Section 1: Introduction

How can these guidelines help you?

One of the hallmarks of graduate studies at the University of Toronto is a student's deep engagement with scholarly work, both past and present, in a given discipline. For research-stream doctoral students, this includes a requirement to produce original research, complete a written thesis, and defend it at a Final Oral Examination. Similarly, research-stream master's students normally have to write and defend a thesis based on original research. Additionally, a number of professional doctoral and master's programs require that their students are engaged in scholarly activities under the supervision of a faculty member.

Fundamental to the idea of "supervision" is that a graduate faculty member (or occasionally more than one) takes primary responsibility for assisting the student learn the craft of research and proceed successfully to the degree. Supervision can take many forms, depending on a variety of factors: for instance, the program you are enrolled in, the approach used by the supervisor, your needs and learning style, your discipline, and so on.

This document will help you as a graduate student at the University of Toronto understand best practices in graduate supervision. While these guidelines are written primarily for students in research-stream programs, they will equally apply to many students in professional programs. Indeed, most of the principles underlying best practices in supervision apply to all activities that involve students working with faculty members on scholarly projects.

Acknowledgements

This document was developed by a working group at the School of Graduate Studies (SGS) which involved representatives from the School of Graduate Studies, the University of Toronto Graduate Students' Union (UTGSU), and the Graduate Conflict Resolution Centre (CRC), as well as faculty members and students from various Divisions. In addition, sections from the document have benefitted greatly from input and comments obtained from various experts across the University. Companion publications provide guidelines for faculty supervisors and graduate administrators. Jointly, these guidelines outline best practices for graduate supervision at the University of Toronto and assist all participants in the supervisory process to have a clear understanding of responsibilities and expectations in order to optimize the graduate experience and prevent or reduce potential problems or conflicts.

GRADUATE SUPERVISION GUIDELINES
Student Edition

Section 2: General Characteristics of Graduate Supervision

Graduate supervision is not a one-size-fits-all

The University of Toronto offers many graduate degrees extending across the full range of humanities, social sciences, physical sciences, engineering, and life sciences. All research-degree programs and a number of professional programs require that students engage in some form of research under supervision of a faculty member.

Given the variety of programs and disciplines, it is not surprising that one can find considerable variation in supervision across the University. In some research-stream programs graduate students may be expected to develop their research project quite independently from the supervisor, while in other programs or research groups, a student may be expected to develop a project that fits within the ongoing research projects of the supervisor. In addition, the interaction with the supervisor may change throughout the program. Some students may interact and receive guidance from their supervisor fairly regularly (e.g., sometimes daily or weekly), while more advanced students may be expected to work very independently on their project, receiving only occasional guidance from the supervisor and the supervisory committee. Furthermore, in some programs, identifying a supervisor is a requirement for admission; in other programs, you may not have a supervisor identified until after your qualifying exams.

VIGNETTE

Jennifer is doing her PhD project in a chemistry lab as part of a funded project. She is expected to attend biweekly lab seminars with her supervisor, other students in the lab, and post-doctoral fellows to discuss her research progress. In addition she often meets with her supervisor informally throughout the week to discuss her work.

In contrast, Jennifer's friend Adam is a second-year PhD student in history and has been asked by his supervisor to come back in six months with a proposal for the research topic he wants to pursue. He usually meets with his supervisor once every six months, but is welcome to request earlier meetings, if helpful.

General characteristics of good supervisory practice

Good graduate supervision can be recognized by a number of characteristics. It should inspire and guide you to reach your full scholarly potential. It should provide an environment that is supportive yet stimulating. It should enable you to learn the essential methodologies, concepts, and culture of your discipline, and perform research of high quality and significance. It should introduce you to the wider context of the discipline and the relevant communities of scholars, and help position you for future careers both within and outside academe. It should foster a strong sense of academic integrity, and it should help you to navigate successfully the journey through your program with a clear understanding of the appropriate requirements, rules, and procedures. Any emerging or anticipated problems should be handled in a timely fashion with compassion and clarity.

Graduate supervision vs. mentoring

- Supervision: tends to be task oriented
- Mentorship: tends to be focused on broader scholarly and career development
- Good supervision will involve both roles, although the focus may differ depending on where you are in your program

Graduate supervisors can assume a number of different roles in a student's academic program, and these roles may vary depending on where the student is in his or her program. Two important roles are that of **"supervisor"** and of **"mentor."**

The Oxford English Dictionary defines a supervisor as "a person who directs or oversees a task or activity" (Oxford University Press, 2016). In contrast, a mentor is defined as a person who acts as guide and adviser to another person.

As a supervisor, the faculty member will guide you through the requirements of the academic program, set out expectations, provide evaluations and assessments of your work, and generally assist you in meeting and completing the various milestones and tasks that are part of your program in a timely manner. This is a critical role throughout your program, from the initial stages when your academic program is being planned to the final stages where you are preparing to submit and defend your thesis.

At other times, however, your supervisor may take on the role of "mentor." As a mentor your supervisor will be more focused on your long-term development and on providing personal support, not just with regard to the academic requirements but also regarding your development as a scholar and researcher. As a mentor, your supervisor will support you in aspects relevant to the academic process, including but not limited to time managements, conflict resolution, gaining familiarity with the scholarly or research culture in the particular discipline, exploring career options and providing advice on how to prepare for a career, etc. As such, a mentorship relationship can be more personal than that a supervisory one.

We believe that a good graduate supervisor will incorporate both roles of supervisor and mentor. Therefore, we do not see supervision and mentorship in graduate education as two completely distinct roles but ones that are closely intertwined. For that reason, we will continue to use the terms **"supervision"** and **"supervisor"** with the understanding that while the focus of a relationship between the graduate student and supervisor may vary from time to time, mentorship always is an integral part of a good relationship.

Graduate supervision is a shared responsibility

The success of good supervision is a shared responsibility between you and your supervisor. It depends on both communicating well, being tolerant and understanding, and each holding the other to high standards. The graduate unit (department, centre, or institute) also plays a role, providing clarity and consistency of expectations, upholding academic standards, administering the program fairly and effectively, and intervening where necessary to help resolve problems. These Guidelines are intended to help all participants fulfil their roles and to ensure that the supervision of graduate students at the University of Toronto is of the highest quality.

