



# 'Til degree do we part

For a graduate student, the relationship with your faculty supervisor may be the most important of your academic career. How can you make sure it won't end in divorce?

by Moira Farr

A good relationship with your thesis supervisor is central to a graduate student's life. Yet, in the past, few in graduate school – students or faculty – put much forethought into what it really takes to make such an important relationship work over the long haul of completing a PhD. No one likes to dwell on the horror stories, but bad matches do occur, and things can go spectacularly wrong when ground rules and understandings are not clearly set out from the beginning.

"Once a relationship has soured, it is difficult to clean up," observes Alan Weedon, president of the Canadian Association of Graduate Studies and vice-provost, policy, planning and faculty, at the University of Western Ontario.

In the strictly academic sphere, work styles and expectations may clash, causing delays or total failures. Research partnerships may lead to intellectual-property disputes that, in the worst-case scenarios, blow up into costly, time-consuming and reputation-damaging lawsuits; issues of authorship and copyright may be similarly tricky to resolve.

In a precedent-setting case in 1997, a former University of Ottawa student won damages of \$7,500 in his plagiarism suit against a professor who had claimed authorship of a paper actually written by the student, causing the university to re-evaluate how it deals with student complaints about copyright and other matters. The case may not be unique in itself, what was unusual was that a student made a complaint against a professor and took legal action, successfully, beyond the university.

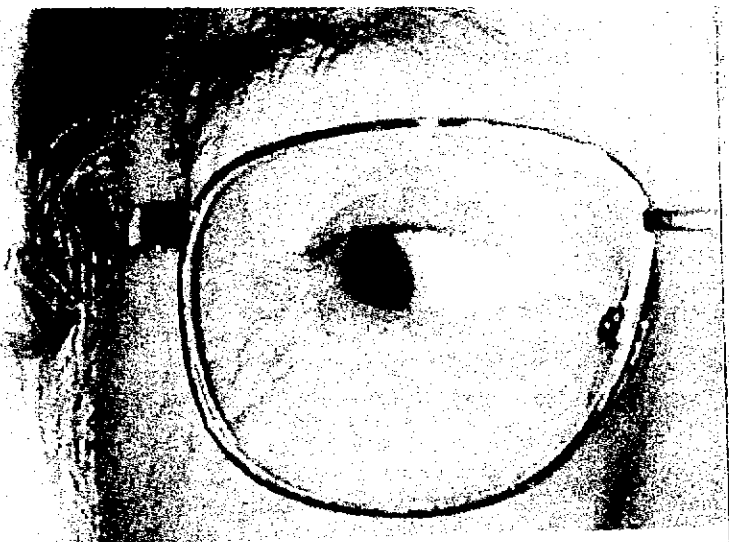
Sometimes, too, boundaries between the professional and the personal relationship of a supervisor and student may blur. As the headline of an article in the U.S. weekly, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, pointedly asks, "Should dog-walking and house-sitting be required for a PhD?" The article goes on to report that grad students may "chafe" at such requests, which aren't easily refused, as well as those for lifts to the airport, house painting and other odd jobs a professor might want done, at less than minimum wage. In extreme cases, a grad student may feel that running personal errands or being exploited as cheap

labour is the only way to get ahead.

While Canadian faculty and students interviewed for this story agreed that such situations are always inappropriate and to be avoided, many also knew ("off the record") of instances in which faculty had taken unfair advantage of students.

"It would be rare for supervisors to treat graduate students like slaves these days, but there is a power imbalance and faculty have to be sensitive to that," says Dr. Weedon. "We are in a time of cultural change, and I think younger faculty in particular are more sensitive to the issues."

Although it's a perennial subject of debate, no national guidelines exist for how to conduct the ideal student-supervisor relationship. But without such guidelines to follow, both students and their supervisors may be caught off guard when something goes awry, and wonder where to turn. In the past, "most grad schools told you how to get your keys and find your office, and maybe gave you a sheet on sexual harassment policies," quips Ingrid Price, who recently earned her PhD in psychology at the



University of British Columbia, where she's now an instructor. In her previous job as a faculty associate at UBC's Centre for Teaching and Academic Growth, she co-wrote the university's well-regarded 2001 *Handbook of Graduate Supervision*.

