



How to Ensure a Rewarding Thesis-based Student-Supervisor Experience at the University of Alberta

The relationship between students and supervisors is arguably the most important relationship you will develop in graduate school. Your supervisor or mentor will be the person that will help you throughout your graduate school career as they advise you on course selection, program trajectory, research development and progress, and support you on scholarships, career development, and job searches. While supervision styles and cultures may vary across the university, understanding the roles and expectations may help you align your goals better with the supervisor and department culture you inherit. That is why it is important to ensure that your relationship is professional and all expectations are made clear right from the moment you are paired with or choose a supervisor in a Master's (thesis based) or a PhD. Below are some helpful tips to assist you identify a supervisor, understand everyone's roles and responsibilities, maintain a healthy professional relationship, and deal with conflict.

How to identify the right supervisor:

Some programs require you to identify a supervisor upon application. Others may assign you a supervisor after admission, while others will assign you a temporary supervisor until you find your own. You must have a permanent supervisor within 12 months of starting the program. You can ask the Graduate administrator how this process works for the program into which you enroll.

When you are looking for a supervisor it is important that you have a sense of the supervisory style ranging from [low support \(laissez faire/directorial\) to high support \(pastoral/contractual\) \(Gatfield 2005\)](#) and culture of your potential mentor and your department or Faculty. You will need to inquire about expectations, funding, and interaction styles. The Graduate Student Association (GSA) has developed [some useful questions to ask your potential supervisor](#) so that you are well aware of expectations and responsibilities before you commit to working with that supervisor.

Roles and responsibilities as a student:

What to expect from your supervisor and committee:

For a relationship to be both productive and healthy everyone needs to understand their role and responsibilities. Below you will find listings for the roles and responsibilities of the student, supervisor, and supervisory committee as per the [University of Alberta Calendar](#) and the [FGSR Graduate Program Manual](#).

Student

As a student you are ultimately responsible for your own program. You are expected to read the Calendar, *The FGSR Graduate Program Manual*, and any other department or program relevant documents in order to understand regulations and deadlines.



You are responsible for:

- Ensuring that your registration is accurate and does not lapse
- Submitting appropriate forms the department requires for signature and processing
- Paying all fees required by the deadlines set out in the relevant documentation
- Informing yourself of possible scholarship opportunities and seeking advice regarding these
- Being aware of supervisor and departmental expectations
- Informing your supervisor about your progress
- Communicating with your supervisor, supervisory committee, administrator, and graduate coordinator about progress and any concerns that may arise
- Discussing any conflicts with the appropriate individuals

To understand the general guidelines for students see [*The Graduate Program Manual \(Section 1.1\)*](#).

Supervisor

The supervisor is directly responsible for the supervision of the student's program. The supervisor's role is to:

- Assist the student in planning the program
- Ensure that the student is aware of program requirements
- Inform the student about department/Faculty and FGSR regulations
- Give advice about the program, the expected standards in the discipline
- Stay informed about the student's research activities and progress
- Conduct research that is effective, safe, and productive
- Work with the student to set up the Supervisory Committee or equivalent on a yearly basis
- Ensure that supervisory committee meetings and examinations are held in accordance with FGSR regulation
- Review the thesis in draft and final form
- Communicate with the student in a timely manner and form

To understand the general guidelines for supervisors see [*The Graduate Program Manual \(Section 1.2\)*](#).

Supervisory Committee

The supervisory committee (or an equivalent such as a secondary 'reader') acts as a supplementary resource for graduate students' research. They also help monitor your program progress and approve the thesis (PhD) for defense.

How to set expectations:

Many of the issues that arise between supervisors and graduate students result from miscommunication or unmet expectations on either or both sides. During the first meeting between the supervisor and student (or very early on in the professional relationship) expectations need to be set, where applicable, regarding roles, key documents, registration requirements, academic requirements, the role of the supervisor, funding, research collaboration, the thesis, author conventions, and availability for further assistance. Setting early expectations creates a positive tone and allows you both to thrive in your professional relationship.



See the [FGSR Template Conversation Checklist for new Graduate Students](#) (under Supporting Student Success) that FGSR recommends for discussion early in your program. Your department or Faculty will have a more specific checklist.

How to ensure a healthy Student- Supervisor relationship:

As a graduate student you have both [rights](#) and responsibilities. Below are some tips for ensuring a healthy and productive relationship with your supervisor.

1. Ask for regular meetings.
2. If applicable discuss funding during the first formal meeting and as issues arise or whenever circumstances change. You need to know what you can and cannot expect.
3. Ask for feedback and be open to feedback.
4. Ask for assistance in developing a plan with clear milestones and deadlines
5. Define a manageable research topic, develop a research plan, write the thesis, and prepare for defense.
6. “Recognize and acknowledge that a robust element of academic challenge and questioning is a normal, and indeed, healthy aspect of the student-supervisor relationship” (CAGS Guidelines 2008).
7. Ask for guidance on such matters as scholarship applications, presenting at conferences and getting published, and on general professional development.

How to deal with conflict:

If you have a dispute with someone in your graduate program it is best to resolve the dispute as quickly as you can. Resolve it informally by meeting with the parties involved. Speaking to people face to face allows for fewer misunderstandings. You should discuss the problem together. Ask for documentation of the discussions and keep a record of any agreements you made. In the event of a conflict that cannot be resolved, the Graduate Coordinator should be consulted as early as possible by you and your supervisor. Or if you do not feel confident in dealing with the situation, you can go to your Graduate Coordinator in your department to ask for assistance. If for some reason you cannot talk to your Graduate Supervisor or your Graduate Coordinator you can seek out advice from the appropriate Associate Dean Grad in your Faculty, the Student Ombudservice (ombuds@ualberta.ca), Graduate Students' Association (gsa.frontdesk@ualberta.ca), or make an appointment with an Associate Dean at FGSR. Associate Deans, FGSR are available for students if they cannot resolve the conflict at the departmental level. To make an appointment contact ascdean@ualberta.ca.

How to resolve conflict:

- Be calm, be patient, be clear.
- Stick to the facts and be aware of how you are approaching the situation.
- De-escalate the situation and handle it sooner rather than later.
- Protect yourself (and your memory) by keeping a record of meetings, deadlines, and events.
- Seek advice (from your department’s Graduate Coordinator, the Associate Dean – Grad in your faculty, or an FGSR Associate Dean).
- Know when to end the relationship but recognize that doing so may delay your program at best and may make it difficult to continue your project.



If informal resolution is unsuccessful or inappropriate and the graduate coordinator determines that the supervisor-student relationship is beyond repair, the department will attempt in good faith to work with you to find alternative supervision within the department and will keep the FGSR apprised of these efforts. Where the supervisor has been providing funding to the student, the funding should continue for a period of at least 30 days from the date on which the graduate coordinator determines that the supervisor-student relationship is beyond repair. If the best arrangements of the department and the FGSR fail to meet your expectations, you may choose to withdraw. If you refuse to accept the supervision provided, or if no supervision can be secured, then you are not fulfilling the academic requirement of having a supervisor and may, on academic grounds, be required to withdraw.

Refer to the [Fairness in Communication Guide. A Relational Fairness Guide](#) developed by the University of Alberta Office of the Students Ombuds.

References:

Gatfield, T., "An Investigation into PhD Supervisory Management Styles: Development of a dynamic conceptual model and its managerial implications," *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 27.3 (2005), 311-325.