The need for mutual respect

Regardless of their respective roles or positions, **all parties (student, supervisor, members of the supervisory committee) should treat each other with dignity and respect and make all possible efforts to manage conflicts in a respectful way.**

It is not always easy to determine what constitutes appropriate behaviour and respectful responses in a given situation. These may depend on the context and also may be influenced by cultural differences and expectations held by the supervisor, student, or both. The *Human Resources Guideline on Civil Conduct* published by the University of Toronto and available online, provides a useful guide.

Section 3: Choosing a Supervisor

The three most critical choices facing you as you pursue your master's or doctoral research degree are what institution to choose, what program to attend, and the supervisor you will work with.

These three are not independent: for instance, some students know which supervisor they want to work with before they even start to apply. This will determine both the program and institution they will choose. Other students know exactly what research question they wish to pursue, which in turn may determine which institution, program and supervisor they want to apply to. At the University of Toronto, most students apply to a particular program where there may be many potential supervisors. While some programs assign an advisor at the start of a student's program with the supervisor identified only later in the program, most programs expect that students themselves choose a supervisor from the beginning or early in their program. In some programs, identifying a faculty member who agrees to work with the student is a required component of the application process, so the supervisor may be determined before the student even arrives on campus. Although it is not done frequently, it may sometimes be useful for a student to have a co-supervisor.

It is important to understand that SGS regulations state that the final authority to approve or assign a supervisor rests with the head of the graduate program (Graduate Chair or Director). Normally, the same supervisor will guide the student from the start of the program all the way to graduation, but in exceptional circumstances a student may need or want to consider switching to a new supervisor at some point in the program. While such a change may be possible, it is important that you first discuss a contemplated change with the Graduate Coordinator or Chair of your program. This will allow you to explore the potential implications of a switch before making a decision.

The Student-Supervisor Relationship

The student-supervisor relationship is a key factor in determining a successful and satisfying graduate experience.

When it works well, you not only will learn the craft of research scholarship, but will also gain an advocate who will speak on your behalf, are welcomed into a network of professionals, and may work with someone who ends up being a lifelong colleague and maybe even friend. Most supervisory relationships allow the student to experience the deep satisfaction of academic work and the creation of new knowledge.

However, as any relationship, the student-supervisor relationship may not always go smoothly. It is hoped that in most cases this is only a temporary situation that can be resolved relatively easily and quickly. But sometimes it may not be so easy to resolve and it may be necessary to look at other solutions. Such difficult situations may lead to a student to lose their enthusiasm for research as a career and, in extreme cases, result in a student abandoning their dream and pursuit of a higher degree at the University of Toronto. These Guidelines will provide you with best practices on what you can do for establishing a positive supervisory relationship that will prevent or minimize the impact of such negative experiences.

While there are many factors that can affect the success of a graduate supervision relationship, a good place to start is to make sure you pick a supervisor that is right for you.

Here are some suggestions for what you can do as a student when looking for a supervisor:

- **Look up online information on potential supervisors**. First of all, the potential supervisor should be highly qualified in the expected area of research. Check their biographies on the graduate unit's website, noting their research interests, publications and other academic activities; their grant support; graduate students they have supervised; and how busy they may be on activities away from their lab or office. Look at their CV as well, if it is available. Remember that just because a faculty member is an internationally recognized research expert, this does not mean that their supervisory style fits what you are looking for. You have to look beyond the CV to find more information about the best fit.

Key Points

The Supervisor Search

- Look up online information on potential supervisors.

- Check other online sources.

- Talk to other professors.

- Contact the unit's graduate office.

- Arrange to speak face-to-face (or arrange for an online meeting) with potential supervisors.

- Contact other students who are studying or who have studied with the supervisor.

- **Check other online sources**. Use your favourite search engine to find more information potential supervisors. Look for blogs, discussion groups, or social networking sites they may have in order to get a sense of who they are.

- **Talk to other professors**. Check with professors you know who might be aware of faculty in your area of interest. They could offer valuable insights to help you identify and evaluate potential supervisors.

- **Contact the unit's graduate office and visit in person if possible**. Talk to the graduate coordinator (the faculty member responsible for the graduate program) and/or the graduate administrator (the administrative staff member assisting the graduate coordinator). These people can be an invaluable source of information about the program and the faculty.

- **Arrange to speak face-to-face** (or arrange for an online meeting) with potential supervisors and, if applicable, see if you can visit their research facilities.

- **Contact other students** who are studying or who have studied with the supervisor. You can find those students by checking the website or CV of the potential supervisor, or check with the graduate administrator in the department. You should try to contact those students and let them know you are thinking of studying with the supervisor. Ask them for comments on the style of supervision, the frequency of contact, the level of independence, the supervisor's personal interaction style, whether there are or have been any issues, and so on. Do this in person if you can or via an online meeting, as information is usually more forthcoming in person than it is by email.

Finding a Supervisor: Some questions to ask

When you have identified a potential supervisor, you should contact them to ask about supervision opportunities, discuss your research interests, and what it is you are looking for in a supervisor.

Here are some question topics you might find useful:

- **What previous supervisory experience does your potential supervisor have?** Faculty are usually self-taught in the art of supervision, starting with their own experience and learning as they go. With a novice supervisor, you might want to ask how supervision was handled in their own doctoral program. With an experienced supervisor, you should be able to consult former or current students.

- **How many graduate students does a potential supervisor have?** Compare this number to others in the same graduate unit or discipline. High numbers are more common in the sciences. They may mean a high-profile successful researcher and supervisor, but could also mean you get less direct supervisory attention and a more impersonal, standardized program. Small numbers are not uncommon in the humanities; in any discipline, fewer graduate students for a supervisor could mean you get to interact one-on-one more often with your supervisor, but may also mean you have fewer student-peers to talk to, particularly in small graduate units.

- **What is the "culture" of the supervisor's research or scholarly activities?** Is it one where you are expected to work quite independently and only occasionally meet with the supervisor? Will you be working independently on research topics that are not part of the supervisor's own research program? Or conversely, would you mostly be part of a research team, be responsible for a specific part of a larger project? Will you be expected to report frequently (e.g. weekly) or only when you have completed a self-defined significant part of the project? This varies not only across disciplines, but even within single programs. Make sure you would feel comfortable with the expectations of the culture in the supervisor's research group.

