

How to Supervise PhDs Effectively

Six best practices for supervisors, students, and supervisory committees

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Supervision only works when all participants are working together: supervisor, student, and supervisory committee.

We often see rights and responsibilities listed in calendars and handbooks for supervisors and students, but we are at the same time left without much of a clue about how to actually manage the supervision process to a successful conclusion.

The goals of the PhD supervision process are challenging and varied: high quality research, high-quality graduate experience, timely completion, development of new expertise, and, finally, the creation of a new colleague.

Supervision is not an exact science and varies not only on an individual basis but also along disciplinary lines. Sometimes this relationship works out terrifically and sometimes not so!

Here are a few best practices based on our collective experience and discussions with colleagues. The process is not, of course, the sole responsibility of the supervisor, and so our remarks are addressed to all participants: supervisor, student, and supervisory committee members.

Share expectations early

All relationships benefit from a shared understanding of mutual expectation, and the supervisor-student one is no different. If it helps, use this article as a basis for that discussion. There are many other topics that deserve attention when establishing

such expectations, depending on discipline, some as trivial as what time of day people work best and some as fundamental as respect for intellectual property.

Draw the Box

“Draw the Box” is a way to define the research topic. It is being clear about what problems will be addressed (i.e., in the box) and even clearer about what will not be addressed (i.e., outside the box). This short circuits well-meaning diversions along the way. This works best, of course, if the problems in the box are doable in three to four years! The limits to the proposed research shape the timetable and deliverables.

Meet early. Meet often

The most common cause of a supervisory malfunction is lack of meetings. Meetings are in many ways a bellwether of progress. Meeting the supervisory committee at least once or twice a year allows the student to demonstrate progress (or lack thereof); both the student and supervisor get a reality check. Regular scheduled one-on-one meetings of the supervisor and student drive the process forward with their odd mixture of guilt, pat on the back, and planning. Regular meetings, of course, increase the pressure to demonstrate actual progress!

Having structured meetings is useful. For example, sticking to an agenda, expecting a summary or presentation from the student at each meeting, keeping notes of meetings, providing documentation of the process, and keeping that timetable and those deliverables

in sight provide tangible evidence of progress and prevent many unwanted surprises.

Have a Plan B

Attacking a research problem needs an understanding of the required resources. Not everyone gets to use the Cyclotron or rent an icebreaker for the summer! The resources must be affordable and they must be available in the time frame of the student’s program. Even best-laid plans have problems, and often unanticipated road blocks occur: software or hardware does not arrive, equipment breaks, manuscripts are delayed, datasets are incomplete or garbled, etc. A three-month delay can easily develop into a show stopper and the supervisor, student, and perhaps the committee need to be proactive and be prepared to move to Plan B before the timeline of the thesis is completely destroyed.

Show and Tell

Unless the thesis contains code for the next Google or a multi-gazillion dollar patent, ideas benefit from exposure. Supervisors should make opportunities for the student to speak about their work; students need to take them. Write about it. Give seminars on the question, the methodology, the results. Go to conferences and talk about it to people in the coffee line, around the posters, after your talk, after other people’s talks. Develop and practice an elevator pitch, the two minute spiel in English that covers the problem (so what), the idea (what), and the results (how good). Hopefully the student and

supervisor have the same story!

It's all about respect

Above all, a good supervisory experience is about respect. Respect of the student for the content knowledge and experience of the supervisor and the supervisory committee. Respect by the supervisor and committee of the needs and expectations of the student. This plays out in the manner that everyone (i.e., not just the student) accepts and acts on feedback, the collegiality of interactions, and the timeliness of feedback.

Fundamental, of course, to respect is good old fashioned honesty. Students are responsible

for honesty in their effort to act on feedback, to be honestly interested in the topic. Supervisors are responsible for honesty in their interactions with the student especially when the student is falling behind or not performing at the level expected.

These six ideas are not new and they are not rocket science but they are good starting points and timely reminders for us all. At the end of the process, the newly minted PhD becomes a colleague, and whether the relationship grows or withers will depend on the mutual respect developed getting there.

If we could add a seventh point it would be to participate fully in the process: celebrate

the successes, mourn the losses and the rejects, and laugh at the improbable. It is hard to think of a single researcher who does not treasure the time spent with his or her graduate students and certainly administrative researchers, to a person, call this the best part of their week. So it is our job to make sure this is also the best part of the student's week as well.

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