

Done and Defended

Strategies to Foster Timely Completion of Graduate Degrees

YORK 



Graduate Studies at York University

A Place Where Knowledge is Made!

Contents

Background.....	3
Strategies for Graduate Programs	3
Begin with Fit	3
Support Effective Supervision	4
Support Supervisors	5
Promote Wellbeing and Work-Life Balance Strategies	5
Strengthen and Foster Community within Cohorts and Your Program.....	5
Foster, Monitor and Track Student Progress.....	6
Enhance Student Readiness with Clear and Transparent Funding Communications	7
Foster Involvement in Scholarly, Research and/or Creative Opportunities	7
Promote Student Participation in Professional Development	7
Review Program-Specific Time to Completion (TTC) Data	8
Build Awareness of Program, Faculty and University Resources	8
Strategies for Graduate Students	9
Treat the Degree as a Structured Project	9
Take an Active Role in Your Supervision	10
Embrace the Mentee Role.....	10
Build Community within your Cohort, Program, Faculty, and University.....	11
Get Involved Early and Often in Scholarly, Research and Creative (SRC) Opportunities	11
Learn About and Use Graduate Studies and University Resources	11
Know Your Degree Requirements and Stay on Track	12
Know the Details of Your Funding Package.....	12
Start Now to Improve Your Scholarly and Professional Skills	13
Develop and Use Project Management Strategies	13
Prioritize Your Wellbeing and Work-Life Balance.....	13
Strategies for Graduate Supervisors.....	14
Clarify Expectations and Roles	14
Establish a Warm and Transparent Supervisory Relationship	14
Provide Structure and Milestone Guidance	15
Maintain Regular and Effective Communication	15
Normalize Conversations about Degree Progress.....	15
Foster Student Inclusion and Wellbeing	16

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STRATEGIES TO FOSTER TIMELY COMPLETION OF GRADUATE DEGREES

Curated guidance for graduate programs, graduate supervisors, and graduate students

Background

The timely completion of one's graduate degree has well-documented benefits for student, program and supervisor wellbeing. While individual circumstances and trajectories vary, and not every graduate student completes their degree on a single uninterrupted timeline, there is strong evidence that academic momentum, consistent progress, and access to timely support are associated with better outcomes for student wellbeing, program health, and supervisor relationships. Graduate programs, supervisors, and students can take intentional steps to build the conditions that make this possible. When students have the guidance, structure, and resources they need, they can focus on launching their careers and moving forward rather than absorbing the prolonged mental and financial weight of an extended degree. Programs benefit through stronger culture and reputation, and supervisors thrive when their students progress and complete.

This guide provides research-informed, data-driven strategies recognized as best practices for supporting the timely completion of graduate degrees. We know not every strategy will be right for every program, and it may not be possible to adopt all of them at once. Graduate programs, students and supervisors are invited to choose the ones that make sense given their own circumstances and programmatic specificities.

Strategies for Graduate Programs



Begin with Fit

Data-driven research demonstrates that students admitted to programs matching their academic and professional goals complete at higher rates. Timely completion starts at admission. Graduate programs can take intentional steps to ensure that prospective student

abilities and interests align well with the program's culture, academic trajectory, and learning outcomes.

- Check current supervisor availability and capacity to ensure there is an appropriate supervisor for each admitted student, who will be able to give them sufficient time, attention, and feedback.
- Host recruitment events or join Faculty of Graduate Studies (FGS), university, or sector-wide events to increase awareness of your program.
- Consider meeting with prospective applicants to better understand their academic interests and capabilities.
- Encourage prospective students to contact potential supervisors prior to applying and accepting their offer.
- Ensure applicants are aware of all program requirements and academic milestones, including timely completion.

Support Effective Supervision

Students can make important decisions about their research trajectory earlier when supervision is established promptly, and when it is frequent, predictable, and supportive.