- **How long does it take students to complete their program with this supervisor? How does this compare with the graduate unit norm? Do the majority the supervisor's PhD students finish within or close to 4 to 5 years? How many students take 6 years or more to complete their degree? How many students did not complete their PhD degree?**
While graduate units may not always be able to provide specific and detailed information, they should be able to provide you information on average times to completion.

- **Do you have any personal characteristics or circumstances that might affect whether this supervisor is a good fit?**
Decide early on what you are willing to discuss with the supervisor, even before starting your program. You may have family responsibilities, health or disability issues, or special travel needs. If you are aware of any issues that may affect academic progress, try to resolve them prior to entering the program or as soon as possible after you start. You may choose to have discussions with potential supervisors and the graduate coordinator to discuss your particular circumstances to make sure they will be appropriately accommodating. Remember that you cannot expect a supervisor to accommodate needs that he or she is unaware of. The first step to obtain disability related accommodations is to register with Accessibility Services if you are on the St. George campus or with AccessAbility Services on the UTM or UTSC campuses. You will find tips on how to disclose (or not) a disability in [Section 5](#).

Key Questions

- What is your supervisor's research environment like? What are his/her expectations?

- Will your supervisor be reasonably available during your program?

- On average, how long does it take to complete your program?

- Do you wish to disclose a disability or other personal circumstance to your supervisor? What resources are available to support you?

- What kind of financial support will you receive during your studies?

- **What is the supervisor's role in providing financial support?**
  You should find out what the graduate unit's policy is on funding doctoral (or research master's) students, and to what extent you are expected to teach or work as a research assistant to generate the funding. Particularly in the sciences, support in the form of research assistantships (RAs) is usually available from a supervisor's research grants. Ask your supervisor or the graduate office whether your potential supervisor has appropriate grants to do this. You might also want to find out whether the supervisor has historically provided support if students don't finish before other funding ends. What are the graduate unit's policies on providing teaching assistantships? Some supervisors or graduate units also require that students apply to external funding opportunities during their program to help pay for their research and/or stipend.

- **If you anticipate significant research expenses to pursue your topic of interest, what is the program's expectation for covering them?**
  Research programs in the sciences may need substantial equipment and supplies. In all disciplines there may be travel or field expenses. Is the equipment available and does your potential supervisor have sufficient grant funds to support the research? How much, if any, of these expenses are you expected to cover? In any program, travel to present your research at conferences should be expected; can and will your potential supervisor provide travel funding? What other funding sources are available in the department, at the university, etc. and how can you find them?

- **What advice and assistance can your potential supervisor provide for finding a suitable job after graduation?**
  For some students, this is not important, whereas others may expect assistance. Check the supervisor's presence on the web and social media; if possible, talk with their former students. The CV may indicate how actively involved the supervisor is in national and international communities within the discipline, and whether they have the scholarly or professional status and connections to help. If possible, ask your potential supervisor directly what you can expect.

- **Is the potential supervisor going to be reasonably available for the duration of your program?** Do they have significant administrative responsibilities, and if so, how might that affect their ability to supervise effectively? Are they frequently away from campus, e.g., do they travel extensively to conferences and other meetings? Do they plan to be away for a research, administrative, or parental leave? Who will be the supervisory contact during their absence? Are they intending to retire sometime during the duration of your program?

Of course, you may not find complete answers for all of your questions, but asking them may help you anticipate and minimize problems down the road. Setting up a personal meeting with your (potential) supervisor will often give you a good sense of whether this is a person who fits your learning style and someone you can see yourself working with.

Section 4: Responsibilities of the Student, Supervisor, and Supervisory Committee

While success in a master's or doctoral degree is the prime responsibility of the student, others share in that responsibility. Foremost amongst these for research-stream students are the supervisor and the graduate unit responsible for the program. In addition, the student's supervisory committee members often have an important role as well. In this section we outline some of responsibilities, both explicit and implicit, of these principal parties.

What will be expected of you

In order to graduate, a student in a graduate program must fulfill the degree requirements of the program and abide by the general and degree regulations and policies of the graduate unit, SGS and the University. Doing so, and being aware of these requirements and regulations, which are readily available on the School of Graduate School's website, is your responsibility.

But a high-quality graduate student experience should be much more than simply getting the degree. Ideally, you will graduate with a passion for learning and research, a respect for academic colleagues, a network of valuable contacts, a deep understanding of academic integrity and other professional standards, believe that you have had an excellent graduate experience, and that you have acquired a skill set useful in a wide range of related careers. Optimizing these depends not just on the academic environment, but also on you and your relationships with the other parties.

Some of the more important student responsibilities:

- **Be familiar with the policies and regulations.**
  Become familiar with, and adhere to, the rules, policies, and procedures in place in the graduate unit, the SGS, and the University as outlined in resources such as graduate unit websites or handbooks, the SGS Calendar and SGS website, and the University's website. This includes important information on intellectual ownership and research integrity (see Policies and Other Guidelines).

- **Know your deadlines.**
  Be aware of and conform to the timelines and deadlines associated with the various parts of the program such as registration, committee meetings, candidacy (for doctoral programs), and thesis submission.

- **Prepare a timeline for your program.**
  Prepare a research plan and timetable for the program of study. A good approach is to work with your supervisor or advisor to formulate a timeline for your whole program, noting important milestones and deadlines such as: establishing a thesis topic; completing a literature review; achieving intermediate research goals; attending conferences, doing seasonal fieldwork, publishing papers; completing the research; analyzing data; and completing drafts of the thesis. You will have the opportunity to revisit this plan regularly (e.g., at your mandatory committee meetings which should take place at least once a year) and, of course, you should revise it when necessary.

- **Establish an appropriate supervisory committee.**
  How much say you have in choosing committee members varies across graduate units, but ideally both student and supervisor approve of, understand, and are comfortable with the choices. Though timing depends on the culture of the graduate unit, this should be done as early as is reasonable, certainly no later than the end of the second year of study in doctoral programs. In many graduate units, particularly in the sciences, supervisory committees are formed as early as at the initial registration in the program. In others, they may be constituted after a research proposal or comprehensive exam is completed. For some research master's programs, a supervisory committee is also required. You should check the regulations for your graduate unit, which are usually included in your student handbook or can be found on your unit's website.

