



Best Practices for Supervisors

Best practices can help ensure the student-supervisor relationship is productive and beneficial for everyone. (Content extracted from a U of Calgary presentation.)

Use Effective Communication

Effective communication can increase productivity and aid student progress in their training. Best practices in effective communication include:

- Use the Checklist of Expectations for Graduate Student and Supervisor. Meet with each student and discuss the items on the checklist soon after becoming their supervisor. The checklist outlines your roles and responsibilities as a supervisor, as well as those of your student, and helps develop a common understanding of these roles and responsibilities.
- Meet to discuss progress. The frequency of these meetings (e.g., weekly, bi-weekly, monthly) will depend on many factors, including the nature of the thesis work, the personalities of the student and supervisor, the progress being made, and how far the student has already progressed in their program. Frequent meetings help to ensure that the student is making sufficient progress and has access to the resources that are needed for success.
- Provide feedback on strengths and areas needing improvement. Your students need to be aware of areas needing improvement. By giving them constructive criticism, and providing them with the opportunities and resources they need to improve, you are helping them to become more independent and gain the skills and attributes necessary for future success.
- Be honest and thorough when completing the Annual Progress Report. The Annual Progress Report gives you a formal opportunity to evaluate your graduate student. Highlight their strengths and provide feedback on areas that need improvement. If the student progress is deficient, this should be explicitly stated to give an opportunity for the issue to be addressed, as well as to provide documentation for any needed action in the future.
- Establish mutual expectations for vacation time. Both you and your graduate student should understand that graduate students are entitled to a minimum of two weeks of vacation time.

Develop a Relationship Conducive to Research and Intellectual Growth

Your relationship with your student should help them to grow intellectually and provide them with training and resources necessary to perform high-quality research.

- Keep your relationship friendly, but professional. While there are many different types of successful student-supervisor relationships, remember that you will be evaluating your student and you may need to provide them with difficult assessments. This may be more difficult if your relationship is overly casual.
- Engage your student in intellectual and critical discussions. To help your students develop as critical and independent thinkers, engage them in intellectual discussions that give them an opportunity to test and expand these attributes.

- Show genuine excitement for your student's research topics. The enthusiasm that a student has for their research project is often influenced by their perception of how enthused their supervisor is. Consider different ways that you can, directly and indirectly, demonstrate your interest in their research topics and excitement for the progress that they are making.
- Ensure that your student has a clear understanding of policies on Academic and Non-Academic Misconduct. Do not assume that your student understand what constitutes academic or non-academic misconduct, especially if they are an international student. Misconduct definitions and penalties are in the university calendar.
- Ensure that your student has a clear understanding of policies on Intellectual Property. Seek advice from the Research Services Office at the beginning of the research training to promote early awareness of intellectual property issues.
- Ensure that your student acknowledges the contributions of others in presentations and published material, including joint authorship, if appropriate.

Provide Resources and Timely Feedback

- Provide frequent and prompt comments on thesis drafts and other written material. Since the student will be critically examined on the quality of their thesis and other materials, it is important that you are also constructively critical in the draft stage. This helps the student to become more aware of the standards that will be expected when they defend their thesis and helps the student to think more critically about their work. However, you should also ensure, whenever possible, that your comments are encouraging, helping your student to be excited about their ability to improve. Care should be taken when providing comments on thesis drafts to ensure that the final thesis is a product of the student.
- Communicate with your student well in advance regarding leaves, and the arrangements that are being made for continued supervision. Leaves that you may take during the training of your student should not hinder their progress in their degree program. Ensure that proper arrangements are made for supervision and that your student agrees with these arrangements. Your student should be made aware of any potential leaves as early as possible and be involved in making supervisory or other arrangements.
- Work with your student to develop a realistic timetable for completion. Many students lack an accurate understanding of typical times needed to complete various elements of their training, such as preparing for a candidacy exam, causing them to be underprepared and unsuccessful. Additionally, they may become discouraged when their progress is not as rapid as they anticipated when their anticipated timeline is not realistic. Setting up a timetable for completion, which includes various milestones in their graduate education, will help your student organize their time and be more prepared, as well as allow for a measure their progress against a realistic expectation.
- Help prepare your student for oral examinations. Many students have not previously been tested in an oral exam; therefore, they may be unfamiliar with the format and expectations associated with candidacy and thesis exam, which could result in them being under-prepared. Discuss with your student how these exams normally proceed, and the standard expectations of an examination committee. Most students benefit from a practice exam, which you can participate in or help arrange.

Resolve Conflicts in the Supervisor-Student Relationship

Difficulties can arise in the supervisor-student working relationship that can be detrimental to the progress of the student, as well as to the overall quality of the research environment.

- Resolve issues quickly. It is important to resolve issues as soon as possible so they do not escalate. Some supervisors tend to ignore signs of a relationship breakdown in order to avoid conflict. However, this can result in the issue becoming more complex and difficult to resolve, as well as hinder the progress of the student during the time of the breakdown.
- First, try to resolve the problem yourselves. Many problems in the supervisor-student relationship can be resolved through open, honest and respectful discussions between the student and the supervisor. Try to emphasize the student's overall goals (e.g., graduation, obtaining a faculty position, etc.), and what each of you can do to help reach those goals. Avoid being overly accusatory during these discussions. Remember that the overall goal is not to 'win' an argument, or to be recognized as being 'right', but rather to build a relationship that will be beneficial to both of you.
- If needed, seek assistance in resolving the conflict. Others may be able to help resolve differences between you and your student. The student's supervisory committee can often provide excellent guidance and can meet with you and your student together and/or separately to help resolve the conflict. If the conflict persists, guidance can next be sought from the Graduate Program Director and the Department Head or equivalent. If none of these avenues resolve the issue, please contact the College of Graduate Studies for assistance.
- Access resources on campus to resolve conflicts. There are many resources on campus that may assist you and your student in improving your working relationship. As a supervisor, you are a mental health advocate, which includes being aware of the signs that a student may need assistance and helping them access resources on and off campus.

Train Graduate Students for Future Careers

Both graduate students and supervisors can sometimes focus on the importance of the research to the extent that they neglect the development of attributes and skills that could help the student progress in their graduate program and be successful in their future careers.

- Encourage your student to attend workshops offered through the College of Graduate Studies on topics designed to directly aid students in completing their degrees, such as learning to format their thesis, as well as to learn skills that will help them in their graduate program and beyond, such as time management.
- Encourage and assist your student in applying for external funding. External funding not only reduces the strain on your resources and those of the institution, but it also improves the quality of the student's CV. You may want to consider 'topping up' the scholarship award as an incentive for students to apply for external funding.
- Provide your student with the opportunity to attend regional, national or international conferences. Attending these meetings helps students hone their networking skills, gives a more accurate understanding of the quality of work taking place in their field of study, and allows them to receive feedback on their research from experts in the field.

Continually Strive to Improve Your Supervisory Skills

Each student you supervise may require or benefit from a somewhat unique supervisor-student relationship; therefore, you must continually strive to improve your supervisory skills to ensure that you are providing the highest level of graduate supervision.

- Stay updated on the College of Graduate Studies and departmental rules and regulations. These regulations may change over time and may affect certain aspects of how you train your student.
- Take advantage of workshops and resources. The College of Graduate Studies offers workshops and resources on various aspects of graduate supervision. Other groups on campus, as well as in the academic community, also have resources that can assist you in improving your skills as a graduate supervisor.