

Supervisor-student conflict resolution

The University of Alberta has several different resources for students and supervisors to use as guidelines for any student-supervisor relationship. For a basic description of the responsibilities and guidelines for students and supervisors, please see the University's 2008–2009 Calendar. Open communication between the student and supervisor are key to ensuring a good relationship, but in case of disputes there are several mechanisms in place to protect both parties. In cases where the disputes are due to employment problems, the FGSR publication, "Funding of Graduate Students" (the Grey Book) provides a complete dispute resolution clause under Section 6. In cases involving the supervisor and student outside the context of 'employment' please see the section in the "Graduate Program Manual" (GPM) on Dealing with Problems in Supervision.

The first step in resolving any dispute is to try to resolve the conflict or misunderstanding informally as early as possible. The student and the supervisor should sit down together and discuss their concerns. If necessary, they can consult with the student's supervisory committee to get different perspectives on the issue. If the dispute is not solved at that level, the Department or Graduate Chair should be consulted, as it is the responsibility of the Department Chair to arrange for the necessary consultation and mediation. The final level to deal with disputes within the university community is the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research. The Dean, or Associate Deans, of FGSR will work with the supervisor, student, and Department Chair to resolve the dispute, up to and including arranging for alternate supervision or department transfer. In cases where no resolution can be reached at this level, the student may be required to withdraw from the program or to transfer departments. It is essential for all parties involved to work hard to prevent the escalation of any dispute to reach this level of severity. Throughout any dispute, students can always ask for help or advice from the GSA or from the Graduate Student Ombudsperson (780) 492-9183.

How to be a successful graduate student*

1. Form a strong professional relationship with your supervisor.
2. Learn from your supervisor(s) about supervisory skills.
3. Do not become married to your research.
4. Collaborate.
5. Publish before you leave.
6. Be aggressive in your approach to meetings with faculty and colleagues.
7. Spend at least half a day per week in the library.
8. Get involved in teaching.
9. Get involved in leadership activities (i.e. GSA, Department committees, Faculty committees, etc.).
10. Use a daytimer or electronic organizer.
11. Build bridges, do not burn them.
12. Use time off for pleasure.
13. Interact with the outside world.
14. Talk about your research with friends from your field.
15. Read general publications within your field.

* Used with permission from Dr. Jeff Goldberg, Associate Chair of Graduate Programs, Department of Biological Sciences

Remember:

1. Never assume you don't need to know policies or that they don't apply to you.
2. Take ethical concerns seriously; even minor concerns can come back to haunt you.



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Keys to successful Student-Supervisor Relationships at the University of Alberta

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elcome to graduate student life at the University of Alberta, a new stage full of challenges, excitement, and learning experiences. The opportunity to study at the U of A will develop your personal skills; allow you to explore your limits of patience, endurance, and satisfaction; and provide you the opportunity to do original research. The most important element of making your graduate studies as successful as possible is to establish a strong working relationship with your supervisor(s).

Maybe the best way to start building such a relationship is by asking, "What do I need and expect from my supervisor? What does my supervisor need and expect from me?" This pamphlet is designed to help you think about the various questions you and your potential supervisor might want to discuss. Our goal is to help you make your transition into graduate life easy and successful. The GSA wishes you the best in your new learning experience. We hope that your time at the U of A will be one that rewards you with the enjoyment of discovery and accomplishment of your goals.

Questions you may want to ask your supervisor

Supervisor expectations

- What do you expect from me as your student?
- How frequently do you expect to meet with your graduate students?
- How many hours of work per week do you expect from a graduate student?
- What is your preferred mode of communication? (i.e., in person or via e-mail)
- Do your graduate students have periodic meetings (i.e., lab meetings, research groups, brown bag lunches, etc.)?

Supervisor history with graduate students

- How many graduate students do you currently have?
- How many graduate students or post-docs have you previously supervised?
- How successful are your past students at continuing on in the field?
- How long does it typically take your PhD or Masters students to finish their degrees?

Supervisor availability

- How accessible are you to answer your student's questions and to discuss your student's research results?
- Do you expect to be away from the University for an extended period during the course of my program?
- How accessible are you when you are away from campus?
- Is it a possibility that you might retire or change institutions while I am your student?

Research, teaching, and publishing opportunities

- Could I have some of your recent publications to look at?
- How much independence do your graduate students have in designing their research project?
- What role do I have in the selection of my committee?
- How frequently do your graduate students attend national and international conferences?
- How frequently do your graduate students publish? And do they publish as first author?
- Do you encourage your students to teach during the course of their studies?

Time and resources

- What are the sources of funding provided for me during my studies?
- Do all of your graduate students receive funding?
- Will I have time to work part-time if I do not get adequately funded?
- What financial resources are available to me for conference or research related travel expenses?
- Does the department have resources like computers, photocopying, phone access, and mail boxes available for graduate students?