

# GRADSPEAK

## SFU Reviews Graduate Supervision

*Jon Driver*

For the past year the graduate student supervision task force, composed of professors and students, has interviewed experts, conducted surveys, examined the literature and reviewed SFU policies. As noted in the following literature review on graduate supervision, effective supervision is a key factor in graduate student success. The lively debates that take place in our task force suggest that attitudes towards supervision are personal and deeply held. I do not want to anticipate the recommendations of the task force report that we expect to release in January; however, I will reflect on two issues that have emerged.

Early in our discussions a task force member asked how we would recognise effective supervision. I believe that supervision is effective if it allows the student, the professor and the University to meet their goals for graduate education. Some of these goals are common to all parties -- for example, to foster independent scholarship, or to ensure that students make good progress towards degree completion. But there are also goals that may be more important to one party than to the others. For example, some students may want more mentoring about professional development, whereas their supervisors are concerned about getting the research published. It is essential that the task force recommendations respect the legitimate needs and goals of all parties, recognize significant differences across disciplines, and acknowledge that each supervisory relationship contains unique features that cannot always be accommodated with formulaic practices.

It has also become clear that the quality of supervision cannot be improved solely through complex regulations and processes, nor by creating detailed manuals of best practices. Obviously, there is a place for such tools, and the task force will probably make some recommendations for improvements in our current practices. However, professors have a legitimate concern that their workload will increase if more regulations and monitoring processes are introduced. And students are rightly worried that further bureaucratization of the supervisory relationship will result in the loss of opportunities for personal mentorship and collegiality that are so difficult to measure, but seem to be at the heart of good supervision.

This year I am again running workshops on supervision for professors and students. The fall events are full, but notices about spring events will be circulated soon. These workshops provide an opportunity for participants to think about the goals of supervision and to compare experiences, and they also provide simple tools for helping students and professors achieve their goals. I encourage you to participate in a workshop, and to read and comment on the task force's report when it is released early in 2007.

The following article is an abridged version of a literature review on graduate student supervision, compiled in the summer semester, 2006. The full version will be available on our website early in 2007.

### Literature Review

*Heather Latimer, Trude Heift, Jon Driver*

Research on PhD student supervision, and on what exactly makes good supervisory practice, has been undertaken by various scholars and institutions in Canada, the US, England

and Australia in the last twenty-five years. Connecting supervisory practice to attrition and time-to-completion rates, national and international studies alike have cited good supervisory practice as the key factor in successful and timely graduate completion. Girves and Wemmerus (1988), for instance, claim that the student/faculty relationship is directly related to doctoral degree progress. Similarly, Bargar and Mayo-Chamberlain (1983) refer to graduate student/faculty relations as the single most important aspect of the quality of students' graduate experience. They also point out, however, that graduate supervision is usually the single most disappointing aspect of students' experience as well. Good supervision and mentoring are vital to student success in graduate school. Unfortunately, as Repak (2002) recently found, these are also the areas of graduate experience where students are most likely to express disappointment, insecurity and isolation.

In the Canadian context, this information is reflected in a study (1992-2002) of attrition and time-to-completion rates at Canadian universities conducted by the Canadian Association for Graduate Studies (CAGS). In a 2003 article in *University Affairs*, Peggy Berkowitz interviews Dr. Martha Crago, president of CAGS, and reveals some of the study's more upsetting preliminary findings. On the low end Crago states average PhD graduation rates are only at 45.6% in the humanities and 55.1% in the social sciences. Further, time-to-completion rates from PhD programs among the four broad fields of study range from 14 terms in the physical sciences to 17 terms in the humanities and social sciences. Crago does point to some positive findings, but, according to her, overall the rates suggest that too many students are staying six to eight years and then leaving without a degree. While lack of student funding is a major contributor to these low rates, Dr. Debra Stewart, president of the U.S.

