

## February 2012: Policies Regarding Graduate Thesis Supervision

### Responsibilities of faculty, students, and administrators

**NOTE:** The responsibilities and dispute resolution processes outlined in this document apply to students in the 13 masters programs at Acadia within the Faculties of Arts, Professional Studies, and Pure and Applied Science, as well as to students in the PhD program in Educational Studies.

### Introduction

This document is intended to provide clear and succinct guidelines for graduate students, faculty supervisors, and administrators on issues related to the supervision of graduate theses and research projects. This is an area of critical importance to the University. Undertaking research is an essential component of graduate study. A good supervisory relationship creates a healthy and supportive environment in which students can accomplish their research and scholarly goals. It also creates a positive and productive environment for faculty supervisors. For many faculty members, the research done by their graduate students not only contributes to their personal research programs, it is frequently an indispensable component of it.

This document has been prepared by the Office of Research and Graduate Studies, with the support and assistance of the Senate Committee on Graduate Studies. It was undertaken with a view to establishing University-wide policy to guide the supervision of graduate-level research. The policies and guidelines contained in this document are intended to bring clarity to the expectations and responsibilities of graduate students and supervisors, and to outline procedures for dealing with conflict and otherwise problematic circumstances in the supervision of graduate research.

### Responsibilities

#### Joint Responsibilities of supervisors and students:

- **Respect.** Every student and faculty supervisor has a right to be treated respectfully. This includes, but is not limited to, the following:
  - Maintaining appointments, except in cases of extenuating circumstances. If cancellation is necessary, provide as much advanced notice as possible.
  - Coming to meetings having read or prepared whatever was agreed upon prior to the appointment.
  - Allowing for disagreements, but recognizing that it is the supervisor's responsibility to guide the direction of, and approach to, the study; no research project will proceed to a public defense without the agreement and written consent of the supervisor, the student, and the head/director of the department/school. If disagreements or disputes arise in the relationship, faculty and students are expected to treat each other in ways that are not hurtful or otherwise disrespectful.

Maintaining confidentiality. While not all aspects of a supervisory relationship are confidential, areas that have been identified by one or the other as being such must be respected.

- Constructing a joint relationship that is free of stereotyping, discrimination, and prejudicial behaviour.

### **Responsibilities of Supervisors**

- **Topic Development.** Supervisors are expected to provide guidance for students in the development of thesis/project topics. This includes offering ideas and generally assisting students in identifying areas within a disciplinary realm that are suitable for investigation. In instances where a student enters the relationship with a well-developed idea for a research study, the faculty supervisor can assist in refining the research focus and delimiting the study.

- **Proposal Development.** Every thesis-based research project at Acadia begins with the development of a formal research proposal by the student. While the length and substance will vary among departments and schools, a proposal serves as a basis for the development of a research project that will meet academic standards. Once the proposal is at the stage where the supervisor feels the study is ready to be launched, he or she will sign a proposal acceptance form and file it, along with a copy of the proposal, in the departmental or school office. A copy will be provided for the student. Departments and schools may require a proposal meeting in order to provide feedback from an examining/proposal committee.

Signing a formal research proposal does not preclude the possibility that research studies can change due to unforeseen circumstances, creating a situation where the purpose of the study as originally stated is not achievable. Where this happens, changes must be jointly agreed upon by the supervisor and the student, and must adhere to departmental or school policy. Substantial changes in focus may require the preparation and submission of a new proposal.

- **Reasonable Access.** Faculty members who have agreed to supervise graduate students are expected to be reasonably accessible for thesis consultation, occasionally on short notice. To whatever extent possible, supervisors should plan with students around likely completion dates in order to avoid interruptions and delays. In cases of leaves of absence or sabbaticals, the supervisor, in consultation with the graduate coordinator, may arrange for a replacement supervisor.

- **Length of Study (timelines).** It is the responsibility of the faculty supervisor to assist a graduate student in designing a study that is achievable in a reasonable period of time.

