

## Doctoral education and supervision: Responses from sessions held Thursday and Friday (February 10, 11, 2011)

### THURSDAY OPEN SESSION INCLUDING DOCTORAL STUDENTS

*What is working/ available at U of A?*

#### 1. At the university level

- the Writing Centre (3)
- T and L Services
- this kind of event
- annual supervisory committee meetings (FGSR form) with feedback for students/ supervisors (2)
- outstanding facilities, world class researchers, active graduate society and opportunity for interaction with peers
- many resources: a) professional development, have list serve to announce events; website 'learning stop' that serves as good resource of activities; b) have good student resources such as academic support centre, health (mental) support = free 11 sessions per year
- have good relationship among Grad Student Association, Faculty of Grad Studies and Ombudsman service

#### 2. Practices in at least SOME departments/ faculties

- grad student on doctoral student committees
- inviting students to all department, faculty meetings
- collaborative graduate program chair/ director (good facilitator)
- strong support from grad secretary and staff
- strong support from experienced senior faculty in role of associate dean for grad programs, open-door collegiality and consultation
- excellent support staff to help negotiate the system
- department-level communication of expectations
- policies/ regulations are mostly clear
- some departments have grad manuals that map out the progress

- rigorous attention to formation of supervisory committees, regular meetings of supervisory committees
- regular feedback (documented) to students and report from students on perceived quality of supervision that goes directly to grad coordinator (one department in Medicine)
- equal stipend for all master's and doctoral students in the department
- funding is well structured, transparent, uniform and perceived to be fair; this gives a sense of security
- Faculty of Engineering Grad Research Symposium
- yearly capstone/ guidepost seminar for graduate students to assess where they are in degree process and what opportunities are available
- successful at obtaining research money (both faculty and students)
- lots of support for presenting at conferences and some support for publishing – usually with supervisor and/ or other students
- teaching and research opportunities for students

### 3. Engagement by faculty

- multiple labs getting together to discuss research and other issues
- our work is interesting – pursuing it is gratifying and sweetens all working relationships

*What needs working on/ is missing at U of A?*

#### 1. Preparation needed for supervisory role

- as a PhD student we are never taught how to be a supervisor
- strategic T & L and skill building in supervision
- somewhere for me to go to get feedback on my supervisory role – to be a better supervisor
- information package for new supervisors with respect to what the expectations are for training master's and PhD students, including how to get, what to pay, criteria for projects, time to completion

#### 2. Policies and norms – what is needed

- I was told that I have to have tenure before I can supervise at the PhD level – is this correct?
- lack of centralization of information about policies surrounding supervision
- clear definitions about time frames for completion
- expectations for supervisors are not so clear

- clarify what the '2 year residency' requirement really means
- lack of clarity about the timing of candidacy
- lack of clear and consistent specific outcomes (at the institutional level) for plagiarism offences
- there is promotion of interdisciplinarity but no structure in place to support it effectively
- no straightforward mechanism for forbidding some faculty members from supervising students
- the supervisor is the nominated conduit between the departments and the students for more and more activities (appointments for TAs and graders, administrative duties, safety) – this is a huge burden on supervisors and isolates students from the academic collective
- capping of stipend if student receives external award
- stipends vary across departments
- get away from culture of student poverty
- improving ongoing financial resources and support for grad students throughout program to enhance income stability
- high number of part-time and working students
- lack of support for international students

### 3. Needed for graduate students

- basic training – how to be a grad student 101 course (some departments have) e.g., how to 'read' literature, to see argument structure not just content; what it means to be and earn a PhD
- PhD seminar (cross faculty/ department) on research approaches/ being an academic/ academia
- PhD/ master's seminar on critical reading skills (e.g., monthly reading group)
- PhD/ master's seminar on a) writing academic papers and b) writing practitioner friendly papers
- better research methodology courses
- career services missing

### 4. Institutional/ departmental culture

- push for big graduate programs and big research groups leads to lack of intimacy (homey feeling)
- students not feeling empowered to bring up issues with their supervisors
- stronger sense of community
- faculty are too busy/ overworked (intensification) and prioritize activities that have high importance in faculty evaluation process
- students caught up in the increasingly competitive academic environment

### 5. Opportunities for supervision

- in my faculty (Extension), there is not a PhD program so how can I actively make it be known that I want to supervise at the PhD level

### FRIDAY WORKSHOP FOR NEW SUPERVISORS

(Those who attended the Friday workshop for new supervisors completed an exercise before coming)

