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Western Guide to Graduate Supervision

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Western Guide to
Graduate
Supervision

The University of Western Ontario
Teaching Support Centre



Elizabeth Skarakis-Doyle
Gayle McIntyre

Teaching Support Centre Purple Guides





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Purpose

Why focus on graduate supervision?

This document comes as part of Western's response to a changing environment in graduate education. Graduate supervision is increasingly recognized as a unique and multifaceted form of pedagogy, the foundation of which can be shared in a more formal manner than has typically been practiced.

We sought the experience of Western's exemplary graduate supervisors in a series of focus groups in order to identify the qualities of effective supervisors and the manner in which this is achieved. We also surveyed faculty at different points in their careers about their experience as graduate students and as supervisors. Importantly, we conducted focus groups and surveys with graduate students here at Western in order to more completely characterize the graduate supervisory experience.

Our goal was to utilize their insights in such a way as to provide guidance to both those supervisors who are just starting out with their first student and to those who are experienced but are seeking to reflect and improve on their practice.

Background

1

SUPERVISION AND GRADUATE EDUCATION

Around the world, graduate education is undergoing a period of significant reflection and reexamination (McAlpine & Norton, 2006). Taking into account the political pressure to increase the number of doctoral degrees awarded, there is considerable interest in examining how graduate education can improve the preparation of graduate students for careers both within and outside of academia. Recent studies have shown that doctoral attrition rates in Canada range from 30 to 50 per cent depending on the discipline, and average time to completion has increased (Lovitts, 2001; Elgar, 2003). While the supervisor-student relationship is just one of several factors that influence retention and completion, research has shown that good relationships are associated with higher completion rates and faster times to completion (Girves & Wemmerus, 1988; Golde, 1996; Lovitts, 2001). Graduate student relationships with faculty are regarded by students as both the most important and most disappointing aspect of their graduate education (Hartnett & Katz, 1977). Bauer and Green (1994) showed that students who are given useful and explicit information about program expectations early in their program develop better working relationships, are more committed to their programs, and are more productive as measured by the numbers of their future publications. Supervision is not necessarily viewed as a teaching responsibility. Hence, many supervisors are

unaware that there may be more effective ways to support graduate students than the methods and practices they experienced during their own graduate education.

DISCIPLINARY DIFFERENCES

Fundamental disciplinary differences also contribute to varied practices. Supervision models vary dramatically across disciplines. In the Laboratory Sciences, a group-based apprenticeship supervision model is common. In these disciplines, supervision tends to be embedded in the research process itself and hence, students' research is closely linked to that of the supervisor and his or her scholarly productivity. Students and supervisors may be in daily contact as part of the lab group in this supervisory model. Conversely, in the Arts and Humanities, an individual apprenticeship model prevails wherein students' research is mostly independent from that of the supervisor, and thus not related to his or her scholarly productivity. In the Social Sciences, the degree of involvement may change throughout the supervisory relationship, from a situation where the supervisor steers the research, to later years where the student is the owner of the research (Hockey, 1997). Becher, Henkel and Kogan (1994) also highlight the variation within disciplines, noting that in disciplines such as economics and sociology, there is a tendency toward following the group-based model. Despite these differences, the literature suggests that several fundamental practices transcend discipline and facilitate good supervision (Vilkinas, 2002). These practices include: regular and effective communication, well-matched expectations, and mutual respect (James & Baldwin, 1999).

2

STUDENT DIVERSITY

The graduate student population is a diverse community with a wide range of experiences. According to recent data, 22 per cent of graduate students enrolled in Canadian institutions were international students (Gluszynski, Tomasz & Peters, 2005). Studies have found that cultural background is a contributing factor in conflict between graduate students and supervisors (Aspland & O'Donoghue, 1994; Adrien-Taylor, Noels & Tischler, 2007). A discussion of the strategies appropriate for effectively addressing cultural issues is beyond the scope of this document, but will be examined in an upcoming Teaching Support Centre Purple Guide on intercultural communication. Please refer to the list of additional resources in Appendix A for mentoring guides from other universities that address common issues in supervisory relationships related to gender, nationality, race, disability, sexual orientation, class, as well as differences associated with non-traditional students and those students with family responsibilities.



Methodology

Although a number of research studies have examined the supervisory relationship, we decided to use a local approach in the development of this guide based on the experiences of faculty and graduate students here at Western. The quotes throughout this publication were selected from a series of faculty and student focus groups that were held throughout the fall of 2006 and the spring of 2007. We sought to identify faculty members who were considered excellent supervisors by asking each department's graduate chair to identify those people who were regarded as especially effective supervisors of graduate students. From this list of 54 faculty members identified by the graduate chairs, the 33 supervisors who agreed to participate were split into focus groups divided along disciplinary lines according to the supervisory model common in each field. There were six sessions held for faculty, two for each supervisory model, grouped together as follows: Arts and Humanities and Faculty of Information and Media Studies were grouped together under the individual model; Science, Medical Science, and Engineering as the lab or group model; and Health Sciences and Social Sciences as a hybrid model. A seventh session focused on issues in interdisciplinary supervision and included participants from all three groups. Each session was audio-recorded and lasted approximately 90 minutes.

Faculty who agreed to participate were e-mailed ahead of time as to the general topics that were to be discussed such as characteristics of the supervisory relationship; elements of effective and ineffective supervision; recognizing excellence in supervision; and strategies for addressing ineffective supervision. Questions for the focus groups were guided by a similar project at the University of Victoria (Ricks, Kadlec, Corner & Paul, 2003).

Graduate students were recruited for the focus group sessions through an advertisement placed on the Society of Graduate Students (SOGS) website, and through poster advertisements, which were sent out by each department's Graduate Affairs Assistant. Students who had worked with their supervisor for at least one year were invited to share their perspectives on determining the attributes of effective graduate supervisors. Fifteen respondents were again divided into disciplinary groups and responded to questions about effective and ineffective practices in the supervisory relationship.