**Constructive and Timely Feedback.** A central component of the research process for graduate students is constructive and timely feedback from supervisors. This is crucial in allowing a student to maintain consistent progress. What constitutes timely feedback is to be negotiated in each supervisory relationship, and perhaps by standards established within departments and schools. Under normal circumstances, students should not expect feedback to be “immediate,” but neither should they expect it to be in excess of two (2) weeks.

Constructive and timely feedback is equally crucial in instances where students are not meeting academic expectations. While these conversations can be difficult, it serves no one’s interest to prolong a study if success is unlikely.

- **Professional Growth.** Supervisors are expected to support students' professional development by encouraging participation in discipline-specific professional gatherings (e.g., conferences, symposia). Where appropriate, supervisors should encourage the publication (jointly or otherwise) of a student's work.
- **Thesis quality.** It is the responsibility of the supervisor to advise the student as to the quality of the thesis (i.e. that it meets or exceeds the standards of graduate level work at Acadia) and to judge whether it is ready for submission.

### **Responsibilities of Students**

- **Commitment to Research.** Graduate research takes time and commitment on behalf of students. In discussion with faculty supervisors, students need to plan for sufficient time to complete a thesis or project of substantial scholarly merit. This includes: (i) time needed to gain sufficient background and skills in the research area before initiating the study, (ii) time required to undertake the fieldwork/analysis in a comprehensive and rigorous manner, and (iii) time to produce a thesis manuscript that is thorough, well organized, and lucidly written.
- **Research Proposal.** Each thesis student is required to write and submit a research proposal in consultation with their supervisor that meets the standards established by their department or school.
- **Communication.** Students are expected to maintain regular contact with supervisors to inform them of progress and make them aware of factors that may cause problems or interruptions. It may be helpful if students and supervisors agree upon a schedule of meetings and event horizons, although this may not always be possible. It is important for students to recognize that faculty members have other responsibilities which can delay access on short notice.
- **Ethical Behaviour.** All students are expected to adhere to high ethical standards in undertaking research that involves humans or other animals. This includes close familiarity with the protocols established by the Research Ethics Board or the Animal Care Committee, in addition to appropriate discipline-specific codes of ethics.

### **Dispute Resolution**

At times conflict arises in a supervisory relationship. As uncomfortable as this may be, it is imperative that troubling issues be addressed at an early stage before they lead to a deterioration of the working relationship. Resolution at an early stage should be between the student and the supervisor, without the necessity of involving others. However, given the power imbalance in a supervisor relationship, if students are uncomfortable approaching their supervisors on issues of conflict, or if the supervisory relationship has deteriorated to the point where the likelihood of resolution at this informal stage is remote, the following procedures are to be employed:

- **Graduate Coordinator.** All departments and schools offering graduate programs select a faculty member to serve as their graduate program coordinator. This individual is normally responsible for providing academic counselling for graduate students. However, in cases of conflict in the supervisory relationship, the coordinator serves as the first external point of contact for the student

and/or supervisor in seeking resolution. In instances where the graduate coordinator is the supervisor, recourse will be directly to the head or director.

- **Head or Director.** In instances where the graduate coordinator is unable to construct an acceptable solution to the conflict, the head of the department or director of the school will be engaged through the graduate coordinator. In some cases, it may be in the best interest of the student to have a new supervisor appointed. This is done by the head/director and coordinator, in consultation with the student. Appointing a new supervisor will be done without penalty or disadvantage to the graduate student.

In instances where the head or director is the supervisor, recourse will be directly to the Dean of Research and Graduate Studies.

A dispute involving a student in Social and Political Thought will skip this step and proceed directly to the Dean of Research and Graduate Studies.

- **Dean of Research and Graduate Studies.** If the dispute is unable to be resolved within the unit, the graduate coordinator or head/director will bring the matter to the attention of the Dean of Research and Graduate Studies. Where appropriate, the Dean will meet with the student or faculty member to seek a resolution. As Acadia does not have a faculty of graduate studies, in instances that directly involve faculty, the Dean of Research and Graduate Studies may request the involvement of the relevant program dean. When necessary, the Dean of RGS will bring the matter to the attention of the Vice President Academic.

Situations that cannot be resolved through these procedures can proceed to the stage of formal appeal as outlined in the University Calendar.