

Supervisors Roundtable, March 22, 2017 (hosted by SGS)

Supervising Late-Stage PhD Students: Some Good Practices

- Clarify departmental and disciplinary expectations about length and scope of dissertation so that students have as clear as possible a sense of what remains to be done. Remind students that not every thesis needs to make as many contributions as the best theses or even an average thesis in your unit. Suggest that some of the research that they had hoped to do could be included in the recommendations rather than needing to appear as a completed chapter.
- Clarify departmental and disciplinary norms for times to completion so that students may judge their progress/success in context.
- Establish and maintain a regular schedule for email contact, progress updates, and face-to-face meetings, especially if you have been more hands-off with your student up to this point. Some students at the SGS dissertation bootcamps have said that they want their supervisors to be more firm about deadlines as they approach completion.
- Help students decide about what research absolutely needs to be in the dissertation and what might better be developed as a separate article or other publication. When preparing a manuscript-style thesis, reassure students that not all of the manuscript chapters need to have been submitted for publication prior to the defence. Comments and suggestions from thesis examiners can provide helpful input for polishing a chapter after the defence to make it suitable for publication.
- Suggest to students that they take on some mentoring of more junior students in their subject area, perhaps even co-authoring papers or presentations (internal or external). In general, try to encourage students to break out of the 'silo' into which late-stage PhDs are particularly prone to find themselves.
- Give permission to produce 'bad' drafts, as a stimulus to creativity and a starting point when writer's block is an issue.
- Develop a completion plan in collaboration with your student, working backwards from the anticipated (or desired) defense date.
- Advise about SGS policies and procedures on leaves and changes of status, and encourage students to consult an SGS Associate Dean when investigating whether a medical leave or part-time status would be appropriate. Be sensitive to any medical conditions, family commitments, or work commitments that late-stage students may have.
- Encourage students to become involved in some form of community, whether within or outside the department/university.
- Explore with one another ways we could co-mentor late-stage PhD students, perhaps within research clusters, cognate departments, or even across larger disciplinary divides. We all have wisdom and experience to share and may be able to help students who are not 'our' supervisees.