] For instance, while the supervisor should give all students equal opportunities to meet, early morning meetings may be difficult or impossible for students who also have childcare obligations. Similarly, a student with disabilities may require unique accommodations with meeting deadlines or completion of certain writing or research tasks. Maintaining equity will allow *all* students the opportunity to work towards successful completion of their program of choice.

While every student will have their own specific needs, the key to building an effective relationship with the student is to be empathetic and to build a relationship of trust and respect through patience, time, careful listening, and honesty.[2]

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Creating a space where open conversations are possible will allow students to feel comfortable with expressing any successes and/or challenges they might encounter during their studies. However, supervisors should also recognize their limits in understanding the experiences of graduate students with different life experiences, which is why encouraging multiple mentors as well as opportunities to participate in peer communities (on or off-campus) is important.[3]

Different Experiences in Graduate School

Supervisors should be aware of how a student's experience might be different from their own experience and from the experience of their peers.

A student's experience in graduate school can be shaped by a number of factors. For example, studies examining graduate-level programs across North America have demonstrated that **older students tend to feel more connected to faculty members than to their peers**.[4] This experience can lead to the students feeling isolated, and productive approaches should be taken by the supervisor to help the student integrate into departmental and peer groups.[5]

Other studies show that **racialized students often face discrimination yet do not have the mentors to help them cope, and this lack of support can contribute to a lack of confidence among students**.[6] Supervisors must understand culturally appropriate ways to work with these students or they are less likely to be successful in graduate school and future careers.[7]

Student-supervisor relationships can also be defined along gendered lines. For example, research has shown that women are more likely to choose other women as mentors.[8] Women students also report that they are more likely to receive psychosocial support (acceptance, confirmation, role modelling, and counselling) from their mentors, while men report that their mentors are more likely to provide support for work-related tasks such as networking.[9]

It is important to recognize that all students are different and that these guidelines cannot possibly provide a comprehensive list of those differences. For example, **supervisors may also encounter students from different religious backgrounds, sexual orientations, ability status, ideological stances, etc.** Being aware of the ways in which such differences can shape a graduate student's relationship to their studies, their department, and their overall experience within academia is integral to creating a solid framework for a successful supervisor/student relationship.

Supervisors should also be aware of any implicit or hidden biases that they may hold. These biases can originate from past experiences and, in many cases, the individual who possesses them may not be aware of their presence.[10]

For example, you may think that you do not maintain a bias regarding age and ability; however, you may discover that you have innate preferences with regard to your students. One way to measure and begin considering these implicit or hidden biases is to participate in an online test offered as part of Project Implicit by Harvard University. Being open and willing to examine your own possible biases is important in being able to provide appropriate support to your graduate students.

The following sections address some challenges or issues that graduate students might encounter during the course of their studies.

Life Stages

Graduate students enter their programs at different life stages and, as a result, it is necessary for supervisors to try to accommodate a reasonable academic plan for the student's degree that meets the needs of the program but also suits the student's individual schedules and time constraints.

Some graduate students may begin graduate school directly after their undergraduate degree and may be more willing and able to work long hours in a lab or travel extensively for archival research to finish their degree more quickly. Others, however, may be returning to their studies later in life or they may have family responsibilities that require additional consideration when mapping out their degrees. In either case, clarifying expectations from the outset of the student-supervisor relationship will be useful for all parties involved.

Enrolment Status

Enrolment status must be taken into consideration by a graduate student's supervisor, particularly as students may choose to pursue their master's or doctoral degrees as part-time students. One way that faculty members can assist students who are part-time or have external responsibilities is by encouraging them to take part in programs or opportunities that have proven to help students complete their degrees, such as time management workshops or writing support groups, as well as maintaining good communication with these students so that they feel they are associated and active in the program.[11]

There are also situations that may arise as a result of a change in a student's personal circumstances, which might impact enrolment status. For example, an illness or loss in a student's family may require a student to take some time away from their studies. Supervisors should create an environment where a student feels safe to bring these issues to the supervisor's attention so that they can be discussed and options explored. Supervisors should know the appropriate contacts within the department, as well as appropriate processes, such as that a student can request a leave of absence. They should also be prepared to assist the student in resuming their degree when they return from their leave.

Graduate students who are enrolled on a part-time basis may feel less connected to their peers or their department.

Students with Family Responsibilities

Family responsibilities can impact the way students engage in their studies, and may occur at any stage during the program. For example, students who have young children may require more flexibility in regard to their work schedules and meeting deadlines.[12] Childcare issues also cannot always be anticipated or planned for in advance. Some students also may encounter illnesses or emergencies among family members that require their attention.

Because such circumstances may well affect academic progress or a student's involvement in their studies, they may not feel comfortable bringing such childcare or family issues up in discussion with their supervisor. Some students may feel that these are personal issues and that they should not "bother" their supervisor with them. Other students may be concerned that they will make the supervisor think less of them or that it may be interpreted as if they are not as committed to their academic work.

Nevertheless, "life happens," and situations like this will occur in everyone's life at some point. It is important for the supervisor to create an environment in which the student can open up about these pressures and where the student feels that the supervisor is there to help them explore various options for dealing with these situations, and if necessary locate resources at the University that can provide advice and support.

First-Generation Students

In some cases, graduate students will experience unique pressures because they are the first in their families to enrol in higher education.[13] Studies have shown that doctoral students who are the first in their families to enrol in graduate studies are more likely to be women and racialized individuals and, in many cases, they carry significant levels of financial stress (e.g. debt) for pursuing higher education.[14]

Taken together, these characteristics can make the process of completing graduate school more stressful for these students. They often do not have the support in their immediate family to help them navigate the complex system of higher education, and supervisors should take this into consideration in their approach to supervision. Students in this category might require explicit support with expectations and more information on University processes.[15]

> A supervisor should be open to considering a student's unique circumstances.

