



# **Supervisory Guide**

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## **Executive Summary: Supervisory Guide**

The core mission of universities is to educate students and produce excellent research. A key element of teaching and research is the supervision and mentorship of graduate students to conduct independent, original, and ethically sound research as well as to become innovative problem-solvers. Establishing and maintaining strong relationships between graduate students and their supervisors is fundamental to both intellectual and creative productivity as well as to graduate student learning, motivation, overall well-being, and preparedness for professional activities after graduation.

Graduate student supervision and mentorship are a significant part of the working lives of most professors, and they play a critical role in the quality of experience graduate students have at the University of Alberta. This guide is intended to help supervisors, new and established, understand the high standards we want to meet, and maintain, at the University of Alberta. Good supervision is the most important element for many graduate students' learning journeys. In general, supervision combines teaching and guidance, expertise and research skills, time, emotional intelligence, and often elements of service.

At the University of Alberta, supervision is a privilege granted to professors by the Dean of their faculty. Graduate student supervisors ensure students meet the standards required to achieve their degrees but great supervisors do much more. This guide outlines some of the core traits of effective supervisors including: having subject-matter expertise; being clear communicators; being flexible in accommodating students who are parents or have other special needs; being available for regular contact; providing constructive, specific and timely feedback; guiding students to develop increasing autonomy and independence; motivating and guiding students who have setbacks in their programs; and recognizing and supporting students as whole persons with career goals that may very likely be outside of academia.

For many professors, supervising and mentoring graduate students is the most satisfying and rewarding part of their academic roles. Good mentors are attuned to the personal and professional goals of their graduate students, and they seek to support them in gaining additional experiences beyond the courses, research knowledge and skills, and academic products that are rewarded in academe. The guide is divided into two main areas that are tied to supervisor responsibilities: enabling academic success and creating supportive environments. Both these areas are important for



students' academic success and for maintaining effective supervisor-student relationships.

The University of Alberta expects that professors will invest in being good supervisors, provide graduate students with high-quality environments for research and learning at every stage of the graduate program, and hone their own supervisory and mentorship skills as they do for teaching and research.



## Preface

The core mission of universities is to educate students and produce excellent research. A key element of teaching and research is to supervise and mentor graduate students to be able to conduct independent, original, and ethically sound research, as well as be innovative problem-solvers. Increasingly, the quality of communication—both in terms of intellectual content and the way we treat each other—is recognized as fundamental to the learning, motivation, and preparedness of our graduate students for professional activities after they graduate.

Graduate student supervision and mentorship are a significant part of the working lives of most professors, and they play a critical role in the quality of experience graduate students have at the University of Alberta. This guide is intended to help supervisors, new and established, understand the high standards we want to meet and maintain at the University of Alberta. Every supervisor develops excellent mentorship skills over their career; it is not expected that someone can practice all the suggestions provided in this guide overnight. What is expected is a progression of skills development in mentoring that matches the natural progression of skills development in teaching and research. Please refer to the section titled, “the most important features of a supervisor” on page four for minimum supervisory expectations.

We hope this guide will be a helpful reference for supervisors and others who oversee or assist graduate programs. This document will be updated over time for Associate Chairs of graduate programs, graduate coordinators, Department Chairs, and Deans to refer to as they evaluate the quality of supervision among various professors, at various levels at the University of Alberta. This guide was informed by a Mentorship Academy Task Force, the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research Council, a literature review, and members of the Graduate Student Association.



## **Introduction: The Context of Supervision in the Academy**

This report is written in recognition of the many roles professors play in addition to supervising graduate students. Significant changes in academia have influenced how to best supervise and mentor graduate students. The number of graduate students has increased significantly across North America in the past 30 years (Statistics Canada 2011; Baron 2012).

This rate of increase in graduate students has exceeded the rate of increase in professor hires, so in general, many professors are supervising more students than they did 30 years ago. Graduate students, in composition, are more diverse than in decades past. Roughly half of our PhD's and one third of our Master's are international students, and one quarter of our graduate students are parents. Students' ages vary more across the adult years, and more women are in graduate school than in previous years, especially at the Master's level (FGSR, 2017a). Over the last 39 years, average completion times have fluctuated, but generally it takes thesis-based Master's students three years to finish, and PhD students five to six years to complete their degrees. Recent analyses suggest around 85% of our thesis-based Master's students complete their degrees, and 80-85% of our PhD students complete their degrees (FGSR, 2017a).

At the same time, documented knowledge has mushroomed, thereby bolstering further specialization across all fields. Simultaneously, there are increasing calls for inter- and transdisciplinary knowledge to address wicked problems, or grand challenges, such as climate change adaptation and global health inequalities. These demands have thus required professors and students to bridge disciplines, methods, and be able to work with other key knowledge-holders in society. Advances in technology, laboratory infrastructure, and research methods have doubly increased the need for specialized spaces and expertise, and have increased the costs for many kinds of research.

Professors are consequently pursuing larger research grants to cover research costs and compensation, for both students and other professionals who collaboratively carry out the research. Available research funding is variable, depending on the foci and holdings of granting agencies, foundations, industry, and other non-profit sources of funding. The increased expectation that professors have continuous research grants and that they provide stipend and research funds for their graduate students means they must balance the management of existing projects while also applying for new research grants, alongside other mandatory teaching and service roles.



Whereas supervisors may have been a key source of intellectual guidance for a students' thesis project in the past, most supervisors share this role with other supervisors, and occasionally with other key informants from government, industry, think tanks, and other knowledge keepers such as indigenous elders. Together, changes in the public expectations of university researchers and advances in communication technologies call on professors to convey their findings and research-based recommendations to audiences via alternative information outlets and social media, most of which did not exist ten years ago. Administrative tasks, ethics and safety protocols, and the increased expectation to publish in refereed sources also impacts a professor's time budget and attention capacity.

### ***Importance of good supervision and mentorship to graduate student education***

Graduate students embark on an intensive educational experience when they do a Master's or PhD. Throughout their studies, these students rely on their supervisors to guide them in how to do research, place their work in a broader field, communicate or display their work to expert and other audiences, and navigate through research groups and other professional associations. In fact, the relationship a graduate student has with their supervisor is likely the most important influence on a graduate students' mental health during their graduate program (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2016).



**Most important features of a supervisor:**

- Offers subject-matter expertise and/or effectiveness in adding appropriate expertise to supervisory committees
- Clearly communicates expectations, normal standards of performance, and potential outcomes for poor performance
- Flexible in accommodating students who are parents or have other special needs such as health conditions
- Available for regular contact
- Provides constructive, specific, and timely feedback, especially regarding research methods and thesis revisions stages
- Guides the student to develop increasing autonomy and independence
- Motivates and guides students who have setbacks, such as failed exams, experiments, rejected research papers, and inappropriately slow progress on research and research products
- Recognizes students as whole persons with career goals that may very likely be outside of academia

Graduate students enter academia as junior colleagues, and look to their supervisors to help them solve problems, learn from failures, prioritize their attention to different elements of their work, and publish papers or develop other creative works that are of high quality and which abide by research integrity protocols.

