

FGS Conference: Building a Positive Supervisory Relationship

Workshop: Roundtable on Communications Strategies

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We invited 53 graduate students attending a roundtable on communications strategies to share their supervisor challenges with the group and then invited other students to make their own suggestions. **Fatema Ali took notes for us. I've arranged the discussion into a Q&A format.** (*Note: some of the bullet points below are direct quotes from students, and some have been edited to enhance understanding*)

Problem: I need some help to manage my relationship with my supervisor

Solutions:

- I am an ID PhD student. I run into problems, but Lynne is always there to help. I advise you all to talk to a coordinator and bridge with supervisor.
- Lynne saved my experience as I had some difficulties. I'm in my fifth year, a student in ID PhD. I have 5 jobs.
- This [session on supervisory relationships] is the most important session I attended in my entire 5 years. Some supervisor-student relationships are great but others are dysfunctional.
- Your mental battery runs out from handling some issues, recharge your mental battery so you could overcome these things.

Problem: My supervisor talks too fast. *I have a friendly supervisor, but he talks too fast, and I can't keep up. So writing is really hard for me, and I look unprepared.*

Solutions:

- I never dealt with this specifically. The supervisor relationship is important but we should respect ourselves. It is not unreasonable to say "can you give me few minutes to finish my things first". You should realize that your relationship with your supervisor is one where both parties adapt to each other.
- I talk fast and I taught courses two years ago. Supervisors talk in a way that they see as accessible to others. But you have the opportunity to say "hold on".
- My supervisor is the nicest person in the world, but sometimes there were names of people thrown in the conversation and names of organizations, and I'm from a different culture, which makes it difficult for me to understand. So I went to a grad coordinator and said to him/her that I cannot keep up with my supervisor. However, writing down notes helped me a lot. I think it would be a good idea to write things down and tell the person

to hold on and then go and search about these organizations and the names of people. Writing things made a very big difference for me.

- I find a NOTES app to be very helpful for taking notes
- There are also apps that convert what is spoken into recorded text
- Reach out to resources or accessibility centres because there could be resources on campus that we are not aware of.

Problem: Lack of information about how to navigate graduate study in the University. *We come from diverse backgrounds, and for some, post-secondary education was not a thing. Therefore, we don't know who to talk to.*

Solutions:

- Before applying, I had an instruction paper which stated e.g. "6 months before you apply you have to do these things. This was very helpful, and if FGS has something like that, it would be very helpful.
- I just wanted to add on what she said. As an international student, having something like that would be very helpful. I want to know what I should expect from the supervisor, and understand what I am getting committed to. So having something like that in addition to other things you mentioned would be very helpful for students to make decisions.
- I am in a situation where I am gathering applications to get into graduate studies and it is very difficult, and I find it helpful to have someone in (for example) Facebook, where we could ask questions.
- I think we should have a course where every graduate institute and students with different areas and backgrounds come together in an open discussion area.
- A Brightspace feature will be soon released where a discussion section for PhD and Masters students could be set up.
- I think the Brightspace thing is fantastic. Having something that says here are the things you need to know before you apply. Students should be informed before they apply so that they do not get bogged down through application process.
- If I did not know my TA, I would have not known my supervisor. If you are an undergraduate, I would advise you to go to FGS and talk to someone. Ask them about the application process, and how the faculty is. They would be able to refer you to the department you are applying to. It is very helpful.

Problem: Supervisors contradict each other: *I have done 6 years of PhD, I have 2 supervisors. When one is busy the other is available. However, two supervisors cannot edit at the same time, and it is very confusing because I don't know whose advice to take. They both have different opinions. I feel I'm in the middle. Can you give me advice on that?*

Solutions:

- I had 2 supervisors too, I ask them about the end results, and get a list of things they agree on. Sometimes just step back and give them a chance.

- I tried to do that, but it didn't work. One of them might have strong opinions, and they do not necessarily agree on many things.
- Maybe a direct approach would help. Bring both of them to a room and explain to them that this is what I'm experiencing.
- In my opinion, unfortunately, sometimes supervisor relationship can be a little complicated, so just to reemphasize, have two of them in the room, and send them documents at the same time.
- I agree with everything that has been mentioned. Supervisors work differently. Based on my experience, I have had explicitly said to my supervisors that each of them takes the lead on one project and the other supervisor agrees. And that worked very nicely. It is important that they respect each other. Taking leads on different projects had helped me a lot. The other thing that helped is bringing them together once every one month, and bring up the things they disagreed on. This helped me resolve some things. I give my input and make a decision and ask them have we agreed on x, y, z?
- If things don't work you can change your entire committee.

Problem: Evening out the workload

- **Tip:** I am finishing my PhD, and I did an internship with a company, and I found that if you work too hard in the beginning then they would set the expectation too high, but if you don't work hard one day they would say you did not work at all. And this is same for research and other experiences.

Problem: Writing difficulties: *I would like to get a little help on writing my proposal. The writing centre did not help. Where should I go? There are different issues with writing, is it grammar, spelling, etc. or constructing the actual document? It is not spelling. When I set up my outline and send it to my supervisors, one of the supervisors makes some changes and adds some things that the other supervisor might not agree on.*

Solutions:

- Dal library has been organizing writing sessions. [Dalhousie has a writing centre that offers a great deal of help to graduate students. See: https://www.dal.ca/campus_life/academic-support/writing-and-study-skills.html]
- My writing at first was in a certain way, but not the way my department wanted, especially because it was not my field. However, reading other people's papers helped me a lot because it made me understand what kind of writing and format the department wants.
- A lot of the times we put focus on supervisor relationship, but having outside relationships is important too. They could help you understand your supervisor's feedback and why he asked to have (for example) two headings etc.

Problem: Meetings with committee members feel like attacks *I'm a PhD student at Dal and my program requires me to have meetings. My last meeting was a disaster as it felt more*

of a personal attack. The meeting is supposed to be a growing meeting, but the questions I was asked did not question my understanding, rather it questioned my limitation. I was surprised from these question, but they said to me “we are preparing you for your defense”, but my defense is in two years.

Solutions:

- I have a lot of competition with my supervisor. I had to remind her where I am and where she is in the career. They are more used to identifying limitations rather than promoting understanding.