Fortunately, graduate schools across Canada are learning from past mistakes and, at various paces and in various ways, are seeking to address the issues of graduate supervision and scholarly

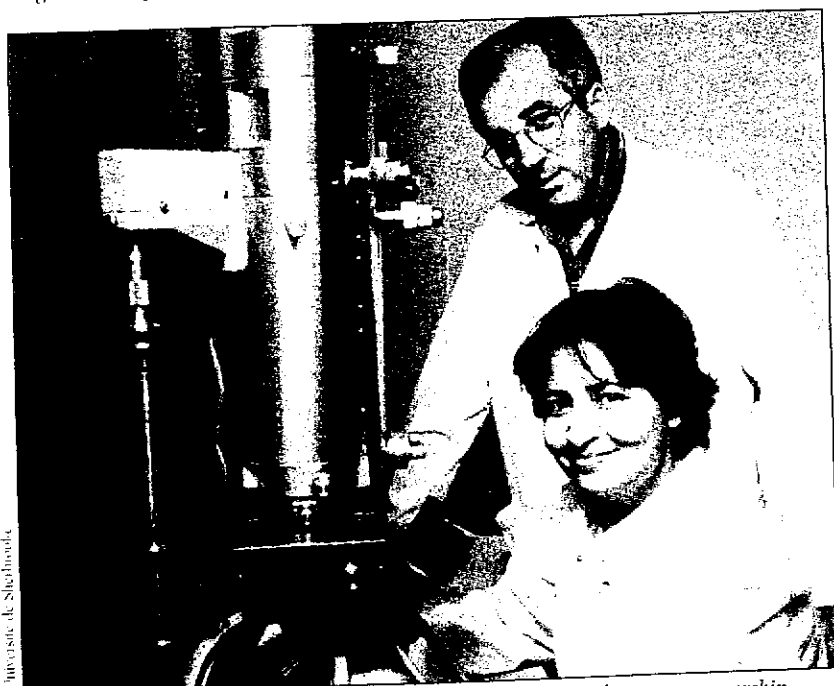
integrity more clearly and directly. Most universities, like UBC and Western, now include at least some "best practice" guidelines for graduate students and faculty on their Web sites. More and more universities are devoting substantial resources to the increasingly complex matter of intellectual property, especially in the sciences, where the growing number of corporate- and government-sponsored research projects is adding

new dimensions to issues of ownership and publication rights. Since 1995, the Canadian University Intellectual Property Group, a coalition of representatives from liaison offices at 10 universities (Alberta, British Columbia, Laval, McGill, McMaster, Montréal, Queen's, Toronto, Waterloo and Western) has made a guide available on its Web site.

While it's difficult to standardize meaningful supervision guidelines across disciplines, departments and collective agreements (what makes sense in mechanical engineering may have no bearing in French literature), many universities have formed committees and are producing pamphlets and brochures that provide some basic general principles and suggestions for incoming students who are wondering what to expect of the graduate-school experience.

Not many institutions spell out the more difficult personal and professional issues that can arise, but the Western site does attempt to tackle them. (Please see the end of this article for Web site references.) It acknowledges up front that the potential for problems does exist if an agreement – even an actual contract – outlining the parameters of the student-supervisor relationship is not established from the beginning. "That [Web site] document was developed in response to a few messes we had to deal with," admits Dr. Weedon, who was dean of graduate studies until July of this year.

Such candor about what can go wrong is welcome as well as refreshing.



Université de Sherbrooke

Universities are devoting more resources to the area of intellectual property ownership, including the rights of graduate students.

says Roxana Vernescu, president of the Graduate Students Union at Memorial University. Ms. Vernescu says Memorial's own Web site guidelines are sufficient when it comes to strictly general academic matters, but when students come to her with problems. "I refer them to the Western site. It's more explicit about other things, types of relationships, what's inappropriate to go beyond. All these issues are so grey, you need some kind of preventative measures." Ms. Vernescu – a psychology student who says she has a "wonderful" relationship with her own thesis supervisor – also cites as a model the University of Guelph site, where graduate students have recently joined the Public Service Alliance of Canada and have a complaints policy written into their collective agreement.

#### State of the art

UBC's *Handbook of Graduate Supervision* is recognized as one of the most thorough and practical guides available in Canada today. It contains detailed

information on everything from how to manage your time to how to end an incompatible supervisory relationship. Each new grad student receives a copy of the substantial booklet and each university department also has copies on hand for faculty members. (It's also on UBC's Web site.)

The UBC handbook grew out of a video the graduate studies faculty used in teaching workshops, which featured students and faculty enacting various one-on-one scenes of typical problem situations: a distraught student in a supervisor's office explaining how family commitments are keeping her from completing her work, for example. "People would smile and say, 'That could have been me'," says Frieda Granot, UBC's dean of graduate studies.