The perspectives gleaned from these focus groups, combined with our informal surveys of new and experienced supervisors, are summarized in the following sections. Due to the conversational nature of our focus groups, the quotes that follow have been edited or paraphrased for clarity and are identified only by the predominant supervisory model (Arts and Humanities, Sciences, or Social Sciences) rather than by the specific faculty of the participant.



The Supervisory Dilemma

“It’s always a balance, it’s always a balance.”

Graduate supervision is a unique and multifaceted form of pedagogy. As highlighted in the following exchange from one focus group of experienced supervisors, an important part of the role of the supervisor is to guide the transformation of the student from a consumer of knowledge to a creator of knowledge:

“[It is] the idea that you are kind of like a booster rocket, in that you are the first stage, or one of the stages that takes this person into orbit and the chances are quite good that you will drop away and their work will become the really exciting thing.”

“In an ideal world, those booster rockets would fire and get the student well launched, but if the person on ground doing the launching sees that rocket as a competitor, you may have problems. So there’s a kind of maturity that needs to exist in the supervisory relationship.”

(Exchange between supervisors from the Arts and Humanities)

As Grant (1996) observes, this transition can be fraught with challenges for both the student and the supervisor. In large part this is due to the central role that the relationship between supervisor and student plays in the graduate education experience. Personalities figure prominently in this process. The imbalance of power among the parties adds complexity and there are differences in what is at stake for each, as illustrated in the following example from the Science disciplines where a lab group-based supervision model is commonly used:

“The best piece of advice I ever got about graduate supervision came from a colleague of mine when I was just starting and setting up my lab, and I’ve never forgotten it: remind yourself that being a graduate supervisor is often a conflict of interest. You’re charged with the task of building up a research program, and making that internationally competitive and successful. In our graduate programs, the system has been set up such that the graduate students represent the major labour pool, but that’s where the conflict can exist. The student is in the training program, but they’re not necessarily charged with this

task of being able to produce the latest thing that's going to appear in 'Nature' or 'Science'. They need to learn their trade; they have to understand what it is to be a researcher. So we've got this teaching mission and that's coupled with a research mission. You've got to look at things through the student's eyes as well, not simply from your point of view because they can sometimes clash."

(Supervisor from the Sciences)

The potential for such a conflict may also be present in the individual model of supervision, common in the Arts and Humanities disciplines:

"Supervisors need to be very open to the fact that it could very well be your ideas that are being challenged by the student and that you've got to just say, well here's a new approach, here's new information, here's a younger person making their career. And in part it's always sitting on the shoulder of giants."

(Supervisor from the Arts and Humanities)

Thus, graduate supervisors strive for a balance between personalities, between their goals and self-interests and their students', and of course between their supervisory responsibilities and other academic duties. Unlike other pedagogical endeavours, in graduate research supervision the relationship between student and supervisor is not only more personal but also long-term. The student's thesis progress is often greatly impacted by the nature of the relationship, and therefore the student's future career success rests largely in the hands of the supervisor since that individual provides recommendations for scholarships, post-doctoral applications and job references. Thus, more than disciplinary expertise is required to navigate the complexities that an imbalance of power can create.

As both graduate students and supervisors from our focus groups suggest, good supervision requires both a high level of self-knowledge and an awareness of the power complexities in the relationship as well as the ability to successfully negotiate these dynamics:

"A lot of it has to do with the security or insecurity of the supervisor. I think the more secure supervisor will look at the student and say, 'here is another student, this is not my slave, this is not the person on whom I will prove myself, this is not the person with whom I am in competition.' And you need to be clear on that stuff because for example, early on in my supervisory career I met a student who I thought and I still think is as bright or brighter than I am, and is an excellent writer, and I thought yeah, you could really get into a tussle

with somebody like that. And that's a real mistake. So you have to recognize, hmm, well, you're a little insecure there. A little jealous maybe."

(Supervisor from the Arts and Humanities)

"My piece of advice would be to recognize that the power relationship exists, but by doing so remember what it's like to be a student. Remember what it's like to be a beginner again."

(Graduate Student)

"Power imbalance is okay; power abuse is not okay."

(Graduate Student)

"As human beings we have equal respect for one another but as a supervisor or supervisee, it's a radically unequal relationship. And if you lose sight of either of those things, you're in trouble."

(Supervisor from the Arts and Humanities)

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Both students and supervisors are aware that there is an inevitable power imbalance in the supervisory relationship, but they also acknowledge that good communication and clear expectations can mediate these complexities. Good communication offers a sound foundation for navigating not only these interpersonal aspects but all other facets of the supervisory experience as well.

GOOD COMMUNICATION MEANS BEING CLEAR ABOUT EXPECTATIONS

A key element of successful graduate supervision is initiating clear and frequent communication early between the supervisor and the graduate student in which expectations for roles and responsibilities are clearly established and can evolve as needed. Several studies identify a lack of communication leading to mismatched expectations is the number one reason the graduate supervision experience gets derailed (James & Baldwin, 1999; Rackham School of Graduate Studies, 2006). Supervisors from a range of disciplines emphasize this point:



“Whenever I have encountered problems, it’s usually that either I have not been clear enough, or there’s been some misunderstanding for whatever reason, but I really try more and more with students to be clear about expectations.”

(Supervisor from the Arts and Humanities)

“I know that all of the problems that arise from students and their supervisors come from this relationship or partnership breaking down and the expectations aren’t understood.”

(Supervisor from the Sciences)

James and Baldwin (1999) suggest that the following (fig. 4.1) are among those areas in which expectations should be clarified and negotiated if necessary and appropriate:



Fig. 4.1

Areas in which expectations should be clarified and negotiated

- The extent and nature of direction from the supervisor
- The degree of independence of the student
- Frequency, preparation for and manner in which consultation and feedback will be given
- Written work – frequency of submission, drafts, progress reports
- The role of the supervisor in editing work
- The manner in which ideological or opinion differences will be handled

Because of the student’s vulnerability in the relationship, the supervisor should initiate the conversation about expectations. Indeed, in some disciplines a student would be regarded as inappropriate if he or she initiated the dialogue about what is expected. Therefore, supervisors need to be aware that the conversation is critical and that the topic should be broached early in the student’s graduate education.

