WELL-BEING THROUGH THE SFU SUPERVISORY PROCESS

SUPERVISOR GUIDE FOR ACTION

BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE

Mental health concerns negatively impact graduate student educational outcomes and degree completion. Graduate students who consider withdrawing academically suffer more from anxiety, exhaustion, and self-evaluated stress than their counterparts (Pyhältö et al., 2012). As a greater number of students are pursuing graduate education, unmanaged mental health concerns can have negative implications on their physical and mental well-being.

One of the main challenges that negatively impact graduate student well-being are problems relating to the supervisory relationship and misalignment of expectations (Pyhältö et al, 2012; Barry et al, 2018). Faculty mentors are perceived as the last resort for academic support, due to student concerns of possible repercussions on their standing and being viewed differently among their peers (Tompkins et al., 2016, Posselt, 2018).

Although there is an understanding that positive supervisory relationship leads to reduced stress, there are limited resources at SFU to support this. While 86% of graduate students identified that they were very or somewhat satisfied with their supervisor (SFU Graduate Exit Survey, 2018), it is important to build on best practices for understanding factors that contribute to positive mental health and well-being within faculty-student relationships.

The relationship between a graduate student and their supervisor has the most impact on reducing undue stress and contributing to a supportive institutional culture. This work builds upon the Thriving in Graduate School project and the following conditions identified in the Well-being in Learning Environments project:

- Personal Development
- Flexibility
- Social Connection
- Optimal Challenge
- Positive Classroom Culture

- Civic Engagement
- Instructor Support
- Services and Supports
- Inclusivity
- Real-Life Learning

By creating opportunities for personal development, flexibility, social connection, optimal challenge, and psychosocial support, graduate student well-being can be realized as part of a comprehensive campus approach.

PURPOSE

To provide a framework to intentionally consider how the supervisory process impacts the physical, social, and mental well-being of graduate students. It is acknowledged that the supervisory process is an essential part of the graduate student experience, and facilitating a mutually beneficial student-supervisor relationship contributes to learning and well-being.

Graduate student well-being and success are fundamental to the core business and research mission of the institution. The intent of applying this guide to the supervisory relationship is to contribute to an institutional environment and culture that supports student success and well-being.

SCOPE

This document aims to provide guidance on how to optimize the supervisory process to ensure graduate student learning, persistence, and success. The primary audience of this document are new faculty members who are supervising their first graduate student, and experienced supervisors that are seeking to reflect upon and improve their practice. This document is not intended to be prescriptive, and should be interpreted and implemented in alignment with existing discipline policies, resources, and pedagogical practices. It has been prepared in an attempt to provide principles and guidelines that prevent undue stress caused by a break down of the student-supervisor relationship and/or prevent the development of unresolvable situations if the relationship does break down.

The statements in this guideline do not override the responsibility of supervisors to make decisions with their students, after considering each student's unique circumstances.

PRINCIPLES

All aspects of the supervisory process will embody a culture of respect and support for graduate student success and well-being.

Navigating the graduate supervisory process is seen as a unique teaching and learning opportunity for both the supervisor and graduate student.

LINK WITH SFU STRATEGIC VISION AND ACADEMIC MISSION

Enhancing graduate student well-being through the supervisory process improves retention, completion, and satisfaction. This project is aligned with SFU's 2019 – 2024 Academic Plan (Challenge 1.10), which includes "building on the Student Experience Initiative to ensure undergraduate, graduate, and postdoctoral students have positive supervisory experiences". This guide also contributes to SFU's Strategic Vision to be the leading engaged university defined by its dynamic integration of innovative education, cutting-edge research, and far-reaching community engagement.

HOW THIS DOCUMENT WAS CREATED

This document was developed collaboratively with supervisors who have won a Dean of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies Award for Excellence in Supervision, experienced supervisors from various faculties, staff, and graduate students.

