

## Graduate Supervision Philosophy and Practice Statement

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### STATEMENT OF PHILOSOPHY

I embrace and espouse a focused and unwavering commitment to excellence in my pedagogy and graduate student supervision praxis in the Werklund School of Education. As an adult educator and academic in our School, mentoring, advising, coaching, and supporting graduate students is my greatest privilege and, perhaps, encompasses the most rewarding, complex, and demanding aspects of my work.

Three core principles guide my work and relationships with graduate students: 1) valuing a relational epistemology informed by an ethic of care; 2) recognizing the critical importance of a holistic approach in my relationship with graduate students; and, 3) co-creating safe and challenging learning spaces to support graduate student success.

### APPROACH TO GRADUATE SUPERVISION

#### **RELATIONAL EPISTEMOLOGY AND AN ETHIC OF CARE—**

I did not plan to come to academia after completing my PhD—I was deeply rooted in community practice as a social worker and then as an adult educator and I loved my work. My journey as a graduate student, however, was profoundly impacted by a focus on the relational (from my graduate supervisor(s), peers, and other faculty members)—I was transformed by this experience and it became my intention to provide this same depth of care and support to other graduate students navigating this same journey. In retrospect, this was my greatest motivation and impetus for accepting an academic position at the University of Calgary. As the saying goes, I felt compelled to *pay it forward*. Now, 14 years later, I have no regrets!

A relational epistemology and extending an ethic of care serve as my compass and is evidenced in all my relationships with graduate students whom I am privileged to journey and learn with, along the way. As an adult educator, I embrace the *teacher and learner* within all of us—the reciprocity of relationship and learning that provides tremendous opportunity for critical reflection, growth, and development in support of lifelong learning that encompasses formal, informal, and incidental learning on multi levels—personal, professional, and academic. Graduate students soon come to know that I have a deep desire to learn from them—a reciprocity of relationship, where we each teach the other and learn from the other.

Relational ways of knowing emphasize the importance of our interactions with others in that, “we become knowers and are able to contribute to the constructing of knowledge due to the relationships we have with others” (Thayer-Bacon, 2003, p. 73). In 1963, John Dewey asserted that, “the most important attitude that can be formed is that of desire to go on learning”

(Experience and Education, p. 48). Rooted in the belief that, as adult learners, we are *all* social beings with an innate need to connect with others, to be valued, and to experience a sense of belonging, connecting with adult learners/graduate students in supportive, responsive and receptive ways, with genuineness, warmth, sensitivity, thoughtfulness, and positive regard, resides *at the heart* of my philosophy and practice as a graduate student supervisor.

This commitment is evidenced in the time I take and the space I create to get to know students whom I mentor—to connect with them in ways that are both personal, while always respecting personal boundaries and professional ethics. Genuineness, openness, commitment, and authenticity are what I offer. I believe that if a graduate student feels authentically and genuinely welcomed, and warmly regarded and respected, she/he will know that they have my hand on their back, so-to-speak—a commitment to support their learning and growth and to always ensure an eye on their wellness and well-being. This is a relationship where our differences in roles and responsibilities are clearly known, without any manipulation or abuse of power differentials.

#### **HOLISTIC APPROACH—**

I recognize that a graduate student typically juggles numerous diverse roles and responsibilities—their lives are, indeed, complex and multi-faceted. As lifelong adult learners, graduate students also arrive, rich in life experience. My narrative as a graduate student was similar; in kind, it is paramount that I regard and respond to others with the same deep commitment and integrity that I experienced. Although the focus of our work together is on their academic journey, I always regard and locate who they are as a graduate student against the backdrop of a much larger life narrative—a narrative textured and shaped by many factors (some factors known to me and others, not so much) that will inevitably impact and influence their journey and overall graduate student progress.