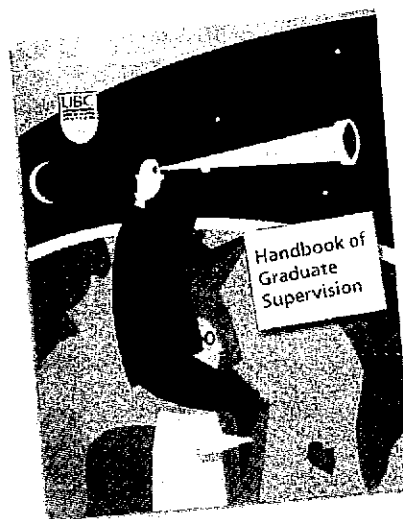
Based on consistent positive feedback on the workshop material, the faculty of grad studies decided to develop the handbook, to guide students step by step through the whole process of writing a thesis and to fend off problems by anticipating them. The handbook provides a template for resolving conflicts before they become too serious. And it echoes the basic advice given by many who have learned the hard way: shop around for a supervisor, and make an informed choice.

That, according to John Andraos, a lecturer with York University's chemistry department, entails lining up interviews with several prospective supervisors, reviewing their publications and talking to their students, past and present; discovering what kind of reputation the potential supervisors have with colleagues, industry partners and students; and finding out what career stage they're at. In a recent article on *Science* magazine's Next Wave Web site, Dr. Andraos outlined some pros and cons to consider with both veteran academics and less senior members of faculty. For example, in the sciences especially, he notes that it's important to establish what contacts the supervisor has in a given field, and what kind of career path may open as a result of a research liaison.

Meanwhile, Dr. Price says she thought a lot about her own experience as a graduate student, and what she would have found useful from the beginning, as she worked on the UBC guide for graduate students. "Graduate students don't know how to self-advocate," she maintains. "They come in as passive undergrads, but in grad school everything is different.

"There tends to be a lot of finger-pointing, with faculty as the bad guys, but students also have to take responsi-

bility for learning how to manage the relationship in a professional way. These are generic life skills," she stresses. "You have everything on the line here, so you



UBC's handbook: tops in the field.

## Unresolvable conflict

### Words from Western's grad studies faculty

"The Faculty of Graduate Studies is occasionally asked to intervene in situations where a graduate student and supervisor have come into unresolvable conflict. In such situations it can sometimes be very difficult to arrange matters so that the student can complete his or her program of study with a new supervisor. Often this is because the rights and responsibilities of the student and the original supervisor have never been completely defined, and each party may have different expectations or assumptions of what the rights and responsibilities are.

For example, in some disciplines the supervisor may have provided considerable input into the conception, design and conduct of the student's research and would normally expect to publish the work with the student. In such cases, if the student and the supervisor come into unresolvable conflict and a new supervisor is appointed, how is the ownership of intellectual property established, and does the student have the right to continue the research based upon the supervisor's original idea? . . ."

have to set it up for success. Supervisors also put up with a lot and most are pretty flexible. They want students to do well. The goal is to finish your degree with minimal scars."

Dr. Price solicited input from other graduate students, too, and incorporated many of the responses in the handbook itself, in the form of highlighted tips, such as: "Don't hook up with someone who is known to be difficult; it's not worth the effort." Also included are a sample agenda for a supervisory meeting; a ground-rules checklist; a suggested annual work plan; advice on learning styles, on giving and receiving, and on appealing decisions; detailed information on the roles and responsibilities of the supervisory committee; and information on all aspects of writing and defending a thesis.

Graduate studies dean Dr. Granot says the guide has been "extremely successful" and is winning rave reviews from both students and faculty, at UBC and beyond. "A lot of universities have Web-only guides, but we discovered that people like to have a document in their hands," says Dr. Granot, especially as an aid to discussions up front about how a student and supervisor will work together. The guide has already helped resolve some conflicts, she adds.

"Cases that might have escalated to the senate were handled in meetings with students and associate deans." The handbook is now the basis for workshops conducted in various departments and faculties at UBC, and other univer-

ties have expressed interest in using the guide as a model for developing their own.

With universities embarking on more research partnerships with industry and government, especially in the sciences, the need for clearer ground rules and agreements about intellectual property, patents and copyright has become evident in recent years. The University of New Brunswick is one of several Canadian universities that have received funding from the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council (among other national and regional government bodies) to develop programs and resources dedicated to helping faculty and students understand and deal with the issue effectively. The intellectual property staff at UNB includes legal expert David Foord and technology transfer analyst Shane Nason, who together provide in-house expertise, mainly to faculty and a small number of students.