Reflecting upon expectations and exploring those of the graduate student will assist the supervisor in creating the communication patterns necessary for successful supervision. The appendices to this guide contain self-reflection questions to help the supervisor clarify expectations for the experience. The Role Perception Rating Scale (see Appendix B) developed by Moses (1985) can be used to explore how well the expectations of the supervisor and graduate student match (or are mismatched) and identify topic areas that may need to be demystified and clarified for the student, as well as those areas that the supervisor feels may appropriately be negotiated. Making it an early priority to communicate expectations clearly and regularly is essential to a successful supervisory experience, but taking the time to revisit these expectations is particularly useful as they may evolve as the student moves toward the goal of independence and completion of the degree. Appendix C contains a checklist to assist in planning initial meetings with graduate students and a guide to the topics that should be communicated regarding expectations. Graduate students share the responsibility to communicate their needs clearly and should confirm their understanding of what is expected of them, particularly as those expectations evolve.

Faculty members in our focus groups also shared some helpful suggestions for developing successful communication of expectations. (fig. 4.2)

Fig. 4.2

Advice from experienced supervisors

“When a graduate student first comes in, from us they get two things. The first is called the Graduate Student Handbook, which is a departmental book that has evolved over the years and every time we have a graduate student problem, the solution to that problem goes into the book. In addition, I give them a one-page document with about 10 points on it stating my policies on graduate students: this is my responsibility, this is your responsibility, these are my expectations, this is what you get if you’re at a certain point or a certain level.”

“I sort of assume they have a certain amount of basic knowledge, but then once again, it’s always a matter of kind of reminding them about things and clarifying things along the way.”

“I’ll put [the expectations] down on paper. I think sometimes it’s not enough just to talk. Sometimes the verbal discussion is good, but there are cases where you have to go to that written documentation as well for feedback.”

Some supervisors employ supervisory agreements, which are “living documents” that reflect the evolving nature of the supervisory relationship as the student progresses through their graduate education. They provide an opportunity to clarify and document expectations from the very beginning of the relationship, and then are modified as those expectations change with the student’s development. Topics typically covered in such agreements include: frequency and preparation for meetings, timelines, the type and frequency of feedback provided on written work, authorship and intellectual property, and confidentiality. Supervisory agreements provide a useful reference point for discussion particularly when problems begin to arise and as a reminder of previous discussions, although they are not legally binding documents. A generic example of a supervisor agreement is provided in Appendix D that can be modified to fit individual needs or specific supervisory contexts. Although such agreements have been subject to a range of criticism from being too inflexible to being too facile, typically they are quite useful in communicating a mutual understanding of expectations.

Regardless of the manner in which one approaches conveying expectations, it is critical that it be done clearly and with some regularity. Why? As both supervisors and students in our focus groups shared, graduate school is a unique educational experience and students are mostly unaware of the extent to which it is different from the undergraduate experience.

DEMYSTIFYING THE GRADUATE EXPERIENCE

“I think most grad students don’t understand. Undergrads don’t understand what grad school is about so when they come into grad school it’s a closed system. And you are kind of the only person who is open. So I think of it as wandering around in the dark, a lot of being in the dark for the student. And I think if you see that then you work to explain just how the system works. Demystifying it.”

(Supervisor from the Arts and Humanities)

“What I try to do when they are deciding whether they’re going to go to grad school is try to give them some idea of what I think the graduate school experience will be like and so you talk about the roller coaster ride that research projects will bring them.”

(Supervisor from the Sciences)

“Entering into a Master’s program you don’t know the questions to ask until maybe a year down the road. I didn’t know what the thesis was or just the process of it. Let the student know answers to questions that will come up six months from then.”

(Graduate Student)

“I think that it is really important just to know the process.”

(Graduate Student)

While juggling the multiple demands of academic life, it is easy for faculty to overlook new graduate students’ lack of knowledge about the experience they are embarking upon. Indeed, students also bear the responsibility for seeking out the information they need. The problem, as described by our focus group participants, is that they often do not know what questions to ask or what information they should seek. Terminology pertaining to the preparation of a thesis or preliminary examinations may be new to the student. Thus, openness to and perhaps even anticipation of the most basic questions (e.g., How do I apply for funding? Why is it important for me to apply for funding?) are fundamental to guiding graduate students, particularly in the early stages of their graduate experience. Departments, programs or Graduate Affairs Assistants will often provide orientations for new graduate students that focus on policies and procedures, but supervisors should also be aware of and have easy access to the necessary policy documents.

Additionally, there are aspects of the graduate education experience that only a supervisor can communicate. These are generally the unwritten or implicit aspects that are keys to success in the field. A common observation from our faculty focus groups was that it is important to inform graduate students about how advisory committees operate because they are new and unique to graduate education, and would not be part of the prior educational experience of the student.

Clearly articulated expectations and regular communication are recognized as hallmarks of good supervisory practices in the research literature and, as we expected, have emerged as foundational characteristics of effective supervision across our disciplinary focus groups. As such, they also cut across the other major themes emerging from our focus group discussions. Flowing from these foundations, our participants identified specific characteristics of effective supervision which we have organized into four sections: (1) flexibility, (2) availability, (3) respect, and (4) being a mentor. The subsequent sections of this guide are based upon these essential characteristics, but the thematic threads of clear expectations and good communication as discussed above run throughout each aspect of the supervisory endeavour.





Figure 4.3 lists some suggestions from our faculty focus groups and common tips derived from the graduate supervision literature on how to demystify this experience for students.

Fig. 4.3

Advice from experienced supervisors

“There are organizational issues with advisory committees and the like, and prospectus presentations. I think that laying that out first is very, very important.”

“One of the things that it’s important to try to get clear on the outset is the role of the other committee members. Because it varies from case to case, and who wants to see every draft, and who doesn’t want to see the thing until it is done and who is going to, you know, really be the expert on this or the other thing. Just make sure nobody feels betrayed at the end of the day, or feels that there is a misunderstanding.”

- Adjust the level of your conversation to that of the student and explain terms such as ‘comprehensive exams’, or ‘manuscript style thesis’ as necessary.
- Discuss how colleagues in your field determine ‘quality work’ both formally and informally.
- Alert students early to potential obstacles and pitfalls that could have negative consequences for funding or timely progression.

