Supervisory Agreement and Expectations v3

#docs #guides #logistics

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Advising Statement

My goal as a graduate student advisor is to train students to become independent researchers, particularly in teaching, research, scientific skills related to programming languages. These include general scientific skills such as research process, written and oral communication particularly of technical knowledge and results; and specific discipline skills, such as designing, modelling, implementing, and evaluating programming languages. While these skills are particularly useful in academia, they're also useful more generally.

I do not expect all of my students to pursue a career in academia. Instead, I expect to work with my students to achieve their goals. I'm happy to train students who wish to become research faculty, teaching professors, industry researchers, or specialized software engineers.

As part of this training I will critically evaluate your skills and your progress (as your supervisor), but also work with your to develop those skills and achieve your goals (as your mentor).

My general approach to advising is to give you advice to reach our mutual goals. I will advise on how to improve your skills, on what you need to demonstrate to achieve your goals, and to hit your milestones. You are free to disagree with or even disregard that advice.

I despise hierarchy. I want to work with you and collaborate with you, not manage you and give you orders. You can call me "William", not "Dr" or "Prof". You should challenge me when you think I'm wrong.

I am more concerned with process than goals. Following good processes leads to good goals. I will avoid focusing on specific goals, such as a specific deadline, and instead focus on developing a process that will lead to that goal. However, occasionally such goals take priority.

I am direct, although I try to be kind. I will tell you what I am thinking in the most direct way possible, without mincing words. However, when I need to tell you something hard, I will also try to help you deal with the emotional impact of what needs to be said.

I value attention to detail---precision, care, and correctness. I prefer to hear "I don't know" than a vague, careless, or incorrect explanation. You should be prepared to be challenged on details. By the time you're done with a project, you should be able to defend and explain every choice and every decision, and explain it in the larger research context. I prefer to push back a deadline if it means doing a more careful analysis.

I value my time. The best way to show me respect is to use my time, and enable me to use my time, effectively. I will protect my time, and the other resources I'm responsible for managing from being wasted.

Working Environment and Relationship

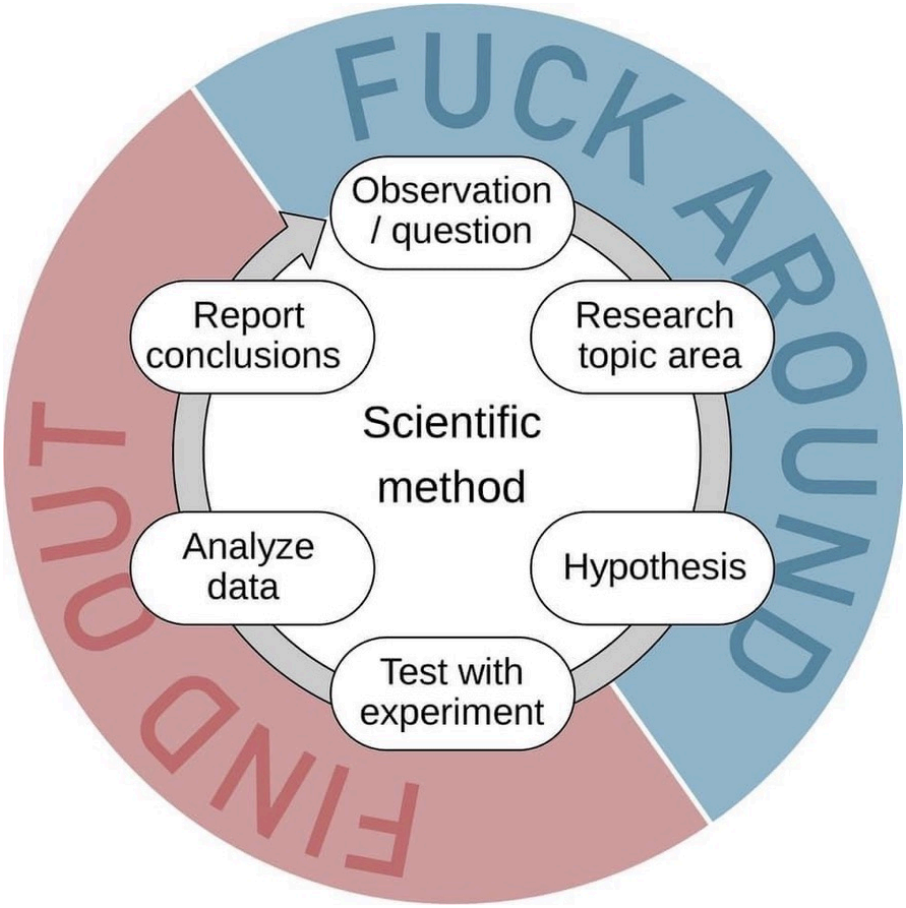
- You should expect me to maintain a supportive, positive, inclusive, and collegial lab environment. I have 0 tolerance for verbal or physical bullying or harassment of any kind. You can and should report any concerns to me immediately, and expect me to deal with them promptly.
- I expect you to contribute to a supportive, positive, inclusive, and collegial lab environment. Participating in or contributing to verbal or physical bullying or harassment will result in being removed from the lab and from my advising immediately. I expect you to support your lab mates, and report problems to me.
- You should expect me to critically evaluate your skills and progress in research, teaching, and other technical skills. Critical feedback is difficult to receive, and you can expect me to be direct and honest, but constructive and kind in how I deliver this feedback. This feedback should always be about your work or your performance, not you.