While subject-matter expertise is important, students also generally prefer supervisors who are friendly and personable, flexible, available for regular contact, supportive, and who help the student develop autonomy and independence while providing professional, timely, and constructive feedback.

During their degree programs, graduate students will learn from a variety of modalities such as coursework, university seminars, disciplinary conferences, professional development opportunities, as well as from their peers, the professoriate, and senior colleagues. However, the advice and guidance of their supervisor helps the student “articulate and model the ethical norms of responsible, rigorous research” (King, 2010: 1) and learning, as both parties towards culminating capstone projects, theses, and dissertations. Good supervision occurs when the student draws enthusiasm, inspiration, and a sense of intellectual support from their supervisor for their Master’s or PhD research.



The role of the supervisor may vary, and is considerably discipline-dependent. In laboratory sciences, for example, a group-based supervision model is common.

Students are more likely to be working on a professor's research project and may interact daily with their supervisor (Chiapetta-Swanson and Watt, 2011). As such, good supervision entails excellence in managing a lab and the various people in it, including technicians and undergraduate, Master's, PhD, and post-doctoral students. In the Arts and Humanities, graduate students are more likely to work one-on-one with their supervisor, where the supervisor may steer them to choose a research topic, and then in later years oversee the quality of the written work (Hockey, 1997).

An excellent supervisor and mentor demonstrates care and guidance for their students as whole persons, in terms of the procedures (courses, exams, research protocols, etc.) of their program, the intellectual content of their work, and in the relational elements of their experiences at the University of Alberta. The gift of attention and time is required for all of these. A professor's ability to learn how to share attention, time, and knowledge, as well as appreciate and foster the gifts of their students is a privilege of enormous proportions. What a supervisor creates with their graduate students can truly make the world a better place.

### ***What is good supervision?***

Good supervision is the most important element for many graduate students' learning journey. "Supervision in the academic context is a process to facilitate the student becoming an independent professional researcher and scholar in their field", capable of adapting to various research arenas, such as in university, government, industry, think tank, non-governmental, faith-based, or non-profit organizational settings (Pearson & Brew 2002: 135). In general, supervision combines teaching and guidance, expertise and research skills, time, emotional intelligence, and often elements of service. Each institution formally defines who may hold a supervisory role, under what circumstances, and in what manner by outlining expectations, norms, and accountabilities for the position. Faculties and departments may have additional disciplinary differences in expectations and norms for supervisors.

Many researchers have found that when students work closely and communicate well with their supervisors, their research quality and



educational experience improves (James and Baldwin, 2000; Lee, 2012; Wisker, 2005). As their advisors, “Research supervisors and the graduate program faculty as a community must [regularly] ask themselves two key questions: ‘Have we adequately discharged our obligation to facilitate this student’s or these students’ progress toward the degree?’ and ‘Have we done anything to hinder their progress unnecessarily?’” (King, 2010: 3).

At the University of Alberta, supervision is a privilege granted by the Dean of the professor’s faculty. At a minimum, supervision should comply with the policies and norms of the institution. Good supervisors also ensure students meet the standards required to achieve their degrees, noting of course that these standards are often negotiated among supervisory committee members and other examiners of students’ work.

### ***What is good mentorship?***

For many professors, supervising and mentoring graduate students is the most satisfying and rewarding part of their academic workload. Mentoring is generally “a long term, ongoing relationship with a student by mutual agreement” (Chiapetta- Swanson and Watt, 2011:2). Graduate students share a learning journey with their supervisors, sometimes challenging their supervisors’ assumptions, and other times opening pathways to new research, asking novel questions and testing their supervisors’ existing knowledge. A student’s ability to pursue ideas, read recent scholarly work, explore new methods, and display findings in new forms thus enriches professors’ academic lives and the world of discovery.

**“Mentoring is a process for the informal transmission of knowledge, social capital, and the psycho-social support perceived by the recipient as relevant to work, career, or professional development; mentoring entails informal communication, usually face-to-face and during a sustained period of time, between a person who is perceived to have greater knowledge, wisdom, or experience (the mentor) and a person who is perceived to have less (the protégé).”**

Bozeman, B and Feeney, M.K. (2007).

“Toward a Useful theory of Mentoring: A Conceptual analysis and critique.”  
*Administration and Society* 39: 719-713



A good mentor is a supervisor who acts as a caring leader for their graduate students as *whole* persons. Good mentors are attuned to the personal and professional goals of their graduate students, and seek to support their graduate students in gaining additional experiences beyond the courses, research knowledge, and academic products that are rewarded in academia.

These experiences may include taking short courses, study abroad opportunities, internships, and research forays into areas that will prepare the graduate student for work outside of the academy. A good mentor will recognize the array of professional development learning opportunities available at the University of Alberta and give the student opportunity learn from others who are more knowledgeable in areas that may benefit the student.



## **Roles and responsibilities of the supervisor**

For ease of reading, we have divided the following sections into two broad areas of responsibility for supervisors to better support students:

- 1) Enable academic success and
- 2) Create a supportive environment.

These areas work together to encourage an effective supervisor-student relationship.

Supervisors are not solely responsible for mentoring their graduate students. Supervisors can be very helpful in pointing students to the numerous services and opportunities at the University of Alberta (or connected to the university) to foster student success, and should do so at every available opportunity. We have included links to pertinent resources throughout this document.

The supervisor also plays a critical role in helping graduate students understand their own rights and responsibilities as graduate students at the University of Alberta. To this end, supervisors support students by upholding the Collective Agreement, gaining access to various University services, and pursuing learning opportunities that can enhance their employability upon graduation. Graduate student responsibilities include a conscientious work ethic, respectful and reliable communication, thoughtful response to constructive criticism, and an effort to bring timely progress, rigour, and excellence to one's work. It is up to the supervisor to discuss these responsibilities with their students early in their relationship.

### ***Enable academic success for your graduate students***

#### **Guide students in choosing a research topic**

To provide appropriate guidance, supervisors are expected to have sufficient knowledge of their particular field (or be willing to learn) prior to agreeing to act as a supervisor. This includes helping students select and plan a suitable, well-defined, and manageable research topic. The supervisor should be able to guide the student about the advantages and disadvantages of different approaches to the research, and be able to gauge how much guidance the student will need to excel at their research and in their graduate program based on the abilities of the student, the stage they are in, their course workload, and what other supportive expertise is available.

How research topics are selected often varies between departments and faculties, as well as whether selected research can be funded independently (e.g., through scholarships like NSERC, SSHRC, Alberta



Innovates) or by research contracts or grants held by the supervisor in question. Some students may approach a supervisor with a research idea and need help refining the approach or research methods, while others may be interested in a particular area but need far more direction to develop the research and find funding outlets for that research.

As a supervisor, it is important to help students select and narrow their topic so that it is not too ambitious and can be successfully completed in a reasonable timeframe. Students often do not have sufficient understanding of what is needed for a final thesis, and rely on their supervisor to ensure they have appropriate, specific, clearly defined, and manageable boundaries around their work. Students will need their supervisor to help figure out if the project or the institution has the appropriate resources available (financial, facilities, courses, etc.) to inform, support, and complete the work. For students just starting out, who have not yet selected a topic, supervisors can help them find an appropriate topic by seeking to understand their students' interests and passions, strengths and weaknesses, future academic and career goals, and family and health needs as they pursue their degree.