Council of Graduate Schools (CGS), tells Berkowitz that mentoring plays an equally important role. According to Stewart, mentoring is not only the most important single factor in completing a program but it is also the most difficult to define in a way that fits all cases. Recognizing a problem common to all studies on supervisory practice, Stewart acknowledges that, although the CGS knows that mentoring is important to student success, it is hard to define as a set of practices.

One of the reasons good supervisory practice is difficult to define is because other factors that affect attrition and completion rates, such as financial support, departmental characteristics, socialization, isolation and social factors such as gender, race and ability are also connected in varying degrees to the relationship students have with their supervisors (Girves and Wemmerus, 1988). Another reason is that most literature on supervision tends to focus on the negative effects of poor mentoring and researches students who leave school disappointed (Leaving the Ivory Tower) rather than concentrating on best practices. Several areas of literature, however, identify mentoring and supervisory strategies that have been employed successfully by students, faculty and administrators at institutions nationally and internationally. What follows is a brief summary of the literature identifying common themes in the advice for students, supervisors and administrators, and a selected bibliography.

#### ***How to Survive Graduate School – Literature Aimed at Students***

Books, pamphlets, articles, and websites aimed at graduate students often target students entering school who are in the process of choosing a supervisor. Books such as *Getting What You Came For*, *How to Get a PhD*, *In Pursuit of the PhD*, *Being Bright is Not Enough*, and *Successful Dissertations and Theses* warn students they will need to manage their graduate experience and their supervisors rather than vice versa. Focusing on typical problems that can occur between students and supervisors, these books consistently

tell students that choosing an advisor is the single most important decision a graduate student makes during his or her graduate career (Lovitts, 2001) and that, according to Hawley (1993), self-management is more important now than it has ever been before. Informing new graduate students how to move through their programs successfully and speedily, the advice in these books is practical and useful if students are proactive enough to seek the books out and assertive enough to put this “self-management” advice into practice.

The most useful place for schools to post expectations regarding graduate student supervision, and for students to find out about them and learn how to self-advocate, is on university websites across Canada. Offering accessible guidelines on what students should expect from their supervisors, the information provided ranges from open-ended descriptions of supervisory practice to detailed and prescriptive listings of what students, supervisors, and administrators need to know and do to ensure best practices are put into effect and take root.

#### **Common Themes in the Advice for Students**

- Discuss expectations (including those that are not program-based such as attendance at conferences, grant applications, RA/lab duties, etc.)
- Learn to manage time, establish goals, and follow deadlines
- Initiate contact regularly with supervisor
  - Learn to respect your supervisor’s criticism
- Recognize your supervisor may be busy
  - Have academic integrity and honesty
  - Get involved in your department

#### ***Learning New Pedagogy – Literature for Supervisors***

Brown & Atkins (1988) suggest that graduate student supervision is probably the most complex and subtle form of teaching in which a professor engages. Despite the importance and complexity of graduate student supervision there has been very little empirical research

done on the process. Recent guidebooks on the topic, however, are compact and useful, concentrating both on supervisory problems and on good practice. One of the easiest and most effective ways supervisors, and faculty in general, can become mentors, colleagues, researchers, friends and contribute to graduate student success is through academic socializing. Usually not thought of as “supervisory practice” per se, social interactions and social-academic interactions between faculty and students are vital to student life. In fact, proper student socialization is a key factor in fighting a common reason for attrition: isolation.

