

Steps Towards a Good Graduate Student – Supervisor Relationship

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Welcome

■ A bit about myself:

- Garth Huber is a Professor of Physics
- Researcher in Subatomic Physics for over 30 years, over 200 refereed journal articles
- Currently supervising:
 - 2 PDFs, 1 Research Associate, 4 PhD students
- Recipient of the 2024 FGSR Award for Outstanding Graduate Supervision

■ Outline

- The “secret” to supervisor-relationship success
- Rights and Responsibilities
- What to do when things go wrong
- Questions and Conversation

The “secret” is open and clear communication

- Communication is a two a way street
- Consider the mode of communication
 - In person, online, phone, written
- Be honest
- Actively listen
- Clarify what you have heard
- Confirm afterwards (preferably in writing)

What students can do...

- Initiate regular meetings (don't wait for your supervisor)
- Topics: what does “regular” mean to you and what does it mean to your supervisor?
 - Create a time-table, schedule and initiate and attend
 - Can we talk about this research or this assignment?
How can I prepare grants or journal articles? How am I doing overall? I need help!
- Ask questions, be present – in person is usually best

Communication...

Understand the “culture” of your faculty or lab...

- Attend workshops or seminars in your department or faculty
 - Especially if your supervisor is attending or presenting!
- Be independent as possible i.e. be aware of deadlines and responsibilities
 - If you forget or need help.... ask. (Independence with support!)

Communication... Build boundaries

- Create and clarify boundaries... i.e.
 - Does your supervisor expect you to answer calls or email on the weekend?
 - Do you expect your supervisor to respond to your emails or calls after 8 PM?
 - Sometimes communication and research work outside of normal hours is required to meet some external deadline
 - How long does your supervisor typically take to provide feedback?
 - 1-2 weeks is recommended, but it depends on the context
- **Boundaries change over time so re-evaluate periodically**

Communication... Be social

- Be social and friendly

- Say “hi” in the hallway – it is okay to have a social conversation with your supervisor and get to know one another
- Some groups engage in “team building” social events outside of working hours. These help establish collegial working relationships and better integrate diverse groups into a team

What relationship skills do you already have?

- Respect
- Honesty
- Compassion/empathy
- Humor
- Genuine
- Kindness
- Active listening

Rights and Responsibilities

Graduate students have the right to ...

- expect a professional relationship with their advisors and committee members
- expect a reasonable degree of confidentiality and privacy
- feel safe when conducting research
- not have to tolerate bullying, discrimination or sexual harassment
- request a separation from advisors with whom irreconcilable differences have arisen
- assistance from their advisors, committee members, Department and FGSR in ensuring a successful student-advisor relationship

Supervisor's Role ...

- Assisting with selection of courses
- Development and implementation of a research project
- Overseeing the research and writing of the thesis and giving timely feed-back (between 1-2 weeks)
- Monitoring the progress of the student and informing the student immediately if their performance in either courses or research falls below the required standard
- Offering and teaching research hours
- Communicating to the student and the committee on the student's progress and any concerns

Set Clear and Realistic Expectations

- Learn what your supervisor expects of you
- Tell your supervisor your expectations for your graduate work
- Create milestones together with your supervisor
- Be responsible to your commitments