*What would make your work as a supervisor easier?*

#### 1. Preparation for supervisory role

- I wish I had more support/ training from HR – academics are not natural-born supervisors!
- I would also like some guidance about what it means to be a good supervisor. The only experience I have to draw on, really, is my own experience in being supervised as a PhD and master's student.
- having a regular meeting with other supervisors to address specific issues related to grad students-supervisors (meeting deadlines, progression, etc) and brainstorm about possible solutions
- having a senior faculty member as a mentor
- learning how to communicate expectations/demands of PhD effectively (especially the quality of scholarship required)
- I have struggled with negotiating understandings regarding collaborative publications with graduate students. I did not feel that I received adequate mentoring from my doctoral supervisor in regards to publishing. Therefore, this is something that I want to make sure to better mentor my graduate students on. I would like some guidance on how to work with graduate students on collaborative publications in a way that benefits both the student and the faulty member
- I think students and supervisors along with other students and supervisors should have scheduled meetings and workshops in order to make it clear to both parties what the expectations of that collaboration entail

#### 2. Clarity about expectation, policies and norms

- having some sense of the standards for grad students from different faculties; I have supervised students from several faculties and each has a different standard of what is acceptable – some quite low and some quite high. This makes marking drafts of major papers and theses very difficult
- knowing what the expectations are for PhD students with respect to skills they should learn, how much student supervision they should do, and how many papers they need to publish ... also how to choose the best candidates

And there is uncertainty regarding what is required of a successful thesis (i.e., expectations). Sure, there are copies of theses in our departmental library, but there are no specific guidelines. Essentially, I'd like to have a better idea of what qualifies as an MSc or PhD level thesis. This, I suppose, is a learning-by-doing process.

- I looked at the Uof A website and I read the documents I needed but there were departmental issues they did not tackle (so) having one place that would summarize and link to individual issues. Lots of material is scattered and hard to bother folks over and over to make sure I understand right. I think it does not help that I did not get my PhD in a traditional institution. I'm not sure how it's done at UofA.

- a central way to find and search grad courses (NOT beartracks)

### 3. Redistributing the responsibility for supervision

- I found the work of organizing the candidacy defense time-consuming and difficult – is there an easier way to get seven academics in a room for two hours?

- having my office located further from the lab

- if a post-doc could tutor a couple of students regularly, my work would be much easier.

- a weekly group meeting may facilitate discussions among students and post-docs

- departmental support through mentoring and outlining the expectations associated with being an effective supervisor

- having a senior student or post-doc that provided a good example to the students for how to prepare a presentation and how to write a manuscript

- time schedules

### 4. Understanding students

- students sticking to the program (and not being seduced by extra-curriculars)

- students taking more initiative without being explicitly told to do something

- students who know exactly why they want to work with me and what they want out of the program

- the hardest part so far is the uncertainty; there is uncertainty whether or not the students really understand what you are trying to tell him/her. There is uncertainty regarding how the student is actually working on his/her thesis.

- having a departmental level graduate student training program

FRIDAY WORKSHOP FOR NEW SUPERVISORS (from discussion in workshop)

*What needs working on/ is missing at U of A?*

1. Preparation for supervisory role

- introduce manager workshops with a lot of practical skills discussion so we can learn how to be a good supervisor
- more workshops like this one offered to junior faculty early on in their career path
- create new PI workshops (monthly) = how to get funding, how to start your career, how to supervise students, promotion workshops
- formal mentoring programs with senior faculty and have this topic one that is explicitly addressed
- match the new PI with a mentor and ‘pubnight’ between several new PIs with senior PIs within faculties or departments to specifically discuss supervisory issues
- mentorship from senior colleagues
- we don’t want another manual; we want direct feedback and suggestions from more experienced PIs

2. Clarifying expectations, policies and norms

- a U of A strategic priority to help faculty be good/better PhD supervisors, i.e., develop skills, etc.
- I don’t want to be judged by the number of students I supervise when I am in a faculty without a PhD program and where master’s students mostly choose the program coordinator as their supervisor/advisor
- I want to know a) the standards I am supposed to be using to judge/ critique, master’s and doctoral work, and b) the differences between them in terms of expectations in the social sciences
- clarity on number of PhD and master’s level students one is expected to supervise, particularly for new faculty
- FGSR and department with some structure: website clearer and to the point – main points and on the side ‘click here’ for explanations (now all in one and hard to get to the point you want)
- some explicit guidelines especially for new/ junior faculty, i.e., do junior faculty need a co-supervisor? Deadlines, timelines, constitution of committees, etc.)

- make it easier to 'fire' students that are not up to the standards of the program (I have never needed to but I know it is difficult)
  - university put clear deadlines and time constraints when PhD or master's student is not able to finish program
  - clarify expectations from PI and students for graduation (not only in terms of courses but in terms of quality of research)
3. Institutional/ departmental culture
- someone to coordinate master's and doctoral level supervising/ mentoring