#### **Common Themes in the Advice for Supervisors**

- Adjust perceptions of supervisor/ student relationship
- Be interested in the student as a person as well as a student
- Give timely responses to work and thoughtful feedback
- Identify what you expect and explain your working and communication habits
  - Expect to act in several roles: as mentor, researcher, friend and colleague
  - Initiate regular meetings

#### ***Making the Rules – Literature for Administrators***

It was previously thought that increasing the rigor of entrance screening processes would lower attrition rates. Current literature on supervisory practice suggests the opposite, however, and encourages administrators to spend less time focusing on entrance practices and more time on organizational factors such as establishing supervisory procedures and communicating those policies and procedures. While there is clearly no one formula for the advisor-advisee relationship according to Butterwick and Mullins (1996), there are two important aspects for administrators to consider when developing a “best practice” model of graduate supervision (CGS, 1990). The first and most important aspect has to do with understanding that supervision is a creative process open to negotiation and change. Good supervision

has a level of flexibility to it that makes each relationship unique, and ultimately it is this creative aspect that should structure supervisory strategies. The second aspect is more easily monitored and focuses on the mechanics of ensuring students make good progress through their degree. While the first aspect of supervisory practice is individual and personal, the CGS encourages administrators to control the second aspect with diligence and clarity so that the first may be allowed to grow (CGS, 1990). In order to ensure a good supervisory framework exists, therefore, the CGS has three base-level suggestions for administrators: that they produce a definite plan in writing different for each department which establishes each department's view on good supervisory practice: that they establish a system for regular meetings between supervisor and students, and: that they set up methods for assessing coursework and/or thesis and dissertation progress (CGS, 1990) .

#### **Common Themes in the Advice for Administrators**

- Define individual departmental expectations
- Create policies which balance supervisory direction and student independence
- Ensure procedures are in place for revising research design if necessary
  - Monitor student progress
  - Provide setting for students to present progress
- Create a detailed handbook

#### **Selected Bibliography**

[www.ualberta.ca/~gsa/Services/studentsupervisorrelationships](http://www.ualberta.ca/~gsa/Services/studentsupervisorrelationships)

[www.yorku.ca/grads/pub/03supervision.pdf](http://www.yorku.ca/grads/pub/03supervision.pdf)

[www.uwo.ca/grad/supervis/](http://www.uwo.ca/grad/supervis/)

[www.grad.ubc.ca/students/supervision/index.asp?menu=000,000,000,000](http://www.grad.ubc.ca/students/supervision/index.asp?menu=000,000,000,000)

#### **For Students**

Bargar, Robert and Jane Mayo-Chamberlain. (1983). Advisor and Advisee Issues

in Doctoral Education. *Journal of Higher Education* 54.4, 407-432.

Council of Graduate Studies. (1990). Research Student and Supervisor: An Approach to Supervisory Practice. Washington: CGS.

Handbook of Graduate Supervision. (n.d.) Retrieved May 15, 2005 from University of British Columbia Web site: <http://www.grad.ubc.ca/students/supervision/index.asp?menu=000,000,000,000>

Phillips, Estelle M. and D. S. Pugh. (1994). How to Get a PhD: A Handbook for Students and their Supervisors. Philadelphia: Open UP.

#### **For Supervisors**

Council of Graduate Studies. (1990). Research Student and Supervisor: An Approach to Supervisory Practice. Washington: CGS.

Brown, George and Madeleine Atkins. (1988). Effective Teaching in Higher Education. New York: Methuen.

Delamont, Sara et al. (1997). Supervising the PhD: A Guide to Success. Buckingham: SHRE & Open UP.

Gaffney, Nancy A. (1995). A Conversation about Mentoring: Trends and Models. Washington: CGS.

King, Margaret. (2003). On the Right Track: A Manual for Research Mentors. Washington: CGS

#### **For Administrators**

Council of Graduate Schools. (2004). Ph.D. Attrition and Completion: Policy, Numbers, Leadership and Next Steps. Washington: CGS.

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Donald, Janet G. et al. (1995). Graduate Student Supervision Policies and Proce-

dures: A Case Study of Issues and Factors Affecting Graduate Study. *Canadian Journal of Higher Education*, 25.3, 71-92.

Holdaway, Edward et al. (1995). Supervision of Graduate Students. *Canadian Journal of Higher Education*, 25.3, 1-29

Lovitts, Barbara E. (2001). Leaving the Ivory Tower: The Causes and Consequences of Departure from Doctoral Study. New York: Rowman & Littlefield.

