

Student recommendations for effective supervisory relationships

By Sheryl MacMath,
Faculty of Education
Chair, Student Supervisory Focus Group

In November 2004, the Graduate Students' Society (GSS) organized the Supervisory Focus Group to address concerns regarding the graduate student – supervisor relationship. This initiative was a response to research identifying ineffective supervisor relationships as the number one reported reason for thesis incompleteness at the University of Victoria (Ricks, Kadlee, Corner, & Paul, 2003). Graduate students were asked, via email and at meetings, the following three questions: (a) *What do graduate students need to know before starting their graduate studies?* (b) *What makes the student – supervisor relationship effective?* (c) *What problems contribute to ineffective student – supervisor relationships?* In total, feedback was received from 21 students (16 written responses and six focus group participants with a variety of departments represented). Information regarding what graduate students need to know before starting their studies could be organized into two different timeframes: (a) information required before applying for their studies and (b) information required after they had been accepted, but before they had arrived at the university.

Suggestions for establishing and maintaining the supervisory relationship were organized into three different categories: (a) student traits, (b) supervisor traits and (c) structuring of the relationship.

Student Traits

It was felt that graduate students need to be

encouraged to take more of a leadership role in the establishment and maintenance of an effective student - supervisor relationship, such as:

- knowing that they can call meetings with their supervisor—they do not have to wait for the supervisor to initiate meetings;
- having specific questions for their supervisor and remaining in meetings or in contact with their supervisor until those questions were answered;
- taking workshops on time management; and
- ensuring that they did not avoid their supervisor if they were having difficulty completing a task—it was important to seek out the support of the supervisor to ensure completion.

Supervisor Traits

- Providing feedback in a timely manner;
- Knowing their student's profile—it was important for supervisors to demonstrate an interest in knowing them as a person and not just a responsibility;
- Being dedicated to their field;
- Forwarding information regarding conferences, professional development opportunities and authorship opportunities to their students; and,
- Motivating students.

Structuring the Relationship

- Regular contact is required between the student and the supervisor. This echoes the



Students need to be encouraged to take the initiative in developing and maintaining an effective supervisory relationship



recommendations of previous research on effective supervisory relationships (Ricks et al., 2003). It was consistently identified that these meetings did not have to be long; they could be as short as 30 minutes for a cup of coffee. However, the repeated contact was important to keep both supervisor and student up-to-date and to ensure that progress was continually being made.

- A timeline for completion needs to be created at the beginning of one's graduate studies, then revisited throughout the entire graduate period. This timeline would include all steps required for degree completion with dates (even if approximate) for that completion. These

Before applying for graduate studies, students need:	After being accepted into graduate studies, students need:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • to know the supervisors they would be working with better • to have access to comments regarding professors from previous graduate students • to have more information regarding each professor's field(s) of interest, personality and training philosophy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • to know the roles of the administrative staff before they even arrive at the university • to know their rights and responsibilities • to know who they could go to if they had problems with their supervisor