Findings from a literature review of graduate student mental health, well-being and resilience; and an environmental scan of existing resources for supervisors were also incorporated.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

GUIDELINES FOR SUPERVISORS

AVAILABILITY

Initiate conversation about expectations early in the student's graduate education, and revisit these expectations as they evolve.

Provide access to regular meetings and be responsive at other times. Arrange for substitute supervision during extended absences.

I maintain a living "expectations" document that I send to prospective students and revisit regularly with my current students. It describes what students can expect of me, and what I expect of them, when it comes to: funding and support, guidance and mentoring, formulation of a research project, program progress, communication and conflict resolution, working habits and time management, dissemination of research results, publishing, data archival and intellectual property, research integrity, professional development and career preparation.

I schedule an hour a week for each of my students. We don't always use these slots, depending on the stage of the project, but I find students happy to take advantage of this time much more often than not.

- Dr. Gwenn Flowers | Earth Sciences

Dr. Daniel Leznoff (Chemistry) consistently goes out his way to provide support, guidance, and mentorship to graduate students: 'Students can email, phone, Skype or Zoom me at any time. I do not hang over their shoulders hourly, since that can be rather overbearing, but I ensure that I talk to everyone in the lab every day or two, even if it's just for a minute to say "how's it going - do you need anything from me?" If they ask me to look at something written, I try to do it as quickly as possible (which might take longer if I'm teaching a big class!), so that they are not held up'.

Dr. Ron Wakkary's (School of Interactive Arts and Technology) accessible and open personality contributes to a collaborative culture among all graduate students. He frequently holds group meetings with his students to explore different perspectives, share ideas, and exchange feedback. Ron's also been known for his preference for sitting with his graduate students in his innovative Everyday Design Studio, which has contributed to casual interactions during an in-person learning environment.

FLEXIBILITY

Find a balance between academic support and autonomy. Understand when to give more direction and when to encourage independent thinking by building the student's confidence in their personal research capabilities.

Appreciate the student's point of view and support the pursuit of their research questions.

Be mindful of any challenges related to remote/online learning, and the additional impact on equity-deserving students. Provide multiple options for communicating and collaborating.

Recognize and value the diversity of students. Adjust your supervisory practices according to their individual learning styles which may be related to their cultural background, strengths, and areas for improvement.

> Flexibility, when exercised with transparency, honesty, and good humour, is the most important guiding principle for me in my supervisory experience. It signals our recognition of graduate students' diversity in age, ability, and background. Each student responds differently to supervisory strategies and no supervisor could get everything right all the time. It is thus important to stay attentive to what works and what doesn't, and to be ready to change things up. For example, some students respond well to pressure and perform their best under high expectations and demanding conditions. By contrast, others thrive when nurtured with patience and positive reinforcement. Neither is necessarily the right or wrong strategy. Supervision is a process of trial and error: flexibility keeps us humble, allows us to make mistakes, and motivates us to find solutions whenever problems occur (and they inevitably will occur!)
>
> **- Dr. Helen Leung | Gender, Sexuality & Women's Studies**

Reframe challenges as learning opportunities, and place current performance into a longer-term context.

Cultivate trust by engaging on common ground and minimizing the usual faculty-student status hierarchy.

Consider creating a cohort of graduate students under your supervision to provide an opportunity for peer support and accountability.

GUIDELINES FOR SUPERVISORS

I think that oftentimes it's easy to forget that our grad students have a life outside of academia and that they may experience challenges and difficulties. I think it is important for the supervisor to be there for that too. I think it's important to inquire about how they feel, what's going on, to make sure that they are not experiencing severe difficulties at home. Without being intrusive I think students appreciate the fact that their supervisor cares. Sometimes it is also helpful to understand why the quality of work of a student is not as good as it can be. Personally, I do not develop friendship with my grad students. However, I'm trying to be there for them when they need support and they can recognize that. They know they can count on me and I think this is one of the things that can make a difference during the supervision process.