## **2006 Awards Recipients**

Like their acclaimed predecessors, this year's SFU graduate students were very successful in winning external awards. For the 2006 competitions, our internal success rate in the SSHRC Doctoral competition was 71%, for NSERC Postgraduate Scholarships 66%, and for the Michael Smith Foundation Awards in Health Sciences 40%. In the SSHRC Doctoral competition, of the 24 SFU graduate awardees, 10 are receiving SSHRC Doctoral Fellowships (\$20,000) and 14 are receiving Canada Graduate Scholarships Doctoral (\$35,000). For the Canada Graduate Scholarships Masters (SSHRC) competition, SFU's success rate was 100%, with all 39 candidates receiving an award. Of the 5 CIHR Canada Graduate Scholarship applications put forward in 2006, 3 received an award. This is the same success rate (60%) as in 2005. Congratulations to all award recipients!

#### **American Association for the Advancement of Science Canon National Parks Science Scholarship**

Capps, Denny (EASC).

#### **Canada Graduate Scholarship Doctoral (SSHRC)**

Beardmore, Alan (REM); Brown, Sherri (POL); Fox, Stephanie (CMNS); Garner, Patricia (WS); Greaves, Caroline (PSYC); Hadic Zabala, Loreley (LING); Joseph, Christopher (REM); McKenzie, Stephanie (PSYC); Schmidt, Bonnie (HIST); Smolash,



W. Naava (ENGL); Speller, Camilla (ARCH); Thomsen, Kaitlyn (PSYC).

***Canada Graduate Scholarship Doctoral (NSERC)***

Bone, Christopher (GEOG); Hendriks, Andrew (SIAT); Jumean, Zaid (BISC); Macauley, Matthew (CHEM); Murphy, Rose (REM); Squires, Kelly (REM).

***Canada Graduate Scholarship Masters (SSHRC)***

Aagesen, Sonja (ARCH); Beile, Jeremy (EDUC); Bibok, Maximilian (PSYC); Boschman, Lorna (SIAT); Boydell, Carroll (PSYC); Buckley, Stephen (POL); Climenhage, L. James (PSYC); Cummings, Anne (HIST); Davidson, Martin (PSYC); D'Elia, Teresa (GERO); Failows Neyestani, Laura (EDUC); Fielding, Stephen (HIST); Folvik, Robin (HIST); Fowler, Gail (ENGL); Guigne, Francoise (SA); Haw, Jennie (SA); Heaslip, Robyn (REM); Howard, Kristen (CRIM); Ishiguro, Laura (HIST); Jauernig, Nina (PSYC); Kahanoff, Sharon (CA); Kelly, Karen (ARCH); Kempton, Karilyn (ENGL); Klingbeil, Melanie (CMNS); Milloy, Jeremy (HIST); Paulin, C. Andrew (SIAT); Pearlman, Emily (CA); Peters, Jodi (PSYC); Plumpton, Shannon (PSYC); Puurveen, Gloria (GERO); Rahemtulla, Shadaab (HIST); Rosamond, Emily (CA); Ruelle, Annamarie (GEOG); Rushmere, Andrew (EDUC); Scott, Rebecca (WS); Szoke, Donna (CA); Toews, Anne (HIST); Torrie, Rachel (HIST); Tucker-Abramson, Myka (ENGL); von Gaza, Katie Jane (REM); Weekes, Victoria (REM); Weeks, Lisa (WS); Woods, Karen (SA); Wozniak, Kelly (REM); Wuschke, Kathryn (GEOG); Zukiwsky, Shae (CA).

