

# GRADUATE SUPERVISION GUIDELINES

## Faculty Edition



### Section 2: Supervision and Mentoring

#### A combined approach

Broadly defined, the role of a "supervisor" is to oversee an individual (or group) engaged in a particular task with the express goal of ensuring that they perform it correctly. In the context of graduate studies, a supervisor's role is to successfully guide a student through the requirements of their academic program.

Mentorship also plays an important role in the student-supervisor relationship. Generally speaking, a "mentor" is someone who is more experienced in a particular field and agrees to advise or counsel a less experienced mentee. In most cases, this relationship tends to be focused on broader scholarly and career development. However, it can also lead to the formation of a more personal relationship.

The difference between supervision and mentorship is not always clearly defined and good supervisors often adopt both roles, although the focus may differ depending on the stage the student is in their program.<sup>1</sup>

**Effectively combining the role of mentor and supervisor can have a positive impact on the overall graduate student experience.<sup>2</sup>**

In these guidelines, we have opted to continue using the term "supervisor" primarily because the term is widely used across the University of Toronto and is embedded in many policy and procedural documents. However, it should be understood that good supervision should combine both the supervisor and mentor role.

**SUPERVISION** tends to be task-oriented

**MENTORSHIP** tends to be focused on broader scholarly and career development

## General characteristics of good supervisory practice

Good graduate supervision can be identified by a number of characteristics. A good supervisor should:

- Aim to **inspire and guide** their student to reach their full scholarly potential.
- **Guide a student through the various requirements** of the doctoral program
- Help the student **navigate the relevant policies and procedures** established by the graduate unit, the faculty and the University.
- Seek to provide a work environment that is **supportive yet stimulating**, enabling students to learn the essential methodologies, concepts, and culture of their disciplines.
- Provide a student with **clear, fair and honest feedback** on their progress through the program.
- **Allow the student the opportunity** to conduct research of high quality and significance, and **receive appropriate recognition** in publications, presentations, etc.
- Introduce the student to the **wider context of the discipline** and the relevant communities of scholars and professionals, positioning them for successful careers within or outside of academia (or both).
- Foster a sense of **academic integrity**.
- Handle any emerging or unanticipated problems in a **timely** fashion with both **compassion and clarity**.<sup>3</sup>

## Graduate supervision as a shared responsibility

Good supervision depends on communicating well, being tolerant and understanding, and each holding the other to high standards. The graduate unit (department, centre, or institute) also plays an important role, providing clarity and consistency of expectations, upholding academic standards, administering the program fairly, effectively, and intervening where necessary to help resolve problems.

Good supervision is a shared responsibility between the supervisor and student.

## 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 every effort possible to manage conflicts in a respectful manner. The [Human Resources Guideline on Civil Conduct](#) published by the University of Toronto, available online, provides a useful guide to appropriate behaviour and respectful responses.<sup>4</sup>

## What is my role as a supervisor?

As the supervisor of a graduate student, a faculty member's role is to guide a student through the requirements of their academic program, set out expectations, provide evaluations and assessments of their work, and generally assist their students in meeting and completing in a timely manner the various milestones and tasks that are part of the degree program. The student-supervisor relationship is critical to a student's success in graduate school and should be established early in a student's program and, barring graduate unit policies or unanticipated circumstances, remain intact until the student has successfully submitted and defended their thesis.

**As a supervisor, the faculty member should provide support to their graduate students at every stage of their degree. Such support includes the following:**

### Planning

A supervisor should assist their students with 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. This includes helping develop a realistic timeline for completion of the student's program, preferably including a number of milestones to measure the student's progress along the way.

### SUPERVISORS . . .

- Provide guidance
- Clearly set out expectations
- Provide feedback
- Are accessible
- Assist with setting up a supervisory committee
- Help students understand policies and regulations
- Promote academic integrity
- Provide supportive environment
- Avoid conflict of interest

## Offering Guidance

A supervisor should provide their graduate students with support and resources throughout their program to help them contemplate relevant theories, knowledge, and background literature, as well as the methodological and technical skills necessary for the research. A supervisor should also provide adequate opportunity and a positive environment for discussion and constructive criticism of ideas, research plans, research results, and a timely review of thesis drafts as the research progresses. This includes being accessible to the student for consultation throughout the research process, as well as helping the student establish a supervisory committee that will meet on at least an annual basis (see section **Establishing a supervisory committee** below as well as [Section 4](#) of these guidelines for further information about committees).

## Providing Feedback

A supervisor is responsible for providing sufficient and appropriate guidance and commentary on the student's progress to support successful completion of the program. The supervisor should keep track of progress and investigate any concerns; and be open, honest, and fair with the student about their academic performance. This includes providing positive feedback on successful achievements and contributions; when appropriate, fairly recognizing a student's contributions in written materials, teaching, presentations, publication, etc.; being clear with students when they are not making sufficient progress; and indicating what is required for them to get back on track. Please refer to [Section 8](#) of these guidelines for more tips about dealing with conflict.

## Being Accessible

A supervisor should establish regular meeting times for discussion and review of progress with their graduate students; be reasonably accessible for unscheduled meetings; and make arrangements to ensure continuity of supervision during leaves or extended periods of absence.

## Establishing a supervisory committee (for doctoral students)

In addition, a supervisor should also assist students in establishing a supervisory committee with a minimum of three members for the duration of their degree. This should be done as early as possible in the program, and no later than the end of the second year. Supervisors should ensure that there is an annual meeting held with all members of the committee involved, the results of which should be included in a written report that is added to the student's academic file. The student should be given the opportunity to add comments to the report. Supervisors must be aware of all relevant departmental and University-wide policies and requirements for the student's academic program and research.<sup>5</sup>

## What is my role as a mentor?

As a mentor, a supervisor should be focused on the student's long-term development and on providing personal support, not just with regard to the academic requirements of the program, but also regarding their development as a researcher and a scholar. The supervisor should provide support in all aspects relevant to the academic process, including but not limited to time management, 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 future career. In many ways, the mentorship relationship often is more personal than a supervisory one.