- Establish and communicate an infrastructure that connects students to potential supervisors. Encourage students to use the [Smart Questions, Strong Matches](#) (pdf) guide.
- Orient newly appointed faculty to your graduate program, including its specific requirements, timelines, and expectations for supervisory practice.
- Share York's [Graduate Supervision Guidelines](#) (pdf) to ensure roles and responsibilities are clearly understood.
- Require frequent meetings between students, supervisors, and supervisory committees in your program to review progress, provide feedback, and support forward momentum.
- Discuss and promote best practices for [convening regular supervisory meetings](#), including [remote supervision](#) (pdf) options and encourage in-person meetings where possible and mutually desired.
- Encourage students and supervisors to use the [Strong Start to Supervision Checklist](#) (pdf).
- Facilitate discussion about personalized roadmaps to graduation via the [Individualized Development Plan](#), and promote IDP uptake in seminar spaces and supervisory meetings.
- Encourage agile supervision, ensuring supervisors are aware of and responsive to the distinct needs of different student populations, including [international students](#) (pdf) and [mature and part-time students](#) (pdf), and connect supervisors to relevant cohort-specific guidance.
- Ensure procedures are in place to facilitate a change in supervisor where needed and possible.
- Address problems between students, supervisors, and supervisory committee members early. Connect supervisors to [Common Ground: The Graduate Supervision Conflict Consultation Service](#).
- Monitor student-to-supervisor ratios to ensure supervisory workloads remain reasonable.

Support Supervisors

Supervision is a rewarding and time-intensive component of graduate faculty membership. Supporting supervisors promotes their wellbeing and is directly associated with the supervisory practices that foster student success and timely degree completion.

- Discuss capacity and role expectations clearly when appointing graduate faculty to your program.
- Support supervisors with intentional efforts to promote equitable and manageable supervisory workloads. Invite supervisors to consult the [Questions to Consider Before Accepting a Graduate Student](#) (pdf) decisional tool.
- Raise awareness of FGS supervisory guidance tools, especially the [Graduate Supervision Handbook](#) (pdf).
- Champion peer support between new and established supervisors, including evidence-informed [co-supervision](#) (pdf) arrangements which create a shared space for supervisors to align on roles, responsibilities, and student success.
- Foster ongoing conversations about supervisory experiences, challenges, and effective practices as a regular part of program culture.
- Encourage supervisors to take part in professional development related to graduate supervision including the FGS *The Graduate Supervision Journey* module on the YU Learn platform.
- Check in annually with graduate faculty members to discuss whether their supervisory workload feels manageable and to identify where additional support is needed.

Promote Wellbeing and Work-Life Balance Strategies

Encouraging students to strike a healthy balance between academic work and their personal lives helps them recharge and stay motivated in their program of study. Intentional efforts aimed at wellbeing and work-life balance can help students develop effective coping strategies for the demands of graduate study and broader life circumstances.

- Include explicit discussions about wellbeing and work-life balance strategies at orientation, establishing these as foundations for their wellbeing and timely degree completion.
- Promote mental health resources tailored to graduate students, including [Graduate Student Wellness Services](#), and the [Virtual Wellbeing Hub](#).
- Build awareness of university-wide resources that support wellbeing across different dimensions of student life, including financial supports, multifaith centres, athletic facilities, and student cohort-specific clubs and communities.

Strengthen and Foster Community within Cohorts and Your Program

Graduate studies, especially in a large institution, can be overwhelming and for some, contribute to feelings of isolation, especially after courses are complete. Belonging actively

supports student wellbeing and motivation, helping students achieve their academic goals and degree completion.

- Make community a priority by emphasizing the program's shared purpose and goals, and actively cultivating belonging across student cohorts.
- Foster the sustained presence of a graduate student group for your program, such as a program-level Graduate Student Association.
- Consider facilitating peer-to-peer support by pairing alumni or upper-year students with newly admitted students as part of orientation, with attention to matching students across shared identities and experiences where possible.
- Organize social events, forums, speaker series, and workshops.
- Create a common place for students and faculty to gather socially and academically.
- Enlist student leaders in maintaining community by organizing student-led events, and actively support leaders representing specific student populations, including international students.
- Encourage students to [get involved on campus](#) and join [student groups](#) beyond the program.

Foster, Monitor and Track Student Progress

Encouraging and tracking student progress allows Graduate Units to provide more effective support when it is needed. Proactive strategies to foster progress are strategies of care.