    - I will regularly give you written feedback on drafts, practice talks, code, proofs, and models that we develop. We can also discuss this feedback in one-on-one meetings.
    - The lab will give you systematic "critique circle" style feedback on practice talks.
    - Each semester, we will set milestones and goals, I will give you written feedback at the end of each semester evaluating your progress on those goals.
- I expect you to take feedback seriously, but not personally. You should work hard to act on feedback to improve your work and performance, and I expect you to fail sometimes, but to keep trying and improving. I expect you to solicit feedback and input on your work.
- You should expect me to work with you to develop those skills and make progress towards your goals and milestones. While I want to train you to be an independent researcher, I don't expect you to become one independently---it's my job to train you, which means giving you tasks and working with you on shared tasks to develop your skills.
    - This also means you should expect me to be regularly available to meet with you and do work together, answer questions, provide pointers to papers and other resources.
    - You can also always email me, or drop by my office. You should let me tell you if I don't have time; you're always free to ask for my time.
- I expect you to work hard on tasks assigned to you, but tell me when you need help. I cannot train you if you are not direct and honest about your progress, understanding, and effort or lack-thereof.
    - I expect you to meet with me weekly. I expect you to have made some progress on tasks weekly, even if that progress results in getting stuck, or new questions, or just new attempts at something that you want to talk about.
    - I expect you to cancel meetings in advance if you anticipate having nothing to talk about. This should be rare. If we're regularly canceling meetings, this suggests you're regularly having unproductive weeks, and we should try to identify why and work to improve.
- You should expect me to maintain and provide a productive and academic lab environment. This means adequate funding, a space to work productively, with necessary equipment, lab mates to work with and learn from, and courses, reading groups, and materials for advanced study.
- I expect you to contribute to a productive and academic lab environment, and make good use the resources provided to you. This means being in the lab (normally at least 3 days a week, during normal work hours). This is both to be doing your own work and learning from others, but also being available as an expert for others to consult, participating and contributing in reading groups and advanced study.
    - While you will have much of your own work to do, being a member of the lab is about more than just writing your own papers. Attending talks by your lab mates, giving feedback, discussing other research areas, ideas, and process, and even just talking about academia over a coffee all contributes indirectly to your training, and the training of others in the lab.
- You should expect me to provide reasonable working hours, time off, vacation time, including reasonable accommodations for appointments during the work week etc, and to be normally available in the office and by email and Slack during normal working hours.
- I expect you to work full time. I expect you to occasionally work late, or on weekends, when deadlines demand it, and to take time off in lieu when this happens.
    - I also expect you to be reasonably responsive to email and Slack during normal working hours. You should use email for anything asynchronous or archival (sending me drafts, forms, etc), and in general I prefer email even for short notes or thoughts. You can use Slack for synchronous non-archival chats, and should backup any notes, etc, from Slack for future use.