Respect Your Supervisor

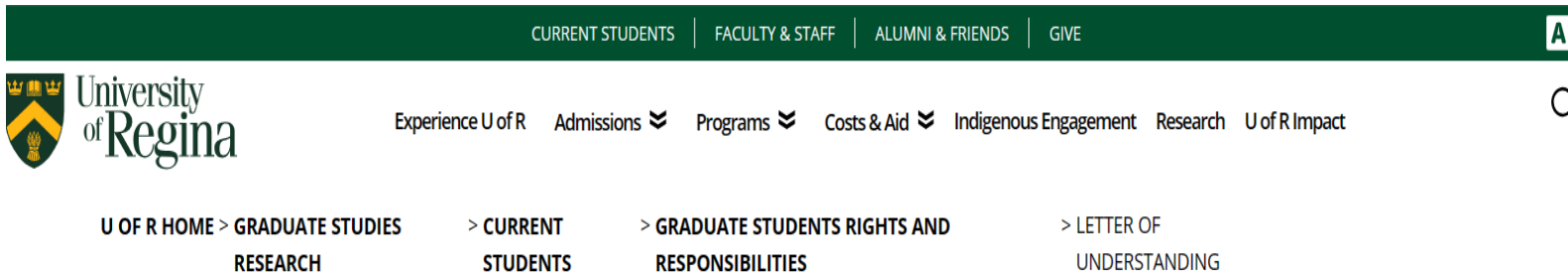
- Professional, platonic relationship
- Be courteous and thank your supervisor for their support
- Don't argue but rather negotiate
- Be aware of dissatisfaction on either side
- Be on time and be prepared for meetings
- Follow through
- Do not expect instantaneous or continual communication

Intellectual Development

- **The goal of a successful graduate program is not only for the student to acquire the skills needed to complete their thesis project, but also to prepare them for success in their future careers.**
- Evidence of leadership in a variety of different venues is highly valued:
- **Communication skills:**
 - Internal and external research contributions
 - Three Minute Thesis Competition
 - Assist with public outreach
- **Mentoring skills:**
 - assist in the supervision of more junior students
- **Soft skills:**
 - Professional Development workshops
 - Get involved in a Student Group, or as a Student Representative on some other group (such as your collaboration)
- **Be proactive in your intellectual development and engage with your supervisor on this journey!**

Letter of Understanding

- <https://www.uregina.ca/graduate-studies-research/current-students/graduate-students-rights-and-responsibilities/letter-of-understanding.html>



Letter of Understanding

Template and guidelines for writing a Letter of Understanding between a graduate student and supervisor.

The Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research aspires to provide the highest quality of graduate student supervision experience at the University of Regina (U of R). This document is clarifying the graduate student supervisor relationship and aligning supervisor and graduate student expectations. Following national best practices, and U of R policy about what constitutes a respectful university, this Letter of Understanding (LoU) template aims to facilitate a conversation between supervisor and student to help build a respectful and fruitful relationship of mutual benefit. It is highly recommended that students and supervisors review this LoU at the beginning of the program and revise and adjust it as the graduate program progresses (if needed).

Instructions

1. Student and supervisor(s) should read the supporting information for the creation of a Letter of Understanding by the Canadian Association of Graduate Students (you can access it through this link <https://cags.ca/cags-publications/> select *Best Practices* and then *Creating a letter of Understanding for Advisors/supervisors and Students*).
2. Student and supervisor(s) should meet to discuss the document and identify each person's main responsibilities.
3. Supervisor(s) should write the LoU (template below)
4. Student and supervisor(s) should initial to indicate acceptance of their responsibilities
5. Student and supervisor(s) will keep a copy of an initialed LoU

As a student, I will...

- Develop skills, learning approaches, and background knowledge necessary to carry out graduate work
- Carry out academic activities with rigor and intellectual honesty
- Arrange and attend regular meetings with supervisor(s) to assess performance, discuss progress, research related topics, preparation and submission of thesis, journal articles, etc.
- Arrange and attend term meetings with supervisor(s) to discuss course work, research, schedules for work completion, funding and all matters pertaining to support of the student's studies, including personal matters, if necessary

As a student, I will... (2)

- Be up to date in matters related to deadlines, regulations and registration at all university levels (department or unit, faculties (home faculty and FGSR))
- Make timely progress towards completion of degree (FGSR recommends a semester-by-semester plan be set when a student begins their degree)
- Read about [Intellectual Property](#) and agree to be bound by the rules and regulations governing the ownership of IP as set out in the policy unless an alternative agreement has been agreed to by student and supervisor.
- Comply with all University of Regina Safety, Health and Safety policies and protocols (<https://www.uregina.ca/policy/browse-policy/policy-GOV-100-005.html>) in the classroom, residence, laboratory and campus at large

As a supervisor, I will...