- Nurture a student's growth mindset from program recruitment to degree completion, reinforcing that a student's capacity as a scholar is not fixed and can be developed through effort, reflection, feedback, intentional learning and goal setting. GPDs, seminar professors, and supervisors can support this by:
 - Reframing feedback as opportunity rather than definitive judgement of ability.
 - Naming effort as a positive path to capacity building.
 - Encouraging students to set high but realistic goals, prioritize self-awareness, and try different learning strategies.
- Normalize conversations about progress and timely degree completion.
- Establish and track program milestones and requirements. Demystify milestones at orientation, in seminars, in supervisory meetings, and in up-to-date program handbooks.
- Expect and facilitate uptake of [annual progress report](#) meetings between student and supervisor.
- Actively follow up with students who are not making progress in the program, even in the early years, and address student and program issues promptly when progress is off track.
- Collect student input regularly and then upon graduation to understand their experiences, and inform adjustments to resources, academic supports, and supervision practices.
- Work with FGS to communicate academic milestones, expectations, and key processes to students in a timely manner, minimizing unpleasant surprises.

Enhance Student Readiness with Clear and Transparent Funding Communications

Ensuring students have clear and accurate information about graduate school financials is key.

- Provide complete and accurate funding information in admission letters, where relevant.
- Foster financial literacy by helping students understand their [graduate funding package](#), including changes in their funding levels across all years of the program.
- Inform students about the [cost of living in Toronto](#) and implications for financial planning throughout their degree.
- Share information on when funding is posted to student accounts each semester.
- Ensure students understand that funding is contingent upon maintaining satisfactory academic progress.
- Communicate the [Types of Work Performed by Graduate Students](#).
- Raise awareness about scholarships and awards, actively encouraging students to [apply](#), with targeted outreach to students who may be less familiar with available funding opportunities.

Foster Involvement in Scholarly, Research and/or Creative Opportunities

Students who are provided with frequent and collaborative scholarly, research and/or creative (SRC) opportunities have been found to be better prepared to meet thesis and dissertation requirements later in their program.

- Establish and explain research and writing requirements early in the program.
- Integrate SRC opportunities across all stages of the program, from early skill-building to later-stage research.
- Connect students with discipline-specific research skills training, including library services, data management, and methodology workshops.
- Provide writing support beginning in the first year and continuing through each stage of the program.
- Offer and connect students with thesis or dissertation writing groups, broader cross-disciplinary seminars, and reading groups.
- Support and encourage students to present their work and developing ideas.
- Encourage and support attendance at conferences and professional meetings, while helping students balance conference participation with dissertation progress.
 - Programs can consult discipline-specific professional associations, listservs, and online conference databases for upcoming calls for proposals, meetings, and conferences.

Promote Student Participation in Professional Development

Students with professional skills are better equipped to complete their degrees and to find employment sooner. Programs that provide and raise awareness of relevant professional development programming contribute to decreased time to completion for their students.

- Facilitate the use of the [Individualized Development Plan](#).
- Promote existing professional development offerings and identify or create program-relevant professional opportunities where gaps exist.
- Consider experiential learning opportunities for students such as research assistantships, internships, and practicum and field placements.
- Identify and support opportunities for students to build professional networks within and beyond their discipline.
- Invite alumni and industry leaders to speak and mentor graduate students about a broad range of careers relevant to your program's learning outcomes.
- Encourage students to use career services and connect them with the FGS [Graduate and Postdoctoral Professional Skills](#) which supports career readiness across six broad areas.

Review Program-Specific Time to Completion (TTC) Data

Timely completion rates improve when programs secure and consider TTC data (e.g. rates and timing of student completion over the last 5 or 10 years). Program-specific TTC data establishes an accurate, program-level baseline and provides insights into where and when delays occur, including delays related to coursework, comps, research, or dissertation writing. TTC data shifts the focus from individual blame to evidence-informed programmatic structural considerations that program leadership can address, including whether certain milestones consistently exceed expected timelines and where targeted supports could have the greatest impact.

- Routinely secure TTC data for transparent program awareness and consideration.
- Ensure that graduate program committee conversations include disaggregated TTC data and promote conversations regarding strategies for achieving timely completion.
- Build in a review of TTC rates when reviewing program objectives, milestones, learning outcomes and delivery methods, proactively adjusting processes where helpful.
- Identify where and when delays occur, initiating strategies to address them, including structured proposal or writing courses if the proposal milestone is routinely stalled; ethics application support for cohorts if delays occur due to ethics application shortcomings; and review of supervision capacity to ensure supervisors and students have the time and space to thrive.

Build Awareness of Program, Faculty and University Resources

With the right resources and supports, students can navigate the complexities of graduate studies with confidence before they impede academic progress.