Training Process

I view a graduate research degree as an apprenticeship.

In general, I try to organize training around the scientific method:



Each term, I expect you to make progress through this process. You should be able to explain and provide concrete evidence of your progress through this process each term. I also expect to train you in specific skills related to this process, and will try to communicate your strengths and weaknesses specifically in how they relate to each part of this process.

When you start, you will be assigned a new research question.

1. We will start addressing that question with a literature review. During this time, I expect our regular meetings to involve discussing papers: discussing what you learned, what you found confusing, new papers you tracked down while following the literature, applications or or limitations in the existing work to our research question.
2. The literature review should help us narrow our question down to a specific novel hypothesis that we plan to evaluate. While generating this hypothesis, we should be looking at methodologies for evaluation---specific models, proof techniques, benchmark sets, etc. This will likely involve rereading in much more detail several papers we already looked at, and replicating or applying results from those papers. We should generate specific evaluation plans during this time. I expect our regular meetings to involve generating notes, proof sketches, definition sketches, etc.
3. Then we should start executing our evaluation plan. This will involve writing proofs, models, and implementations. At this point, we will be generating a lot of new material outside of meetings. I expect meetings to involve reviewing these materials and iterating on them.
4. After executing our evaluation plan, we should start analyzing the results. This could mean trying to understand what our benchmarks mean, or what limitations exist in a definition, or the implications of a set of proofs. At this point, we will start generating new research questions and observations. We may need to rerun experiments, or try to extend our evaluation. I expect meetings to involve critical analysis of our own work, trying to find flaws and question our own assumptions.
5. Finally, we should start writing a paper. During this time, I expect you to be generating new drafts regularly, and to be providing lots of written feedback. I expect meetings to involve work on outlines, working on explanations of technical details, context, motivation, and results, and writing together.
6. Then, we'll restart the process at step 1, with questions generated from step 4.

I will keep track of your progress and your skills in a document, the template of which looks like the following. I will keep this updated regularly, with references to past assessments, milestones, projects, and meeting notes. If there is ever a question about

how I view your progress, what my expectations are, or what we should be focusing on, we can use this to guide such discussions.

Skills

Evaluations: ✅ , Area for Improvement, Mixed Performance, Unsatisfactory

Research and Scholarship

- Mastery of Core Material in Field -- *Evaluation*
  - Learned core material in field.
- Engagement with Current Research -- *Evaluation*
  - Kept up-to-date with current developments.
- Independent Critical Evaluation of Literature -- *Evaluation*
  - Evaluate literature independently and critically.
- Research Execution and Independence -- *Evaluation*
  - Demonstrated ability to successfully carry out research.
- Critical and Objective Evaluation of Own Work -- *Evaluation*
  - Able to judge their own results critically and objectively.
- Independent Learning -- *Evaluation*
  - Learned how to acquired new knowledge or skills independently.

Interaction

- Working Independent -- *Evaluation*
  - Work independently, but ask for guidance when necessary.
- Contributes to Lab Group Activities -- *Evaluation*
  - Contributes to group discussion, reading groups; giving substantive feedback; engage with criticism and feedback without giving or taking offence unnecessarily.
- Collaboration and Leadership -- *Evaluation*
  - Demonstrate (and opportunity for) effective collaborate and leadership.

Communication

- Written Communication -- *Evaluation*
  - Demonstrate clarity, brevity, and precision in written communication.
- Oral Communication -- *Evaluation*
  - Demonstrate clarity, brevity, and precision in oral communication.

Progress Tracking

Assessments: ✅ , Needs Improvement, Deferred, N/A, Unsatisfactory

Semester	Event	Assessment	Notes

Semesterly Review

If there are technical, communication, or research skills you feel you're struggling with, you should expect me to spend time and provide resources to help you improve. However, you are also expected to seeks our resources and develop skills on your own; I am a resource, but I cannot develop the skills for you. Independence is also a vital skill as a researcher.