Key Points
As a student, you should:

- Know how and where to access graduate unit and university policies and regulations.
- Be pro-active.
- Keep your supervisor informed of emerging issues or upcoming events that may affect your academic progress.
- Be sure to have regular meetings with your supervisory committee (SGS requires at least one meeting each year).
- Prepare a realistic timeline for your program, review and adjust when needed.
- Seek conflict resolution as early as possible.
- Participate cooperatively and responsibly in the supervisory relationship.
- Understand that graduate supervision is a shared responsibility.

- **Have regular meetings with your supervisor.**
Your supervisor is your primary academic advice and support person during your doctoral degree. Some supervisors will expect to meet frequently with their students, others may not. Some may schedule regular meetings, while others will rely on you to request a meeting when needed. Remember that you should be proactive in your program, identify when (extra) advice or support would be helpful, and organize a meeting with your supervisor when needed.

- **Keep your supervisor informed.**
It is your responsibility to let your supervisor know how you can be contacted, when you will be absent (e.g., due to illness, a disability related issues, to attend to family obligations, or upcoming travels), and inform your supervisor of any significant issues or events that may affect your academic progress or that of others. If you are a member of a group, for instance in a large laboratory, you will also have responsibilities to others in the group. This includes keeping them informed of matters that may affect their work or studies.

- **Seek conflict resolution as soon as possible**.
If you experience any emerging problems in the supervisory relationship, you should try to discuss these with your supervisor as early as possible. If you feel uncomfortable talking directly to your supervisor about these issues, you should contact your graduate coordinator or chair. Remember that issues are usually more easily resolved if addressed early. You will find additional information on conflict resolution resources in [Section 6](#).

- **Have regular meetings with your supervisory committee.** Ensure that meetings with your supervisory committee actually occur. According to SGS regulations, you must have a meeting with your full committee at least once a year. Your graduate program may require more frequent meetings. As a doctoral student, you share equal responsibility for making sure that progress, results, and plans are discussed. You should feel free to request additional meetings if you feel it will be useful to your progress.

Key Points
Your supervisor should:

- Help you in planning your academic program.
- Provide guidance, support and feedback.
- Be accessible.
- Ensure academic integrity.
- Avoid conflict of interest.

Key Points
Your supervisory committee should:

- Meet regularly (at least once a year).
- Provide guidance during your research.
- Add complementary value to your supervision
- Provide meaningful written feedback.

- **Be cooperative.**
Behave in an appropriate way that contributes positively to the atmosphere, culture, and productivity of the research group and/or supervisor. Successful supervisory relationships are synergistic, with both student and supervisor benefitting more than they would without it. Both you and your supervisor share **responsibility in making it so.**

- **Be responsible.**
Acquire the necessary scientific, technical, health, and safety skills for undertaking the proposed research and adhering to the ethical and integrity practices appropriate to the discipline and as required by the University of Toronto.

What you can expect of your supervisor

Your supervisor will assist and guide you so that you can reach your scholarly potential. At the same time, your supervisor also must assess your progress and help ensure that you know and comply with the rules and regulations of the University.

Sometimes, the role of your supervisor is to enforce these rules and regulations. The balance between these various roles can be challenging and students as well as supervisors can expect some bumps along the way.

In general, you can expect your supervisor to assist you in these areas:

- **Planning.**
Guiding you in the selection and planning of a meaningful and appropriate research topic that can be successfully completed within the normal time limit for the degree program; helping you establish a realistic timetable for completion of your program, preferably including a number of milestones to measure progress along the way.

- **Guidance.**
Providing you support and resources to help you understand the relevant theories, knowledge, and background literature, and the methodological and technical skills necessary for the research; providing adequate opportunity and a positive environment for discussion and constructive criticism of ideas, research plans, research results, and thesis drafts as the research progresses.

- **Feedback.**
Providing sufficient and appropriate guidance and commentary on progress to help ensure successful completion of the program; keeping track of progress and investigating any concerns; being open, honest, and fair with you when your academic performance is not meeting expectations. Sometimes, the most helpful feedback a supervisor can give you is that you are not making sufficient progress and what is required of you for improving your academic performance. While dealing with inadequate academic performance can be difficult, it is in no one's best interests to prolong a program of study when success is unlikely (see Section 6 for problem solving tips).

- **Accessibility.**
Establishing regular meeting times for discussion and review of progress; being reasonably accessible for unscheduled meetings; making arrangements to ensure continuity of supervision during leaves or extended periods of absence.

- **Assistance with setting up a supervisory committee.**
  Check your program requirements, but this should be done as early as possible in the program, and no later than the end of the second year. Ensuring that you have a meeting with your supervisory committee at least once a year, that the meeting is meaningful and helpful, and results in a written report of your progress for inclusion in your academic file. You should be given the opportunity to include your own comments in the report.

- **Awareness of policies and regulations.**
  Being aware of, and ensuring that you are made aware of, all relevant policies and requirements for both your academic program and research (see Policies and Other Guidelines in Appendix 1).

- **Ensuring academic and research integrity.**
  Ensuring that you understand the need for and meaning of the highest standard of academic and scholarly integrity both in coursework and research.

- **Support and encouragement.**
  Assisting and encouraging your wider professional development through such means as: participation in seminars and colloquia, attendance and presentation of work at local, national, or international conferences; publication of your work in appropriate journals; encouraging authorship or co-authorship on publications as appropriate; taking advantage of the numerous offerings provided by the University for professional development, including the Graduate Professional Skills (GPS) program through the School of Graduate Studies; assisting you in the transition from degree program to employment by, for instance, providing advice on various career options, how to prepare a CV/resume, and strategies for launching an academic or other professional career, introducing you to professional colleagues and assisting in establishing a network of contacts, being willing to write letters of reference and communicate with relevant contacts.

- **Health and safety.**
  Ensuring that the research environment in the lab or research group is safe, equitable, and free from violence, harassment and discrimination.

Key Points

What can you expect of your supervisor?

- Planning.
- Guidance.
- Feedback.
- Accessibility.
- Assistance with setting up a supervisory committee.
- Awareness of policies and regulations.
- Ensuring academic and research integrity.
- Support and encouragement.
- Health and safety.
- Avoiding conflict of interest.