"The federal government and research councils want to make sure that research expenditures benefit the country," says Dwight Ball, director of industry-government services at UNB. Mr. Ball says the program has helped a number of UNB researchers in the few years it has operated, including a husband-and-wife team who developed a thermal measuring device based on her PhD in chemical engineering, of interest to the pharmaceutical industry. These endeavors usually involve financing arrangements, the splitting of rights and ensuring that all parties involved – students, faculty, the university and industry partners – receive fair credit and compensation. The office is also establishing a provincial network, through relationships with researchers at the francophone Université de Moncton and with Mount Allison University.

"It's a means of assuring that research doesn't gather dust on the shelf, and for cash-strapped universities to generate some revenue. We provide

#### Helpful Web sites:

University of Western Ontario  
Graduate Studies:  
[www.uwo.ca/grad/index-curr.html](http://www.uwo.ca/grad/index-curr.html)

University of Guelph Graduate Studies:  
[www.uoguelph.ca/GraduateStudies/](http://www.uoguelph.ca/GraduateStudies/)

University of British Columbia  
Handbook of Graduate Supervision:  
[www.grad.ubc.ca/handbook/handbook.htm](http://www.grad.ubc.ca/handbook/handbook.htm)

Choosing a graduate or postdoc advisor,  
by John Andraos <http://nextwave.sciencemag.org/cgi/content/full/2002/08/14/4?>



#### Ground Rules Checklist

For use by graduate students and supervisors

Experienced graduate supervisors recommend that "ground rules" for interactions with students be established early and maintained.

These items should be discussed and clarified in the initial meeting:

- How frequently you will meet and why (data updates, literature reviews etc.).
- The student's role with regard to the data collection and analysis.
- The supervisor's role with regard to the student's data collection and analysis.
- Who will train the student to do technical work OR The role of the departmental technician.
- Standard hours for office space, weekend work or labs.
- A timeline for the research program, which may include experiments, data analysis, manuscript writing and thesis writing.
- Presentations at conventions and meetings: how many, how often and who pays?
- Safety considerations which may need to be completed before working, such as training programs, standard office or laboratory etiquette, or laboratory attire.
- The use of university computers and accounts for research, net surfing, games, personal work, etc.

advice to researchers on protecting their rights." That means making sure that the wording in research contracts is such that everyone gets credit who should, says Mr. Ball.

This kind of care and attention ensures there's academic freedom for graduate students as well as faculty members, as more researchers are discovering. "There can be weird situations that a contract could never predict," says Brad Wuetherick, chair of the Graduate Students' Association of Canada and a master's student in history at the University of Alberta. Mr. Wuetherick cites the case of a PhD student who began his research with an industry partner, then moved on to be funded by NSERC, and found himself in disagreement with his supervisor over whether he could defend and publish his thesis without the approval of the industry partner. "A student should be allowed to publish research without a supervisor or industry causing delay. That could be mandated nationally," argues Mr. Wuetherick.

Dr. Weedon of CAGS agrees that "all research has to be publishable and published. There can never be a suppression of publication by a corporation. It may delay it, but not by much." It's a strict policy at Western but on this and other matters, it can be hard to come up with a one-size-fits-all rule – there are 57 different graduate programs at Western alone.

"There are cultural differences across disciplines," he says. "Some faculty are

very entrepreneurial in seeking sponsorship for their research, and some are not in favour of that at all. It's all apples and oranges, and hard to give a detailed template that works for everyone."

Difficult though it may be to standardize practices around graduate supervision and intellectual property, it's likely that more universally accepted rules will be hammered out in future. Mr. Wuetherick (who cites the UBC handbook as the best available) says the GSC has begun a research initiative looking at "best practices" in support services for graduate students in Canada. The organization sent out surveys and plans one-on-one interviews with 20 graduate-school deans, with findings to be presented at the CAGS conference in late October.

"Nationally, we could have a very bare-bones set of guidelines. I'm not sure how enforceable they would be, but if I could change one thing, it would be to get students and supervisors communicating about specifics," says Mr. Wuetherick.

Those specifics may vary from program to program, but the chances of success are indeed far greater if students and faculty work together to agree on them. "It's difficult to legislate behaviour," Dr. Weedon points out. "but these discussions are a high priority." At the annual general meetings of CAGS, he says, "We will be maintaining vigilance with steady, constant discussion." **AD+UA**