By knowing more about one's graduate students, a supervisor can better match the student within their own area of expertise, emerging interests, and available projects. In some cases, students and supervisors are co-learners in a new research area, in which case it is important to involve other area experts on the supervisory committee to inform the design of the overall student research project and provide approval of final products.

**Key points:**

- Supervisors should be ready to help students select and plan a suitable, well- defined, and manageable research topic.
- The thesis topic a supervisor supports should be able to be successfully completed in a reasonable timeframe.

**Develop students' writing and presentation skills**

Supervisors have a special role to play in providing guidance to students on writing and presenting academic work. Given its centrality to a researcher's success, it is important to provide positive feedback as well as constructive criticism in that guidance. Improvement is more likely when supervisors articulate *what to do* rather than *what not to do* when they offer responses on a student's work.

Before a student starts writing a chapter, article, or other piece of work, it is critical that supervisors check for clarity of thinking around the story of the work, i.e. determine what central questions are being addressed, the methods they chose to answer those questions, and the key findings and contributions to their field based on those findings. Once the student can articulate the contents of their work, they will have a better roadmap for their writing journey. A strategy many supervisors find useful in this area, is to share with their students a piece of writing that may serve as an example of the kind of work they are hoping the student can produce, as well as a thesis that may be comparable in format and length.

Written feedback is often best executed in stages. For example, you might give feedback on the quality of the research question(s) and suggested literature sources first, then in a subsequent draft focus more on coverage of the topics and organization of the sections, and finally, as the document is refined, focus more on details of grammar, sentence construction, brevity, and flow. Software programs such as Grammarly (free to UA students) can help provide editorial feedback, saving the supervisor additional time. The important point here is to not overwhelm students with criticisms all at once since studies have shown this method causes students to learn less about writing and that they often find it discouraging.

There are many opportunities for students to obtain on-campus writing support: through FGSR programming, the Writing Centre, and through graduate student writing groups within and across departments. Encourage your students early in their programs to see their writing as an ongoing set of skills they will hone over a lifetime of writing, and to perhaps embrace the Roger Graves' (former director of Writing Across the Curriculum at the University of Alberta): "There is no such thing as good writing. Only good re-writing."



**Key points:**

- Improvement is more likely when supervisors articulate *what to do* rather than *what not to do* when professors respond to student work.
- Guide the student to articulate the contents of their work and the roadmap they will follow before they begin the writing journey.
- Provide feedback to written work in stages.
- Offer opportunities for the student to practice delivering their presentations (especially before a defense), and be prepared to tailor their presentations to specific audiences.

It is also wise to provide opportunities for the student to practice delivering their presentations (especially before a defense), being prepared in such scenarios to tailor presentations to specific audiences as required. Students tend to perform better at their defenses if they have had a mock defense beforehand, or if they have prepared to answer questions they expect may be asked during the exam/defense portion of their study. This can be arranged with other graduate students and facilitated by lab meetings or regular graduate student group meetings. FGSR and the Student Success Centre offer workshops to graduate students on preparing for the candidacy exam, presenting to different kinds of audiences, and many other topics. Encourage your student to invest in their professional skills by attending these workshops and seminars, which cost a small amount or are free.

**Negotiate goals and make expectations clear**

At a minimum, supervisors should organize annual supervisory committee meetings for their graduate students. In general, students tend to perform better when their progress is informed by and monitored by their supervisory committees.

PhD candidacy exams should occur in the first three years of a student's program, though some programs require the candidacy to occur earlier. When a new student agrees to commit to research under a supervisor, that supervisor will want to initiate a conversation early on to define roles and responsibilities, and discuss expectations for the working relationship. In all cases, it is important to acknowledge that the supervisor has more power than the student, and the supervisor must carefully navigate this power dynamic to create a safe and respectful relationship for students to ask questions.



To prevent assumptions and miscommunication, supervisors and students should discuss and articulate fundamental expectations and goals throughout the time they work together.

Initial topics that could be discussed include:

- the areas of research the student/ supervisor is interested in pursuing;
- the regular duties of the student, and milestones they are expected to meet;
- the way the student's progress will be assessed over time;
- the number of hours they will work per week (which must be consistent with the Collective Agreement policies for paid work);
- how often the student and supervisor will meet and what should be prepared in advance;
- how much funding is available per year and for the overall degree (including realistic time to completion);
- what type of work space is available, including whether the student will have an office, laboratory, or other work space;
- who will be responsible for inviting supervisory committee members to serve on the supervisory committee, and who will contact and schedule committee meetings;
- the preferred communication and supervision styles of both parties (e.g. weekly check-ins, early feedback to written work, or feedback when full draft of a chapter is done, etc.);
- how and when feedback will be given including expected turnaround times.

As the research progresses, both the supervisor and the student should discuss:

- what helps motivate the student to improve their progress on written work;
- how authorship/credit will be allocated for research findings, ideas, and written projects the supervisor shares with the student;
- how milestones are reached and how the subsequent milestones can be adjusted to reflect the current reality;
- how conflict is managed, and the chain for seeking another point of view, or support;
- what job interests, prospects, and other knowledge areas and skills would the student like to strengthen before entering the job market.





**Key points:**

- At a minimum, supervisors should organize annual supervisory committee meetings for their graduate students.
- Discuss graduate student expectations early on and again later, especially before candidacy, comprehensives, defenses, and other critical deadlines for research products.
- Invite graduate students to be open about what would most help them understand how to perform

**Be available to your student**

Supervisors should be accessible to their students for consultation and the discussion of academic progress and research. The frequency of these meetings will vary according to the discipline, stage of work, nature of the project, independence of the student, and full- or part-time status of the student. A general rule of thumb is to meet regularly, e.g. every other week. This also requires that students be available to their supervisor and generally accessible by email, these expectations having been made clear from the outset.

Meeting regularly is often especially important at critical times, e.g., before the candidacy exam, during data collection and data analysis, and as the student prepares for their thesis defense. Most graduate students benefit immensely from extra supervisory attention while they make decisions on how to analyze the content of their data, and display that knowledge in their thesis. Supervisors should also facilitate access to necessary resource facilities and materials for their students. *A general rule of thumb for turn-around time on written work is within three to four weeks.* Additionally, a small but important act is to acknowledge the receipt of a students' work, even with the briefest of emails. This act acknowledges the student's progress, and sets the student's mind at ease.

Many supervisors have found it helpful to develop a schedule of when drafts will be submitted and when reviewed drafts will be returned. This agreed-upon schedule removes much of the unpleasant uncertainties students experience around anxiously waiting for supervisor feedback on their work, and gives the professor room to prioritize the time it will take to give constructive and thoughtful feedback to the student.



**Key points:**

- Supervisors should be accessible to their students for consultation and discussion of academic progress and research at regular intervals (ideally in week(s), not months).
- A general rule of thumb for turn-around time on written work is within three to four weeks.
- When supervisors are going to be absent or unavailable for extended periods, such as a month or longer, they should make alternative arrangements for supervision to ensure continued student progress.

