

Maximizing your Relationship with your Research Supervisor

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The supervisor-student relationship is an important component of any student's graduate school experience. There are a number of things that students can do to make the relationship a positive and productive one.

Making the match (Remember, you've got to live with this person!):

- As graduate programs are increasingly competitive, it is easy for students to become concerned just about "getting in". Spend as much time finding out about potential supervisors as you do completing your graduate applications!
- Clarify your own goals and needs (how much one-on-one time do you feel you'll need?).
- Get in touch with the supervisor's current graduate students (don't be afraid to ask for phone numbers!) and attend to both what is said and what is not said.
- Try to make contact to get a sense of the supervisor's personal style. If a supervisor is too busy to return your phone calls, e-mails, or letters, this may be an indication of how much time he or she has available for students.

Now that you're "in", prevent problems BEFORE they arise (An ounce of prevention . . .!):

- Clarify your supervisor's expectations (how do they feel about authorship? how much time do they expect you to be in the lab?).
- Clarify your own expectations (e.g., need for timely feedback) and be upfront about other commitments that may constrain your time (e.g., other program requirements).
- Make the most of backup resources (e.g., other graduate students in your lab or program).
- Know the departmental rules and protocols. They are there for a good reason (usually!).
- Agree upon and establish an effective line of communication (e.g., e-mail, standing meeting times).

Strategies for dealing with problems as they arise ("I have to do WHAT!?):

- Keep open lines of communication with your supervisor (although intimidating, it is best to be honest in a diplomatic and professional manner about your concerns as soon as they arise).
- Expect a transition period as you and your supervisor navigate and establish the boundaries and nature of your working relationship.
- If need be, consult with your departmental ombudsperson who can clarify departmental policies.
- Some students unfortunately are faced with switching supervisors when problems cannot be resolved.

However, don't make this decision without carefully considering the advantages and disadvantages (e.g., it may slow your progress in the program).

The professional approach:

- Be a professional right from the start to maximize your relationship with your supervisor and enhance your own career.
- Expect to work both independently and collaboratively.
- Be organized, conscientious and actively involved in your lab and department.
- Don't forget to take good care of yourself. Stress can impact both your productivity and your relationship with your supervisor.

It is important to remember that every cloud has a silver lining. While well-known, high profile supervisors may have less time available to you, they may

have more financial resources to support you and your research. On the other hand, less well-known supervisors may have limited funding but greater availability for one-on-one consultation. The key to maximizing your relationship with your supervisor is to make the most of the opportunities you are presented with, and recognize that you may have more control and impact on the relationship than you realize.

Recommended Readings:
A.P.A. (1993). Getting in: A step-by-step plan for gaining admission to graduate school in psychology. Washington, DC: APA.
Gill, D. (Ed.) (1995-1997). Guidelines on student-faculty advising relationships. Send requests for this 5 page handout to Virginia Holt at the American Psychological Association, Science Directorate, 750 First Street, NE, Washington DC, 20002-4242; telephone (202-336-6000); fax (202-336-5953); e-mail: VEH.APA@EMAIL.APA.ORG