- **Avoiding conflict of interest.**
  Avoiding personal or business relationships that may constitute a (perceived) conflict of interest (see [Appendix 1](#) for links to relevant documents).

What you can expect of your supervisory committee

All doctoral students should not only have a supervisor to assist them throughout their program, but also a supervisory committee. This is a formal requirement for doctoral studies at the University of Toronto, but many graduate programs also require supervisory committees for research master's students, which SGS considers a very useful practice.

A supervisory committee should consist of the supervisor and at least two graduate faculty members, which are usually, but not always, from the graduate unit responsible for the program. Interdisciplinary topics often benefit from the presence of a committee member drawn from another graduate unit.

Supervisory committees not only help ensure academic standards in the discipline through their evaluative role in the mandatory annual committee meetings, but can and should provide considerable additional value to the student. Committee members should be able to provide expertise that complements and expands that of the supervisor. They can act as a valuable sounding board for discussion of ideas emerging in the research.

And since committee members can be important to help if things go wrong, it is good practice to avoid having committee members that have close personal relationships, or other potential conflicts of interest, with your supervisor, such as being a junior member of the supervisor's research team or being a former graduate student of your supervisor.

Your supervisory committee should:

- **Meet regularly.** The supervisory committee must meet, as a committee, with you at least once a year to assess your progress in the program and to provide advice on future work. This meeting should be substantive and rigorous. It should not be a brief, casual meeting which is only held to satisfy SGS regulations. Meetings should be more frequent if there are significant questions concerning progress and performance, or if it would benefit your academic work or research.

Key Points

How do you choose committee members?

Though it is ultimately the responsibility of the graduate unit to ensure a committee is appointed, committee members are best selected in consultation with your supervisor.

Here are some key questions when considering prospective members:

- Can they add value (e.g., field-specific advice) to your research program?

- Will they be around and available for consultation and meetings throughout most of your program?

- Will they be approachable and offer constructive advice?

- Can they be objective enough to help if problems arise?

- Will they be able and willing to offer their opinion even if contrary to that of your supervisor or other members?

- Is there a good balance? Do their areas of expertise cover a sufficient range?

- **Allow for individual meetings with committee members.** Sometime you may benefit from individual meetings with one or more members of your committee to discuss specific research or personal issues. You should check with your committee members how such meetings can be requested.

- **Provide formal written feedback.** The committee must prepare a formal report of its assessment of your progress after each committee meeting, detailing its observations of your progress, and its recommendations, including whether you are considered in good academic standing. You must be given the opportunity to respond to the committee's report and recommendations, and to append this response to the committee's report. Copies of the report must be given to you as the student and filed with the graduate unit.

- **Provide guidance during research completion.** Your supervisory committee is also responsible for advising the graduate unit that your doctoral thesis is ready to proceed to examination. This means that the committee should be involved in reading and giving feedback on drafts of the thesis, advising when and if the research is complete and adequate, and approving the final draft as ready for examination.

Though the relationship between you and the members of your supervisory committee is typically much less close than the one you have with your supervisor, some of the earlier suggestions for choosing a supervisor may be useful when thinking about prospective committee members. Consult the column **"How do you choose committee members?"** on page 6 for additional suggestions.

Section 5: If You Need Academic Accommodations

Some students may need temporary or ongoing academic accommodations for disability-related barriers the affect their ability to demonstrate their knowledge and skills. The University of Toronto is committed to providing a learning environment that is accessible and open to all students, regardless of their disability.

The University provides many resources to assist you with your academic progress. **If you believe you may need a disability-related academic accommodation, your first step should be to consult with the University of Toronto Accessibility Services on the St. George Campus or the AccessAbility Services on the UTM or UTSC campuses.** These offices provides confidential services that can assist you with an assessment of your needs and helping you identify available resources, including adaptive technology, test and exam accommodations, note-taking, extensions and tutoring among others.

Accessibility Advisors at the services office can also help you create a modified work plan and share it with your supervisor. They will focus on identifying and accommodating functional limitations and will not disclose to your supervisor personal medical information, including a medical diagnosis.

In some cases, it may be helpful for students to request a temporary leave of absence. Such a leave may allow you to seek treatment or support with personal issues before resuming your academic program.

Key Points

• Whether to disclose a disability or not, and when, is your decision.

• Be pro-active by contacting Accessibility or AccessAbility Services for disability and related barriers.

• Learn about available resources.

• You do not need to disclose a diagnosis to anyone other than your accessibility counsellor.

• Seek counselling, if needed, to maintain your mental health and well-being.

The leave period is not included in the time limit for completion of the degree. If you believe that a leave of absence may be helpful to you, you should contact your program director or coordinator, or your accessibility counsellor, for more information.

Are you considering disclosure?

Some students may want to or feel comfortable disclosing information about their disability to their supervisor.

In a paper published by the National Educational Association of Disabled Students (Mohler, C.E., Duffett, E.M. and Sukhai M.A., *Disclosure in the Graduate Environment: A Tip Sheet for Students in Transition*), the following tips are provided for students considering disclosure:

- **Whether or not to disclose is highly personal** and there is not right or wrong way to go about the process.

- **Disclosure has pros and cons.** The authors point out that disclosure can promote openness and trust, may facilitate accommodation, and can protect against risk of discrimination. However, they also discuss that some students choose not to disclose out of fear of stigma, loss of privacy, because they fear that the supervisor may not understand the disability and associated needs, or because the student does not feel that accommodations are required and, thus, disclosure would not be helpful.

- **Graduate education is provided in a different environment from undergraduate studies.** Especially research-stream programs offer a more student-driven learning process, and there is a greater expectation that graduate students will be more pro-active in seeking out accommodations that are needed.

- **As part of the decision-making process around disclosure, it is important that you are an active participant and familiarize yourself with policies and practices around educational accommodations.** Staff in the School of Graduate Studies and Accessibility Services are available to assist you with identifying such policies.

- **As part of the disclosure process, it is necessary to decide to whom to disclose.** It may be helpful to disclose to more than one individual but you should only disclose to those to whom you feel comfortably doing so.

- **If you decide to disclose to individuals other than those in Accessibility Services, you do not need to disclose a diagnosis; rather, you should discuss a need for an accommodation.** Only Accessibility Services will want to receive confirmation of diagnosis. Information you wish to share with your supervisor may include general information about your disability, how your disability may affect your academic work, the reasons why to choose to disclose now, and what accommodations you have found helpful in the past and what accommodations you anticipate will be helpful in the future.