I regard each learner as a *whole and unique person*. Albeit, although their ultimate goal might be the same, how each graduate student navigates this journey, their unique and diverse learning needs, varying levels of confidence and abilities, and the supports and resources needed along the way to achieve success, is always at the forefront. Out of respect for other roles and responsibilities that graduate students attend to on a daily basis, I seek to clarify and document, in all ways transparent, timelines, our respective responsibilities, expectations, and back and forth communications. I often send notes simply to ‘touch base’, to invite updates, and to keep communication channels open. Although I respect the boundaries of time and expectations pertaining to other aspects of a graduate student’s life (other roles and responsibilities that require their time, attention, and energy), they know that they can contact me 24/7 if the need arises. In this way I am *not* enabling dependency; rather, I am encouraging open communication to ensure that no one falls into any crevices without me knowing. In this way, I also communicate that each graduate student has my full support. I can honestly say that in the past 14 years, I have never felt abused or exploited by any graduate student, having provided them this open and full

span of support. Paradoxically, I have found that this level of *openness* actually serves to foster graduate student independence and accountability. More explicitly, this conveys to the student that I trust that they are deeply steeped in the process of learning; that they will dig deep to access their own resources and critical thinking; and, that they can be strong and self-directed *and* still have needs.

To anticipate challenges and to monitor progress, I keep detailed Excel spreadsheets on graduate students--noting timelines, milestones, and next steps. I document all communication so as to have a resource to go back to when/if different interpretations of expectations arise. I have a hard file and electronic version for each student I supervise. They have copies of relevant communication to ensure clarity and coherence. Students typically send me an email detailing discussion points after we have met, either face-to-face, over the telephone, or via Skype chat. In this way, what was discussed is reinforced *by the student* and this lessens room for miscommunication.

When my 'away' students come to Calgary for other purposes, I ensure that we meet face-to-face, for lunch or dinner, if they are able to do so. Having some social time strengthens the relationship and reinforces my regard and care for them as a whole person, beyond milestones they aim to achieve as a graduate student. When I sense that a graduate student is distressed, or when they have stepped away from communication for a while, I reach out, letting them know that I am concerned and am here to provide support. I respectfully navigate these nudges and prompts in ways that are not intrusive. I appreciate and deeply value how they have responded to these overtures, often confiding something in their personal life that is causing them unrest. In this way, and if the student is open and willing, I can connect them to resources on campus or in their own community, to provide them further support. I simply can't 'bookend' our relationship to an exclusive focus on tasks performed as a graduate student—they bring their whole selves into this process and are deserving of being supported in all ways that are respectful of this.

### **CO-CREATING SAFE AND CHALLENGING LEARNING SPACES—**

I aim to create learning and dialogic spaces informed by trust (safety) and critical thought and feedback (challenges) that support graduate students in all ways that are *both* safe and challenging.

*Safety* refers to a learning and relational climate and culture that is welcoming and inclusive of diversity—a learning space and place informed by trust and principled, ethical supervisory praxis. Safe space honours the life experiences acquired, along the way, by adult learners and supports critical reflection to make deeper meaning of experiences to connect with the learning potential that resides there. By attending to trust and safety needs, graduate students are more willing and able to challenge themselves and to be challenged by others.

*Challenge* refers to learning spaces that nudge and prompt the learner to lean into the unfamiliar, the unknown, and often the uncomfortable, to critically reflect on tightly held notions,

biases, and assumptions—to shift the lens to consider alternate perspectives, ways of knowing, and practices. Challenging learning spaces encourage and support authentic dialogue and opening to difficult conversations in support of deep engagement and informed, thoughtful, critical, and respectful discourse. As an adult educator, I work towards creating a safe learning space and in this space I encourage, support, and challenge graduate students to take risks, to revisit assumptions (sometimes faulty), and to view the world, their place in it, and other ways of being, knowing, and doing, through alternate lenses.

I continue to learn so much through my relationships with graduate students—I encourage them to challenge my thinking and assumptions and together we critically explore and navigate terrains that broaden and deepen knowledge and practice. The strength of relationships formed through this graduate student journey often extend far beyond convocation—where what began as a mentor—mentee relationship progresses across the continuum and transforms and transcends to a long-standing connection.

Respectfully submitted,



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