When supervisors are going to be absent or unavailable for extended periods of time, such as a month or longer, they should make alternative arrangements for supervision to ensure continued student progress. A letter written to the student, and copied to the graduate coordinator/Associate Chair of the graduate program should be provided outlining how supervision will be available to the student while the professor is absent. Before professors leave on sabbatical, arrangements should be made to assure that their students can continue receiving guidance on their work. This plan should be in writing and held by both the department and the student. *Students should not be held up for months, waiting for exam results, written feedback, or to defend, because a supervisor is on sabbatical or another kind of leave.*

**Model research integrity**

Supervisors should support and acknowledge their student's contributions and successes in writing, presentations, and published material—i.e. give credit where credit is due according to the norms of that discipline. These and other obligations of principle investigators are outlined in the Research and Scholarship Integrity Policy. In particular, supervisors should be transparent with their students about why certain authors are on a paper, the order of authors, and the roles and responsibilities across lead author, corresponding author, and other authors.

Research integrity implies that supervisors will assign duties to graduate students for their thesis projects or for the specific research project to which they are formally

**Helpful resources for research integrity**

- [Research and Scholarship Integrity Policy](#), professors and graduate students are required to follow this policy
- [Authorship guidelines](#) in the Graduate Program Manual
- [Intellectual property guidelines](#) in the Graduate Program Manual



appointed. It is therefore a conflict of interest to ask graduate students to work on non-thesis related research projects for which they are not paid, or for which they are not voluntarily doing for additional intellectual development. It is a violation of research integrity to expect a student to work without pay on projects that are not related to their thesis or explicitly related to mutually agreed-upon professional development opportunities.

Research integrity also calls on graduate students to be honest with their supervisor about any paid work they are doing outside of their full time graduate student work, and to be guarded about becoming overcommitted to additional work outside of their thesis-focused project. Thus, supervisors should be clear about their expectations on graduate students' dedication to research projects when they are paid as full time students.

**Key points:**

- Supervisors should openly discuss their approach to authorship and other forms of credit for research output.
- Graduate students should only be asked to work on thesis-related research projects, and if they are working on other forms of professor-funded research, they should be paid for the work they do.
- Supervisors and students should discuss and agree on graduate students' voluntary, additional work that is done without pay for additional intellectual development.
- Supervisors should be clear about their expectations of a graduate student's dedication to research projects when they are paid as full time students to avoid inadequate progress on professor-funded research timelines.

**Manage the supervisory committee**

The supervisor should establish a supervisory committee in the first year of a student's PhD program—with their student's or colleagues' suggestions as appropriate—that meets on at least an annual basis to discuss student progress. A progress report, either formalized by the department or recorded for the purposes of the student and the supervisory committee, should be completed and given to the student and supervisor after every annual supervisory committee meeting. It is inappropriate for supervisors to issue letters of concern about a student's performance to graduate coordinators or others without giving the student an opportunity to discuss with their supervisor any concerns that have arisen, or share their own experiences in relation to the supervisor, their learning, or progress.



Supervising, in other words, requires two-way communication around how learning and progress are unfolding. Responsibilities in some cases include the professor, supervisory committee, and student having to find ways to improve the conditions under which that student is learning and seeking progress.

If the student and the supervisor are at odds around a theoretical orientation, methodological procedure, or interpretation of results, it often helps to involve the supervisory committee in the issue so as to gain a broader and more informed perspective on the issue, and come to an agreed-upon resolution.

Supervisors play a critical role in communicating with the supervisory committee well ahead of FGSR thesis-submission deadlines to solicit the supervisory committee's review and suggestions for any revisions needed to the thesis *before* the defense (or for thesis-based papers to be submitted for publication). Supervisors play a key role in planning ahead to ensure adequate time is given to obtain Faculty approval for the external examiner, and to ensure there is time for the external examiner to review the thesis. Supervisors and their students should discuss timelines regularly. For some students, this timeline is critical as their study visa may be expiring and other opportunities may be put on hold (e.g. the start of a PhD program or Post-Doc, or professional position elsewhere). Students generally rely on their supervisors to explain to them the time required to move a thesis from draft stage to defense, and students typically underestimate the amount of time this requires.

Supervisors should encourage their students to complete and defend their theses when it is not in the student's best interest to extend their program. It is not appropriate to delay a student's defense so that s/he can publish more papers with the supervisor, or complete more work in the lab, for example. Where possible, supervisors should provide sufficient support and resources to ensure a timely completion of the student's degree.

In some cases, the student may put pressure on the supervisor to move a thesis to defense before the supervisor feels the thesis is defensible. There are different ways to address this challenge. One is to involve the supervisory committee to see if they believe the thesis is defensible. A student may insist a thesis go to defense without the supervisor's agreement, or committee's agreement, and in those cases, the supervisor should make the student aware of the remaining weaknesses in the student's work, preferably in writing, and be clear there is a

realistic chance of adjournment or failure. In general, the supervisory committee should acknowledge a thesis is ready for defense before it goes to a defense, even if it delays a student's defense date or the student thinks the thesis is ready.

The supervisor should ensure that recommendations for external examiners of doctoral dissertations are made to the graduate program advisor and forwarded to FGSR in a timely manner. Supervisors are also expected to assist their students in complying with any changes that need to be made to their thesis after the defense, as well as adhere to the university's [policy regarding ownership of intellectual property](#).

**Key points:**

- The supervisor should establish a supervisory committee in the first year of a student's PhD program.
- A progress report should be completed and given to the student and supervisor after every annual supervisory committee meeting.
- In general, the supervisory committee should acknowledge a thesis is ready for defense before it goes to a defense, even if it delays a student's defence date or the student thinks the thesis is ready.
- Supervisors play a critical role in communicating with the supervisory committee well ahead of the FGSR thesis submission deadlines to solicit the supervisory committee's review and suggestions for any needed revisions before the defense.

**Attempt to provide reliable funding for your graduate students**

Funding availability varies widely across all disciplines. It is customary for the majority of students in the faculties of Medicine, Engineering, Science and Agriculture, Life and Environmental Sciences to receive a research stipend through a scholarship, research, or teaching assistantship. Students deserve to know the amount of financial support being offered to them (stipend and/or tuition and benefits), its initial duration, the likelihood and conditions of renewal beyond the initial appointment, and what will be required of them to maintain their funding (King 2010).



The link between funding and degree completion is mediated by other factors, such as the quality of supervision for moving research into publication. According to a study by Larivière (2013: 27), who uses data from the province of Quebec to examine the relationship among excellence scholarships, research productivity, scientific impact, and degree completion, “funded students publish more papers than their unfunded colleagues, but there is only a slight difference between funded and unfunded PhD students in terms of scientific impact.

Funded students, especially those funded by the federal government, are also more likely to graduate. Finally, although funding is clearly linked to higher degree completion for students who did not publish, this is not true of those who managed to publish at least one paper during the course of their PhD” (Larivière, 2013: 27) Students who do not have adequate funding have increased stress, are more likely to be food insecure, may live precariously (homeless, couch surfing, or in unsafe homes or areas), and take outside work to support themselves and/or their families.