Characteristics of Effective Supervision

“I came up with four adjectives [about effective supervision]: one was clear, one was humane, one was adaptable and one was flexible. Perhaps the first is the most important. In my experience with graduate students, clarity of expectations is enormously important on both sides, on the side of the student and on the side of the supervisor. I put humane, or we could even talk about a kind of shared humanity here, because certainly in the Arts and Humanities one has to be

prepared to cope with various sorts of crises in the graduate student population. At least again that's been my experience, sometimes quite serious so one has to be aware that many graduate students feel that they are under a lot of stress. And so on one level you have to push a little bit but on the other hand you have to know when to stop pushing too hard. Adaptability, because every individual student is different and you can't do the same thing with each one. You have to get to know the individual student. You also need to know what the student's goals are because not everyone does a PhD for the same reason. Some are already quite professional coming into a program and clearly want to have your job when they are finished and others are doing it for the sake of doing it. So you need to be adaptable in the sense of knowing the students and not doing the same thing with each one. That also comes under the heading of flexibility."

(Supervisor from the Arts and Humanities)

In many ways the reflection of this colleague captures several of the predominant themes on effective graduate supervision from all of our focus groups. As reviewed earlier, clear communication of expectations is foremost. The "shared humanity" that she describes speaks to the essential roles of trust and respect in a successful relationship as well as to the need for accessibility. Being able to adapt to the substantial differences among students comes under the heading of flexibility. Both students and supervisors agree that supervising a graduate student is not a matter of applying the same template over and over again. Although the supervisor quoted above does not specifically name these characteristics as "mentoring", taken together they clearly form a solid foundation for good mentorship.

These themes of *flexibility, availability, trust* and *respect*, and *mentoring* emerged as fundamental characteristics of effective graduate supervision in our focus groups and we elaborate on these characteristics in the following sections using the insights of experienced supervisors and graduate students.

FLEXIBILITY

"It's not a one-size-fits-all proposition."

"I think every student is different. It means you can't make a template for supervision. Every student is going to be different and work with the individual student. You have to find out what they can do, what they can't do, how they are comfortable."

(Supervisor from the Arts and Humanities)

“One more fundamental that comes to mind...that each student is different, you cannot have developed one plan and treat each student the same.”

(Supervisor from the Sciences)

“There needs to be a flexibility in a supervisor’s managing style of the student so that the supervisor has a better fit with how the student works and then the student can learn to work with the supervisor’s style as well.”

(Graduate Student)

“They need to be able to mold their supervisory model depending on the student...if you are working with people who are on very different timelines you can’t apply the same model to all of them. I think that some supervisors get in a rut when they find something that worked with a couple of students and then just sort of go through the same steps over and over – but all those contexts change.”

(Graduate Student)

As both our experienced faculty supervisors and graduate students describe, the effective supervisor is one who can identify students’ learning styles, their strengths and weaknesses, while employing a repertoire of skills for working effectively within this range of differences. The importance of this attention to individual differences between students is commonly cited in the literature on graduate supervision:

Research students are highly individual. They have different preferences, expectations of the relationship, and approaches to study, some of which may be related to their cultural background. Good supervisors recognize and value this diversity and adjust their own practices accordingly.

(James & Baldwin, 1999)

How does the busy faculty member determine and maintain an individualized approach in their supervision of each graduate student? (fig. 5.1)

Fig. 5.1

Advice from experienced supervisors

- Get the student to understand how it is they actually work and how it is they actually learn. They could be verbal, textual learners, or maybe kinesthetic learners. Probing the learning styles and modalities requires excellent communication skills but helps to discover who your student is.
- Have kinesthetic learners write a storyboard and start filling it in. It allows them to proceed with the actual construction and research in the way that is most beneficial to them, and then the outcome can still look like any other piece of work that anybody sees.

14

It is also important to monitor students' emotional states as well as academic progress and respond accordingly with more or less direction. This, as our colleagues note, may require more frequent meetings for a period of time, or perhaps written feedback:

"Every student is different and some students will require the weekly meeting just to keep them on track. Other students – they'll bring in the manuscript when it's ready!"

(Supervisor from the Sciences)

"You should respond to the individual needs of the student. So, be flexible. If one student is getting really anxious, you may have to give them a little more direction and hands on help for a while and then back off when they're going. It's a matter of judging their needs at a given time."

(Supervisor from the Social Sciences)



"You've got to measure the frustration level of the student and sometimes call a time out. For example, say, 'well here's the way I think we should proceed,' and depending on the number of those, where you've started giving the answer, that's maybe when you want to go to a paper copy to say, "you know, over the last few months this is what I've seen, here's where we want to go and so let's look at these things over the next period of time'."

(Supervisor from the Social Sciences)

Recognizing and reacting to student variability is one aspect of effective supervision. But because graduate student supervision is a two-way relationship, faculty should also be aware of their supervisory style and how well it matches that of each student:

"We talked a lot about knowing the student's strengths and weaknesses, but I think a lot of it depends on knowing yourself and your own supervisory style, and realizing you're not the best supervisor for every student. So for example, in my department I do a fair bit of mothering, but I'm not going to supervise any student who wants me to mother him, because you can't mix those two relationships. And I have friendships with a lot of grad students, but I can't supervise somebody who thinks this is going to be a relationship of equals, because I'm going to be the one who is criticizing. Of course as human beings we are equal but it's not a relationship of pal to pal. And so I know that I'm not a very good supervisor for some people, but for other people I'm terrific. So it means knowing your own style and what it's good for."

(Supervisor from the Arts and Humanities)

Flexibility means having a range of strategies to apply when supervising a graduate student. It does not mean one can or should fundamentally change who they are as a supervisor. It is highly likely that one person cannot meet all the needs a student might have and, as noted in the following section on mentoring, a student should have multiple mentors. However, this still requires that the primary supervisor recognizes this need and knows where to send the student to get what he or she cannot provide:

"You may need to say to your student, 'you're not original in your research' or 'you're not writing well,' then you need to know where the support mechanisms are to get your student there. For example, 'I want you to go to the writing skills clinic.' Or, if it's a methodological



problem, what are the courses within the program that will help, and if it's public speaking, then we need to work on all of these things that are appropriate for Master's and PhD work."