First Nations Students

Many Indigenous students will have a cultural background that is different from that of their non-Indigenous supervisor, which may affect their approach to academic and scholarly work. For instance, Indigenous students may take different approaches to their writing and how they intend to convey their story. Feedback and directions provided by the supervisor may conflict with this approach and be perceived as changing the meaning of the Indigenous student's intent and writing. Indigenous students also may experience discomfort competing with peers. They may be uncomfortable with specific hierarchical relationships and may benefit not only from academic support, but also from emotional and spiritual support, as well as words of encouragement that values the students' respective Indigenous cultural attributes.

Supervisors should be aware of such cultural differences and be acquainted with specific resources, such as the First Nations House, that are available at the University of Toronto. For instance, at the First Nations House, Indigenous students have access to the services of Traditional Elders and an Aboriginal Learning Strategist, can get help with academic planning, seek advocacy for academic issues, and access a resource centre and computer lab. In addition, Indigenous support services may be available within the student and supervisor's Faculty, such as the Office of Indigenous Medical Education in the Faculty of Medicine, the services and programming for Aboriginal students in the Faculty of Law, or the Indigenous Education Network at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. Indigenous support services are also available at each of the UTM and UTSC campuses. Other support services include the Supporting Aboriginal Graduate Enhancement (SAGE) initiative, which is a student-driven initiative focused on enhancing the academic experiences of Indigenous/Aboriginal graduate students at the University of Toronto across the three campuses.[16]

International Students

Students come from around the world to attend the University of Toronto, bringing with them a wealth of expertise and experiences that enrich the overall academic contributions of the University. At the same time, students who come from abroad may have difficulty and may experience high levels of stress in dealing with the cultural differences they encounter during their time in Canada, especially differences in the academic environment, such as how to interact with faculty members,

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when and how to ask for support, and how to deal with the University administration.

Often for these students, English may not be their first language, so accessing the resources that they need and engaging in the academic community in their departments, and at the University at large, may be more challenging.

Funding can be an added stress for these students, placing pressure on them to do well in their program in order to meet visa requirements to stay in the country or completion pressures imposed by their scholarship.

Cross-cultural communication can also be a challenge for international students. For example, cultures can vary in expected behaviour associated with power differences. This can lead to students appearing overly formal or deferential, or the supervisor expecting an informality the student is not used to. Students from cultures with a high deference to and respect of authority sometimes may seem to treat administrative staff, technicians, and more junior students less respectfully than their supervisor because of an ingrained need to differentiate.

Additionally, in cultures where there are high power differences, students may be reluctant to question their supervisors or other faculty, whereas in cultures with low power differences, frequent challenges and constructive criticisms may be the norm. Cultural norms may also create a relationship where students may be unwilling to ask questions lest it reveal a lack of knowledge on their part, academic weakness, or because asking questions might infer that their supervisor might not have explained something adequately. Additionally, it is important to note that communication styles may differ: some cultures value indirectness, others directness.

Students arriving in graduate studies from different cultures may face challenges their peers do not, including deciphering the expectations of the program and/or discipline while at the same time getting used to both a new university and a new living environment. Supervisors should mentor their students during this transition. In these situations, it is important to work toward avoiding potential misunderstandings by employing strategies such as depersonalizing and anticipating the issue.

Supervisors can provide support to international students to help them succeed in their graduate education. One of the most important steps supervisors can take is to help their students

Asking students to address you by your first name or to "drop by" with questions may be uncomfortable for some students who are used to more formality in an academic setting.

A supervisor might say that they know some students may be uncomfortable asking questions, but that questions are expected and welcome.

identify resources on campus that can be helpful to them during their studies. Examples of resources are as follows:

- the [Centre of International Experience](),
- the [University of Toronto Graduate Students' Union](),
- [peer support programs](), and
- [immigration advising]()

This list is not an exhaustive listing of resources; the [Centre for Teaching Support & Innovation (CTSI)]() at the University of Toronto has published a useful online resource entitled, "[Recommendations and Resources for Supporting International Students and Teaching Assistants at the University of Toronto]()." Faculty members are encouraged to consult this publication to familiarize themselves with programming and resources available on campus for international students.

Finally, supervisors should be able to help alleviate feelings of isolation that may be experienced by international students.[17] One way to do this is by being able to help their students connect with financial, social, language, and cultural support resources on campus.[18]

Supervisors also may be able to help international students who are new to the city to find ethnic neighbourhoods that the student may be able to relate to.

Writing support

Faculty might also recommend the programs offered by the [Graduate Centre for Academic Communication]() at SGS for students whose first language is not English or for students who may have received different academic training during their previous studies. GCAC also offers classes for graduate students on presentation skills and other communication methods that all graduate students may find helpful. Being aware of campus resources can help faculty and students identify the resources that might be useful to them at any given time.

Mental Health and Wellbeing

While some students thrive within the context of graduate studies, others may experience mental health challenges that may put them at risk.[20] While supervisors should not take on the role of therapist, it is important that they have an active role in supporting the mental health and wellbeing of their students

Mental health and wellbeing have been identified as priorities at the University of Toronto.[19]

during the course of their studies. Supervisors should be aware of campus programs and resources—including the offerings of University of Toronto's Health & Wellness Centre, Academic Success, the Community Safety Office, and the resources and services listed on the student-facing Feeling Distressed web page—that students can access during their studies and be able to direct these students to these places where it is appropriate.

Notes

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