Students in these types of situations may want to access the Campus Food Bank, or look at the Emergency Bursaries available through the Graduate Students Association.

Ideally, scholarship programs, departments, and supervisors financially support students in research-based programs for the length of their degree. The average length of completion for a thesis-based Masters student is roughly three years, and five to six years for a PhD student.

While many incoming students assume they will receive funding, they are often uncomfortable or afraid to ask about the details with potential supervisors, especially if discussing finances may be a culturally taboo topic. Supervisors should be upfront and clear with accepted students about what they can reliably provide these students each year of their degree program.

### **Understanding the Collective Agreement**

It is important that faculty members abide by the [Collective Agreement](#) that represents graduate students to the University of Alberta and the Government of Alberta. Note: the agreement is updated annually.

The Collective Agreement defines graduate assistantship types, provides requirements for the letter of appointment, outlines minimum stipend rates, provides assistantship time-use guidelines, describes entitled leaves and benefits, specifies health and safety requirements, and stipulates a dispute resolution process.

Faculty members who have issues with the conditions or implementation of the Collective Agreement should contact Susan Buchsdruecker ([susan.buchsdruecker@ualberta.ca](mailto:susan.buchsdruecker@ualberta.ca)) in Faculty Relations in the Provost’s Office for support. Graduate students should contact the GSA Vice-President Labour ([gsa.vplabour@ualberta.ca](mailto:gsa.vplabour@ualberta.ca)).

All students should receive a breakdown of their financial package with their offer letter, and then an annual update at the start of each academic year if the amount varies. Supervisors, departments, and faculties should give sufficient notice when communicating important information about upcoming funding opportunities that students can apply for, including internal and external awards, bursaries, scholarships, and available teaching and research assistantships.

Departments and supervisors should be able to explain to students why there are differences in levels of funding among students in the same lab, program, or department, as these differences across students in a common cohort can create conditions for jealousy and resentment. Where possible, supervisors should try to help their graduate students defend their theses before their funding ceases; assist students in finding alternative sources of funding while they are writing their theses; and/ or confirm that students have sufficient independent resources such that they can focus on their studies or research without significant stress from lack of finances, or without having to work on other projects to the exclusion of their time for thesis writing.

**Key points:**

- Ideally, scholarship programs, departments, and supervisors financially support students in research-based programs for the length of their degrees.
- Supervisors should be upfront and clear about what they can reliably provide their student each year of their degree program when they are accepted.
- Where possible, supervisors should try to help their graduate students defend their theses before their funding ceases, and assist students in finding alternative sources of funding while they are writing their theses.



## ***Create a Supportive Environment for your Graduate Students***

### **Model respectful behavior**

Supervisors should work to *first understand* situations in which there is discontent among the graduate students, co-students, or other research partners or laboratory members.

As outlined by Kube (2016:9), our responses to conflict are shaped by the action itself, while the contextual details are “what we fill in as part of the story we tell ourselves.” Our own values and cultural backgrounds shape our perceptions of that context, i.e. the assumed motives behind others’ behavior.

Supervisors are better able to be mindful of their predispositions, or perceptual tendencies, when they work to cultivate self-awareness.

This self-awareness can be cultivated by seeking to understand one’s own cultural lens on the world. Such self-awareness is simultaneously fostered by making transparent—through respectful conversation—what actions are of concern, and by listening to another person about how to interpret those actions. This non-judgmental perspective allows supervisors learn to see unfamiliar behavior from a more compassionate perspective that is mindful of intercultural differences (Ting-Tooney and Oetzel, 2001).

Supervisors should ensure that the research and learning environment is safe, healthy, and free from harassment, discrimination, and conflict.

This means an environment free from threatening behavior, verbal or written threats, harassment, verbal abuse, or physical attacks—all of which are considered to be forms of workplace violence (Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety, 2018), and which are not permitted under the newly amended Occupational

### **Dealing with conflict**

Where possible, the supervisor should try to resolve differences when there is a conflict. While conflicts can come in many forms due to the high variation of research projects, work settings, and disciplinary homes in which students and supervisors work, all conflict resolution starts with demonstrating respect.

[Fairness in Communication: A Relational Fairness Guide](#) from the University of Alberta Ombuds Office is an excellent resource for further guidance on approaching problems to avoid conflict and how to properly address it when it occurs. It summarizes the elements of culturally sensitive good communication, which include:

- 1) active listening to be able to paraphrase what another person is saying to you, to check you have understood them correctly;
- 2) asking more questions to understand the perceptions of others;
- 3) practicing empathy;
- 4) being mindful of tone of voice;
- 5) being aware of body language;
- 6) not reacting to one’s hurt feelings by taking action, but stepping back from immediate personal reactions to enter into a conversation more respectfully and self-reflectively.



Health and Safety Act that extends the notion of safety to respectful workplaces free of violence or harassment.

When supervisors are aware of a problem, they should address issues immediately. In some cases it is not necessary to single out one person, but rather remind the research team about expectations of respectful behavior and accountability to professionalism. Good supervisors also manage external relationships with research partners, or key audiences of the research, so as to protect the student and their research.

Supervisors should protect the student from being caught in a conflict between the supervisor and other professors or research associates, and they should not ask their graduate students to choose sides in a conflict to show loyalty to their own supervisor. Supervisors should refrain from speaking negatively to their students about current or previous students or other professors, given that the power imbalance puts the student in an awkward position in which they may feel expected to hold the same prejudices.

While friendships form between graduate students and their supervisors, it is important to put healthy boundaries around the relationship. Such boundaries are important given the power imbalance and comfort the student needs to build with the supervisor as a person who closely evaluates and sometimes criticizes the student's work. A student should not feel obligated, for example, to emotionally "take care of" their supervisor, nor should the supervisor be too closely involved in the student's personal life. This is possible while still making the supervisor-student relationship professional, caring, and friendly. If a student is behaving in too familiar a manner with a supervisor, it is incumbent upon the supervisor to be able to speak to the professionalism he

### **Important resources re: behavior of students and supervisors**

Supervisors should be aware of these codes of conduct:

- [Code of Applicant Behavior](#)
- [Code of Student Behavior](#).

Professors are also expected to adhere to several policies relating to their behavior around their graduate students and the work environments they influence (e.g., research teams, laboratories, and associations with research partners). These policies include:

[Discrimination Harassment and Duty to Accommodate Policy](#). This includes bullying, intimidation, shaming, yelling, using inappropriate language (e.g. profanity), sharing private information about students to others who have no good reason to have that information, demanding unreasonable work hours, and deliberately creating rivalries among students.

#### [Sexual Violence Policy and Resources](#).

The University of Alberta's Sexual Violence policy prohibits sexual violence, sexual assault, sexual harassment, stalking, indecent exposure, voyeurism, and distribution of intimate images.

[Occupational Health and Safety Policy, Government of Alberta](#). See Part 1, item 4 about responsibilities of supervisors.

or she expects from the student.