***Canada Graduate Scholarship Masters (NSERC)***

Barrett, Jennifer (REM); Darling, Emily (BISC); Falcon, Laura (PSYC); Finney, Jessica (REM); Fletcher, Neil (REM); Franks, Samantha (BISC); Gibson, Richard (MATH); Giesbrecht, Ian (REM); Gray, Tyler V. (REM); Harrison, Megan (BISC); Lee, Michelle (PHYS); Li, Feng (STAT); Neilson, Heather (PSYC); Nicoll,

Tami (GEOG); Rowland, Eloise (BISC); Thomson, Jordan (BISC); Whitehorne, Ivy (BISC).

***Canada Graduate Scholarship Masters (CIHR)***

Jaspers-Fayer, Fern (PSYC); Maric, Biljana (KIN); McIntosh, Christopher (CMPT).

***Canadian Institutes of Health Research / Institute of Population and Public Health / Public Health Agency of Canada Public Health Professional Master's Award***

Harding, John (HSCI); Prisiak, Amy (HSCI).

***Canadian Institutes of Health Research Doctoral Research Award***

Boudreau, Vanessa (PSYC); Burkett, Kelly (STAT); Loshny, Helen (WS).

***SSHRC Doctoral Fellowships***

Kilty, Jennifer (CRIM); Kurytnik, Karen (EDUC); Masri, Kamal (BUS); Robertson, Sean (GEOG); Wasik, Adrienne (SA); Weiler, Mark (EDUC); Yager, Jodi (PSYC).

***NSERC Industrial Postgraduate Scholarship***

Assonitis, Katrina (REM); Henry, Lee M. (BISC); Springford, Aaron (REM); Turner, Derek (EASC).

***NSERC Northern Research Internship***

Heath, Joel (BISC).

***NSERC Postgraduate Scholarship Doctoral***

Bradley, Brian (BISC); Brideau, Marc-Andre (EASC); Farahbod, Roozbeh (CMPT); French, Leon (CMPT); Green, Jessica (PSYC); Gregg, Jennifer K. (BISC); Katz, Michael J. (CHEM); Landry, Glenn (PSYC); Lau, Matthew (MBB); Letourneau, Michael (CMPT); Mah, Allan (MBB); Peterson, Jason H. (BISC); Shugar, Daniel (EASC); Syrzycka, Monika (MBB);

Waliwitiya, Ranil (BISC); Wheler, Brett (EASC); Yao, Zhenwang (ENSC).

***NSERC Postgraduate Scholarship Masters***

Adachi, Michael (ENSC); Chan, Paulman (ENSC); Glen, Edward (CMPT); Goldan, Amir H. (ENSC); Humphries, Thomas (MATH); Huxtable, Robert (ENSC); Johnson, Christopher (CMPT); Khan, Ali (ENSC); Khodami, Ida (ENSC); Laferriere, David (MATH); Liu, Ted Chi-Kao (ENSC); Mah, Allan (MBB); Neudorf, Christina (GEOG); Vincent, Kyle (STAT).

***Mathematics of Information Technology and Complex Systems (MITACS) Industrial Internship***

Coury, Michael (CMPT).

***Michael Smith Foundation in Health Research Trainee Awards – Masters & Doctoral Studentships***

Bradley, Brian (BISC); Frohlick, Sherri Lynn (PSYC); Jaspers-Fayer, Fern (PSYC); Krawczyk, Marion (SA); Kupferschmidt, Anthony (GERO); Langille, Morgan (MBB); Laronde, Denise (KIN); Maric, Biljana (KIN); Mcquaid, Nancy (PSYC); Murnaghan, Chantelle (KIN); Shen, Weiping (MBB); Shin, Heesun (MBB); Trapp, Melissa (MBB); Wang, Qing Sunny (MBB); Wilson, Catherine (PSYC).

***Contact Information***

Office of the Dean of Graduate Studies  
Maggie Benston Centre 1100  
Simon Fraser University  
8888 University Drive  
Burnaby, BC, V5A 1S6  
Telephone: (604) 291-3042  
Facsimile: (604) 291-3080  
E-mail: [dgs-sfu@sfu.ca](mailto:dgs-sfu@sfu.ca)

