

The Supervisor and the Supervisory Committee

Fall 2010

This section describes a set of guidelines that are followed in matters related to graduate supervision in the Department of Psychology. These guidelines apply to all in the M.Sc. and Ph.D. programs.

Matching Student and Supervisor

Our graduate program is based on an apprenticeship developed by mutual agreement between the student and the supervisor. In most cases, students are paired with a research supervisor before starting the program. This pairing is seen as provisional; occasionally, a period of a few weeks of sorting out may be required before a permanent match is achieved. In general, we try to arrange pairings so that the interests of student and supervisor are well-matched, and in most cases the original pairing works satisfactorily to the end of the program. In some cases, because of limitations of time or laboratory space, the faculty member who seems most appropriate for supervision of a student will not be able to serve as supervisor. However, that person may be able and willing to serve as supervisor in a subsequent year. Finding the right supervisor is, of course, important. The supervisor will probably have more to do with a student's education than anyone else. Therefore, within the limits of our resources, we try to make it possible for a student to change supervisors without prejudice. Interests change, and not every pairing proves compatible. Obviously, change becomes more complicated as the student advances in the program, so it is best for the student to identify a mismatch as early as possible. If a student wishes to change supervisors, they are asked to talk first to their current supervisor about their intention, and then to the chair of the Graduate Studies Committee, who can provide guidance to the work of other faculty members and on how to proceed. In the end, it is up to the student to meet with any faculty member with whom they might like to work. Changes of supervisor must be approved by the Graduate Studies Committee.

The Supervisory Committee

The supervisory committee consists of the student's supervisor and at least two other faculty members. When forming a supervisory committee, it is important to keep in mind the following guidelines from the Graduate Calendar:

Section 1.2.4:

The Supervisory Committee... provides advice to the Department... Additional responsibilities include, where applicable: planning and approving the student's program of courses and research; approving thesis proposals; deciding, within departmental regulations, on the timing of the comprehensive examination and, language and other examinations; maintaining knowledge of the student's research activities and progress; giving advice on research; providing the student with regular appraisals of progress or lack of it; initiating appropriate action if the student's progress is unsatisfactory, including any recommendation that the student withdraw; deciding when the student is to write the thesis and giving advice during this process; acting as internal examiners for the thesis.

Section 2.6:

The department/program should ensure that the members of a supervisory committee are sufficiently competent and experienced to serve at the required level. In identifying a supervisory committee, the department/program should consider the following, among other things: the balance of the committee by rank and experience; publications and other demonstrations of competence in scholarship or research on the part of the supervisor. Supervisory committees for Ph.D. candidates shall be reviewed annually by the department/program.

The selection of the other members is up to the student and supervisor, but all supervisory committees must be approved by the Graduate Studies Committee. Members should be chosen because of the special contributions they can make to the student's research, perhaps because they complement the supervisor's expertise in some way. The supervisor and at least one other supervisory committee member must be full members of the Psychology Department. Other members of the committee may be drawn from other departments or faculties if they have expertise in an area that is relevant to the research being undertaken. A committee with more than four members is cumbersome and should be avoided.

The supervisory committee should be set up by December of the student's first year in the graduate program. This initial committee may well turn out to be an interim committee that advises the student in the first year and evaluates progress in May. The student may wish to change membership as her/his research project develops. Such changes in membership are permitted, but must be approved by the Graduate Studies Committee.

The student is responsible for keeping committee members informed of his/her research progress. The formal aspects of the program that foster interaction between the student and supervisory committee are committee meetings, which occur at least once a year, and written progress reports, which are due May 15 each year. (Students should consult with their supervisory committee to determine the format of the progress report.) Committee meetings provide an opportunity for students to present their research orally to committee members, while progress reports provide an opportunity for students to write a document that describes their research progress. Committee meetings and progress reports also provide the supervisory committee with an opportunity to evaluate the student's research progress and communication skills. Beyond these formal interactions, it is anticipated that students will work most closely with their primary supervisor, but students are encouraged to discuss their on-going work with other members of the committee. Finally, committee members are expected to play an important role in the final stages of preparation of a thesis. When the student and supervisor agree that the thesis is ready to be defended, other members of the committee are then expected to read the thesis and to help the student make any revisions that are required to meet their standard for a defensible thesis.