When students are having issues with a supervisor, they may seek out a third party external to their faculty to obtain advice and support, from persons in the Student Ombudservice, the Graduate Student Association, the Office of Safe Disclosure, Faculty Relations in the Provost's Office, or the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research. It is best if the problem is first addressed by those closest to the problem, such as by the supervisor and the student, and next the Associate Chair of the graduate program or graduate coordinator. Encourage your students to talk to you early if they are worried or bothered by something. Hurt feelings can harden into rigid judgments if not addressed over time.

When students do go to a third party, many are concerned about the direct or indirect consequences of the actions they may take, i.e. be fearful that supervisors can negatively affect the outcome of the student's degree program (course marks, time to completion, defense outcome, etc.), a student's financial situation (access to scholarships, assistantships), and even a student's future career prospects through the influence (or the withholding of said influence) of the professor in their professional networks.

Students are also very fearful of not receiving supportive letters of references from their supervisors. International graduate students may also be concerned about 'losing face' (or respect) with their supervisor if they raise a problem, damaging their relationship with the institution, having their visas revoked or funding stopped. A culture of fear is not conducive to learning and professional growth.

It is important that when supervisors are asked to work with a third party to resolve conflict that they know the professionals in these offices are looking for an improvement to the situation, not to punish or establish "who is right and who is wrong". There should be no retaliation for a student who acts within their interests and rights to seek out assistance for a problem they have had with their supervisor.

Supervisors who maintain respectful communication patterns with their graduate students can often avoid these third party interventions.



**Key points:**

- All conflict resolution starts with demonstrating respect.
- Supervisors should work to *first understand* situations in which there is discontent among the graduate students, co-students, or other research partners/laboratory members.
- Such self-awareness is fostered by making transparent, through respectful conversation, what actions are of concern, and listening to another person about how to interpret those actions.
- There should be no retaliation for a student who acts within their interests and rights to seek out assistance for a problem they have had with their supervisor.
- There are several resources for graduate students and supervisors to access when there is a supervisor-graduate student conflict. Graduate students may choose to contact their own departmental graduate student organization, the Student Ombudservice and/or the Graduate Students' Association. Supervisors may choose to contact their Associate Chair of graduate program or graduate coordinator and/or their designated Associate Dean at FGSR.
- In some cases, supervisors may have to lay out clear expectations about what defines respectful behaviour (nature of emails, tone of voice, patience for feedback, etc.) when graduate students are disrespectful to them.

Depending on the issue, the sequence for consultation may spread from the supervisor to other supervisory committee members, even going as far as reaching the Associate Chair of the Graduate Program or graduate coordinator, the Department Chair, Faculty Dean, FGSR Associate Deans, and at top level, the Dean of FGSR. Graduate students may choose to contact their own departmental graduate student organization, the Student Ombudservice and/or the Graduate Students' Association for assistance and support at any point in the process, while supervisors may choose to contact their Associate Chair of graduate program or graduate coordinator and/or their designated Associate Dean at FGSR at any point in the process. Graduate students are also expected to foster relationships and work environments that demonstrate respect. If a student is doing something you are concerned about, address the behavior as early as possible.

The UA Code of Student Behaviour prohibits inappropriate behaviours such as disruptions, harassment, discrimination, damage to property,



unauthorized entry, unauthorized use of facilities or equipment, and misuse of library or computer resources. Inappropriate behaviour punishable under the Code includes (but is not limited to) plagiarism, cheating, misuse of confidential materials, misrepresentation of the facts, and research and scholarship misconduct. Supervisors should feel comfortable seeking advice from their graduate coordinator/Associate Chair of graduate program, or an Associate Dean at the Faculty of Graduate Studies, about how to address their problem with graduate students.

### **Recognize the power imbalance between supervisor and student**

The power imbalance between student and supervisor should be recognized, and the rules of the relationship must not disadvantage the student. Graduate students often depend on their supervisors to validate their work, fund their research, support their discovery process, problem-solve, and advocate for them when there are difficulties. Conscientious supervisors write good, highly individualized letters of reference for students when they are applying for jobs, award applications, and for entry into other educational programs. Graduate students, especially international students, may feel vulnerable and even fearful of falling out of favour with their supervisor. It is incumbent upon the supervisor to use their power and privilege responsibly, to foster knowledge and skills development in their students, to try and provide funding for the students' work, to foster a conducive environment for students to write their theses, and to encourage other professional growth opportunities. To offset the power imbalance, it is important that supervisors strive to proactively resolve tensions or problems as they arise, to communicate with regularity, kindness, and clarity, and to practice professionalism. Supervisors should be role models for excellence, not only in teaching and research,

#### **Dealing with conflict**

Where possible, the supervisor should try to resolve differences when there is a conflict. While conflicts can come in many forms due to variation in research projects, work settings, and the disciplinary homes in which students and supervisors work, all conflict resolution starts with demonstrating respect. [Fairness in Communication: A Relational Fairness Guide](#) from the University of Alberta Ombuds Office is an excellent resource for further guidance on an approach to avoid conflict and address it when it occurs. It summarizes the elements of culturally sensitive good communication, which include:

- 1) active listening to be able to paraphrase what another person is saying to you, to check you have understood them correctly;
- 2) asking more questions to understand the perceptions of others;
- 3) practicing empathy;
- 4) being mindful of tone of voice;
- 5) being aware of body language;
- 6) not reacting to one's hurt feelings by taking action, but stepping back from immediate personal reactions to enter into a conversation more respectfully and self-reflectively.

but in how they demonstrate professionalism and leadership, which combines adequate attention to the student, patience, kindness, clear communication, informed instruction, encouragement, and tolerance for differences.

The power and security imbalance between a student and supervisor places the onus on the person with greater power and security to cumulatively learn from these situations to avoid similar situations in the future. As a general rule of thumb, a person with more power over another should be judicious in their judgment, slow to anger, and try to find a solution that is mutually acceptable. Supervisors should also know they are welcome and encouraged to seek advice from their graduate coordinator/Associate Chair of a graduate program, an Associate Dean at the Faculty of Graduate Studies, or the Student Ombudservice on how to approach and manage a difficult situation with a graduate student.

**Key points:**

- Conscientious supervisors write good, highly individualized letters of reference for their graduate students.
- To offset the power imbalance it is important that supervisors strive to proactively resolve tensions or problems as they arise, communicate with regularity, kindness and clarity, and practice professionalism.
- As a general rule of thumb, a person with more power over another should be judicious in their judgment, slow to anger, and try to find a solution that is mutually acceptable.

**Practice healthy communication**

Good communication means respectful communication, where basic manners (salutations at the beginning and end of greetings and emails, and the frequent use of “please”, “thank you”, and when appropriate, “I apologize”, or “I may have misunderstood”) go a long way to creating a safe culture of civility. Acknowledge student emails even when you may have inadequate time to immediately respond— this alleviates student worry relating to the possibility that the email was lost or inadvertently missed.

More importantly, healthy communication also means regular communication, and a focus on a positive pathway forward, even when a temporary failure has occurred (e.g. failed candidacy, rejected refereed

journal article, field season, or laboratory experiment setbacks). Focus on the positive behavior or outcome that you want to reach with your students and how to get there, rather than on what is solely wrong with their work or behavior. The academy is no place to personalize a student's failure by attributing personal shortcomings—stick to the demonstration of knowledge to which you hope to see improve.