(Supervisor from the Social Sciences)

For resources available at Western see the Student Development Services web page for graduate students at www.sds.uwo.ca/learning/index.html?grad

AVAILABILITY

"Face time is important"

In a survey we conducted of newly hired faculty members, we asked what aspects of supervision they had received that they found helpful and what they did not find helpful. Following closely behind their supervisor's personal style was availability: 43 per cent of respondents stated the availability of their supervisor was among the most helpful aspects of their graduate experience and 35 per cent said that lack of availability was the least helpful. In a different survey of graduate supervisors at Western, "seasoned" faculty members identified lack of time and not meeting with students as often as they felt they should as among their biggest challenges in graduate supervision. They nonetheless also state they are most successful when they have frequent meetings and stay in touch with their students.

The prominent focus on availability that Western's own faculty have stated is also found in other Best Practice documents. For examples, please see the University of Washington guide How to Mentor Graduate Students (www.grad.washington.edu/mentoring) and the University of Melbourne's Eleven Practices of Effective Postgraduate Supervision (www.cshe.unimelb.edu.au/pdfs/11practices.pdf), which emphasize the nature of the commitment required:

"Supervision is an intense form of teaching in a much broader sense than just information transfer. The sustained complexity of supervision involves much time and energy. Good supervisors are aware of this and of the profound commitment to every student they agree to supervise."

(James & Baldwin, 1999)

Although supervisors from our focus groups have told us time management is always a challenge, both graduate students and faculty consider availability as key to success. They define availability as not only making certain that the supervisor makes time for the student, but also ensuring they are approachable:

"I'm really pretty open about [conveying availability] like saying, 'I'm available to you as a graduate student in our program at anytime' [...] So, availability, openness, allowing them to be transgressive."

(Supervisor from the Arts and Humanities)

"I think the first person they should be able to go to is the supervisor. I tell the students if there's any problems, if you don't feel satisfied with the supervision I'm giving you, let me know, and I'll listen and I'll be open, and we'll try to work somehow. Maybe in some cases, it's just not going to work out. But, I think the advisor should be the first person they can go to rather than immediately going off and talking to somebody else about problems."

(Supervisor from the Social Sciences)

"I think availability is very key. I've had the fortunate experience of having professors who are often on campus, often leave their doors open and are around the corner and near where I work, so I can just pop in for quick questions and then have longer formal meetings every once in a while. But my best friend who did her Master's here worked in a lab that wasn't in close proximity to her advisor's office and rarely had face-to-face meetings with him. He didn't respond to a lot of her e-mail, and she had trouble getting him over the phone and he cancelled meetings that she booked through his secretary. It's just very distant, very unavailable."

(Graduate Student)

Among the suggestions that our faculty colleagues provide on how to achieve availability, regular meetings and goal setting are the most prominent. (see fig. 5.2)

Given the many time demands on supervisors and the necessity to use face-to-face time efficiently, we have included a worksheet (Appendix C) for planning meetings with graduate students. The suggestions are helpful not only for the supervisor in organizing the meeting but also for guiding the student's participation and developing shared responsibility. For example, the tone for all meetings can be set initially by having students bring a list of their goals and achievements relevant to their purpose for seeking a graduate education. These serve as a basis for developing appropriate and realistic expectations. As the regular meetings described above are instituted, the supervisor can suggest that students bring an agenda, specifying the issues they need guidance on and also suggest that the student keep a log of those discussions and the outcomes.

Fig. 5.2

Advice from experienced supervisors

“Something basic is that regular meetings work. One needs to have regular meetings, even to discuss why there’s no product so far.”

“I like to book regular meetings because it’s easy to cancel them, and that’s fine. There are times when you don’t need to see them for a month because they are busy writing. But there might be times if it’s really at a critical point that they might need just some discussion.”

“Face-time is really important. If things aren’t going well then certainly making sure that you see their face and setting little goals is helpful. For example, ‘I wanted 20 pages but how about just giving me three?’ Or even if it’s a very modest goal that you set, you keep them going.”

“When I meet students for the first time I tell them ‘I expect that we will meet at least twice a month on a regular basis and that you will give me some written material before each one.’ It’s just a matter of getting it down on paper.”



Although there is consensus that spending time with graduate students is critical, as this student points out, the quality of the time spent is more important than the quantity:

“My supervisor would make time to meet for an hour every week, and I would send him things ahead of time, schedules and outlines - he never kept a folder of any of it, it was like we started from scratch - every time we met he wouldn’t remember. He had eight grad students and he had no clue what each of us was doing, but he made sure he met with us every week, so - he made the time but it was a waste, it was useless!”

(Graduate Student)

While this section has focused primarily on availability and the importance of making enough time for students, the next section focuses on the approachability aspect.

TRUST AND RESPECT

“What’s at the basis of this is trust, respect and mutual confidence”

“In a word, trust. Trust is the starting point for everything if there is no trust on both sides there is not a good supervisory relationship.”

(Supervisor from the Arts and Humanities)

Perhaps the most fundamental insight shared during our focus groups had to do with the interpersonal aspects of the successful supervisory relationship. The essential nature of mutual trust and respect were repeatedly mentioned by our colleagues and students, as was the need for a supportive relationship. James and Baldwin (1999) admonish that “to ignore personalities is to court disaster,” given the sustained nature of the partnership and that both the supervisor and student need to feel comfortable that there is “an appropriate degree of trust and mutual respect” (p. 6).



Fig. 5.3

Best Practices guides from graduate schools at other universities specifically note the fundamental importance of trust and respect:

“In general, good mentoring in all its forms involves treating students respectfully and fairly...”

(University of California at Berkeley, 2006)

“The effective supervisor is patient, open, flexible and honest, as well as accommodating, committed and respectful of students.”

