

Promoting graduate student success: Notes of a Faculty of Forestry workshop

Jan 13, 2022, 3-4pm. Organizer: Pia Smets, Research Development and Awards Officer

Panel: Faculty: Hisham Zerriffi (AD-EDI), Shannon Hagerman (AD-GS), Taraneh Sowlati

These notes are a summary of the topics discussed, not stand-alone faculty-approved advice. AD= Associate Dean. EDI=Equity-Diversity-Inclusion. GS= Graduate Studies.

1. Clear communication

Open communication about the graduate students' goals, including those after graduation. For example: what are the 3 areas (topics) the student wants to become an expert in, and what are the 3 skills sets (methodologies) they want to achieve. This can change over time, but needs to be part of the discussion.

Manage expectations and be upfront about your own strengths and weaknesses.

Regular communication about progress. Ensure students that your door will be open if future problems arrive.

Do not assume all students are well-informed about graduate life (or job prospects?), they may not be: check in with them about your assumptions.

2. Providing structure to the student (from start to end)

This includes your availability for regular check-ins, giving constructive feedback, joint ownership of problems.

Subdivide the literature review and thesis-writing task in small projects or paragraphs. Research writing needs to be taught and learned over time. More frequent feedback on written materials saves the professor time.

3. Building a scaffold in your lab, provide a good team environment

Students also do 'internal mentoring': they provide support to each other and knowledge exchange. It is, of course, nice to have an experienced PDF in the group, as well as PhD students and MSc students at different stages of degree completion. However, such a 'scaffold' takes time to build, and may require making strategic hiring decisions that benefit this long-term goal. Also, knowledge does not always flow in one direction (e.g. down from PDF): MSc can help PhD as well.

4. The secret to good group meetings and creating a supportive team atmosphere

There are several types of group meetings which all have their uses. 1. The half-baked research talk, requesting early feedback and direction 2. The polished presentation, practicing for the conference or defense 3. Discussions about how to review papers, life in graduate school, etc. 4. Meetings with companies about project deliverables 5. Roundtables where everyone provides a progress update on their latest problem.

One tactic is to withhold professor comments and questions until the end. This encourages the students to ask questions of each other.

Model a problem solving attitude.

5. Some time management options: how not to become that supervisor who is not available

Leave enough time in your own schedule for administrative tasks.

Do not accept a new student if you won't have the required time to supervise the student. Check with administrative staff about any funding flexibility.

Prioritize tasks that impact student funding (scholarship deadlines), student publication (the revision of a submitted paper), and student graduation (chapter revision).

Have a clear timeline so the student knows where they are at, and can judge the consequences of intermediate decisions (e.g. the decision to accept an internship) on completion.

Let the students organize some practical details (e.g. social events) to save you time.

Use project management software, where the students can assign you clear tasks. Be clear upfront about what/when you cannot deliver.

6. Model work-life balance, by clearly stating when you're not available. This allows the students to pursue balance themselves. Unrealistic demands may lead to burn-out.

7. What if the money runs out

Life happens to students also. Dealing with student delays is done on a case-by-case basis, and greatly depends on the funding agency. For example, Mitacs funds cannot be transferred to another student or another period. Some funds (e.g. start-up funds, NSERC DG) are flexible. Supervisors can't really plan for this kind of 'unexpected'. Some FoF and UBC emergency funding exists. Consult staff earlier rather than later (see **9**).

Students may need to take a formal leave of absence, which can be a difficult decision, and they may need help evaluating pros and cons of such decisions (e.g. effect on time to graduation).

8. What if the work styles of student and supervisor do not mesh?

Supervisor and student may need to meet each other halfway. After the supervisor has explained the project, students who can meet the project requirements and goals can be given more freedom and flexibility. It may be necessary to adapt, as "life happens".

9. Consult staff

For example, Julie Morey, Director of Graduate Student Academic Services in the Faculty of Forestry.

10. Refer students to the [Graduate Pathways to Success](#) program.

The Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Students (G+PS) has a rich [website](#) and many staff. Their excellent programming ranges from Awards and orientation to Graduation, including everything in-between, such as wellness, how to flourish, preparation for the job market, etc.

The programming is adapted to a 2x yearly intake, and includes support for post-doctoral fellows.

They also have excellent information for [supervisors](#).

Further reading

G+PS offers workshops for graduate advisors twice a year, as well as provides support to students and supervisors who are experiencing conflict.

[Principles](#) of graduate supervision.

Graduate Student / Supervisor Expectations [document](#)