

Reimagining graduate student supervision

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In light of recent national discussions on the purpose, content, structure, and assessment of the doctoral dissertation, the highly competitive (academic and non-academic) job market and the increasing precarity of employment in the academy—it is no surprise that the design and role of graduate education has been called into question. While some might cheekily say “So you want to earn a PhD?” and outline the employment outcomes for PhD graduates, it might be time to ask “could the process of earning a PhD be improved?” More importantly, who could do so?

When graduate students don’t complete their degrees, institutions and departments often point to poor “fit,” lack of student motivation and initiative, and a lengthy list of other personal traits, such as, “they simply didn’t have it in them.” In many of these cases, supervisors immediately shift the blame away from themselves, quipping about unprepared or “bad” students. More concrete assessments point to a lack of financial supports, mental health challenges, unsupportive departmental cultures, or other systemic factors. Yet, little attention is given to the unspoken elephant in the room – poor supervision. Students who drop out of programs due to supervisory reasons rarely share their experiences with those in the academy, and instead, their departures become “horror stories” only recounted with friends or family.

Power imbalances preclude students from speaking out about inadequate supervision and its effect on degree progress and future careers. Formal complaints emerge in extreme situations when brave (or desperate) students use official channels to take action. Institutional conflict resolution methods and models are partly mandated to facilitate supervisor-student communication, but they rarely address the underpinning systemic problems that plague these relationships. The reconceptualization of graduate studies will not be possible without the reimagining of supervision.

The focus is now, albeit slowly, beginning to shift away from the responsibility of the student and towards a re-examination of the institutional factors that contribute to lengthy times to completion and high attrition rates, including a renewed prioritizing of the supervisory role in student retention and success. Graduate student supervision has often been discussed in the context of attrition, times to completion, and retention. Recent conversations have focused on the graduate student experience, financial outcomes for students, #non-ac careers, or a need for a broader systemic cultural shift in academia. While it is not uncommon for our attention to be drawn to the importance of the supervisory relationship, finding the right supervisor, or avoiding toxic relationships, the impetus of this dialogue tends to foreground the responsibilities of graduate students to look out for themselves.

Institutions across Canada must grapple with how they will frame the responsibility for effective supervision in graduate education. Responses have been diverse and inconsistent, mostly based on a decade-old *Guiding Principles for Graduate Student Supervision* published by the Canadian Association of Graduate Studies (CAGS). Most Canadian universities adapted these principles to create their institutional guidelines, producing a twofold dilemma. First, most faculty are not aware of such resources and rarely reach for them. More importantly, institutions considered the release of these guidelines as a comprehensive fix, rather than treating them as a starting point for a serious conversation about supervision. Some universities have undertaken unique and in-depth work to improve supervision at their institutions. McGill University conducted a survey focused on supervision that was translated into an evidence-based [website](#) – a portal full of resources and strategies. The [University of Toronto](#) and [University of Victoria](#) recently released extensive guidelines for students, faculty, and staff focused on supervision, depicting the role as a shared responsibility between students and their supervisors. These approaches emphasize the monitoring/advising and mentoring duality of supervision. Some institutions also offer an award in graduate supervision.

Could these strategies prompt a reimagining of the role of supervision in graduate studies?

As useful as these strategies are, university administrators' focus on policy procedures and formal complaints, and initiatives led by student support services, both neglect to address faculty preparation and development for supervision. Indeed, most new faculty or those new to supervising, never participate in any formal professional development, training, or guidance. Nor is such faculty preparation required by institutions. Like most university teaching, faculty are presumed to be able to learn how to supervise through undefined means and methods. Unsurprisingly, supervisors often model their practice after their own experiences as graduate students or practices of senior colleagues, while trying to avoid the mistakes they see others make. But, if graduate education is to undergo serious change, relying on the development of supervision abilities only through modeling or memory seems out of step.

Recognizing a need for professional development opportunities for faculty on effective supervision practices, universities have slowly begun to develop educational initiatives. Memorial University's award winning [Program in Graduate Student Supervision](#) is a good case in point for four reasons. First, it became a collaborative effort between the Centre for Innovation in Teaching and Learning and the school of graduate studies, bringing together educational developers, career professionals, and administrators to create a multidisciplinary program. Second, the program offers a relevant evidence-based curriculum that serves to support faculty professional development on effective graduate student supervision, to reduce time-to-completion rates and program attrition and increasing optimal student outcomes. Third, the flexible (online and hybrid) formats allow the nine-week program to be organized around the exploration of three key themes. Lastly, and arguably most importantly, it helps new faculty prepare for, and experienced faculty members reflect on, their practice as a supervisor. In other words, it creates a growing community of practice that questions the assumptions about

how faculty learn to supervise, and by extension, how graduate education needs to be reimagined. This approach gives faculty a space to voice their concerns, share their experiences, and learn from their peers, while providing resources to guide them towards more efficient and effective communication and student mentoring. And, it's a place for supervisors to think through what changes to graduate education might mean for them.

If graduate education is changing, then presumably this change affects everyone involved: graduate students, faculty supervisors, graduate studies administrators, and educational developers, and we have a shared responsibility to consider how our practices could and should change. We might find ourselves unlearning what we think we know about our work and, in doing so, create new models for graduate education that are better for many if not most.

Melanie, Marie and Michal are executive members of the Teaching Assistant and Graduate Student Advancement (TAGSA), which works to raise the profile of TA and graduate student development in Canada.