

DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY GUIDELINES FOR SUPERVISORY RELATIONSHIPS

(November, 2019)

1. Policies and Guidelines for Supervisory Relationships

An effective working relationship between graduate student and supervisor is an important contributor to graduate student success. The information below refers to ways in which this relationship can be promoted, and describes information and resources available for addressing challenges or difficulties that may arise.

Students and faculty members are encouraged to consult the [Graduate Handbooks](#) available through the School of Graduate Studies. These handbooks include Guidelines for Supervisors and Graduate students in [Master's](#) and [PhD](#) programs. These guidelines include description of the general roles and responsibilities of students and faculty members, procedures for monitoring progress in the program, and conflict resolution.

Note that text in blue in this document has been quoted from the cited sources.

The Canadian Association for Graduate Studies has set out [Guiding Principles for Graduate Student Supervision](#) which indicate:

1. A Supervisor should be identified in a timely fashion,
2. Supervisory committees or equivalents should be established early,
3. Expectations, roles and responsibilities of graduate students and supervisors should be made clear,
4. Supervisors should be readily accessible to their students, and regular monitoring and feedback should be ensured,
5. Student-supervisor relationships should be professional,
6. Intellectual debate and challenge should be encouraged and supported,
7. Supervisors should be mentors,
8. Issues of intellectual property and authorship should be made clear,
9. Conflicts should be resolved at the lowest level possible,
10. Continuity is important in graduate supervision,
11. Alternative supervision should be available,
12. Students have substantial responsibilities for managing their own graduate education.

The Canadian Psychological Association has set out [Ethical Guidelines for Research Supervision in Psychology](#) related to respect for the dignity of persons, responsible caring, integrity in relationships, and responsibility to society.

2. Roles and Responsibilities in the Supervisory Relationship

Effective working relationships between students and supervisors are built upon responsibilities of both the student and supervisor. The Concordia School of Graduate Studies has guidelines that indicate expectations for both supervisors and students in [Masters](#) and [PhD](#) programs.

One expectation is that supervisors and students [discuss the general nature of their working relationship early in the developmental stages of their collaboration to ensure mutually compatible expectations.](#) Discussing mutual expectations early on can prevent difficulties from arising. Topics that may be discussed include available research training and resources, timeline for research and academic objectives, workload, regular meetings and communication, time required for supervisory feedback, the

nature of the professional working relationship, funding considerations, laboratory etiquette, publications and intellectual property, and plans for professional development. As the supervisory relationship progresses, both students and supervisors should initiate conversations on aspects of their working relationship as issues arise.

Letters of understanding that outline expectations of the working relationship are used in some contexts ([CAGS Creating a Letter of Understanding](#)) but, because of the power differential that exists between the student and supervisor it is important that “students have informed consent and are not coerced into signing contracts with which they are not in agreement” ([CAGS Guiding Principles](#)). The Department recommends discussing mutual expectations and responsibilities.

3. Resolving Difficulties.

3.1 Principles of Resolving Difficulties in Supervisory Relationships.

When challenges arise, graduate students and supervisors should work together to problem-solve and discuss potential solutions. Importantly, challenges or difficulties should be addressed as early as possible, when they may be more manageable, so that the student and supervisor can collaboratively work on a solution before difficulties develop into a larger problem or conflict.

At the core of successful supervisor-graduate student relationships are mutual respect and professionalism ([CAGS Guiding Principles](#)). The principle of Respect for the Dignity of Persons requires supervisors and supervisees to demonstrate respect for each other as well as for all other persons with whom they relate in their psychological activities ([CPA Ethical Guidelines](#)). Respect involves valuing the innate worth of persons and not using them solely as a means to an end. Respect is an essential characteristic in the relationship between supervisors and supervisees. The supervisee shares the responsibility for respect, even though the supervisor has the greater responsibility for modelling and maintaining a respectful relationship and for addressing problems that may arise. Supervisors and students should address professional and interpersonal differences between supervisor and supervisee in as open, amicable, and constructive a way as possible. If appropriate, they should consider third party consultation or mediation as indicated in the procedures below.