For the purposes of training and mentoring, I will provide semesterly formal assessments of your progress and demonstrated abilities. I will first ask for a self assessment, and an assessment of my own strengths and weaknesses as a supervisor and advisor. During this time, you should also raise any concerns you have about your own skills that you wish to develop, your own career goals as they develop, etc.

There are three areas to consider in the assessment, and we should consider progress in these areas and skills related to these areas, both strengths and weaknesses.

- Teaching ability. This includes assessment of your role as a TA if any, and your skills in communication, lecturing, providing feedback and assessment to students, and developing classroom material. If you want to develop these skills more, we should plan to find more roles for you to take on as a teacher.
- Research ability. This includes assessment of your research output in your role as an RA, your skills in written and oral communication, development of basic research skills (such as independently performing literature review, skills in new methodologies and techniques, etc), identifying new research questions, evaluating research questions, and other scientific work such as reviewing submissions.
- Progress as a student. This includes your progress on your thesis timeline. Some of the timeline is not within your control, and a certain amount of flexibility should be expected. For example, while the UBC timeline expects students to propose a PhD thesis topic in the 3rd year, I expect students to identify their own PhD thesis topic, and identifying such a topic is not entirely within the student's control (try having a novel idea that a committee agrees is worthy of a PhD in the next minute; coming up with and evaluating ideas takes time). Instead, we will work together to set time-bounded and concrete milestones that are within your control, such as performing a literature review of a fixed set of papers with annotated bibliography, or completing a concrete piece of writing on a schedule after the research has been evaluated.

In this assessment, you should be, and expect me to be, *scientific*. Feedback and assessment should be concrete, specific, backed by evidence or reasonable argument. A claim should be falsifiable. If I claim you have not demonstrated a skill, there should be a way for you to demonstrate that skill to prove me wrong. And vice versa: if I claim you are strong on some skills, I should be able to produce argument or evidence. We should accept such feedback until we can produce evidence or argument that the feedback or assessment is wrong.

Your self assessment should be sent to me at the end of each semester, as plain text, by email, and should reflect on your progress in each of the above areas over the semester, your strengths and weaknesses in these areas or related skills, your plans to the next semester in each area, including any plans to address any weaknesses.

In your self assessment email, I also expect you to send me any feedback you have of my own supervising and advising process or skills. I am happy to discuss any concerns or changes you have at any point, not only semesterly, but I am making this an explicit expectation once per semester so you don't avoid raising concerns out of awkwardness.

Logistics

Occasionally, we must discuss administrative details. Here are some.

Funding

All graduate students are conditionally guaranteed funding at a set annual rate, depending on degree and progression. I offer more than the departmental minimum.

The current numbers are:

- PhD: $2,941.67 per month, **$35,300 per year**
- MSc: $2,750 per month, **$33,000 per year**

(These are gross number, and may have taxes etc deducted, and you may be required to pay tuition and fees.)

You are free to discuss these numbers.

Funding will come from a mix of roles: teaching assistant, GRAship ("research assistant"), and awards. However, in general, the annual amount I provide will remain the same regardless of funding source. You may go above the guarantee amount by bringing in significant funding from outside sources, or doing additional work beyond what is required.

The primary method of funding from outside sources area:

- Competitive awards above the annual rate.
- Industry work, such as an internship or consulting.
- Research assistantships on projected unrelated to your thesis.

Subject to meeting expectations including those outlined in this document and your offer letter, the annual rate is guaranteed until the end of your 2nd year as an MSc, or the end of your 5th year as a PhD. If you continuing to meet expectations as outlined above, including good progress on your degree, I will continue to support this after the guaranteed funding period.

Notably, you are required to apply for competitive awards for which you are eligible.

This funding is meant to fund your apprenticeship. Legally, the GRAship funding is provided to support the tasks and responsibility related to your thesis, per a BC Labour Relation Board rule (https://lrb.my.salesforce.com/sfc/p/#f40000022yYB/a/Mm000003qn4X/K52YyjzQ.vYWjxyRP_dm6ZX07Za4QJzjDIwfHRgBOfc; 2025 BCLRB 85.pdf), and is not contingent on research tasks and responsibilities that do not contribute to your thesis.