- Dr. Eric Beauregard | Criminology

GUIDELINES FOR SUPERVISORS

SOCIAL CONNECTION, INCLUSION AND BELONGING

Acquaint and socialize graduate students with departmental/discipline norms.

Be conscious of your mentoring role and demonstrate concern for the individual learner.

Learn about racialized and gendered aspects of academic life, and create a safe space for discussing issues when relevant.

Consider the Indigenous Wholistic Framework (Pidgeon, 2016) when supporting the meaningful inclusion of Indigenous knowledge(s) in pedagogy and practices. Acknowledge the role of kinship between a community of scholars, and respect inquiry-based learning between all levels of being (mental, emotional, spiritual and physical).
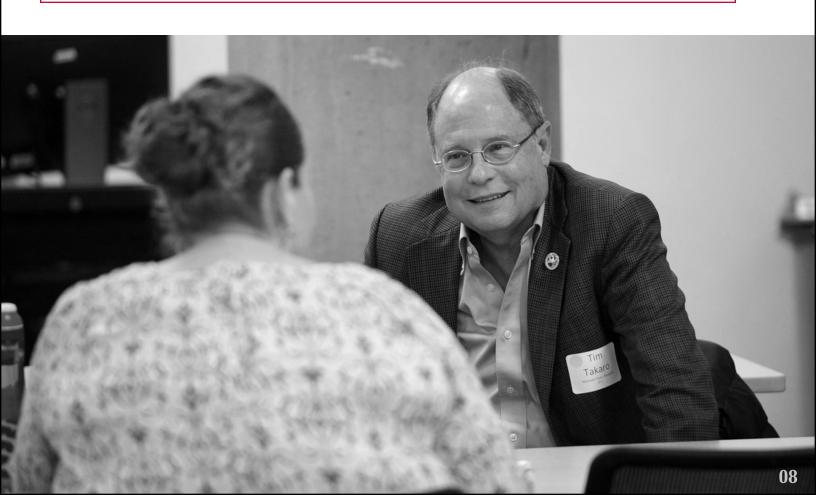
GUIDELINES FOR SUPERVISORS

OPTIMAL CHALLENGE

Offer structure with clear instructions and communicate high but realistic standards (e.g. messages regarding students' ability to succeed).

Give constructive feedback on written work submitted for review within a mutually agreed upon timeframe.

Provide or help students' access funding, equipment, or facilities to complete their research.

> Dr. Sean Blenkinsop (Education) recognizes that graduate students perform, and feel, their best when they are challenged and have adequate resources to meet that challenge. He has been known to find the balance of being supportive, while actively pushing students to critically reflect on how their work can be completed to the highest standard and in service to society. Sean also encourages a culture of respect for graduate students as scholars and people, when providing feedback on their draft research papers and connecting them to professional development opportunities.

GUIDELINES FOR SUPERVISORS

PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

Demonstrate understanding of the student as a whole person by keeping in mind the personal, scholarly, and professional dimensions of being a graduate student.

Support students through publication or conference presentation opportunities.

Discuss career prospects, and help with professional advancement.

Dr. Julian Somers (Health Sciences) emphasizes the skills that his trainees will need to succeed in life, their communities, and their careers. He mentors trainees in the development of research questions with people who are affected by addictions, mental illness, and homelessness, and in communicating results back to community members and to relevant government officials. His lab provides trainees with unique opportunities to work collaboratively on research grants, research papers, and conference presentations that integrate diverse disciplines and expertise in a team environment. Julian's commitment to collective success is reflected in the numerous local, national and international awards his graduate students have received.

GUIDELINES FOR SUPERVISORS

Dr. Mark Leier (History) finds opportunities to increase his students' skills, resilience, and preparedness for the future. His advice for personal and professional growth are hilariously shared in Grad School: An Illustrated Primer, which is based on his manual, Graduate School: Now That You're Here. Mark's efforts in supporting students in understanding the holistic approach to learning have been reflected in their success in winning grants, completing their degrees, achieving fulfilling careers, and writing influential books.