Additional tips for healthy communication include:

- if you are unsure, just ask (rather than assume) why a student is doing or not doing something you think is important;
- plan and prepare with the student so that expectations are clear;
- validate the feelings of your students even if you do not like the behaviors— when students feel understood by their supervisors they are more likely to shift behaviors with a sense of supportive nudging;
- when there's tension consider the other side—try to think of the ways your perspective may be limited or wrong (Kube, 2016). Self-reflection is not only important relationally, but is also generally the hallmark of a discerning scholar.

Skarakis-Doyle and McIntyre (2008) identified five common areas for miscommunication or issues in cross-cultural supervision: (1) assumptions about the nature of research and knowledge production; (2) cultural differences in power and status; (3) differing needs for saving face; (4) cultural differences in communication styles; and (5) expectations about following rules. For instance, supervisors must be cognizant that students from some cultures with high power differentials between genders or between students and teachers may be unwilling to challenge or question the supervisor, or raise issues of concern, because the supervisor is considered the authority. International students may also be less assertive because they are avoiding a culturally taboo topic, or they may fear losing funding, their visa, or their supervisor's favour or respect.

Supervisors from international backgrounds may also find it challenging to work with Canadian students who may not share the same cultural expectations about power differentials in the relationship. For an effective intercultural supervisory relationship, early discussion and clarification about these issues is necessary, as is a willingness to adapt communication styles by both the student and supervisor.



While cultural adaptation for new international students may take several years, supervisors can help facilitate the process with good communication. For instance, they can articulate academic and cultural expectations and norms both within and outside of the academic institution (e.g. politeness to all staff, code of conduct, how original research ideas are developed in Canada); provide honest and constructive feedback and guidance about a student's behaviour; facilitate connections (e.g. between students in their group and other members of the department); direct or help students find appropriate resources and supports (e.g. to improve academic writing, mental health); encourage students to take initiative and express ideas and opinions, discuss work-life balance; and acknowledge and show curiosity about the student's cultural background.

**Key points:**

- Focus on the desired positive behavior or outcome, and how to get there, rather than what is solely wrong with their work or behavior.
- If unsure, supervisors should ask (rather than assume) why a student is doing or not doing something they think is important.
- Be able to articulate academic and cultural expectations and norms both within and outside of the academic institution to all students, recognizing these norms may be different for many incoming international students

Supervisors should also be aware that when stressed, students are likely to revert to communication patterns from their home culture. In cases where both student and supervisor are from the same culture and there is a well-defined hierarchy, it is recommended that supervisors work solely in English to avoid falling into cultural practices inherent with the language use that may not reflect the University of Alberta's values and expectations. Sometimes it helps supervisors and/or students to add a co-supervisor, who can induce a healthier dynamic in the three-person constellation over what was happening in the dyad relationship.



### **Respect family life**

One quarter of our graduate students are parents. Child care availability near the university campus is often expensive for graduate students and is limited, requiring many students to be on waiting lists for months before their child has a spot.

Many of our international students, who rarely have family to help look after their children, must then find alternative caregivers. Daycares and even day homes are generally strict about opening and closing times for the day, which limits parents' flexibility to go in early or work late.

Further, daycares often have several in-service days a year, requiring parents to make other arrangements for child care. Supervisors need to be sensitive to these restricted work hours parents hold, and allow flexibility for doctor's appointments, sick kids, significant holidays, and important children's events for which parents normally attend in Canada. It is important to recognize that by nature of biology women are the ones to have children, and healthy children and parents are in everyone's best interest.

Students should not be labeled as less committed if they have children during their graduate studies, nor admonished for looking after them when extra parental attention is required. It is the childbearing and child-parenting years that most students experience during graduate school, and given the increasing challenges many women experience getting pregnant, the years of graduate student and parenting young children often overlaps.

Men are encouraged and entitled to take parental leave as well, and there should be no stigma on men parenting as graduate students.

It is not ethical to end a students' funding if they are pregnant or a parent of a young child.

Good supervision requires supervisors openly discuss with graduate students who have young children how they will allot time to

### **Resources for graduate students who are parents**

There are a number of initiatives at UA to support a family-friendly campus: <https://www.ualberta.ca/graduate-students-association/services/graduate-student-parents>

Parent Link:

<https://www.ualberta.ca/graduate-studies/professional-development/parent-link>

### **Maternity leave**

In general, full time graduate students are entitled to six months maternity or parental leave if they are the primary caregiver. The Graduate Student Collective Agreement details eligibility of graduate students to maternity and parental leave (see [Article 15](#)). The Tri-council agencies also have a policy on [parental leave](#) for graduate students.



complete their graduate work and program, and how to support their students' ability to be good parents while completing their degree in a timely fashion.

**Key points:**

- Supervisors need to be sensitive to the restricted working hours of parents, and should provide flexibility for parental duties during some regular work- time hours.
- Students have varying entitlements to maternity leave.
- Supervisors should openly discuss with graduate students who have young children how they can support your students' ability to be good parents while they complete their degree in a timely fashion.

**Help students through mental health challenges**

Many graduate students have mental health problems during their programs. These challenges may be due to a mix of internal struggles and/or external events in their lives. Uncertainty of supervisor support, supervisor inattentiveness, unreasonable delays in the scheduling of their thesis defense, and ongoing tensions and conflict with one's supervisor can significantly affect a student's mental well-being. Students may be facing other stressors too, such as social isolation, apprehension about career opportunities, higher than normal levels of depression, and anxiety. Students may feel overwhelmed by the work loads of teaching, undertaking research, coursework, and meeting the expectations of their supervisor.

A good supervisor will watch for signs of discouragement as well as success, and should be mindful of signs of emotional and physical distress. "Students reporting more functional relationships with their advisors overall are less likely to report mental health needs" (Hyun et al. 2006: 262). Hyun et al. (2006) have also found that graduate students who interact with sympathetic administrative staff and supervisors, who then direct them to appropriate services, are more likely to use mental health services than those students with less functional academic

**Mental health resources**

Students who are faced with depression, recurring anxiety, addictions, and other mental health problems often need professional help. Supervisors must be able to guide students to resources on campus that can help. This [link](#) to campus resources is a good start.

If you feel a student is at risk of harming themselves or someone else, you should contact the [Helping Individuals at Risk](#) office.

To build the skills and knowledge necessary to support your peers' mental health and well-being, the [Community Helpers Program](#) runs workshops for both staff and students.

and administrative relationships. Students who are faced with depression, recurring anxiety, addictions, and other mental health problems often need professional help.

Supervisors need to be able to guide students to resources on campus that can help:

<https://www.ualberta.ca/current-students/wellness/mental-health>

Graduate students are often challenged with issues such as Imposter's Syndrome, where they feel they may not be smart enough to be in graduate school, or perfectionism, where they do not want to give a piece of their work to their supervisor unless they believe it is flawless. Both states of mind can delay progress and the personal growth that comes from trial and error, feedback, and revision.

