Relations with Supervisors: A Guide for Graduate Students

The Purpose of This Handout

This handout is designed to provide problem solving strategies for graduate students who may be experiencing a problem with their supervisor or another person in a position of authority at the university. Most of the options outlined in this document focus on resolving conflict at the earliest stages - before relationships become more strained or difficult. However, understanding what conflict resolution strategy will work best for you will depend on a number of factors.

- The stage of your academic program, i.e. the options for students in the early stages of their research may be different from those who are nearing completion;
- Whether you believe the other person can or will change;
- How open you are to revising your expectations, or changing your own behaviour;
- How flexible your plans are i.e. are you tied (via funding or another condition) to a particular project or area of study;
- Your specific goal: problem resolution, a finding of wrongdoing, closure.

An Ounce of Prevention is Worth a Pound of Cure

Research on graduate supervision shows that a common reason for problems between graduate students and their supervisors/instructors are mismatched expectations about the nature of the supervisor relationship. Therefore, it is important from the beginning to establish clear expectations about how you and your supervisor will work together. Before having a conversation with your supervisor about expectations, be sure to do your homework. This usually involves analyzing your own needs and defining for yourself what you require most from your supervisor.

How to Get the Most Out of Your Relationship With Your Supervisor

(Material in this section has been adapted from the University of Washington’s Graduate Student Guide)

Have Realistic Expectations:
- It is unusual for one person to be able to provide you with all of the mentoring support that you will require throughout your studies. Make sure that you have a realistic idea about what any single person can do for you. Make a list of the things that are most important to you and explicitly ask your supervisor for those things. Keep in mind, however, that you may need to adjust your expectations if they are either 1) unreasonable or 2) unsupportable given the other demands on your supervisor’s time and resources. Other faculty members, thesis committee members, and/or colleagues may be able to provide you with additional forms of support.

Clarify Roles and Responsibilities:
- As stated previously, problems between students and supervisors most often come about because of misunderstandings about the expectations the parties have of one another. Many students find it helpful to create a mutual agreement (does not need to be formal) that specifies each person’s respective roles and responsibilities. In developing this kind of an agreement don’t just focus on your own expectations. Make sure you have a clear understanding of your supervisor’s expectations of you.

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• Develop a work plan that includes both short-term and long-term goals as well as a time frame for reaching those goals. This plan should include several opportunities for you to meet with your supervisor to discuss your progress, as well as any additional training and/or professional development that you will need in order to meet your goals. If modifications to the plan are necessary, inform your supervisor and agree upon a new work plan.

• Decide how often you will meet in person, being sure that you request the amount of time you need in order to meet your goals. While face-to-face meetings are not always possible it is a good idea to make them a regular part of your communication. In person communication allows for a more comprehensive form of feedback than email or the telephone. Also, make sure that you understand your supervisor’s restrictions and vice-versa. Your supervisor may have specific preferences in terms of when and where he/she can be reached. For example, some faculty members work frequently from home and don’t mind being contacted there, while for others, being called at home is strictly off limits.

• Clarify how often your supervisor will give you feedback about your research and general progress. Make sure you have a sense of how long it typically takes for your supervisor to return work so you are not always wondering when you will hear from them. Your supervisor may also have other work/commitments that prevent them from getting your work back to you in a timely fashion. Make a point of inquiring about your supervisor’s workload so you are able to anticipate any changes to your usual timeframe. Prepare for situations where you are concerned about the length of time between feedback sessions ahead of time by asking your supervisor what is the best way to remind them about returning your work. For instance, you can ask: “When you are very busy, how should I remind you about a paper/lab results, etc. you have of mine? Should I email you, call you, or come by your office? How much in advance should I remind you?”

• When discussing the issue of your feedback with your supervisor ask about the quantity of feedback your supervisor tends to provide. For instance, does he/she normally provide a lot of comments or very few? Many students find it helpful to know what to expect in advance so they won’t be taken aback later on.

How To Be a Great Graduate Student

As a graduate student beginning to establish connections in the academic field of which you hope eventually to become a part, it is important that you maintain your relationships in a professional manner. Your interactions with faculty members and other colleagues should demonstrate that you are a responsible junior colleague. Faculty members from various institutions have offered the following tips for graduate students.

Use your time with your supervisor wisely

• Prepare in advance for meetings by making notes of the issues you would like to discuss. Prioritize these issues from most important to least important in case you end up having less time with your supervisor than you anticipated. Making notes ahead of time also allows you to be more focused during the meeting; you are less likely to forget to ask important questions regarding your research/progress.

• Meetings will be most productive when you accept responsibility for “running the meeting. Your role is to raise the issues and questions while the supervisor’s role is to respond.
• If your supervisor is facing a work crisis at the time of your meeting, offer to reschedule the meeting, shorten it, or handle the matter over email (if appropriate). Be flexible, but remain committed to getting what you need in a timely manner.
• If you have to cancel a meeting unexpectedly make sure your message reaches your professor. Don’t rely solely on email, since many people do not check their messages every day.