Dr. John Bechoefer (Physics) strives to develop well-rounded scholars with a passion for science, intellectual rigour and an appreciation for fun in the pursuit. One of the things he's most proud of is that his students have had chances to be first authors in prestigious publications. These collective achievements are encouraged by John's support in students seeking professional development opportunities such as attending conferences, and becoming involved in the grant writing and the peer review process.

GUIDELINE OVERVIEW

As an extension of the Well-being in Learning Environments initiative, this framework intentionally considers how the supervisory process impacts the physical, social, and mental well-being of graduate students. The intent of applying this guide to the supervisory relationship is to contribute to an institutional environment and culture that supports success and well-being.

☑ **AVAILABILITY**

Initiate ongoing conversations about expectations, and provide access to regular meetings.

☑ **FLEXIBILITY**

Find a balance between academic support and autonomy. Understand when to give more direction and when to encourage independent thinking by building the student's confidence in their personal research capabilities.

☑ **SOCIAL CONNECTION, INCLUSION AND BELONGING**

Be conscious of your mentoring role, and acquaint graduate students with departmental/discipline norms. Learn about racialized and gendered aspects of academic life, and support the meaningful inclusion of Indigenous knowledge(s) in pedagogy and practices.

☑ **OPTIMAL CHALLENGE**

Students perform and feel their best when they are challenged, while having adequate resources to meet the challenge. Offer structure with clear instructions, communicate positive expectations, and provide constructive feedback.

☑ **PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT**

Understand the student as a whole person and support students with professional advancement.

CAMPUS SUPPORTS AND RESPONDING TO STUDENTS IN DISTRESS

At times, you have probably noticed students who seem to be in distress. You may have worried about them and hoped they are getting the help they need — but not known whether you can or should do anything about it. Your observations and actions can help connect students to the many available resources at SFU.

This Supporting Students in Distress Response Guide is intended to help you identify and potentially assist students in distress. You do not need to take on the role of a counsellor, but you can play a key role in connecting students with resources and support.

> All SFU students can access free, confidential 24/7 mental health support with My SSP (Student Support Program) by calling 1.844.451.9700 (Outside North America, dial 001.416.380.6578) or by chat through the downloadable app.

CAMPUS SUPPORTS AND RESPONDING TO STUDENTS IN DISTRESS

ACADEMICS/CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Graduate Student Society (GSS)
sfugradsociety.ca

Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies
sfu.ca/gradstudies.html

Student Support, Rights and Responsibilities
sfu.ca/students/studentsupport.html

Ombudsperson
sfu.ca/ombudsperson.html

RESEARCH AND WRITING

Research Commons
lib.sfu.ca/about/branches-depts/rc

Dissertation and Thesis Group Support
sfu.ca/students/health/programs/thesis-support.html

HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

Health and Counselling
sfu.ca/students/health.html

Well-being Supports for International Students
sfu.ca/content/dam/sfu/students/health/pdf/Grad%20Student%20Support%20Doc.pdf

Thriving in Graduate School
sfu.ca/healthycampuscommunity/projects/thriving-in-graduate-school.html

My SSP
sfu.ca/students/health/resources/my-ssp.html

Indigenous Student Centre
sfu.ca/students/indigenous/contact.html

Sexual Violence Support & Prevention Office
https://www.sfu.ca/sexual-violence.html

Women's Centre
https://sfss.ca/wctr/

Out On Campus
https://sfss.ca/ooc/

Human Rights Office
sfu.ca/humanrights/contact-us.html

KEY CONSIDERATIONS AT THE DEPARTMENTAL AND INSTITUTIONAL LEVEL

Contributing factors to stress in graduate settings include challenges that are beyond the supervisory relationship, such as lack of transparency of university processes (e.g. problems in department culture, ambiguity around decisions for training), workload, role conflict/strain (e.g. job demands, work-family conflict), financial insecurity and uncertain career prospects.