- **Timing of disclosure is also important.** You should select a time that works best for you. For instance, you may feel that the best time is during the application process or after starting with the program during the first meetings with your supervisor.

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Section 6: When Problems Arise

Despite the best intentions and preparations, the path toward successful completion of graduate studies can sometimes be difficult. Some of the more common challenges are those involving academic, financial, supervisory relationship or personal issues.

Here are some tips to help to you manage and resolve problems that may arise during your graduate studies:

- **Seek out advice early.** Solutions are often simpler and easier to implement before a problem escalates. It is better to come forward with a small issue than simply avoiding having a difficult conversation and see it become more complex. As a student you may not be aware of all the possible approaches to resolving an issue, or supports available, so seek advice about your options even if you are not looking for immediate action.

- **Be open.** Different problems require different solutions and different people have different perspectives. Differences push us to think creatively and leave room for compromise and flexibility. Problems are rarely completely one-sided: solutions often need compromise and flexibility.

- **Remember you are not alone.** Communicate, seek support, and consider that someone else may have been faced with a similar issue at some point.

Key Points
- Seek advice and resolution as early as possible.

- Be open to different solutions and perspectives.

- Try to maintain calm and objective.

- Inform yourself about the spectrum of resources. available to support you in completing your program (see Appendix 1).

- Become familiar with program-specific and University-wide policies and regulations.

- Contact the Centre for Graduate Mentorship and Supervision, if needed

- **Be yourself.** Challenging situations can be emotionally charged, and it is important to acknowledge feelings and emotions (your own and the other person's) while tackling a problem respectfully and with an open mind. Try to remain calm, objective, and rational, even if you think the other party is not.

Who can you talk to?

The University has **both informal and formal processes and pathways** for resolving problems. SGS encourages and supports the efforts of students to try and address their concerns as early as possible. Some of the people and offices you can connect with include (also see Appendix 1):

- **Your department.** You can talk to your supervisor directly, other students, supervisory committee members, the graduate coordinator, chair or director of the graduate unit. It is important to start by addressing an issue at as low a level as possible.

- **Centre for Graduate Mentorship and Supervision (CGMS).** CGMS is a tri-campus service that works with graduate students and faculty to support successful graduate mentorship and supervisory relationships. CGMS provides one-on-one interpersonal skills coaching, informal conflict resolution through mediation and facilitated conversations, system navigation, case management with the Office of the Vice Dean, Students, and skills-based workshops. If you are a graduate student or faculty member and would like support in navigating your supervisory relationship, please email CGMS at cgms@utoronto.ca and a staff member will review your request and contact you to book a confidential in-person or virtual consultation.

- **University of Toronto Graduate Students' Union.** The UTGSU provides its members with confidential advocacy services. If you are experiencing academic and/or administrative difficulties, including problems with your supervisor, department, or the university, the UTGSU can assist you with advice, information and representation. Any information you give will remain strictly confidential.

- **School of Graduate Studies.** You can connect with staff at SGS, including Student Services and the Vice-Dean of Students, to get information about policies, guidelines (such as this Best Practices Guideline), advice on informal intervention and formal appeal processes. The SGS website also provides links to many other services for students, including: Graduate funding, Health & Wellness (workshops and appointments); Accessibility Services (including known/possible disability; temporary disability/injury; chronic medical conditions that affect learning); Information for international students; etc.

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SUPERVISION
GUIDELINES

Student
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Section 7: Finishing Up

When you have met all other program requirements, and your research is more or less completed, the task of writing the thesis arrives. This can be a stressful time for some students (and supervisors), particularly if mutual expectations have not been clarified prior to this stage. Sometimes, this may lead to tension or conflict in the supervisory relationship.

What follows are a number of recommendations that may ease the passage through the final phases of the research degree.

Writing the first draft of a thesis can itself be problematic. Typical "writer's block" may be compounded by a fear of failure or error, a reluctance to make public the fruits of labour, a lack of experience in writing, what appears to be excessive or sometimes conflicting demands or feedback of supervisory committee members, or a host of other reasons. Much has been written on thesis writing, and this is not the place to try to be comprehensive, but a few thoughts may be helpful:

- Sometimes, the most difficult part of writing a thesis is starting the first paragraph. **One way of overcoming anxiety or block associated with writing is just to start writing that first paragraph or the initial thesis outline.** And yes, it most likely will be deleted or completely re-written later, but it will allow you to get started now. It is important to consult with your supervisor frequently during this stage.

Key Points

- Start with writing the first paragraph. Remember that starting to write is often the hardest part.

- Start early, and leave a lot of time for editing.

- Know what the thesis expectations are of your supervisor or program.

- Seek support and advice when stuck. Consider contacting the Graduate Centre for Academic Communication (GCAC)

- The thesis is an important, but not final, stage in scholarly development. It may be required for the degree, but it is not (or should not be) the culmination of an academic career. **Do not regard the thesis as an expectation to present the ultimate answer to your research questions.** Rather, your thesis is an important step for you in making a meaningful contribution to your discipline and society. Ultimately, your thesis is the final step in obtaining a master's or doctoral degree, and an important stepping stone that will allow you to further opportunities to pursue your professional, academic and scholarly interests. Your supervisor and supervisory committee will help you in defining the scope and boundaries of your thesis work.

- **Writing a thesis is much easier if started early.** Particularly in the sciences, much of the work can and, when possible, should be written up and published as scholarly articles during your program. Because such published papers are usually briefer and more constrained, and frequently multi-authored, they may be less intimidating to produce and provide valuable learning experiences. Indeed, more and more theses are becoming compilations of published material with added introductory and concluding chapters, which serve to integrate the information in the thesis. In disciplines where prior publication is not the norm, it is still good practice to write, for example, a literature review as part of the thesis proposal that can then form the basis of an introductory chapter. **You should talk to your supervisor early about expected thesis format and support and resources that are available to preparing publications or other parts of your thesis.**

- Almost every student will experience times when writing may look like an insurmountable mountain. **If you are experiencing serious or prolonged difficulties with writing your thesis, do not wait (and spin your wheels). Discuss your difficulties with your supervisor or supervisory committee; tell them when and where you are having difficulties.**

Best Practice

Try to give your supervisor and/or members of your supervisory committee advanced notification when they can expect to receive a draft of your written work. This courtesy will help them schedule time to provide thorough feedback on your work.

