

GRADUATE SUPERVISION GUIDELINES Faculty Edition



Section 8: When Problems Arise

Despite the best intentions and preparations, the path from start to finish of a successful graduate supervisory relationship can at times be difficult. Some of the most challenging issues to resolve on university campuses are graduate supervision disputes.¹ While student-supervisor interpersonal issues are perhaps the most common, issues can also arise between students and committee members as a result of the following²:

Personality factors

- Lack of contact or discussion
- Personality clashes
- Communication barriers that may be a result of age, gender, class, race differences
- Different working styles

Professional factors

- Supervisor does not feel sufficiently qualified to supervise the topic because interests are different
- Unrealistic expectations related to level of guidance from the student
- Student ignoring guidance
- Student struggling with research process

Organizational factors

- Supervisor has too many students
- Supervisor is too busy
- Isolating department
- Inadequate supports beyond the supervisor

Students are encouraged to seek out support and advice and to try to resolve supervisory issues as early as possible and directly with the supervisor, committee, or department. In recognition of the fact that problems are rarely completely one-sided and implementing workable solutions will often require compromise and flexibility, here are some strategies to help you to navigate conflict in the supervisory relationship:

- **Start earlier rather than later.** Solutions are often simpler and easier to implement **before** a problem escalates and positions harden. Start with the goal of managing a conflict with tolerance and understanding.
- **Anticipate.** Look out for emerging issues and handle them in a timely fashion with compassion and clarity. Discuss expectations about respective roles, responsibilities and important graduate skills as early as possible to prevent future possible misunderstandings.
- **Be clear.** Challenging situations can be emotionally charged, and it is important to acknowledge feelings and emotions (your own and the other person's) when 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.
- **Be open.** Different problems require different solutions and different people have different perspectives. Differences push us to think creatively and demand that we avoid assumptions, generalizations and personal attacks. The root cause of the issue may not be the same as the stated issue, so it is important to ask questions and listen to understand the "why" behind a position or demand.
- **Acknowledge the power imbalance.** There is a real power imbalance in the supervisory relationship: students may be reluctant to speak freely and worry about recriminations. Committee members or the graduate coordinator may be able to help but may also be perceived as part of the "power group." A discussion early in the supervisory relationship about appropriate ways and processes for bringing concerns or issues forward can give clarity and structure in anticipation of having to manage a difficult situation.
- **Get support.** Supervisory committee members can provide advice, mentoring, and, if necessary, intervene in order to assist in problem solving. If you are unable to resolve an issue with a student, you can consult with committee members, the graduate coordinator, the chair or director of the graduate unit, and SGS staff including the Vice-Dean of Students, as well as the Ombudsperson, [Graduate Centre for Conflict Resolution](#) and Office of Academic Progress (416.946.0424). See the [Feeling Distressed](#) web page for additional supports.
- **Understand what happens next.** The University has both informal and formal processes and pathways for resolving problems that cannot be resolved directly between a student and their supervisor. Review relevant policies and guidelines and connect with staff at SGS (including Student Services and the Vice-Dean of Students) to get more information and advice on informal intervention and formal appeal processes. The SGS website also provides links to many other support services for graduate students.

Students and supervisors share responsibility for preventing and resolving conflict. Understanding the importance of managing conflict early and effectively can set the tone for how you and the student approach future issues or disagreements.

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 supervisors to try to address their concerns as early as possible. Some of the people and offices you can connect with include:

- **[Your graduate unit.](#)** As a supervisor, you can talk to your student directly, other faculty members, supervisor committees, 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.
- **[Graduate Conflict Resolution Centre \(CRC\).](#)** Faculty can refer students to the G2G Peer Advisors and/or contact the CRC directly to discuss early and effective conflict resolution strategies and opportunities for skills development and training. All discussions remain confidential.
- **[School of Graduate Studies.](#)** Supervisors can also connect with staff at SGS, including Student Services and the Vice-Dean of Students, to get information about policies, guidelines, advice on informal intervention, and formal appeal processes. The SGS website provides a helpful starting point for many issues, including the following: Graduate funding, Health & Wellness (workshops and appointments); Accessibility Services (including known/possible disability; temporary disability/injury; chronic medical conditions that affect learning); and Information for international students.
- **[Office of the Ombudsperson.](#)** This office is independent of all administrative offices and is accountable only to the Governing Council. Matters that are brought to the Ombudsperson remain confidential and are not discussed with anyone without written consent. This office is available to provide confidential advice and assistance to faculty, students, and staff on all three campuses.

Vignette 1

Sam is developing his thesis proposal. After submitting a recent draft, his supervisor responded over email, "Your writing is unclear; please re-submit." Sam is discouraged and he doesn't feel comfortable approaching his supervisor for clarification because he thinks that that will simply reinforce his supervisor's perception of him as incompetent and inadequate. Sam wishes that he and his supervisor had had an opportunity to meet earlier to talk through expectations for the proposal and the revision process so that there was an agreed plan they could be following.

Comments and Possible Strategies: Sam's situation not only underscores the power dynamic within the supervisor-student relationship, but also demonstrates that discussions about academic expectations, supports, and processes early on in the program can be helpful in the long-term. Sam worked with the G2G Peer Advisors at the Graduate Conflict Resolution Centre to create a plan for requesting help from his supervisor, understanding that a supervisor should be providing feedback and guidance to their students throughout the duration of the program.

Vignette 2

Mina wants to submit her thesis and defend her PhD. She is reaching the end of her time limit for the PhD and is under a lot of pressure. Recently, one of her committee members told her that he would not support her thesis submission and gave her what she feels is unfair criticism about her project. She feels lost and uncertain about how to proceed.

Comments and Possible Strategies: The role of Mina's supervisor in this situation is to assist her in navigating the different expectations of the supervisory committee, as well as preparing her adequately for the written submission of her dissertation and Final Oral Defence.

Notes

1. Jacobson, R. "Managing Conflicts and Resolving Disputes Involving Students on University Campuses: The Present and the Future" (2012, Dissertation Submitted for Doctor of Philosophy, York University).
2. These factors are adapted from Wisker, Gina, *The Good Supervisor: Supervising Postgraduate and Undergraduate Research for Doctoral Theses and Dissertations*. London, U.K.: Palgrave, 2012, 107-108.