

Strategies for Graduate Mentoring and Supervision at a Distance

The relationships between students and supervisors are always a pivotal part of graduate student experiences and mentoring meetings are especially important at this time of uncertainty. Although the physical distancing measures currently in place are unusual, there is a research literature addressing supervision at a distance. Papers on this topic are appended at the end of the document. What follows are some key findings from the literature and some strategies that supervisors and students can adopt to make remote supervision more satisfying and productive:

Whole Life of Students:

- Boundaries between the learning/research space and the life-space can be hard to maintain. Supervisors and students need to surface issues that may arise because of competing demands for time that is needed for academic work.

Isolation:

- Isolation can be stressful and demotivating for students; contacts with other students are reported to be supportive and motivating. Students endorsed benefits of creating small-group meetings to support each other or attending small-group meetings convened by supervisors or other faculty members.
- Department and university webinars and online courses can provide community support and support for maintaining academic progress.
- Students appreciate supervisors who check in regularly and establish a schedule for meetings or emails for updates, even in the absence of new data or writing to review.
- Students need to make more concerted efforts to communicate with peers and others (staff, supervisory committee members) to sustain relationships and dialogues that cannot happen casually on campus.

Need for Increased Structure:

- Supervisory styles vary in terms of levels of structure and support that a supervisor may typically provide.¹ Mentoring at a distance seems to require shifts toward supervisory styles that feature higher structure and higher support.
- Students may have adapted to existing structures of academic support that are no longer available, e.g., working beside supervisors, scheduled individual and group meetings. Distance from supervisors and others creates more need for self-organization. Schedules for task completion should be developed and shared with supervisors to keep progress on track.
- Both students and supervisors need to communicate clearly about availability, expectations, timelines for submissions and feedback.

¹ See "Supervisory Styles" <https://www.sgs.utoronto.ca/wp-content/uploads/sites/253/2019/06/Graduate-Supervision-Guidelines-faculty.pdf>.

Communication issues

- Mentoring at a distance is more vulnerable to misunderstandings due to the absence of verbal and non-verbal cues, and technical problems that can disrupt or distort conversations. Problems can also arise because students or supervisors with experience using online technologies for casual interaction may not recognize the need for a different communication style and pace when using the technology for academic matters.
- Students and supervisors need to adopt a variety of technologies to make distance supervision effective. Phone, email, videoconferencing and screen- and file-sharing technologies are all potential tools to utilize. It is useful to make distinctions between what can be managed using asynchronous communication what is better managed via synchronous communication, and how they can be combined.
- Both supervisors and students view online meetings by phone, audio or video to explain written feedback to be a highly effective practice (e.g. pairing written feedback with a synchronous audio or video meeting for discussion).

Relationships

- Although supervisors are at a distance, mentoring practices like networking, guidance, conflict resolution and providing encouragement and support are still identified as crucial elements of supervisory relationships.
- Supervisors emphasize feedback as a tool for building trust with students and modelling responsiveness to student needs. They also used feedback as an opportunity to provide strategies and resources for skill development.
- Students identify structured, timely feedback as invaluable to supporting academic progress, and endorse it as an indicator of care and respect from supervisors and supervisory committee members.

Key Strategies for Supervisors

1. Schedule regular, consistent meetings with students. Pair asynchronous feedback with synchronous follow-up discussion.
2. Encourage students to incorporate consideration of whole-life concerns in setting goals and timelines.
3. Support successful task completion and adherence to timelines by providing structure for academic progress and providing timely feedback.
4. Encourage students to make use of available department and university resources that will decrease isolation and support academic progress.

Key Strategies for Students:

1. Structure time and timelines for academic work while incorporating needed time for attending to whole-life concerns.
2. Join or create a peer-group to reduce social isolation and encourage other students.
3. Keep or request scheduled meetings with supervisors, thinking ahead about agenda items that can support your academic progress.

Resources:

- Fedock, B. (2017). Online dissertation chairs' perceptions on the role of reflective mentoring practices and changing student cross-cultural and generational worldviews. *SAGE Open*, (1 April-June), 1-8.
- Rademaker, L.L., O'Connor Duffy, J. Wetzler, E., & Zaikina-Montgomery, H. (2016). Chair perceptions of trust between mentor and mentee in online doctoral dissertation mentoring. *Online Learning*, 20(1), 57-
- Swapna, K. & Coe, C. (2017). Mentoring and student support in online doctoral programs. *American Journal of Distance Education*, 31(2), 128-142.
- Swapna, K. & Johnson, M. (2019). Online mentoring of dissertations: The role of structure and support. *Studies in Higher Education*, 44(1), 59-71.