



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.