- There are numerous resources available on and off campus to help with writing. The [Graduate Centre for Academic Communication (GCAC) programs](#) operated by SGS can be particularly helpful, offering workshops and courses on academic writing, and doctoral thesis writing groups or "writing boot camps." All of these will help you with developing your academic writing skills and time management. Or you can organize your own writing boot camp with some of your peers.

- If you have questions about structuring and formatting your thesis, you should discuss expectations with your supervisor. You also can consider consulting previous theses, which are available through the university library.

Getting Feedback

One of the most frequently asked questions concerns expectations for reasonable turnaround times of drafts submitted to your supervisor and supervisory committee.

Expecting a thorough reading and commentary for a lengthy chapter in less than a week would probably be unreasonable. Equally unreasonable would be for you not to hear back for more than two or three weeks, although you should be aware that there may be other demands on and commitments for your supervisor which may slow down the turnaround time. However, the fact that your supervisor is away on research leave should not normally preclude timely reading of drafts or signing off on the final version in these days of electronic communication.

If extended absences may produce a problem, an alternate acting supervisor should be identified. If drafts have been read, and comments acted upon, reading of the final version of your thesis should normally also be possible within three to four weeks of submission. If the supervisor anticipates significant delays in returning feedback, he or she should let the student know and provide an estimate of when the feedback can be expected.

As a student, it also is good practice to give your supervisor and/or members of your supervisory committee advanced notification when they can expect to receive a draft of your written work. In addition, it is good practice to discuss with your supervisor and committee members early in the program what the expected turn-around time is for written submissions. You should discuss with your supervisor or, if necessary, the graduate coordinator, any potential problems with overly long delays.

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Section 8: Scenarios

SCENARIO 1: Ready to Defend but Supervisor Disagrees

SCENARIO 2: Quality of Supervision is Unsatisfactory

SCENARIO 3: Disability-related Issue

SCENARIO 1

I am ready to defend but my supervisor disagrees and wants me to produce "one more" publication. Can I submit my thesis for examination without my supervisor's approval?

Though the simple answer is "yes," we would strongly advise against this. It is best practice that a student's thesis be approved by the supervisor and supervisory committee as ready to defend. After all, they are responsible for upholding the academic standards of the program, and (should) have been chosen for their expertise and experience. And if you disagree with their advice, you should reflect on the possibility they might be right and that your thesis indeed needs some more work. When was your last committee meeting? Did you have a thorough discussion about whether you had completed sufficient research to go forward to your defence?

Is the disagreement over the *content* of the thesis? Or maybe your supervisor feels that you need enough publications to secure an appropriate post-doctoral position? Sometimes, supervisors may want those publications also to show sufficient productivity during their grant funding period. Though you should ideally have discussed expectations concerning publications and length of program earlier than this, you might want to check around to see what normal expectations are in your graduate unit and

discipline. What is the average time to degree in your unit? What is the average number of publications produced by a doctoral student in your program? Though these data may not be formally collected and available, the graduate office should have a reasonable idea of what they are.

And though you may elect to proceed to examination without the full support of your supervisory committee, remember that committee members also play a role as voting members in your Final Oral Examination. Following the question period of the oral defence, all committee members will be asked to vote on whether your thesis and its defence are acceptable. If there is more than one negative vote or abstention at this point, the thesis examination will be adjourned. Though someone with unreasonable bias should not serve on the examination committee, the onus would be on you to show evidence of such a bias; the default assumption would be that they were doing their job responsibly. So, it is risky to move forward without the full support of your supervisory committee. Keep in mind also that it is in everyone's best interest to see a doctoral candidate succeed. Try to reach mutual agreement with your supervisory committee regarding what changes need to be made before you can defend. Incorporate these changes as best you can, remembering at the same time that this is *your* thesis and that it has to be yours to defend through the examination process. Be aware that your supervisor and committee members are expected to encourage doctoral students to finish up when it would not be in the student's best interests to extend their program of study; at the same time, if the thesis or research needs more work, they should point this out. And if after considering all this, you still feel there is a problem, please do talk to your graduate coordinator or program chair/director, or consult us at SGS, before proceeding.

SCENARIO 2

I am very unhappy with the quality of the supervision I have been receiving. My supervisor seems unwilling to return drafts of my thesis until several months later, and when he/she does the comments often seem to be the opposite of suggestions made earlier. Now the supervisor is insisting that more research needs to be done. It seems I will never be able to finish. What can I do?

First, it would be wise to try and evaluate the situation objectively and dispassionately. The later stages of a PhD program can be stressful and emotionally charged, and criticism and seeming delay can too easily be misinterpreted as hostile and negative. Are you submitting reasonably complete drafts, with prior warning, and at times when your supervisor is not overwhelmed with other responsibilities? Keep in mind that your supervisor has other responsibilities and commitments and may in the same period be reading and providing feedback on work submitted by more than one student. While a two-week turnaround on submitted material is generally considered acceptable, it is important to be aware that this is for chapter-sized drafts when the supervisor is aware in advance that they are coming, has perhaps seen them before so the revisions are not extensive, and is not desperately working on other commitments such as a deadline for a major grant proposal, a book or research article that needs to be submitted, or heavy teaching. If some of the criticism you receive seems arbitrary and inconsistent at first glance, remember that minor changes to prose can sometimes have major impacts on other parts of the text, and may well reverse meaning and change the context so that what may have been alright before is now questionable. And as drafts improve, less important problems often begin to be more noticeable. If you still think the criticism as unreasonable, you might show your draft to other students whose opinion you respect, or ask one of your committee members for their opinion.

Certainly the question of whether a student's research results are sufficient for the thesis requires a value judgement, and supervisors may sometimes err on the side of caution. Remember that the quality of a thesis reflects on the supervisor as well. Check other recent theses in your discipline (they should be readily available on the University's T-Space). Seek the advice of other committee members. The point in a student's program when the research is complete should have been discussed and agreed to at a formal supervisory committee meeting; if this did not occur, or if the issue arises and cannot be resolved when the thesis draft is being read, the student should call a full meeting of the committee to seek their judgement. Occasionally, there is disagreement and lack of resolution even within the committee; in this case, or if you have reasonable grounds to believe committee members or your supervisor are acting in a way that is not in your best interest, you should discuss the matter with the graduate coordinator and/or chair. They could for instance attend a committee meeting, change the committee composition, or add an extra faculty member not previously involved.

