

Policy on Changing Thesis Supervisors

Approved by FGSR Council, 21 April 2017

Related Policies:

- Saint Mary's University Policy on Conflict of Interest in Research
- Saint Mary's University Policy on Integrity in Research and Scholarship
- FGSR Guiding Principles for Graduate Student Supervision

Introduction:

In rare cases, there may be cause for a graduate student to change her/his thesis supervisor. The need for such change may include:

- Supervisor leaves the university: The supervisor retires, leaves the university to work somewhere else or is on sick leave for more than a year. Except for sick leaves, if the student has almost completed his or her thesis this may not be an issue, as long as the supervisor is still affiliated with Saint Mary's (e.g. through Adjunct or Emeritus status) and available for support. If the student is still early in their program, and the supervisor is no longer willing to supervise the student, the University/Program has the responsibility to make their best effort to help the student find a new supervisor.
- Student changes area of interest: Sometimes, a student's research focus changes or shifts to such an extent that the supervisor feels he or she no longer has the appropriate background to supervise the research. Also, a student may lose interest completely in his or her research and wish to change fields entirely.
- Incompatibility of graduate student and supervisor: Sometimes two individuals simply don't get along and it interferes with the ability of the thesis research to continue.

Changing supervisors is a big step. It can be stressful, take time and the outcome may not be totally satisfactory to everyone. **Before taking such a drastic step**, supervisors and students are encouraged to consider and address the following questions:

- Has the student and supervisor discussed the problem or conflict?
- Has the conversation about the problem been sufficiently clear that both student and supervisor agree on the problem?
- Has the student and supervisor attempted to remedy the problem?

- Have the supervisory committee members been involved in the discussions and their advice sought?
- Has the student and supervisor consulted with the FGSR Associate Dean – Student Affairs and/or the University’s Conflict Resolution Officer?
- Has the student and supervisor explored the implications of changing supervisors?
- Have student and supervisor considered whether there is anyone else in the graduate program who might have the knowledge, experience, time and interest to supervise the student?

The Policy:

Individual graduate programs, under the leadership of their Graduate Program Coordinators, are responsible for adjudicating any problems in the relationship between a graduate student and her or his thesis supervisor. If it is deemed that a change of supervisor is necessary, programs are primarily responsible for ensuring that the process proceeds fairly and with as little harm as possible to both parties. However, the FGSR should be consulted and it can play a supporting role. If the graduate student and/or supervisor is considering a change supervisors, (s)he/they should:

- Discuss this with the Graduate Program Coordinator (GPC) for the program.
- Attempt to resolve the issue through discussion with the GPC, and, if warranted, the FGSR Associate Dean – Student Affairs, and the University’s Conflict Resolution Officer.
- Ensure that both "old" and "new" supervisors are part of the decision, and consult with the full supervisory committee when appropriate.
- Ensure that the GPC (or Program if applicable) Committee approves the change.
- Ensures that FGSR is informed.

When warranted, the University is required to make best efforts to find a new thesis supervisor, however, it must be recognized that this may not always be possible. Students also need to be aware that changing supervisors may affect their stipend if the former supervisor was contributing to the stipend from his/her research funds. Both students and supervisors should be aware that there are potential intellectual property issues to resolve in changing these supervisors.

Nota bene: Adapted from <https://www.grad.ubc.ca/handbook-graduate-supervision/ending-relationship>.