- Make sure the student's research/project has appropriate research question(s) and achievable goals, can be finished within the given time and aligns with the program structure
- Provide the student with the resources (equipment, space, etc.) necessary to conduct research/work, guide the formation of the supervisory committee and the identification of the external examiner. Meet with the student to discuss course selection, research/project and financial support as appropriate
- Meet with the student to discuss intellectual property, copyright and data sharing
- Arrange and attend regular meetings with the student to assess performance, discuss progress, assignments and research related topics, and preparation and submission of thesis, journal articles, etc.

As a supervisor, I will... (2)

- Arrange and attend term meetings to discuss course work, research, schedule for work completion, funding and all matters pertaining to support of the student's studies, including personal matters, if necessary
- Provide timely feedback that is also constructive, honest and fair on assignments, essays, reports, presentations, project, thesis drafts and other documents pertaining to the student's graduate work (FGSR recommends returning feedback in 2-3 weeks)
- Inform and update the student on policies and procedures at all university levels related to all aspects of student's graduate studies including course work, research/project development, safety, wellbeing, etc.
- Make necessary arrangements to ensure the continuity of supervision during leaves or extended periods of absence
- Read about [Intellectual Property](#) and agree to be bound by the rules and regulations governing the ownership of IP as set out in the policy unless an alternative agreement has been agreed to by both student and supervisor
- Comply with all University of Regina Safety, Health and Safety policies and protocols (<https://www.uregina.ca/policy/browse-policy/policy-GOV-100-005.html>) to make sure all students and personnel in the classroom, office and laboratory are safe

Collaborative Responsibilities

- Many disciplines follow a “Big Science” model, where research is done in the context of a formal Collaboration involving researchers from multiple institutions and countries.
- Collaborations impose their own rules and obligations on both students and professors, such as:
 - **Integrity:** recording and maintaining research results in a form that allows subsequent use, analysis, review, and reproduction of our findings by other collaborators to the maximum extent possible;
 - **Transparency:** meet regularly (weekly, bi-weekly, or monthly) with external collaborators to give updates on research progress, and seek their expertise so that no major issues in our scientific research are overlooked and that our final results are of the highest possible quality;

Collaborative Responsibilities (2)

- Collaborations impose their own rules and obligations on both students and professors, such as
 - **Communication:** regularly attend collaboration meetings or workshops, present our research progress and/or plans at these meetings, and actively seek collaborative input;
 - **Reciprocity:** read all draft manuscripts resulting from our collaborative activities, and provide timely detailed comments (or our explicit agreement) to the lead authors;
 - **Collegiality:** make every effort to be a user/member in “good standing” as defined by the Code of Conduct of the collaboration. This includes:
 - professional and respectful behavior to collaborators and laboratory staff
 - readily providing documentation or source code for our group’s work that is beneficial to others
 - properly acknowledging the contributions of others
 - contributing to collaboration research equipment or software maintenance and/or fulfilling the data-taking requirements for manuscript authorship privileges on experiments led by other members of the collaboration

Sometimes Bad Things Happen

- Different expectations between you and your supervisor
- Funding difficulties
- Unexpressed personal issues
- Problems with your supervisor or other students
- Anxiety, loneliness, and homesickness

Signs of an unhealthy relationship

- Belittling or harassing students or collaborators
- Supervisors or collaborators expecting too many work hours
- Giving conflicting instructions or setting inconsistent expectations
- In these cases, it's important to speak up calmly and clearly regarding behavior either to you, or to a colleague
- Set clear boundaries through assertive communication