(Ricks, Kadlec, Corner & Paul, 2003)

In an effective supervisory relationship, both partners work to build an environment of mutual trust and respect. This in turn leads to a comfortable working relationship. However, given the power imbalance, it is the supervisor who must take the lead and set this tone from the very beginning:

“The student has to have a sense that you’re there to support them, to help them out, and vice versa, that they’re going to listen and interact with them comfortably, because it’s a scary process for students.”

(Supervisor from the Social Sciences)

“I think it’s important, for me...to have a supervisor that even when he or she provides critiques, is still supportive. So, it’s not just picking you apart and saying this is wrong and you have to do better...but also outline positive things you do.”

(Graduate Student)

Forthright feedback given constructively in a supportive context is critical for the growth of the graduate student, as is praise when earned. Our own Western students agree and offer us this suggestion for achieving an encouraging environment with supportive balance:

“If supervisors can take a stance of authority remembering what it feels like to be a student, to feel intimidated, to feel nervous about expressing something that may not come across the way an advisor (would), that will ultimately impact the relationship. It will bring a gentleness to a relationship that will always have a power differential.”

(Graduate Student)

In a relationship built on trust, it is not uncommon that the student will share personal issues both academic and non-academic in nature. Being approachable and open to such discussion can be very helpful to the student in working through difficult issues. This openness can be important for the supervisor as well, as it can often explain why progress has been delayed and helps to facilitate getting the student back on track:

“You do have to stay alert to potential problems with students who are not comfortable working in solitude. It’s a very lonely thing, writing a thesis, or it can be a lonely thing and that doesn’t suit all people. You have to stay alert to signs of depression – depression is a serious problem in the student body at large and a particularly serious problem among graduate students so you have to watch out for the signs.”

(Supervisor from the Arts and Humanities)

The effective supervisor is a good listener and provides a safe environment for discussing a breadth of issues the graduate student faces, but this does not mean they have the expertise to deal with all the problems the student may present. The effective supervisor recognizes his or her own limitations but is knowledgeable as to where the student can go for appropriate assistance. A list of campus resources can be found in the appendix.

Being open and approachable can go a long way toward building a successful relationship. Yet, as our colleague points out, a balance must be struck:

"I've heard it expressed very well, you want to be friendly with the students but not their friends. [It should be] a collegial partnership."

(Supervisor from the Sciences)

As Western's document "Principles and Guidelines Regarding Graduate Student Supervision" notes, however supportive a relationship becomes it should always be primarily academic and professional. How does one achieve a trusting and supportive relationship with their graduate student? (fig 5.4)

Fig. 5.4

Advice from experienced supervisors

" I think it has to do with, don't put the student down in public, or really ever. Teach - don't lecture, explain - don't chastise"

" I think it's very important to try and keep students in contact with as many people, not just yourself the supervisor, but as many other people as possible with similar interests. Other graduate students, colleagues, make sure that they are participating in conferences, stuff like that..."

" In my experience graduate students complete faster when they're teaching. They've got a routine, they've got to get out of bed, come to school."

" If one can't be supportive then one should be transparent about why that's the case."

Many more suggestions for achieving this aspect of effective supervision and for ensuring an appropriate balance of personal and professional boundaries are available in the manuals and handbooks listed in the additional resources (see Appendix A).

Respect and trust can be demonstrated in many ways. Our colleagues from the sciences provide excellent suggestions on how to achieve this in the laboratory: (fig. 5.5)

Fig. 5.5

“As they progress through their studies, I give them more and more responsibility within the group. That’s one way of making them grow in their leadership.”

“Everybody gets a chance to be the boss, especially during the summer. For example, I have them take turns chairing a meeting or running the lab meetings, which we have every week, so that everybody gets a chance. They can take initiative; you can really see the enthusiasm and it really makes a difference to them.”

“I give my postdocs a little budget – it’s small but I tell them ‘this is like your money, spend it as you will.’ And I give them an undergraduate to supervise.”

“We have a large number of fourth-year students doing theses within the department and it is not uncommon for us to take a PhD student and put them on a committee as an advisor. We also give them a chance to do guest lecturing in our undergraduate courses and they usually like to do four lectures because that gives them just enough to get a student evaluation.”



MENTORING

“Good supervisors are conscious of their mentoring role.”

Mentorship is a relationship between a student and one or more faculty members with the goal of developing the student personally, scholarly and professionally. Throughout our focus groups, faculty members described many specific characteristics of effective supervisors, but taken together, many of these characteristics describe a mentor. A mentor serves many functions, monitoring the student’s satisfactory progress through the steps needed to achieve a graduate degree, while focusing on the human relationships, commitments, and resources that help graduate students find success and fulfillment in their academic and professional pursuits. Appendix E is a worksheet to assist in developing expectations for mentoring.

Graduate students from our focus groups describe what they are seeking from the experience:

"I think it's important for a supervisor to be able to take the perspective of his or her student, because the thesis isn't the only thing that's happening. You want to do other research, you have TA responsibilities, you may want to present at a conference, how you go about submitting an abstract or what conferences you should be looking into, collaborating with other faculty, other faculty doing stuff similar to you. I think your advisor should be talking to you about all of these things - it's not just the thesis - it's (not) the only thing that's going on."

"Yeah, more a mentoring kind of role."

"And supporting you in becoming more well-rounded."

(Exchange from Graduate Student Focus Group)



Fig. 5.6

Mentoring enables faculty members to...

- Interact with the energy and curiosity of fresh minds
- Keep current in new frontiers of the discipline
- Develop potential new collaborators
- Prepare the next generation
- Enjoy the personal and professional satisfaction of this type of relationship

Mentoring enables a student to...

- Acquire a body of knowledge and skills
- Develop networking and collaboration skills
- Understand how the discipline operates – overtly and covertly
- Deal confidently with intellectual challenges
- Become a member of the community of scholars, understanding their role in the greater educational context

Both faculty members and students can benefit from the richer relationship embodied in mentorship. A list (see fig. 5.6) from the University of Washington's *How to Mentor Graduate Students* (2005) describes the advantages.