Some positive impacts of this approach to graduate student supervision include: raising student achievement, lowering attrition rates, reducing stress on all parties involved, and making it more likely that both students and supervisors will be satisfied with their progress both during and after the completion of their degrees.<sup>6</sup>

## Multiple Mentors

There are many different kinds of mentors and it is important to recognize that each faculty member may have different areas of expertise, a somewhat unique interpersonal style, and pedagogical methods. For this reason, while a research student must have one primary supervisor, it may be beneficial for some students to have multiple mentors. Different mentors can offer different kinds of expertise and support as a student progresses through their graduate degree. For instance, while all supervisors are very familiar with the academic world, some mentors may have additional expertise in other employment areas such as industry, non-profit organizations, etc. In some cases, additional mentors may be found among the members on the student's supervisory committee, but mentors may also consist of alumni, or others not associated with the student's program.<sup>8</sup>

## MENTORS . . .

- Allow students to develop a new set of knowledge and skills related to their field of study
- Provide students with the opportunity to hone their collaborative skills
- Give students the tools necessary to deal confidently with intellectual challenges
- Allow students to become contributing members of a wider community of scholars<sup>7</sup>

## Effective supervision and mentorship strategies

To be an effective supervisor/mentor, faculty members should strive to achieve the following in their relationships with their graduate students:

- **Effective communication:** Be sure to communicate and discuss your expectations with your students in advance. Putting expectations on the table from the outset ensures that there is little room for misunderstandings.
- **Lead by example:** As a mentor, you should aim to set a good example for your student in all activities related to your field, including research, collaborating, teaching, writing, and presenting.
- **Inspire confidence:** By providing constructive feedback in a timely manner, as a mentor you can help your student acquire the tools necessary to engage within their field with greater confidence.
- **Respect diversity:** Be aware of differences in ability, gender, culture, or life circumstances that may require special accommodations. It is also important in your role as a supervisor to be aware of campus and local support groups that can help your student in varying situations, as well as being aware of your own limits in dealing with such issues.
- **Be accessible:** Be willing to take the time to get to know your student and to build a strong mentoring relationship with them. This includes establishing a mutual respect where both parties respect each other's time, effort, and qualifications.

### Notes

1. Gardner, S.K. and Barnes, B.J., *Advising and Mentoring Doctoral Students: A Handbook*. Faculty and Staff Monograph Publications, 210: 2014). Retrieved from: [http://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/fac\\_monographs/210](http://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/fac_monographs/210); Knox, S., Schlosser, L.Z., Pruitt, N. T. and Hill, C.E. (2006), "A qualitative examination of graduate advising relationships: The adviser perspective," *The Counseling Psychologist*, 34(4), 489-518; Laverick, D., *Mentoring Processes in Higher Education* (London: Springer International Publishing, 2016).

2. Studies have shown that good supervision practices have had a significant impact on graduate student retention and completion. See, for example, Baird, L.L., "Helping graduate students: A graduate adviser's view." In *Student services for the changing graduate student population*, eds. A.S Pruitt-Logan & P.D. Isaac (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1995), 25-32; Barnes, B. "The nature of exemplary doctoral advisor's expectations and the way they may influence doctoral persistence," *Journal of College Student Retention*, 11.3 (2010), 323-343; Barnes, B.J. & Austin, A.E., "The role of doctoral advisors: A look at advising from the advisor's perspective," *Innovative Higher Education* 33.1 (2009), 297-315; Council of Graduate Schools, "Ph.D. Completion and Attrition: Findings from exit surveys of Ph.D. completers" (Washington, DC: Council of Graduate Schools, 2009). Retrieved from: <http://cgsnet.org/phd-completion-and-attrition-findings-exit-surveys-phd-completers-0>; among others. In other studies, a lack of strong supervisory relationship has been demonstrated to correlate with attrition. See, for example, Golde, C.M., "The role of the department and discipline in doctoral student attrition: Lessons from four departments," *Journal of Higher Education*, 76.6 (2005), 669-700; Lovitts, B., *Leaving the Ivory Tower: The Causes and Consequences of Departure from Doctoral Study* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001).

3. Adapted from School of Graduate Studies, "Graduate Supervision Guidelines: Student Edition." University of Toronto, 2016. Retrieved from: [http://www.sgs.utoronto.ca/Documents/Graduate-Supervision-Guidelines\\_Students.pdf](http://www.sgs.utoronto.ca/Documents/Graduate-Supervision-Guidelines_Students.pdf), 3-4.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid., 13-15.
6. Chao, G.T., "Mentoring phases and outcomes" in *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 51 (1997), 15-28; Tenenbaum, H.R., Crosby, F.J., & Gliner, M.D., "Mentoring relationships in graduate school," *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 59.3 (2001), 326-341; Wunsch, M.A., "Mentoring revisited: Making an impact on individuals and institutions," *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, 57 (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1994).
7. Adapted from "The Benefits of Mentoring," Northwestern University, The Graduate School. Retrieved from: <http://www.tgs.northwestern.edu/resources-for/faculty/excellence-in-mentoring/the-benefits-of-mentoring.html>
8. Wright-Harp, W. and Cole. P., "A Mentoring Model for Enhancing Success in Graduate Education," *Contemporary Issues in Communication Sciences and Disorders* 35.1 (2008), 9-11.