ACADEMIC AND PROGRAM NAVIGATION

- Develop and maintain an updated Graduate Program Handbook.
- Organize timely orientation sessions each year to inform students about policies, program structures and procedures, resources, available supports, timelines, courses, and supervision.

- Present materials in accessible formats.
- Ensure students are introduced to York's [Library Research Services](#), including subject-specific librarians and citation and writing resources, to build research confidence from the start of their program.

WELLBEING AND MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORTS

- Connect students directly to [equity-specific supports](#).
- Connect students to support systems in a timely manner as issues emerge, including GPD advising meetings, [Graduate Student Wellness](#), [grad-specific writing support](#), [graduate funding advising](#), [Student Accessibility Services](#), and [international student advising](#).

Strategies for Graduate Students



Graduate students have considerable agency in achieving timely degree completion. Students who complete on time tend to adopt intentional, proactive and relational strategies, rather than relying solely on supervision or program structures for their success.

Treat the Degree as a Structured Project

Approach your degree as a structured project to reduce overwhelm, stay oriented, make the work feel manageable, and the finish line visible.

- Manage your degree as a long-term yet time-limited project.
- Identify clear stages and deliverables.
- Create a realistic term-by-term work plan in consultation with your supervisor.
- Break large tasks into manageable components.
- Set internal deadlines *ahead of* formal program deadlines.
- Track and plan for all program and FGS academic milestones; finishing the early requirements on time allows deeper focus on your research.

Take an Active Role in Your Supervision

Supervision is an important academic relationship involving proactive efforts of all members. Students who initiate contact with supervisors and committee members, prepare for meetings, and follow up in writing, experience greater ownership related to their degree progress.

- If you did not secure a supervisor before applying to the program, ask your program for program-specific guidance and consult the FGS [Smart Questions, Strong Matches](#) (pdf) guide to navigate the search.
- As early as possible, meet with your supervisor to establish a common understanding of meeting frequency, working styles, feedback, communication, and program milestones. The [Strong Start to Supervision Checklist](#) is a key tool for your success with supervision.
- Understand the roles and responsibilities of all supervision parties and take yours seriously.
- If you find yourself struggling to understand or complete program milestones, that is ok. But do not avoid the problem; seek help early, be transparent about your challenges, and work with your supervisor and graduate program director, both of whom want to see you succeed.

Embrace the Mentee Role

When graduate students seek out and welcome academic mentorship and feedback, their self-determination and academic agency blossom.

- Embrace the role by intentionally working with academic supervisors to learn and progress through your program.
- Ask explicitly for the kind of guidance, direction or support you need. These are reasonable and legitimate requests.
- Approach feedback as a resource rather than a judgement of ability.
- Cultivate a [growth mindset](#) (pdf) to build productive supervisory relationships, develop scholarly confidence, and realize your potential as a researcher and professional.
- Practice reflective learning by thinking critically about your experiences and actions rather than taking advice at face value, connecting theoretical knowledge with practical experience to support your personal and professional growth. Consider keeping a reflective journal, debriefing with your supervisor after key milestones, or using structured reflection models to regularly examine what you are learning, how you are growing, and where you want to develop next.
- Seek growth over validation by bringing challenges and open questions to mentorship conversations, not just your successes. Ask for constructive feedback, read it in manageable chunks, take time with it before responding, and follow up to confirm you have integrated it. The goal of mentorship is to become more capable.

Build Community within your Cohort, Program, Faculty, and University

Feeling part of a larger graduate community helps students maintain a positive outlook and approach to graduate studies and enhances personal and academic motivation.

- Participate in or initiate social events, forums, speaker series, retreats, and workshops; get [involved on campus](#) and join [student groups](#); and engage in peer mentoring or cohort activities.
- Be on campus and use dedicated common spaces where you can meet with other graduate students and faculty because informal gatherings are often where meaningful connections are made.

Get Involved Early and Often in Scholarly, Research and Creative (SRC) Opportunities

Students are better prepared to meet the requirements of their graduate degrees when they seize early opportunities to be involved in SRC experiences. Regular involvement, especially when coursework is over, mitigates isolation.

- Stay informed about SRC opportunities through program and Faculty of Graduate Studies' updates and consult your supervisor regularly for guidance on relevant opportunities.
- Consult with your supervisor and committee about which professional and academic conferences you should attend or present at.
- Familiarize yourself with research ethics and academic integrity requirements and resources.