The outcome when a faculty member and student engage in a mentoring relationship includes greater scholarly and research productivity, shorter times to completion and overall better performance in graduate school and ultimately, greater professional success whether within or outside academia. Indeed, "Nature's guide for mentors" notes that "having a good mentor early in your career can mean the difference between success and failure in any field" (Lee, Dennis, & Campbell, 2007).

Mentoring is a multidimensional endeavour, but the core activities involved in acting as a good mentor include (fig. 5.7):

Fig. 5.7

- Helping students to become a contributing member of your field, understanding how your discipline has evolved, its questions of concern and its impact on the world at large
- Guiding development of written and oral communication skills, collaborative problem solving (in the sciences) and leadership abilities
- Guiding the student's long-term career development and link to professional opportunities outside of their immediate department

As several experienced supervisors noted, mentoring does not stop with the successful defense of the thesis:

"There's a whole mentoring thing that goes on [between graduate student and supervisor]. And I didn't realize how long it went on until I was applying for a second job."

(Supervisor from the Arts and Humanities)

"I find much of the supervisory relationship happens after the defense: you are the main person getting their career launched."

(Supervisor from the Arts and Humanities)

A supervisor's disciplinary expertise, interpersonal style and manner of enabling learning all determine the type of mentoring one can provide, and thus, it is unlikely that one person can fulfill all the roles for each student they supervise. In previous sections, our colleagues have described the importance of knowing one's own style. If the supervisor is aware of what he or she does well and not so well, and has a clear vision of what mentorship means to them, then it follows that mentorship should be viewed as an informal team effort. That is, a graduate student should consult multiple mentors so that all the dimensions of a successful graduate experience can be successfully addressed.

Additional suggestions on how to become an effective mentor are available in the resources listed in Appendix A. However, they can be summarized briefly in the following key points (fig. 5.8):

Fig. 5.8

- Don't assume students know what you want them to do – communicate your expectations
- Respect different cultures and lifestyles, particularly in traditionally male-dominated fields
- Lead by example
- Put yourself in your students' shoes
- Remember the most important lessons are not taught in any class or textbook
- Take an interest in your student as a person
- Remember that a good mentor teaches self-confidence – a bad mentor strips self-confidence
- Encourage multiple mentors

Conclusion

Throughout our focus group discussions, supervisors commonly described the practice of supervising a graduate student as both challenging and deeply rewarding:

“An analogy that I use is that being a supervisor is like flying a kite. You can let out a lot of line and see them go really high and far, but also still having that line so you can reel them in, if necessary.”

(Supervisor from the Social Sciences)

Starting with clearly articulated expectations and ensuring that the lines of communication remain open throughout the relationship is a sound basis for navigating all of the facets of the supervisory experience. Being flexible, available, and having trust and respect for your graduate student, along with cultivating good mentorship practices will contribute to a rewarding experience for both supervisors and graduate students, and enhance the quality of education at Western.

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Appendix A

Additional Resources

WESTERN LINKS

Teaching Support Centre Resource Page (with a listing of graduate supervision workshops)
www.uwo.ca/tsc/gradsupervision.html

Principles and Guidelines Regarding Graduate Supervision
www.grad.uwo.ca/current_students/supervising_guidelines.htm

Resources for Graduate Students (Student Development Services)
www.sds.uwo.ca/learning/index.html?grad

Relations with Supervisors – A Guide for Graduate Students (Office of the Ombudsperson)
www.uwo.ca/ombuds/graduate/relations.html

ONLINE GUIDES TO GRADUATE SUPERVISION

Mentoring: How to Mentor Graduate Students - A Guide for Faculty
University of Washington
www.grad.washington.edu/mentoring/

Eleven Practices of Effective Postgraduate Supervisors
University of Melbourne
www.cshe.unimelb.edu.au/downloads/11practices.pdf

Handbook of Graduate Supervision
University of British Columbia
www.grad.ubc.ca/students/supervision/

Ideas for Supervising Postgraduate Research Students
Centre for the Enhancement of Learning, Teaching and Scholarship,
University of Canberra, Australia
www.canberra.edu.au/celts/resources/research-supervision

Adviser, Teacher, Role Model, Friend: On Being a Mentor to Students in
Science and Engineering
National Academy of Sciences, National Academy of Engineering, Institute of Medicine
www.nap.edu/readingroom/books/mentor/index.html

BOOKS

Supervising the Doctorate: A guide to success. 2nd edition (2005) by Sara Delamont, Paul Atkinson, and Odette Parry. Society for Research into Higher Education.

The Good Supervisor: Supervising Postgraduate and Undergraduate Research for Doctoral Theses and Dissertations (2005) by Gina Wisker.

How to get a PhD: a handbook for students and their supervisors, 3rd Edition (2000), by Estelle M. Phillips and Derek S. Pugh.

Supervising Postgraduates from Non-English Speaking Backgrounds (1999), edited by Yoni Ryan, Ortrun Zuber-Skerritt.

Appendix B

Role Perception Rating Scale for Students and Supervisors

Read each pair of statements listed on this sheet. Each expresses a standpoint supervisors may take. You may not agree fully with either of the statements. Therefore, please estimate your position and mark it on the scale. For example, if you believe very strongly that supervisors should select the research topic you would circle (1) beside the first statement.

TOPIC/COURSE OF STUDY		
It is the supervisor's responsibility to select a research topic	1 2 3 4 5	The student is responsible for selecting his/her own research topic
It is up to the supervisor to decide which theoretical framework or methodology is most appropriate	1 2 3 4 5	Students should decide which theoretical framework or methodology to use
The supervisor should direct the student in the development of an appropriate program of research and study	1 2 3 4 5	The student should be mainly responsible for developing his/her program of research and study
CONTACT/INVOLVEMENT		
Faculty-student relationships are purely professional and personal matters should not intrude	1 2 3 4 5	Close personal relationships are essential for successful supervision
The supervisor should insist on regular meetings with the student	1 2 3 4 5	It is up to the student to decide when he/she wants meetings with the supervisor
The supervisor should know what the student is working on at all times	1 2 3 4 5	The student should work independently without having to account for how they spend their time
The supervisor should terminate supervision if he/she thinks the project is beyond the student	1 2 3 4 5	The supervisor should support the student right through until the thesis has been submitted, regardless of his/her opinion of the work
THE THESIS		
The supervisor should insist on seeing drafts of every section of the thesis in order to review them	1 2 3 4 5	Students should submit drafts of work only when they want constructive criticism from the supervisor
The supervisor should assist in the writing of the thesis if the student has difficulties	1 2 3 4 5	The writing of the thesis should only ever be the student's own work and the supervisor should be very wary of contributing too much to the thesis
The supervisor should ensure that the thesis is finished not much later than the minimum period	1 2 3 4 5	As long as the student works steadily he/she can take as long as necessary to finish the work
The supervisor has direct responsibility for the standard of the thesis	1 2 3 4 5	The supervisor advises only and leaves all decisions concerning content, format and standards to the student