TAing

In general, I prefer to avoid requiring you to TA too often, and around critical milestones. However, it may be necessary in order to provide funding. TAing when required is a condition of your guaranteed funding in the program.

TA activities include:

- Office hours
- Marking assessments
- Lecturing or running labs
- Development assessments
- Proctoring
- Developing course materials and infrastructure

If your are consistently performing unsatisfactorily as a TA, I may advise or require you to take on more formal training. If you continue to perform unsatisfactorily as a TA, your conditional support as a graduate student may be revoked.

TAing should take up no more than 12 hours a week on average.

Study

Work is required to progress toward your degree regardless of whether you are funded.

Study activities include:

- Writing a thesis, proposal, or RPE (”milestones”)
- Reporting on activity and progress toward milestones
- Speaking at required thesis presentations and defences
- Completing research tasks related to milestones:
  - Studying, summarizing, and presenting existing literature
  - Designing and evaluating language models and implementations

Notably writing papers for publication is largely not *required* to complete degree, unless peer review is necessary for a milestone. However, not writing papers will impact your ability to get an academic job, so is not unrelated to your apprenticeship.

As a graduate student, I expect you to be able to work and learn independently. This does not mean entirely on your own, but I should not have to provide you a schedule and specific assessments as I do in an undergraduate class. You should be able to identify what you need to learn to achieve your goals, find resources, decompose problems, and develop your own exercises for training. If you are struggling with one or more of these, we should work together on it, but over time you should develop the skills to do this entirely on your own.

As a student, you are responsible for completing your degree on a reasonable timeline. The UBC expected timeline for an MSc is 2 years, and for a PhD is 4 years (although 6 years is more common). This timeline is flexible, but if we're beyond the normal timeline, we will discuss why we're beyond the normal timeline and identify what has gone wrong (if anything), and we will come up with and agree on a new timeline for the next milestone. If we fail repeatedly to come up with and follow a plan to make reasonable progress, you will no longer be in good standing as a student, which means conditional offers of funding or acceptance to other programs can be revoked, and you risk failing out of the program.

Awards

Fellowship and scholarships for graduate students are contingent on research and graduate programs. They're administered and paid through the university, with expectations about research output. If you receive an award, you should still expect to be treated as an RA and student, but one who has more flexibility in the research topic of choice.

If you receive an award less than the annual amount above, I will top-up your pay to the annual amount as either an RA and TA. (Probably an RA.)

If you receive an award at or above the annual amount, I will provide a small top-up as an RA or TA, unless you really don't want it.

I expect you to apply for scholarships, fellowships, and other awards for which you are eligible and you are likely to be competitive. This is both good for your career (funding raising is a part of most careers), and one of your responsibilities to the lab. More awards ensures all lab members have the resources to do effective research.

Internships

I expect students may want to pursue an internship in industry or another research lab during their degree, and strongly support this. It's useful to learn new skills and be exposed to new ideas.

As an intern, you will be fully employed by someone else and not me. I will still act as your advisor for the purposes of your study, but I will not be paying you or assigning you RA or TA tasks, in general.

RAing unrelated to your thesis

You can be employed as a research assistant on projects unrelated to your thesis work, but this is not GRA funding and is compensation on top of your GRA funding.

Working on RA activities, you may be restricted in what topics or methodologies to pursue based on what I'm trying to accomplish or what I have funding to work on.

You are not guaranteed additional RAship funding, and it is not common for me to fund you as a separate RA.

Consulting

Part-time consulting can be a useful way to interact with industry, learning new skills and getting ideas about how to apply research in practice, and to increase your income above your annual funding amount from the university.

I support students consulting up to 8 hours a week; this is the same restriction that faculty are subject to for consulting.

If consulting, I would not ask a student to TA, and this would be too many distractions from research and study.

While consulting, I will top-up your income to the annual funding amount, if the consulting amount is not higher than the annual amount. If it the consulting is higher, I will provide a small top-up on your GRAship, unless you really don't want it.