Learn About and Use Graduate Studies and University Resources

York is a large university, offering many resources and supports. While pursuing graduate studies is enriching academically and personally, it can also be challenging. Proactive students who create support systems and make use of resources applicable to their own circumstances are better positioned to complete their degrees.

- Attend orientation programs and FGS sessions to learn about policies, procedures, resources, support initiatives, and timelines.
- Read your program's graduate student handbook and curricular materials carefully.
- Attend time management workshops or seminars early in your program to build the planning skills you will need at every stage of your degree.
- Take advantage, early in your degree, of professional development workshops and support services related to writing, proposal development, project management, wellness, ethics, and conference presentations.
- Familiarize yourself with York's [student support services](#) including the FGS confidential [Graduate Student Wellness Services](#).

Know Your Degree Requirements and Stay on Track

Students who complete their degrees on time have a clear grasp of formal program requirements, milestones and deadlines. As active partners in their education, students who combine structured work habits, proactive supervisory engagement, and strategic use of institutional supports are better positioned to complete on time.

- Understand degree milestones and expected completion times, create a completion plan, and be deliberate and tenacious in meeting your degree requirements.
- Actively engage in your degree progress and understand that conversations about timelines and milestones, even difficult ones, are acts of care from your supervisor and program.
- Use written plans to support the annual progress review process.
- Build structured, sustainable work habits by designing how, when, and where you work in ways that fit your life. Break large projects into manageable stages and protect your time for focused work throughout your graduate program.
- Communicate early with supervisors and avoid isolating or silent overextension.
- Prioritize your wellbeing and manage competing responsibilities through proactive planning.
- Seek accommodations or program guidance when circumstances change or are unclear.

Know the Details of Your Funding Package

When graduate students understand what funding they have, for how long, and under what conditions, they can plan coursework, research, and writing in ways that align with funded periods rather than discovering constraints too late. Understanding the financial aspects of your graduate degree helps prevent financial stress, delays in progress, and misaligned degree progression plans.

- Read your funding letter carefully and ensure you know the details concerning the amount, source, and timing of the financial support you will be receiving.
- Seek to understand how funding is structured, time-limited and, where relevant, linked to academic progress or registration status. Attend an FGS information session, review FGS funding details, explore [NAVI](#), the graduate funding virtual assistant, and consider making an appointment with a [Funding Advisor](#).
- Initiate and document, where relevant, transparent clarifying conversations with supervisors who are providing your funding. Seek further clarity from your GPD and the FGS funding team.
- Use your funding knowledge to inform plans related to milestone and degree progression, teaching, employment and research workload balance, and the feasibility of extensions.
- Plan toward degree completion within funded periods whenever possible.
- Adjust degree progression timelines proactively rather than reactively.
- Explore internal and external [scholarships and awards](#), and be aware of additional resources such as the [FGS emergency fund and bursaries](#).

Start Now to Improve Your Scholarly and Professional Skills

Professional skills play a direct and practical role in helping graduate students complete their degrees on time by reducing the common causes of delays.

- Explore and participate in the FGS [Graduate Postdoctoral & Professional Skills \(GPPS\)](#) offerings.
- Create and annually review the [Individualized Development Plan](#) with your graduate supervisor.
- Develop strong research, academic writing, and revision skills.

Develop and Use Project Management Strategies

Time and project management strategies help graduate students maintain steady progress and meet degree milestones on time. Developing strong skills in planning, prioritization, and deadline management helps students maintain momentum and meet their degree requirements.

- Assess your obligations across all areas of your life when making a work plan, including coursework, research, teaching and RA duties, and personal responsibilities. A plan that does not account for all your obligations is harder to sustain.
- Break large projects including proposals, ethics submissions, theses, dissertations and comprehensive requirements, into manageable stages.
- Ask supervisors precise questions, seek clarity about expectations for requirements, milestones, and timelines, and request constructive feedback early and regularly.
- Maintain steady work habits and respond to feedback within agreed-upon timelines, and respectfully request the same from your supervisor.
- Navigate inevitable setbacks without disengaging from the program or supervision. If you know you struggle with critical feedback, seek assistance, explain this to your supervisor, and develop strategies for receiving it constructively.

