

Some guidelines for graduate students

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The student-supervisor relationship at McGill is central to your experience here. Compared to other programs in North America, McGill School of Social Work places greater emphasis on the student-supervisor relationship. I am providing this document to give you an idea of what to expect as graduate student and what you can expect from me.¹ It's a work in progress and I welcome your feedback.

In general I treat graduate students as junior colleagues. I assume that you want to gain skills and knowledge to prepare you to conduct high impact policy-relevant research. I expect that you will produce new ideas to advance the knowledge in your topic. Normally this production is demonstrated in grant/fellowship applications, conference presentations, and scholarly papers.² As a student working with me you have the responsibility to meet the expectations of an early career scholar colleague. I expect that you will regularly participate in the scholarly community. For example, this means active participation in the various research seminars and workshops at the School of Social Work and throughout the university. Overall, I aim to provide a challenging yet supportive learning environment where learning happens by trying, failing, receiving feedback, trying again, etc. Working together, our collective goal in this relationship is to make progress. We will accomplish progress by establishing mutually agreed-upon goals and then doing our best to meet them. Along this intellectual journey I hope that you will:

- learn how to conduct meaningful social science research that has real policy implications;
- gain technical skills such as data analysis and management, writing, and presentation; and,
- advance the social work/social welfare discipline while enjoying a fun and challenging collegial environment.

Compared to peer schools, the McGill PhD program requires very limited coursework (5 classes minimum). As the program requirements are flexible and tailored to the students needs/interests, you will need considerable organizational and time-management skills. It is also essential that I, as your supervisor, understand your current and longer term

¹For some ideas here I draw from previous examples of guidelines, see examples by Tom Gleeson and Chris Blattman

²there are a number of conference and journal venues; we should discuss the options relevant to your topic

career goals. The average time to complete the PhD degree is approximately 6 years. My goal is to help you graduate within this time frame considering your personal circumstances.

By default, working with me provides you access to the Centre for Research on Children and Families (CRCF). The CRCF conducts and disseminates research on effective programs and policies for vulnerable children and youth and their families. It offers office space, software, professional networking, and an excellent environment to support your graduate studies. The CRCF hosts monthly research seminars. As a student member you are expected to participate in these seminars. Within the CRCF you are also a member of the Social Development Research Group (SRDG). The SDRG is an informal group of researchers and students working on issues related to poverty and social development. On the SDRG webspace you are welcome to upload a profile and relevant working papers. Please be familiar with this space and use it to support your professional goals.

Your time

I expect that you will regard graduate school as a full-time job. As long as I see progress towards our mutually agreed upon goals it matters not how you spend your time. As is the norm in the discipline, there will probably be times during weekends and holidays that you will need to work to meet deadlines.

Your time in our PhD program is divided into three phases. The first stage involves coursework leading up to the comprehensive exam. During the first phase most of your efforts are directed towards the essential theoretical and methodological learnings that will prepare you for the comprehensive exam. In this phase I expect we will discuss course selection and opportunities to get involved in ongoing research projects through data analysis and writing. In addition to required coursework I expect my students to take both the advanced qualitative and quantitative research methods courses. Towards the end of phase 1 we will begin planning the comprehensive exam committee and process.

The second is the dissertation phase and includes the data collection and analysis of your thesis. During this period I expect to meet with you regularly to discuss and plan the dissertation. I plan to work closely with you around the analysis. Developing conference papers during this phase may be possible.

The final phase is dissertation writing and defense. A major part of the third phase will be planning for next steps in the career. I expect to meet with you often to discuss your thesis and how the results can be disseminated in the field. I also plan to help you think about job options following the defense.

My time

As faculty, my time is spent managing an active research agenda, teaching, and service. Like most of my colleagues, I am managing numerous research projects simultaneously. I work normal hours and more depending on deadlines. I take 1-2 vacations per year where I will be inaccessible. Otherwise, I aim to respond within 48 hrs for small requests.

If you have an urgent or quick question please feel free to drop by my office. Otherwise I keep weekly office hours during the teaching semester. You are welcome to visit these anytime. For longer conversations you should email me so that we can set aside more time.

Meetings

We will meet at least once per term to establish the goals to guide our work together. We will revisit these goals through periodic meetings.³ PhD students must complete an Annual Progress Report detailing the achievements of the previous year and the objectives for the next year (due September 30). It is the student's responsibility to schedule a meeting with me to complete the Annual Progress Report.