Reference Letters and Funding Applications
• Take responsibility for staying on top of deadlines. Make sure your supervisor has all of the necessary information to write your letter well before the application deadline.
• Leave clear written instructions as to when the letters/funding applications are due and to whom to send them. If you have several letters, create a calendar for your supervisor that lists application deadlines.
• Provide a short description about the scholarship, grant or program for which you are applying.
• Provide details about how you are structuring your application and what aspects of your performance/research you would like your supervisor to highlight.
• In case the professor misplaces the application materials, keep extra copies of all forms.

Think of yourself as an academic colleague in training
• Attend departmental lectures and other activities.
• Join professional associations and societies
• Attend conferences and use these opportunities to network with others.
• Attend teaching workshops and training programs.
• Look for opportunities to interact with members of the department. Being visible in the life of the department will help you to build relationships and gather important information.

Conflict Resolution Strategies for When Things Go Wrong
Given the close and sometimes intense nature of the supervisory relationship, problems are likely to arise from time to time. Ideally, attempts to resolve problems or concerns happen as early and informally as possible. With that guiding principle in mind don’t wait for things to get out of hand. Failing to address problems in their early stages will often lead to increased feelings of frustration which will make the problem more difficult to resolve. It is often useful to think of conflict resolution as a step by step process.

Step One – Discuss your concerns with your supervisor

Before the Meeting:
• Make an in person appointment with your supervisor to discuss your concerns. Avoid the temptation to try to deal with issues over email. Face to face meetings usually generate better resolutions and miscommunications are less likely to occur.
• Allow sufficient time for your meeting. Effective problem solving takes time so make sure you block off enough time to have a good discussion. If your supervisor says he/she is only available for a short time, re-schedule your meeting for another mutually convenient time.
• Prepare for the meeting by making notes before hand. Ask yourself the following questions: What are the specific obstacles in the way of my progress? What steps have I
taken to overcome these obstacles? What do I need from my supervisor to enable me to move forward with my work? If your list of issues is very long prioritize your concerns – what issues do you need to resolve right away?

During the Meeting:

- Be prepared to state your needs. Remember, your supervisor isn’t a mind reader. It is your responsibility to clearly (and politely!) tell your supervisor what you need from him/her to be able to move forward.
- Listen to the other person’s side carefully and respectfully. Don’t argue your position without knowing “why” your advisor is asking/telling you to do certain things that you think are unfair. Asking “why” and “why not” will help you to understand where he/she is coming from and can help develop a common incentive for resolution based on having both sets of interests satisfied.
- Learn something. If miscommunication is a problem between you and your supervisor try to find out why this is happening. Are you unknowingly contributing to the problem through words or gestures? Remember: you cannot control other people’s behaviour but you can control your own.
- Identify solutions. Once you and your supervisor have articulated the problem(s), try to come up with some problem-solving strategies that work for both of you. For example, if receiving timely feedback is an issue in your relationship, what are some of the options for addressing this: Can the professor provide more frequent but less detailed feedback? Can you revise your schedule for submitting work? Finding an appropriate solution may require some negotiation, but both you and your supervisor will be more committed to the resolution if each of you has had a hand in creating it.

After the Meeting:

- Summarize the key points made during the meeting. It’s important to make sure that nothing’s gotten lost in the discussion and that both you and your supervisor have reached some kind of agreement about how the two of you will try to resolve the issues you have identified. Some people find it helpful to put in writing a plan of action based on the conversation. Ask your supervisor if he or she would mind if you did this to again clarify the options/steps towards resolution that you have identified. If you and your supervisor have made some progress on the issue, but you still have more to discuss, determine a date for a follow up meeting.

Step Two – Seek other sources of support for resolving the problem

Sometimes, despite everyone’s best efforts problems remain unresolved after Step One. If your conversation with your supervisor didn’t go very well, or you are afraid to approach your supervisor for whatever reason, it is a good idea to seek help in addressing your concerns. Depending on your situation (where you are in your research, etc.) you may want to consider the following options:

- Make an appointment to see the Ombudsperson, who will listen to your concerns and help you identify specific problem-solving strategies. The Ombudsperson can also provide advice and information about other dispute resolution mechanisms.
- Discuss your concerns with peers who have worked with the person you are having problems with. They may have some insight in the problem you are experiencing and be able to suggest solutions. Peers are also a good resource for learning about the norms in your department regarding frequency of meetings, turn-around time for feedback, and general availability of faculty.
• Consider approaching a member of your advisory committee or another trusted faculty member with whom you have a good relationship. He or she may or may not know the person with whom you are having difficulties, but they will likely be able to provide you with a fresh perspective and suggest different ways for you to approach the situation. Other members of your thesis/dissertations committee may be helpful in this regard.
• If you are experiencing a lot of stress in dealing with the situation (conflict can be very stressful!) make sure you seek out sources of support. Talking to a friend or colleague may be helpful, or you may wish to consider making an appointment to see a counselor at the Student Development Services.