The principle of Integrity in Relationships requires openness, objectivity, honesty, straightforwardness, and avoidance of conflict of interest in keeping with respect and caring for others ([CPA Ethical Guidelines](#)). Exceptions to this principle should have strong justification. The supervisee shares these responsibilities even though the supervisor has the greater responsibility for maintaining an open trusting relationship and for addressing problems that may arise. Supervisors and supervisees should identify and address conflict in the supervisory relationship in open, honest, and beneficial ways.

Common challenges faced by graduate students may involve academic difficulties, financial issues, personal stress, or health problems that impact their ability to work effectively. Differing expectations and miscommunication between the student and supervisor regarding practical aspects of research can also occur and lead to difficulties and conflict. This may involve students not meeting expectations for research productivity, and supervisors not meeting expectations for adequate supervision of research or thesis preparation. Challenges can also arise in the personal relationship between the student and supervisor. Students and faculty should be aware of professional boundaries in the supervisory relationship, discuss these boundaries when needed, and manage additional roles (e.g., social relationships) in a manner that does not compromise the supervisory relationship ([CPA Ethical Guidelines](#)).

3.2 Procedures for Resolving Difficulties in Supervisory Relationships.

Most difficulties can be resolved through discussions with the supervisor. When appropriate, student concerns should be dealt with informally as close to the source of the concern as possible, prior to resolving challenges at higher levels of administration ([CAGS Guiding Principles](#)). In general, students are expected to maintain open communication with their supervisor and Graduate Program Director concerning any problem, and in the event of a conflict in the supervisor-student relationship, follow-up with the supervisor and/or Graduate Program Director in a timely fashion ([Concordia Guidelines for Supervision of PhD Students](#)).

Students in the Research and Clinical Training Option should also consult the section on *Clinical Supervision* in the [APC Manual](#) regarding conflict with clinical supervisors, and the section on *Student Grievances, Clinical Program* in the [Psychology Policies and Procedures Manual](#).

The student-supervisory relationship is characterized by a power differential, which may make it difficult for students to openly resolve difficulties or conflicts with their supervisor. The supervisor has higher status, knowledge, and power, and the student is more vulnerable when problems arise, in part due to the influence that the supervisor may have on the student's progression in the program and advancement in the profession. The supervisor therefore has the greater responsibility for modelling and maintaining a respectful relationship and for addressing problems that may arise ([CPA Ethical Guidelines](#)).

If the student is unable to discuss or resolve a difficulty with the supervisor, further advice should be sought, and the student has a right to confidentiality throughout this process. Graduate Program Directors (GPDs) have the responsibility of serving as a confidential and unbiased source of support for students, and to provide consultation and mediation as needed. This source of support is important due to the power-differential that exists in supervisory relationships, and the greater vulnerability of students when difficulties arise. If the GPD is the student's supervisor, or if the student would prefer, the student may also consult with members of the Thesis Supervisory Committee, the Department Chair, or any trusted faculty member. Faculty members that are not in an administrative role, but who are on the Thesis Supervisory Committee, or familiar with the student and supervisor, can sometimes provide valuable consultation. The consultation that they provide must follow the principles and guidelines described in this document, and it is their obligation to refer the student to administrators as appropriate. If mediation is required in the supervisory relationship, the GPD, or Chair if more appropriate, would be responsible for mediation. If it is agreeable to both the student and supervisor, however, at the request of the GPD or Chair, the trusted faculty member could play a role in mediation in collaboration with the GPD or Chair.

In the event of a conflict, the Graduate Program Director (GPD) should be notified as early as possible. Should the supervisor also be the GPD, then the Chair of the Department should be notified. It is the responsibility of the GPD or Chair to arrange for consultation and mediation. The Graduate Program Director or the parties involved may request advice and/or mediation assistance from the Faculty Associate Dean of Research and Graduate Studies and/or other appropriate services, such as the School of Graduate Studies and the Ombuds's Office. The student and supervisor shall not be required to participate in informal resolution against their wishes, especially if either party's behaviour towards the other warrants a complaint under the Code of Rights and Responsibilities ([Concordia Guidelines for Supervision of PhD Students](#)).

Although most difficulties should be addressed informally at the lowest level possible, if there is concern that an individual's behaviour warrants a complaint under the Code of Rights and

Responsibilities, the concerned party is encouraged to consult the Office of Rights and Responsibilities. The [Office of Rights and Responsibilities](#) provides information, advice or assistance concerning the behaviour of any member of the Concordia community. The [Code of Rights and Responsibilities](#) sets out standards of conduct which apply to all members of the University. Concordia University also has specific guidelines that address [romantic relationships](#) and all forms of [harassment](#).