Most of our discussions will happen in meetings between you and I. The frequency of our meetings will depend on your progress in the program and the extent to which we are collaborating on a project. I normally expect students working with me to meet and discuss progress at least twice a month. We will occasionally meet as a group.

Students and professors are very busy people. It's important to prepare for these meetings in advance so the time is used efficiently. Some guidelines:

- To review something I expect to receive your work in advance, e.g., minimum 48 hours for a short update, 1-2 weeks for a full-length paper
- If working on analysis prepare tables and graphs in advance of face-to-face meetings.
- Think through and articulate your questions in advance. If you send to me in advance that allows us more time during our meetings to go in-depth.

Authorship & collaboration

I discuss authorship early in any collaborative project. This ensures the expectations are aligned and reduces frustrations/conflict/general bad feelings down the road. In general, the first author is the leader of the paper. The first author is responsible for organizing the effort and making sure it continues to move forward. In addition, the first author makes final decisions about analysis and formatting questions. If we work on papers that stem from my funded research projects I would normally expect to be the first author.

If you are working with me co-authorship is almost always a possibility (not assured). However, the distinction between research assistant (RA) and co-author is murky. In general, RAs are paid for service. A co-author, in contrast, makes a creative contribution to the production of the paper, most often without financial compensation. Some RA's are invited to be co-authors instead of payment. In general, to be considered for co-authorship one must make a substantial and original contribution to the paper.

Honesty and integrity are assumed. I expect that graduate students know how to cite properly. If you have questions about academic writing and proper attribution see the McGill Writing Centre; <http://www.mcgill.ca/mwc> and/or talk with me.

I tend to provide feedback in electronic format. Therefore I expect that you will send documents in .pdf or Microsoft word. I will provide electronic comments. In providing feedback, I focus on constructive comments that will develop and improve the future iterations of a given paper and/or future papers. It is your responsibility to discuss comments if you do not understand or disagree.

³It is the student's responsibility to keep me informed of progress and any changes in the agreed upon goals and activities.

When working together on a paper I expect you will know how to use the track changes feature of Microsoft Word. I save files with the same general format (Last-name.date.keyword; e.g., Rothwell.2014.Gradstudenttips) and I recommend you follow this system or develop a system of your own. I append a file name with my initials after commenting, e.g., Rothwell.2014.Gradstudenttips_DR.

Other technical aspects

Effective written communication is essential. If you cannot write well you are likely to struggle in this line of work. Fortunately, writing is something that can be improved with effort. As such, I recommend that you

- Practice outlining and organizing your ideas. I've been surprised that many graduate students do not outline their thoughts before writing.
- Bree Akesson and I developed a list of writing tips. I recommend mastering these tips and revisiting often (I do!).
- Use technology such as blogs and social media (.e.g, twitter). I hope you will actively contribute to the following blogs on McGill webspace:

(Poverty and social development)

(CRCF brownbag blog)

- Developing a reference management system is going to save you time and help reduce errors in your references. Regardless of your career path, it is almost certain that you will be writing hundreds of documents in the coming years. You will draw upon your references from graduate school in these documents. If writing a thesis, having an organized set of references will save you a lot of time. There are several software programs out there. The standard is Endnote and is endorsed by the McGill Librarians. I prefer the open-source alternative Zotero <http://www.zotero.org>. I've been using Zotero for years and find it very useful. I have a group library that I will give you access to if we will be writing a paper together.
- Find a way to back up your data regularly. Every year someone's laptop is stolen or the hard drive crashes and, usually, a lot of work is lost. There are several affordable backup services available (e.g., Carbonite). I backup my files everyday to the CRCF S drive.
- My work is moving more and more towards open access and full Reproducibility. Wherever possible I will ask you to do the same. From Christopher Gandrud's book "Research results are replicable if there is sufficient information available for independent researchers to make the same findings using the same procedures (King, 1995, 444)." This work involves careful documentation of data and analysis. Wherever possible it also involves making data freely available. We have begun placing data on the ([Harvard Dataverse Network](#)). All papers are placed online in working paper format before submission to publishers.

Letters of reference

Writing letters of reference is part of my job as your advisor. Please don't apologize for asking me to write a letter. To write an informed letter I ask students to provide me the following:

- Current CV
- Personal statement or cover letter accompanying the application
- List of three professional qualities the applicant feels distinguishes them from the applicant pool
- List of three personal qualities the applicant feels distinguishes them from the applicant pool (bullet point brief description okay)