Regular meetings with students, and providing thoughtful and helpful comments on written pieces (and other types) of work early in the student's Master's or PhD program can demystify the role of criticism and constructive feedback in a student's learning process. Do not assume that only those students who ask for help need it.

If a student is falling behind on his or her work, give the student the benefit of the doubt. Find out if they are exhausted, unclear about their next steps, or if they are uncomfortable with some feature of the project or research team. Make yourself open to students to discuss academic and non-academic issues.

Students with particular health challenges may also need accommodations that allow them to equitably pursue the process and completion of their graduate degrees. Supervisors are required to abide to the [Duty to Accommodate Policy](#).



**Key points:**

- A good supervisor will watch for times of discouragement and be mindful of signs of emotional and physical distress.
- Graduate students who interact with sympathetic administrative staff and supervisors, whom direct them to appropriate services, are more likely to use mental health services than others without this supportive environment.
- Supervisors should make themselves open to students to discuss academic and non-academic issues.
- Supervisors should be aware that students may need to take a [medical or compassionate leave](#) to heal or attend to these personal difficulties.

During their degree, many students face personal challenges due to illness, deaths in their family, divorce, civil strife in their home country, and other potentially traumatic events. They are likely to especially need compassion and comfort to be able to talk candidly about what they can and cannot do while they are facing such challenges. Supervisors should be aware that students may need to take a [medical or compassionate leave](#) to heal or attend to these personal difficulties.

**Key points:**

- A good mentor recognizes that a graduate degree may sharpen a student's ability to make many kinds of contributions.
- Supporting students' professional development involves working with students on their [Individual Development Program](#).

**Support students' professional development**

A good mentor recognizes that a graduate degree may sharpen a student's ability to make many differing contributions to specialist knowledge, social change, public understanding, artistic creation, and other creative pursuits. The majority of students in PhD programs will not go on to be professors, and the majority of Master's students do not go on to complete PhDs.

**Professional development opportunities**

[Professional development offerings](#) in the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research [Student Success Centre](#) (especially Writing Resources)



A recent survey done by FGSR at the University of Alberta (FGSR 2017b) revealed that most students occasionally or rarely have career conversations with their supervisors, and few students share their career goals with their supervisors. It is unfortunate to hear stories from students who fear they will not be taken seriously by their supervisor if they admit to their supervisor they do not want an academic career.

Some students have told FGSR staff they chose to conceal their professional development activities because of the low priority some supervisors place on learning opportunities outside of their research work.

Nevertheless, most students will have fulfilling careers in self-owned businesses, government, industry, or research-focused, non-profit, or charitable organizations. Supporting students' professional development thus involves working with students on their [Individual Development Program](#) (IDP, a required professional development component for most graduate students at UA). In particular, supervisors can hold discussions with each graduate student about the student's self-assessment during their IDP, to offer their own perspective on the student's areas of strength and opportunities for growth.

Supervisors may be in a special position to network with others who know more than they do about opportunities for the student's desired learning or type of employment. Supporting professional development means encouraging students to meet future employers, present papers to relevant non-academic audiences, gain special training that is relevant to knowledge application, and in general encouraging graduate students to attend UA-offered professional development opportunities, of which there are many!

### **Support a diverse graduate student population**

Supervisors can support a diverse graduate student population through recruitment efforts and in the personalized way they mentor students from different backgrounds or orientations.

Diversity is a source of strength in academia. The University of Alberta wants to be a welcome and thriving place for our indigenous populations, LGBTQ+ members, persons with disabilities, and people from all ethnic, racial, and socio-economic backgrounds. The University of Alberta is actively trying to recruit more indigenous graduate students across all disciplines and to provide more opportunities for professors and

graduate students to collaboratively work with First Peoples (First Nation, Inuit, and Métis) communities to pursue knowledge, creative works, and solve problems together. Our students also come from over a hundred different countries.

Good supervision means professors welcome diversity and seek an inclusive environment where all students can thrive. Supervisors are in a unique position; they have the opportunity to be part of the cultural change that removes the structural barriers that have discouraged or prevented diverse peoples from obtaining a higher education degree or receiving the support they need to complete their degrees, such as institutional discrimination.

By supporting diversity, professors ideally check their own explicit and unconscious biases. This effort means re-evaluating how students are admitted to graduate programs, who receives guidance and mentorship early in their academic journey, and how all students are supported and funded on campuses to eliminate barriers preventing success.

Supervisors can also create a supportive environment by showing curiosity and appreciation for diversity, double checking how they are understood by their graduate students, and with regard to minority graduate students' needs (rephrase and recheck often), by being sensitive to the needs of someone whose particular situation may call for greater consideration due to the disproportionate disadvantages they may have faced on their journey to graduate school.

All professors, staff and students are expected to abide by the [Canada Human Rights Act](#) which prohibits discrimination based on race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, age, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, marital status, family status, genetic characteristics, disability, and conviction for an offence for which a pardon has been granted or in respect of which a record suspension has been ordered. Canadian universities are now creating Action Plans for Inclusive Excellence (see this [article](#) from the Globe and Mail) to ensure greater equity, diversity, and inclusion on campuses across the country, and to better reflect the diversity in the general population.



**Key points:**

- The University of Alberta is actively trying to recruit more indigenous graduate students across the disciplines.
- The University of Alberta wants to be a welcome and thriving place for our LGBTQ+ members, persons with disabilities, and people from all ethnic, racial and socio-economic backgrounds.
- By supporting diversity, professors check their own explicit and unconscious biases. This requires reevaluating how students are admitted to graduate programs, who receives guidance and mentorship early in their academic journey, and how all students are supported and funded on campuses to eliminate barriers that hinder success.

## **Develop your supervisory skills**

The University of Alberta expects that professors will invest in being good supervisors, provide high-quality environments for research and learning at every stage of the graduate program, and hone their supervisory and mentorship skills as they do for teaching and research.

Supervisors are expected to fulfill multiple roles as they guide their students through their graduate program that together enhance their own capacity as researchers and communicators. The Faculty of Graduate Studies (FGSR) web page "[Resources for Faculty and Staff](#)" has a number of resources available. As well, numerous procedures are described in our [Graduate Program Manual](#) that can help guide supervisors in fulfilling supervisory expectations.

There are many opportunities through FGSR to invest in good supervision and mentorship through our [Mentorship Academy workshop series](#), as well as through other speakers and workshops. Workshops are generally offered in the fall, winter and spring terms, and address topics such as "What is a good mentor", "How to most effectively help graduate students with writing projects", "Effectively addressing tension and conflict in graduate student-supervisor relationships", "Constructive communication to maximize learning", "The Supervisor's role in the 'good candidacy' and the 'good defense'" and several others.

Learning occurs as we reflect on practice, identify ways to improve, and try out new behaviors.

It takes six weeks to develop a new good habit. Supervisors can be a part of this reflective practice through their own professional behavior, and through their role as a model not only to their students, but to their fellow colleagues in the ways they adopt best practices for supervision.

Anything a supervisor does to become more self-aware and aware of their graduate students' experiences at UA will likely make them a better supervisor. As a supervisor, it is important to enjoy the privilege of this learning journey alongside the amazing leaders, problem solvers, and creative citizens of years to come.



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