When appropriate, individuals may also consult the [Ombud's Office](#) which assists in the informal resolution of concerns and complaints related to the application of university policies, rules and procedures. The office is independent of all the administrative structures of the university, confidential, impartial, and accessible to all members of the university community.

Faculty members in administrative roles have limited multi-year appointments as GPD, Director of Clinical Training, and Chair. The faculty member who takes on the administrative role has the responsibility to provide confidential consultation or mediation for any ongoing difficulties in supervisory relationships. Non-confidential information is therefore provided to the new administrator by the previous administrator. It is the responsibility of the student to provide the new administrator with any confidential concerns they have raised or which need to be addressed. The previous administrator may agree to continue to be consulted confidentially, just as any other trusted faculty member. At the request of the new administrator, the previous administrator may also agree to continue mediating in collaboration with the new administrator, if this is agreeable to both the student and faculty member.

4. Changing Research Supervisors

Continuity of graduate supervision is a major contributor to graduate student success, and a change in supervisor should be made only for strong and compelling reasons ([CAGS Guiding Principles](#)).

When a supervisory relationship is ended because the supervisor leaves the university due to retirement, resignation, or extended leave, the supervisor and the graduate program have a responsibility to make their best effort to secure a replacement supervisor ([Concordia Guidelines for Supervision of PhD Students](#)).

Students sometimes change supervisors due to a major change in research interests, unmet expectations, lack of available funding, or difficulties in the supervisory relationship. When a supervisory relationship ends between the Master's degree and the start of doctoral studies, it is primarily the responsibility of the student to obtain an alternate PhD supervisor, although the supervisor and program administration will assist as much as possible.

Students or supervisors who wish to terminate the supervisory relationship following completion of the Master's degree should inform the other party as early as possible. Students considering changing supervisors would normally discuss this first with their supervisor, in order to determine if existing challenges can be overcome, and/or how to complete work with the current supervisor, and develop an effective timeline for the transition to the new laboratory. Students would ideally discuss this with their supervisor in by the end of Fall term in the year prior to their graduation, in order to reduce negative impacts on the current supervisor that could include the disruption of planned research projects, and missed opportunity for nominating a new graduate student to join the lab. Similarly, supervisors who do not wish to continue a supervisory relationship past the MA level should inform the student as early as possible, and preferably in the Fall term in the year prior to graduation, to provide the student time for planning for the next year.

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Students who are considering switching supervisors, but who initially do not wish to discuss this with their current supervisor, should consult with the Graduate Program Director (GPD) or, if preferred, the Departmental Chair or a trusted faculty member. A final decision to switch, however, should be made in consultation with the GPD who will work with the student to inform the current supervisor and may assist the transition to the new lab if needed. Supervisors who are approached to become a new supervisor should remind the student to consult the GPD, and are expected to inform the GPD if they agree to become the new supervisor.

Students and the new supervisor are primarily responsible for establishing a new supervisory relationship. They may consult as appropriate with the original supervisor and GPD.

In circumstances in which a supervisory relationship cannot continue prior to the thesis defense, students may request either an alternate supervisor or an administrative supervisor for purposes of the defence. Said request should be submitted to the Graduate Program Director, who will make a recommendation to the Dean of Graduate Studies. Notwithstanding possible delays in time to completion, every effort should be made by the program, supervisor, etc. so that a student is not penalized if a change in supervisor becomes necessary ([Thesis Preparation Guide](#)).

In situations where the student is within normal residency, the department will work with the Faculty member, the Faculty of Arts and Science, and the School of Graduate studies to provide the student with the level of funding that was indicated in their letter of offer.

5. Resources for Students facing Challenges

Personal and/or academic challenges can have a negative impact on physical and mental well-being, and students are encouraged to take advantage of services available through the University. Please see the Psychology [Current Student Resources](#) webpage for a list of additional resources.

[Concordia University Health and Wellness Resources](#) (Counselling, Health Services, Sexual Assault Resources, Fitness, Spiritual Life)

[Campus Wellness and Support](#)