The cumulative and combined influence of these factors on well-being can benefit from the socio-ecological approach that is applied in the Healthy Campus Community initiative, which takes into consideration the interdependencies between stressors. Further understanding of the challenges to mental health and well-being inherent in the graduate student experience, and proposed mitigation strategies below, should be explored at SFU.

1. Start a dialogue with SFU graduate students in your faculty/department on their happiness and well-being in relation to their supervisory relationships, career prospects, role conflict and financial confidence. Promote well-being strategies recommended by students.

2. Consider and formalize a co-supervisory relationship and/or a committee as early as possible in the student's period of study. This additional relationship can prevent potential delays in the student's progress that could result from absences of the primary supervisor, or from misunderstandings between the student and primary supervisor.

3. Determine policy interventions to support appropriate work-life balance. Examples include mechanisms for effectively assessing student satisfaction with their supervision, and established processes for intervention; or preparatory training for both students and supervisors on how they can feel empowered to bring up certain challenges.

4. Designate departmental or faculty "Tutors" or "Dissertation Coaches" to provide pastoral care. This non-faculty employee's role would be to primarily "check" in on graduate students and provide a proactive source of support. Mandating regular check-in meetings for students would reduce the stigma of help-seeking behaviour and demonstrate greater departmental support. This staff member could also support faculty learning by acting an intermediary between both parties, and work with their colleagues to develop discipline specific interventions.

5. Build mental health and well-being capacity through peer support. Recruit and train Graduate Student Wellbeing Ambassadors to build the capacity of graduate students to proactively provide information about on and off campus services/supports available to their peers. These graduate student volunteers can also be recruited through existing graduate caucuses.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Dimitrov, N. (2009). Western guide to mentoring graduate students across cultures. Western University, Teaching Support Centre. Retrieved from https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/tsc-purple-guides/4/

Gatfield, T. (2005). 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), 311-325.

James, R. & Baldwin, G. (1999). Eleven practices of effective postgraduate supervisors. The Centre for the Study of Higher Education and The School of Graduate Studies, University of Melbourne. Retrieved from http://www.lcad.icmc.usp.br/~buscaglia/links/sistcient/11practices.pdf

McGill University. (2021). Being a supervisor. Supervision: Graduate and Postdoctoral Support. Retrieved from https://www.mcgill.ca/gradsupervision/supervisors

Pidgeon, M. (2016). More than a checklist: Meaningful Indigenous inclusion in higher education. Social inclusion, 4(1), 77-91.

Skarakis-Doyle, E. and McIntyre, G. (2008). Western Guide to Graduate Supervision. Purple Guides. 3. Retrieved from https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/tsc-purple-guides/3

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

REFERENCES

Barry, K. M., Woods, M., Warnecke, E., Stirling, C., & Martin, A. (2018). Psychological health of doctoral candidates, study-related challenges and perceived performance. Higher Education Research & Development, 37(3), 468-483.

McGregor, M. (2018). International Trends in Doctoral Supervision – "Supervision for the 21st Century" Report. Internal SFU report: unpublished.

Posselt, J. (2018) Normalizing Struggle: Dimensions of Faculty Support for Doctoral Students and Implications for Persistence and Well-Being, The Journal of Higher Education, 89:6, 988-1013, DOI: 10.1080/00221546.2018.1449080

Pyhältö, K., Toom, A., Stubb, J., & Lonka, K. (2012). Challenges of becoming a scholar: A study of doctoral students' problems and well-being. ISrn Education, 2012.

Simon Fraser University. (2018). Graduate Student Exit Survey 2017. Retrieved from https://www.sfu.ca/content/dam/sfu/irp/surveys/Graduate_Exit_Survey/Graduate%20Exit%20Survey%20Report%20-%202018.pdf

Tompkins, K. A., Brecht, K., Tucker, B., Neander, L. L., & Swift, J. K. (2016). Who matters most? The contribution of faculty, student-peers, and outside support in predicting graduate student satisfaction. Training and Education in Professional Psychology, 10(2), 102.