Adapted from: Edwards H., Aspland, T., O'Leary, J., Ryan, Y., Southey, G., & Timms, P. (1995). Tracking postgraduate supervision. Brisbane: Academic Staff Development Unit, Queensland University of Technology, Australia. Ryan, Y., & Whittle, J. (1995). Adapted original Moses schema. Paper presented at the Third Conference on Postgraduate Supervision, Gold Coast, Australia. Moses, I. (1985). Supervising Postgraduates. Campbelltown: HERDSA Inc. Reprinted with permission.

Appendix C

Checklist for planning first meetings with your graduate student

Use this checklist to plan initial meetings with your graduate students in light of what you hope to achieve over the long term.

- ___ Arrange first meeting with a prospective graduate student.
- ___ Explain the goals for meetings and ask how confidentiality should be handled.
- ___ Discuss what each of you perceives as the boundaries of the supervisory relationship.
- ___ Review the graduate student's current experience and qualifications.
- ___ Discuss and record the graduate student's immediate and long-term goals, explore useful professional development experiences in view of these goals. Record these on a professional development plan. Discuss strategies and target dates.
- ___ Discuss and record any issues that may affect the supervisory relationship such as time, financial constraints, lack of confidence, or newness to the role, etc.
- ___ Arrange a meeting schedule with your graduate student. Record topics discussed and feedback given at each meeting. Ensure that meeting records are kept confidential and in a safe place.

30

Discuss the following activities that can form part of your supervisory relationship:

- Giving advice on strategies for improving teaching
 - Organizing observation(s) of teaching and providing constructive feedback
 - Organizing a session of work shadowing
 - Consulting on issues or concerns the graduate student has with colleagues in study or research groups
 - Providing feedback from other sources (students, faculty, administrators, and other mentors in or outside the university)
-
- ___ Create an action plan that reflects different professional development needs at different stages of the student's graduate program.
 - ___ Encourage your graduate student to reflect regularly on his or her goals, achievements, and areas for improvement. Ask the student to compose a brief reflection essay (e.g., 1/2 page) prior to each meeting.
 - ___ Amend the action plan as needed by focusing on your developing needs.

Appendix D

Sample Agreement for Supervision/ Mentorship

Consider using this agreement, or another one that you and your supervisor or mentor create together, if you believe the mentoring relationship will be strengthened by formalizing a mutual agreement of roles, responsibilities, and expectations.

We are voluntarily entering into a mentoring relationship from which we both expect to benefit. We want this to be a rich, rewarding experience with most of our time together spent in professional development activities. To this end, we have mutually agreed upon the terms and conditions of our relationship as outlined in this agreement.

OBJECTIVES

We hope to achieve:

To accomplish this we will:

CONFIDENTIALITY

Any sensitive issues that we discuss will be held in confidence. Issues that are off-limits in this relationship include:

FREQUENCY OF MEETINGS

We will attempt to meet at least _____ time(s) each month. If we cannot attend a scheduled meeting, we agree to notify one another in advance.

DURATION

We have determined that our mentoring relationship will continue as long as we both feel comfortable or until:

NO-FAULT TERMINATION

We are committed to open and honest communication in our relationship. We will discuss and attempt to resolve any conflicts as they arise. If, however, one of us needs to terminate the relationship for any reason, we agree to abide by one another's decision.

Mentor

Date

Mentee

Date

Adapted from: The Graduate School, University of Washington (2005) How to Obtain the Mentoring You Need, available at www.grad.washington.edu/mentoring and from Brainard, S.G., Harkus, D.A., and George, M.R. (1998), A Curriculum for training mentors and mentees: Guide for administrators. Seattle, WA: Women in Engineering Initiative, WEPAN Western Regional Center, University of Washington. Reprinted with permission.

Appendix E

Expectations Worksheet for Mentors/ Graduate Supervisors

Use this worksheet to develop an understanding of what you expect to gain from your mentoring relationships. By clarifying your own expectations, you will be able to communicate and work more effectively with your students. Add items you deem important.

The reasons I want to be a mentor are to:

- Encourage and support a graduate student in my field
- Establish close, professional relationships
- Challenge myself to achieve new goals and explore alternatives
- Pass on knowledge
- Create a network of talented people
- Other _____

I hope that my mentee and I will:

- Tour my workplace, classroom, center, or lab
- Go to formal mentoring events together
- Meet over coffee or meals
- Go to educational events such as lectures, conferences, talks, or other university events together
- Go to local, regional, and national professional meetings together
- Other _____

The things I feel are off limits in my mentoring relationship include:

- Disclosing our conversations to others
- Using non-public places for meetings
- Sharing intimate aspects of our lives
- Meeting behind closed doors
- Other _____

I hope that my mentee and I will discuss:

Academic subjects that will most benefit his or her career

Career options and professional preparation

The realities of the workplace

My work

Technical and related issues

How to network

How to manage work and family life

Personal dreams and life circumstances

Other _____

I will help my mentee with job opportunities by:

Finding job or internship possibilities in my department, center, lab, or company

Introducing my mentee to people who might be interested in hiring him or her

Helping practice for job interviews

Suggesting potential work contacts to pursue

Teaching about networking

Critiquing his or her resume or curriculum vitae

Other _____

The amount of time I can spend with my mentee will be, on average:

1 2 3 4 hours weekly/every other week/per month (circle one)

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