Conflict? How to get your concerns addressed

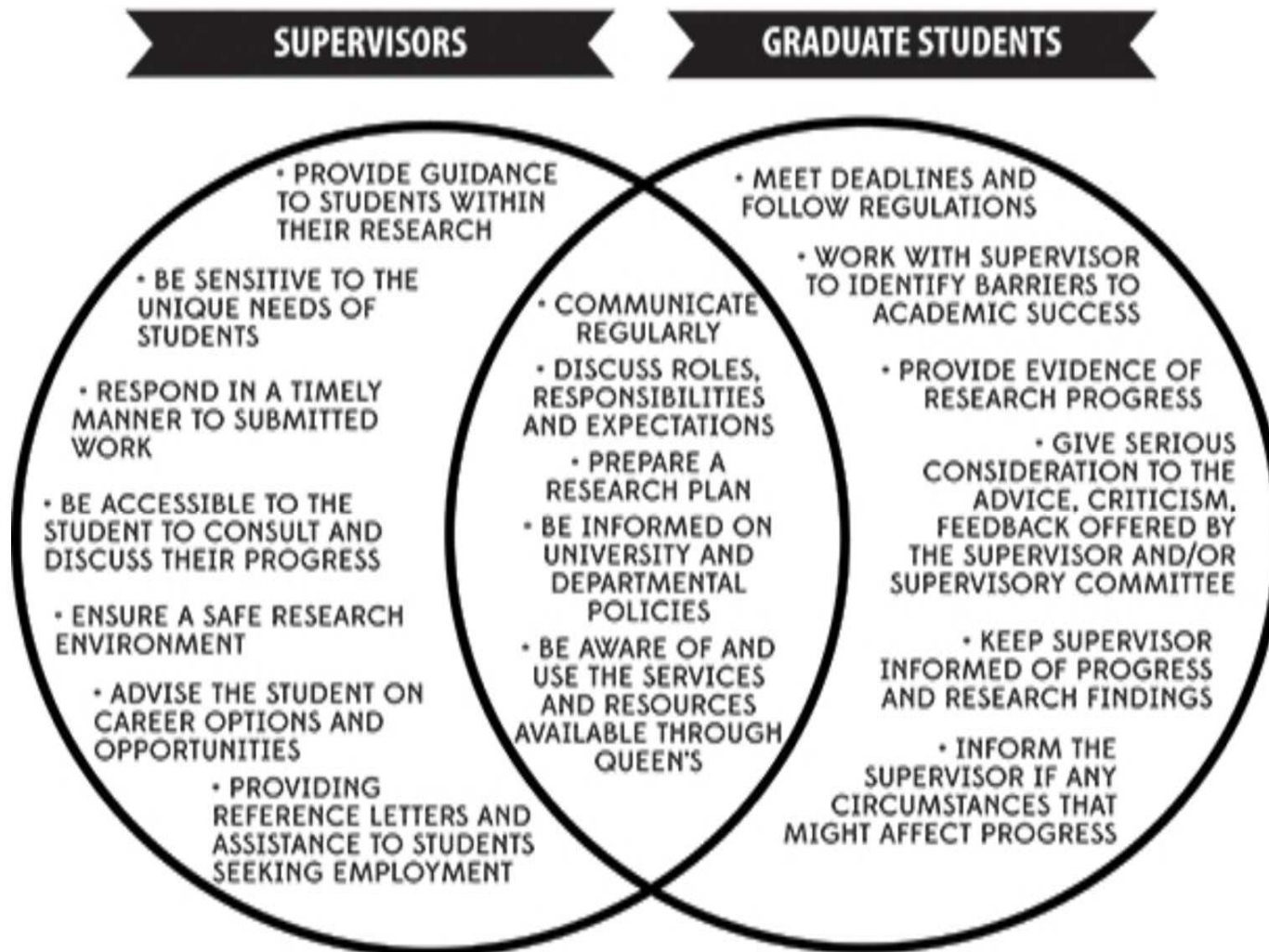
- Talk to your supervisor
- Talk to your supervisory committee or to a trusted external collaborator
- Talk to your faculty graduate coordinator
- Talk to your faculty Associate Dean
- Talk to the Associate Dean of Graduate Studies
- Talk to the Dean of Graduate Studies

If the issue is not being resolved, take it to the next level

Taking care of yourself

- Practice a healthy work-life balance
- Get involved
- Know your rights
- Allies are important! Your supervisor should not be your only mentor, good relationships with other students, PDFs and profs can help when things are difficult
- **Ask for help if you need it**

What should the student–supervisor relationship look like?



Some of the responsibilities of graduate students and supervisors.