Prioritize Your Wellbeing and Work-Life Balance

Graduate school can be intellectually rewarding but also emotionally and mentally challenging. Your wellbeing matters. It supports a graduate experience that is fulfilling and sustainable, making it more likely that you thrive throughout your program and beyond.

- Set realistic expectations with your supervisor and recognize that progress over perfection sustains momentum and long-term success.
- Establish healthy boundaries around work, rest, and personal commitments to prevent burnout. Reach out to friends, family, and community for support when needed.
- Maintain regular communication with supervisors, peers, and support networks to reduce isolation and clarify expectations.
- Engage in reflective practices that help you recognize stress early and adapt your strategies as needed.

- Access community and university resources for mental health and academic support.
- Engage with the [Virtual Wellbeing Hub](#) where you can find personalized content designed to help you manage stress, find balance and connect with wellness resources. Build your profile to let the Hub guide you through the six dimensions of wellbeing.
- Explore York's [Wellbeing Implementation Guide for Students](#) (pdf) practical strategies to support your wellbeing while studying at York.

Strategies for Graduate Supervisors



Supervisors play a key role in the timely completion of graduate degrees. Given the close nature of this academic mentoring relationship, effective supervision involves normalizing discussions about academic progression and balancing forward momentum with flexibility.

Clarify Expectations and Roles

- Be explicit with your student about what they can expect from you as a supervisor, including response timelines, feedback practices, and how to raise concerns. Provide a brief written outline of your supervisory approach and expectations.
- Co-develop explicit expectations for your supervisory relationship, revisit them regularly, and return to them at key transition points such as comprehensive examinations, proposal, analysis, and writing stages.
- Tailor supervision to each student's context, needs, and preferences by discussing these with them early in the relationship.

Establish a Warm and Transparent Supervisory Relationship

Trust-based, respectful supervisory relationships are strongly associated with persistence, wellbeing, and timely completion.

- Centre and discuss core principles of dignity, transparent communication, and respect.
- Build a relationship grounded in mutual respect and accountability by responding to each other in a timely manner, checking in regularly, offering encouragement, honouring the student as a whole person, and being willing to share your academic challenges and experiences honestly.

- Encourage and support your student's participation in scholarly and peer communities.
- Identify and celebrate degree progress and academic growth.

Provide Structure and Milestone Guidance

- Map degree requirements to a term-by-term timeline to demystify milestones and make expectations clear.
- Break large tasks into time-bounded components and workshop each one with your student.
- Support early and timely completion of proposals, ethics, and candidacy requirements.
- Identify potential bottlenecks in progress and address them before they stall momentum.
- Schedule regular working meetings with students, co-develop draft deadlines, and build in intentional teaching to maintain momentum.
- Balance intellectual depth with expectations for timely progress and next steps when providing feedback.
- Engage the supervisory committee actively and ensure students receive coordinated, consistent guidance and feedback from all members.

Maintain Regular and Effective Communication

- Maintain regular, predictable supervisory contact; convene [supervisory meetings](#) where students co-set agendas and action items; and document key decisions, follow-ups, and next steps using shared tracking tools.
- Provide timely, constructive, and actionable feedback.
- Encourage students to raise concerns early.

Normalize Conversations about Degree Progress

- Monitor student progress regularly and normalize transparent conversations about momentum and next steps.
- Approach progress reports as developmental tools by providing clear, honest assessments of progress toward milestones.
- Normalize revision and completion-focused writing practices, and offer concrete support for developing them.
- Help students prioritize degree completion when balancing teaching, research, and degree-related opportunities.
- Encourage students to build peer connections and participate in writing groups and scholarly communities.
- Actively follow up with students who are not making progress in the program and consider scheduling a supervisory committee meeting two to three months after unsatisfactory progress is identified.
- Suggest additional academic, mental health, accessibility, or financial supports and collaborate with programs and FGS when concerns arise.

Foster Student Inclusion and Wellbeing

- Be attentive to stressors, accessibility needs, and cultural considerations that may impact your student's wellbeing and sense of inclusion.
- Encourage open, non-judgmental dialogue about academic and personal challenges, and work collaboratively with students to address them.
- Evaluate student activities and progress with the understanding that delays may stem from disability-related needs, and respond with care, flexibility, and inclusive support.
- Encourage and support your student's participation in scholarly and peer communities.
- Foster and model healthy work-life balance.



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