

Student Notebook: The Outstanding Impacts of Supervisors on Student Success and Well-being

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Selecting a supervisor is the first critical decision a doctoral student will make. Finding the right supervisor is critical because it affects our personal and academic lives for the next 4 to 6 years. Many students assume they are adaptive and flexible and can handle a few disagreements with their supervisors. The research shows otherwise. I am a PhD candidate whose primary research focus is doctoral student mental health. From time to time, I talk with other cohorts about how their supervisors impact their doctoral program experiences. I'd like to share some of what I've learned, including the vital importance of the right supervisor for your success and well-being during your doctoral program.

Supervisors can affect and shape students' learning experiences (Barnard & Shultz, 2019; Lovitts, 2002) and build a culture conducive to students' transition to research autonomy (Barnard & Shultz, 2019). They are the primary determinant of student engagement and participation in various research opportunities (Boden et al., 2011), and they impact students' perceptions of graduate school and its requirements, dissertation topic selection and quality, and future job opportunities (Lovitts, 2002). Furthermore, studies have shown that supervisors impact students' satisfaction with their program (Zhao et al., 2007), mental health (Liu et al., 2019), well-being (McAlpine & McKinnon, 2013), research self-efficacy (Paglis et al., 2006), writing efficacy (González-Ocampo & Castelló, 2018), and persistence (Barnes, 2009; Cockrell & Shelley, 2011). Aligned with these findings, several studies have cited supervisors as the primary reason for students' academic progress.

The first consideration for student success is to work with a supervisor who has a good reputation in research. Try to find a supervisor with whom you have shared research interests; otherwise, you might find yourself working in silos and out of the loop of ongoing research in your lab. Students' perceptions of their interactions with faculty supervisors affect their feelings of connectedness and belongingness (Bireda, 2019); perceiving this interaction positively can help you perform academically better than

students who lack these feelings of connectedness and belongingness (Curtin et al., 2013).

The second key to doctoral student success in academia is clear communication with supervisors. Rose (2003) described communication skills (“My ideal mentor would communicate openly, clearly, and effectively”) and the provision of feedback (“My ideal mentor would provide honest feedback, both good and bad, about my work”) as the two main characteristics of an ideal mentor. Without good communication with supervisors, you could be lost in the ambiguity of your different responsibilities. Students value support, feedback, trust, and good communication in their relationship with their supervisors (Bireda, 2019).

In my own research, I surveyed doctoral students about their motives for changing their supervisors. Poor communication was one of the most common:

“After the first semester, I changed doctoral supervisors due to a lack of communication on their part (not answering emails and inability to plan a meeting with them).”

“... my supervisor isn’t communicative, and I go months at a time not hearing from them.”

“I haven’t changed YET, but I am planning on it due to difficulties in communicating with my supervisor.”

The third key to doctoral student success in academia is having a supportive supervisor. That support might be emotional, educational, or practical—such as being available when you have questions and providing constructive feedback. Highly effective supervisors assist students in fulfilling degree requirements, meeting departmental deadlines, and preparing for comprehensive exams (Ellis, 2001). All these forms of support contribute to student well-being (Thoits, 2010), and lack of them can increase negative emotions such as anxiety, self-doubt, and uncertainty. In my study, I asked doctoral students about their relationship with their supervisors and how it impacted them personally. Their responses included the following:

“I did not get the academic/emotional support and advice... [which] used to stress me out.”

“A supervisor who is not overly critical and harsh has made me much happier and has lowered my anxiety levels generally.”

“... making me more anxious and self-doubting overall.”

“I often felt unsure of instructions/guidance and expectation.”

Doctoral students’ mental health is strongly impacted by their supervisory relationship (Peluso et al., 2011). Given the central role of the supervisor in doctoral students’ academic life and well-being, you need to ask for advice before choosing your supervisor.

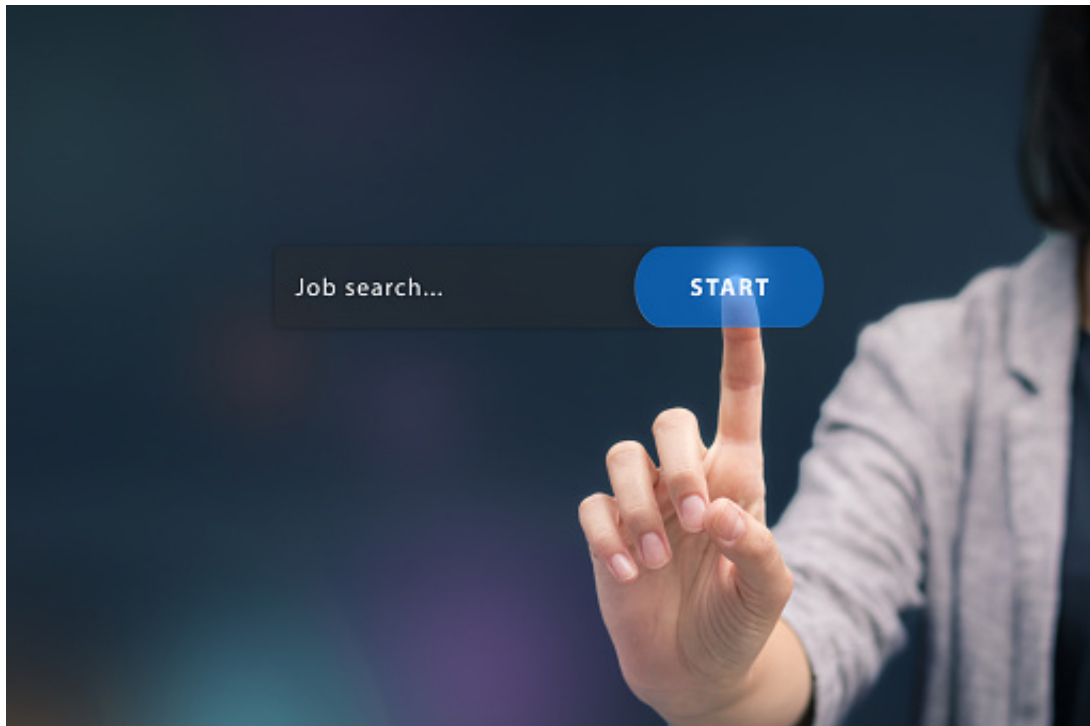
Here are a few more of my thoughts regarding improving student–supervisor relationships:

- Always keep in mind that supervisors have a heavy workload, and they may not always remember the details of every discussion. Therefore, having a written record of your discussions could help you and your supervisors avoid confusion. Writing down meeting minutes and preparing a short write-up about important decisions can provide a helpful reference when in doubt.
- If you ever feel that a topic you discussed with your supervisor was unclear, send an email and ask for clarification. It is better to eliminate any assumptions from the start and work on something only when you are entirely sure about it.
- Clarify your supervisor's expectations by asking about working hours and the amount of time they expect you to be present in the lab.
- If you would like to be involved in research or any publication, simply ask your supervisor. Participating in your supervisors' studies is an excellent opportunity for you to learn research methods and make a professional bond with your supervisors.

In the end, take advantage of your time in graduate school regardless of your supervisor's approach. Graduate school offers an incredible chance for you to develop as a student and transition into a professional. Strive to make friendships and establish relationships; after all, socializing and making connections are necessary components of graduate education.

Finally, keep in mind that you, as a graduate student, also have obligations to your supervisor. Be considerate of their time and efforts and make every attempt to develop a good professional connection with them. However, do not forget to seek assistance from your department and cohorts if you encounter problems with your supervisor.

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