



UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES

Resolving Conflicts in the Graduate Student/Supervisor Relationship

The Graduate Student/ Supervisor relationship is a key ingredient of Graduate Student success, and can be rewarding for both parties. Yet, conflict within this relationship can sometimes arise, hindering the productivity of the relationship. There can be many sources of conflict, including different expectations, different ideas as to quality, personality conflicts, etc. However, the benefits of having a highly productive Graduate Student/Supervisor relationship are so significant that it is worth putting considerable effort into preventing conflicts, or resolving those that may arise. [Expectations for Supervisors](#) and [Graduate Students](#) are set out in our Best Practices documents.

Every Graduate Student/Supervisor relationship is unique, and potential sources of conflict can be quite varied. While there is not a single formula that will resolve all conflicts, below are some general practices and principles that may help prevent or resolve conflicts.

Clarify roles and expectations early and regularly. Many conflicts can be avoided by ensuring that both the Supervisor and the Student have the same understanding of each other's roles and expectations. Therefore, it is important to have an in depth discussion(s) of these topics soon after their formal relationship has begun. To aid in this discussion, Supervisors and Students are required to complete the [Checklist of Expectations for Graduate Student and Supervisor](#) form.

Resolve conflicts early, before they escalate. When conflicts do arise, some individuals will respond by avoiding or ignoring the situation. While some conflicts may naturally diminish, avoiding the situation can often result in an escalation of the conflict. It is best to resolve the conflict early by employing constructive resolution strategies (see below).

Meet together often. Conflicts often arise due to a lack of communication between the Supervisor and Student. One may assume that everything is going well with the project, or with their relationship, while the other may feel the opposite. We suggest that Supervisors and Students meet together often to discuss progress, obstacles, upcoming deadlines, etc. The frequency of these meetings may depend on the stage of the student's training or the nature of the research topic but neither party should assume that things are going well and that meeting often is not needed. The formality and length of the meetings can vary depending on circumstances. It is often helpful for the Student to take minutes during the meeting, and to send a copy of these minutes to the Supervisor after the meeting, to ensure that both have the same understanding as to the items discussed in the meeting, and to provide a record for subsequent discussions.

Have open and respectful discussions. Many conflicts can be resolved or minimized by discussing the situation in an open and respectful manner. Sometimes one party may even be unaware that a conflict exists. During these discussions, it often helps to express empathy towards the other's situation, to clearly articulate the existing conflict and its impact, to make reasonable requests of the other party, and to discuss

what each may do to resolve the conflict. It is important to remember that the goal of these discussions is not to win an argument, but rather to resolve the conflict and receive the benefits of a productive Graduate Student/Supervisor relationship.

Be concerned about each other's wellness. Sometimes friction between the Graduate Student and Supervisor may not be directly related to their relationship, but rather may be due to stressful or difficult situations in their personal or professional lives. Sometimes simple inquiries may increase understanding of the other's situation, and provide opportunities to provide assistance. Both Students and Supervisors should become familiar with the [Creating a Healthy Campus Community](#) initiative, which encourages active participation in providing an environment that is supportive of health and wellbeing.

If a Supervisor loses contact with a student, or if a student does not respond to repeated efforts to communicate, the Supervisor should alert the Graduate Program Director, the Department Head/Associate Dean/Dean, or an Associate Dean in the Faculty of Graduate Studies. Urgent concerns should be directed to the [Student at Risk Team](#).

Seek help when necessary. Sometimes Students and Supervisors will be unable to resolve conflicts on their own. Having a third party involved in a discussion of the situation, either separately or together, can often help to resolve the conflict. Accurate record keeping (e.g., meeting minutes, recommendations, e-mails) are useful to help third parties resolve certain situations. These third parties include: 1) Supervisory Committee 2) Graduate Program Director 3) Department Head, or Associate Dean in the home Faculty, and 4) Faculty of Graduate Studies (Graduate Academic and International Specialist or Associate Dean). These groups and individuals are presented in the order in which assistance should be requested so as to not escalate the situation beyond what is needed. If the conflict is not satisfactorily resolved by seeking assistance from any of these groups or individuals, the next one can then be approached for assistance.

Additional Resources. Other resources are available on campus that can assist Graduate Students and Supervisors improve their conflict resolution skills, and improve the quality of their relationship. These additional resources include:

- a) [Student Ombuds Office](#) – This is a safe place for students to discuss student related issues, including interpersonal conflict.
- b) [SU Wellness Centre](#) – This Centre offers many services promoting a healthy campus community, including counselling services.
- c) [Staff Wellness](#) – Staff Wellness promotes, supports and sustains the health and wellness of Faculty and Staff.
- d) [My GradSkills Workshops](#) – My GradSkills provides professional and academic development opportunities. A number of these workshops are specifically focused on improving the Graduate Student/Supervisor relationship.
- e) [My SupervisorSkills Workshops](#) – These workshops help Supervisors develop skills related to graduate supervision, including how to have a high quality Graduate Student/Supervisor relationship.
- f) Graduate Academic and International Specialist, Faculty of Graduate Studies (Jeanna Parsons Leigh, jjparson@ucalgary.ca) – FGS liaison for academic issues related to graduate students.
- g) Student at Risk SAR@ucalgary.ca