Step Three – Consult a higher authority
• Consult your program’s policies and procedures for handling disputes (note: many programs do not have such policies) and the administrative reporting structure. The program’s graduate affairs assistant may be able to direct you if this information is not readily available.
• Make an appointment with the Graduate Chair or Program Director to discuss what options are available to you. Prepare for this meeting in the same manner that was discussed previously in this document. You should expect that whomever you consult will ask you if you have discussed your concerns with your supervisor, and what, if any, steps you have taken to resolve them. At this stage you may need to make a decision about whether you wish to continue with your supervisor, or whether you want to explore the possibility of changing supervisors. Whatever option you choose you will likely need to take into account your area of study and what stage you are at in your research. Try on different scenarios – what would be the likely outcome if you went through with option A or option B? How would you feel about your choice six weeks from now? Six months from now? The best way to make an informed decision is to consider all of the options available to you.
• If you have good reason to believe that you will be unable to resolve your issues at the department level, either because earlier attempts to resolve the problem have been unsuccessful or because your supervisor is the Graduate Chair, you should consider making an appointment with the Associate Vice-Provost of Graduate Studies to discuss your concerns.
Suggestions for Changing Supervisors

It is important to understand that a change in supervisor is usually made only in exceptional circumstances (e.g. major academic disagreements and/or interpersonal conflicts that are irreconcilable). However, if after exhausting every avenue for resolving your differences, your relationship with your supervisor cannot be repaired, changing to a new supervisor may be your best option. The following are some suggestions for making this important transition as smooth as possible:

- Begin by making a list of the pros and cons of changing supervisors. Make sure you have a clear understanding of how such a change would affect your progress. Keep in mind both the short and the long term consequences. A disruption in the short term might be worthwhile if it improves your ability to succeed in the long term, while far reaching consequences such as difficulties finding post doctoral positions or even establishing yourself within your field, may cause you to reconsider your decision to change.
- Discuss your situation with a member of your advisory committee or a trusted faculty member. Seek their advice about whether a different advisor would be good for you. They may be able to help you clarify your needs and possibly offer suggestions for a new supervisor.
- Make a list of potential advisors who share your research interests. Talk to your Graduate Chair about suggestions of whom and how to approach. Frame discussions with potential supervisors with positive information, such as new interests and possibilities.
- Be professional at all times. Focus discussions on your future goals, not on past negative experiences or problems. If a potential supervisor asks you why you are considering making a change, be as diplomatic as possible in providing a response. Avoid doing or saying anything that could compromise your reputation in the department.
- Make arrangements for completing any outstanding work with your current supervisor before a change takes place.
- Tie up any loose ends as a result of changing supervisors. Make sure you have completed/updated any paperwork that contains information about your advisor (e.g. funding applications, research proposals or thesis committee forms).

One Final Reminder:

- Whatever course of action you choose to take make sure you think carefully about what is in your best interest. Earning a graduate degree is hard work and your relationship with your supervisor is an important one; and one likely to extend beyond the completion of your degree. Your chances of success at the graduate level will be vastly improved if you feel good about your work environment, your research, and your supervisor. If you are experiencing difficulties in any of these areas, seek out the appropriate support and explore what options are available to you.
People, Policies and Websites that May be Useful:

- The Graduate Studies Calendar: www.grad.uwo.ca/calendar.htm. Includes information about program regulations, financial support, scholastic offences and academic appeals.
- Your individual program’s website, and if applicable, the program’s policy and procedure handbook.
- Principles/Guidelines for Supervising Students: http://www.grad.uwo.ca/current_students/graduate_supervision/index.htm
- Society of Graduate and Professional Students (SOGS). Rm. 260 University Community Centre. 519-661-3394 www.uwo.ca/sogs/
- Psychological Services. www.sdc.uwo.ca/psych/
- GTA Union. Somerville House Rm.1313. 519-661-4137 www.gtaunion.com
- Office of the Ombudsperson, WSS 3100b, 519-661-3573. Staffed by Adrienne Clarke and Anita Pouliot: ombuds@uwo.ca; www.uwo.ca/ombuds/
- Equity and Human Rights Services: HSB 334, 519-661-3334; www.uwo.ca/equity
- UWO Guidelines on Access to Information and Protection of Privacy: www.uwo.ca/uni/sec/mapp (Policy 1.23)
- Services for Students with Disabilities: Suite 4100, Western Student Services Building, 519-661-2147. www.sdc.uwo.ca/ssd/
- Ontario Human Rights Commission: www.ohrc.on.ca
- Teaching Support Centre. www.uwo.ca/tsc/gradsupervision.html
- Canadian Association for Graduate Studies. Website: www.cags.ca (offers an online version of the following resource: Guide to Intellectual Property for Graduate Students and Postdoctoral Scholars).

References

Cal Tech Ombuds Office at Cal Tech University. Grad Student – Advisor Issues. www.cco.caltech.edu/~ombuds/html/grad_index.html

Mentoring: How to Obtain the Mentoring You Need: A Graduate Student Guide. University of Washington. 2004-2005