SCENARIO 3

I am worried that I might have a disability-related issue, and I am reluctant to talk to my supervisor in case it changes how they feel about me and think about my work. What do I do?

Contact U of T's Accessibility Services for a consultation. They will maintain confidentiality. This will help determine whether there is an appropriate accommodation that may help your situation. Some accommodations may need your collaboration with people in your graduate unit, such as your supervisor or course instructors; others may not. If accommodations are appropriate, an accessibility advisor can help discuss them with the necessary people if you agree to this. But you remain in control. You decide what accommodations to seek, if any, but in deciding, you should be aware of potential consequences of your decisions (for instance, could it delay your graduation? Will it affect the type of research project you can pursue?). Remember also that accommodations are negotiated, so not all accommodations requested by you or Accessibility Services may be approved. Your supervisor and graduate unit must ensure that your request does not jeopardize the delivery and essential standards of the program, nor your responsibility toward good academic progress as a graduate student in that program.

Section 9: Appendix 1 - Resources

People and Facilities

Academic and Student Services and Support

Accessibility Services: If you require academic accommodations for a documented disability (ongoing or temporary), Accessibility Services offers a number of resources to support you.

Centre for International Experience: CIE provides information, events and resources for international students studying at the University of Toronto, as well as workshops and resources for domestic students planning to travel abroad.

The Centre for Graduate Mentorship and Supervision (CGMS): CGMS is a tri-campus service that works with graduate students and faculty to support successful graduate mentorship and supervisory relationships. CGMS provides one-on-one interpersonal skills coaching, informal conflict resolution through mediation and facilitated conversations, system navigation, case management with the Office of the Vice Dean, Students, and skills-based workshops. If you are a graduate student or faculty member and would like support in navigating your supervisory relationship, please email CGMS at cgms@utoronto.ca and a staff member will review your request and contact you to book a confidential in-person or virtual consultation.

Graduate Centre for Academic Communication (GCAC): If you are looking to enhance your writing and speaking skills, consider the non-credit courses, workshops, and resources offered by GCAC. Individual consultations are also available by appointment.

SGS Student Services: graduate.information@utoronto.ca

SGS Vice-Dean, Students: sgs.vdeanstudents@utoronto.ca

Health, Wellness, and Safety

Family Care Office: If you are seeking guidance, support, or advice with family care needs, this office provides support and hosts a number of events and discussion groups open to all members of the University community.

Health and Wellness Centre: If you require physical health services (similar to those of a General Practitioner), mental health care, travel medicine, immunizations, nutritional care, family planning, or first aid, the Health and Wellness Centre provides a single point of entry. It also provides workshops and resources for student well-being.

SGS Counselling: If you are looking to access counselling support, SGS offers individual sessions that are tailored to the concerns of graduate students.

Equity and Diversity

Anti-Racism and Cultural Diversity Office: Access this office for programs, workshops, and resources on equity, anti-racism, and racism and its intersections. Services available to students, faculty, and staff.

Community Safety Office (CSO): If you feel unsafe or are experiencing unwanted attention, please connect with the CSO.

Equity Offices: A number of equity offices are available to provide guidance, raise awareness, and develop programming to support diversity, equity, and human rights for all members of the University of Toronto community.

First Nations House (FNH): Graduate students can meet with an Aboriginal Learning Strategist, seek academic support and advocacy, and access the Resource Centre and a computer lab at the FHN.

University of Toronto Graduate Students' Union (UTGSU): The UTGSU provides academic advocacy services and can assist students through the provision of advice, information, and representation.

Office of the Ombudsperson: If you are concerned that you are not being treated fairly (e.g. a decision or process within the University is unfair), you can reach out to the Ombudsperson for advice. The Ombuds office is confidential, impartial, and independent.

Sexual and Gender Diversity Office: Provides programs, education, and resources on sexual and gender diversity to all members of the University community.

Sexual Violence Prevention & Support Centre: This tricampus Centre "supports members of the University community who have been affected by sexual violence. The Centre has a mandate to conduct intake, accept disclosures and reports of sexual violence, and to provide support to individual members of the University community who have experienced sexual violence."

Policies

SGS Calendar
Grading Practices Policy
Conflict of Interest
Code of Behaviour on Academic Matters
Code of Student Conduct
Policy on Ethical Conduct in Research
AODA (Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act)

Other

The SGS Intellectual Property Guidelines
Graduate Professional Skills (GPS) Program at U of T
The Tri-Agency Framework: Responsible Conduct of Research, adopted in 2011 by the three federal granting agencies (CIHR, NSERC, and SSHRC)

Section 10: Appendix 2 - Checklist for Students

☐ **I chose my supervisor (or agreed to the choice) after appropriate review of supervisor options.**

During my initial meetings with my supervisor, I have discussed the following topics:

☐ Potential or actual thesis topic

☐ Funding

☐ Applying for scholarships and awards

☐ Teaching assistantships

☐ Availability of space

☐ Expected hours of work

☐ Timelines and major milestones including anticipated program completion time

☐ When and how a supervisory committee will be chosen

☐ Nature of guidance

☐ Frequency and style of meetings

☐ Who arranges meetings with the supervisor and the supervisory committee

☐ Methods of informal communication

☐ Turnaround time for major questions, drafts of thesis chapters, publications (as applicable)

☐ Turnaround time for conference presentations (as applicable)

☐ Intellectual property (IP) issues
(for example, ownership of data, authorship on publications, conference presentations, industry involvement, thesis publication embargoes, patents, etc.)

I understand, and have discussed with my supervisor, my program requirements including (not all may be applicable):

☐ Required courses

☐ Extra courses

☐ Language/breadth requirement

☐ Comprehensive/field/qualifying exam

☐ Seminar attendance

☐ Ethics review

☐ Thesis proposal

☐ Other (specify)

☐ **I am aware of all relevant policies and regulations of my graduate unit, the School of Graduate Studies and the University. I know where I can find these documents when needed.**

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