Advice for Graduate Students on Effective Interaction and Maintaining a Professional Relationship with Senior Supervisors

In order to be successful in a graduate program, the mutual efforts of faculty and student to work diligently and form a productive professional relationship are critical. Faculty members in the Department of Gerontology are committed to providing high quality educational experiences for our MA and PhD students. Ultimately, success of our students is a reflection of the quality in our programs and directly contributes to the reputation and viability of our programs. In order to assist our students to effectively navigate through the program, we provide an extensive set of resources. Key materials are introduced to incoming students at the orientation, while several supplementary documents and links are available on our website in the section for graduate students. This document provides advice as to how you might optimize your smooth progress through the program and interact effectively with your senior supervisor and supervisory committee.

Advice on Progress through the Program:

- During the first semester, develop a draft schedule for completion of your coursework, proposal development and project/thesis work. You should be able to identify the required and elective courses you want to take over 3-4 regular (spring/fall) semesters. You can consult with Anne Marie about courses scheduled for the upcoming semesters. Consult with your supervisor to develop a tentative timeframe for your proposal development, thesis/project data collection and/or analysis, write-up and completion, as well as your internship, if needed. Although this timeframe may change as your research plans are developed, it is important to set clear objectives to facilitate the efficient and successful completion of your degree.

- Graduate students should assume personal responsibility in making sufficient progress in their research work and should adopt a pro-active stance in this regard. Further development as a mature, independent scholar represents an important distinction and departure from your undergraduate studies. In other words, once you have completed your coursework, you need to take full charge of your research project/thesis in terms of making progress, staying self-motivated, disciplined and focused. This does not mean that your supervisor will not be there to provide mentorship, advice, and guidance. However, your supervisor should not be expected to assume primary responsibility for your progress.

Meetings with Senior Supervisor:

- Check with your supervisor about her/his preference regarding the frequency of in-person meetings with you for consultation on your progress through the program. Some supervisors like to meet regularly (e.g., bi-weekly, monthly) whereas others prefer to meet on an ‘as needed’ basis.
There could be a combination of these two approaches depending on the stage or pace of progress in student work and/or supervisor’s preference.

- Although this may sound redundant, you are strongly advised to take detailed notes during a meeting with your supervisor in order that you do not miss important information. Take a pen and pad or a laptop/tablet to your meetings. Ask your supervisor if you should share the typed version of the notes with her/him after the meeting to ensure that you are “on the same page.”
- If a meeting with your supervisor is scheduled to discuss your written work, make sure to send your draft to her/him and provide enough time for them to review it before the meeting. Do not send your work 1-2 days before the meeting (also see Expected timeframe for feedback below).
- It is important that you take the initiative to meet with your supervisor to get feedback, to bounce your ideas off her/him or pick her/his brains. Your supervisor cares for you, but is not going to track you. You should stay in touch and ask questions.
- If you are not meeting in person for an extended time, take the initiative to keep your supervisor and committee members aware of what you are doing and send a brief progress report.

E-Communication:

- If you are not meeting with your supervisor on a regular basis, send periodic updates on your work accomplished (coursework completed, progress in project/thesis, conference abstract submission, etc.).
- As part of good email etiquette, you should acknowledge receipt of emails from your supervisor even if no formal action is required on your part.

Expected timeframe for feedback:

- When you plan to submit your work (e.g., draft of proposal, paper, etc.) to your supervisor for feedback, check with him/her in advance on the timeline. Do not simply assume that you can send your work to him/her for feedback without any prior notice, unless there is a prior agreement on the timeline.
- Copy-edit for spellings, typos, etc. in your draft as best as you can. Sending drafts that are completed in a rush that contain basic errors is not acceptable.
- Have realistic expectations about the time your supervisor might take to give feedback on your work. Professors have hectic schedules with teaching, research activities, multiple advisees, committee work, etc. In general, you can expect to get feedback between 1 and 3 weeks, depending on work submitted and the work demands of faculty, unless otherwise indicated by your supervisor.

Reference Letters

- Supervisors are generally happy to write reference letters for current students applying for scholarships/fellowships or for graduating students
applying for employment positions or admission into a PhD program. However, do not simply assume that your supervisor will give you a reference. Ask him/her if he/she is willing, and if so, you should give enough advance notice when you are requesting such letters. Any request with a timeline of less than 7 days is inappropriate, unless absolutely necessary.

- Be sure to provide all of the relevant information and documents that your supervisor might need or request in writing a reference letter, especially for external reference letters. These include: guidelines for reference letter as provided by the relevant funding agency (could be URLs), address and deadline for sending the reference letter, your CV, current transcript, research/position statement (if needed), etc.

**Publications and Conference Presentations**

- Check with your supervisor if your final research work is potentially publishable as a journal article. In general, our expectation is that PhD dissertations and MA thesis research should be of publishable calibre. Some MA projects are also potentially publishable. In some instances, students have been successful in publishing work done as part of a course requirement. In all of these scenarios, your supervisor will be able to advise you. Also check with her/him about the protocol of sequence in co-authorship.

- If you are thinking of submitting an abstract to a conference, it is advisable that you inform your supervisor. If you are unsure as to the suitability of your research a conference presentation/poster, check with your supervisor. As with papers for publications, ascertain co-authorship protocol for conference presentations/posters. The general practice on authorship is that supervisors are co-authors. If you are planning to present or publish work done as part of a course, you should check with the course instructor.