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[Home](#) > Graduate Supervision Guidelines: Follow-up

Graduate Supervision Guidelines: Follow-up

November 2, 2023

We are writing to follow up on our earlier message (“[Concerning Changes to Graduate Student Supervision](#)”) sent October 5, 2023. The Administration’s proposed changes to the Graduate Supervision Guidelines were initially provided to UTFA this past spring with a two-week window to provide our input ahead of a scheduled implementation date of July 1st. *UTFA pushed back hard on two fronts: process and content, and the Administration agreed to temporarily pause the implementation to allow us to discuss our concerns with them.*

Our previous message to you did not include a link to the Administration’s proposed Graduate Supervision Guidelines. We were reluctant to disseminate a document that the Administration provided to us because we hoped it would have changed substantively before it was published and implemented. However, we understand that the senior Administration has been sharing the document widely with other academic administrators and they have not demonstrated that any wide, meaningful, and collegial consultation with faculty members as a whole would take place prior to any implementation. We are thus sharing it with you now, and encourage you to read the proposed Guidelines [here](#), along with the notes we have provided below. After you have read these, please feel free to share any comments, concerns, or suggestions with us (at faculty@utfa.org), and also, if you wish, with your graduate unit or the School of Graduate Studies.

UTFA underscores its commitment to ensuring graduate students receive faculty supervision that is effective, caring, equitable, and supportive. For many of us, our mentoring relationships with graduate students are a cornerstone of our work as scholars. However, we have serious concerns about the proposed Guidelines. As you read them, you may wish to consider some of the issues that several faculty colleagues have already raised with UTFA, some of which we describe below.

Unlike the [existing Guidelines](#), whose stated purpose is to “assist you in creating a rewarding graduate experience for both your students and yourself,” the [proposed Guidelines](#) appear to establish a binding University-wide set of minimum expectations and responsibilities for individual faculty members, and contemplate an *additional* layer of unit-specific requirements.

The proposed Guidelines also purport to “operationalize” an aspect of our responsibility for teaching under the [Memorandum of Agreement \(MoA\)](#). Thus, instead of serving as a resource designed to help instructors, the proposed Guidelines apparently alter what is expected of graduate supervisors with potentially serious implications for those who, in the eyes of the Administration, fall short. **As drafted, the proposed Guidelines could open the door to complaints, investigations, disciplinary action, or denial of promotion, tenure, or continuing status, on the basis of a failure to comply with broad and vaguely-defined standards that are lacking definition or common understanding, or are dependent on highly subjective feelings, views, or assessments. Even more worrisome is the fact that these proposed Guidelines are also lacking in guarantees of procedural fairness to ensure that complaints against faculty for allegedly falling short of their new obligations would be handled fairly.** The senior Administration has provided UTFA with conflicting answers about whether the proposed Guidelines are intended to be used only as a resource to describe best practices for self-improvement or whether the Guidelines could be invoked and relied upon during tenure and promotion reviews, disciplinary action, and other high stakes purposes.

In addition to these concerns about the proposed Guidelines as a whole, some of their specific provisions are worrisome. For example, graduate supervisors are *already* prohibited by law and under existing policies from discriminating against or harassing their students, but Section 2.3 of the proposed Guidelines purports to create a much broader duty, requiring faculty “to *cultivate* a teaching, learning, and working *environment* that is free from discrimination and harassment, *where everyone shares a sense of belonging, is treated with respect, and is able to fully participate*” (italics added). The kind of environment described here is important, but is not solely within the graduate supervisor’s control; responsibility for this also rests with the Administration (its structures, systems, processes, and staff), and is dependent on the students and their responsibilities within that environment as well. Holding graduate supervisors solely responsible for creating something as amorphous as a “sense of belonging,” and potentially applying serious consequences to the failure to do so, is palpably unreasonable and unfair.

Similarly, Section 2.4 (“Promoting Wellness”) requires instructors “to promote a culture of caring.” Terms such as ‘wellness’ or ‘culture of caring’ and a desire to promote them may be positive aspirations, but in the absence of a shared meaning for these concepts among our (beautifully) diverse faculty complement and a shared understanding of how “success” in these areas may be measured, it is unclear how these requirements can be met—or how a professor might defend against the accusation of failing to meet this new, vague, overly-broad, requirement.

Likewise, Section 3.14 outlines that faculty are to “encourage and facilitate professional success, networking opportunities, and relationship-building within and beyond academia.” But, what does that look like? Wouldn’t this expectation vary dramatically based on the field in question (e.g., urban planning vs. classics) and potentially by the advisors’ own work and biography? Could international faculty new to the local context be penalized for not having a broad, local, non-academic network, for example?

Moreover, nowhere do the proposed Guidelines account for workload implications. It is important to note that there are significant differences in the way graduate supervision is treated in Unit Workload Policies across the University: some departments clearly account for graduate supervision within faculty members’ workload (for example, by treating each student supervision as a portion of a course) while other units treat supervision as something that is done over and above faculty members’ regular teaching load. While there may be unit- or discipline-specific reasons for these disparities, it would make sense for the Administration and UTFA to negotiate some minimum standards for this in advance of new

requirements being implemented related to that work, or at the very least to ensure each Unit Workload Committee reconsiders its approach to graduate supervision-related workload in a fully informed way.

Lastly, when reading the proposed Guidelines, you might notice that the faculty graduate supervisor is responsible for 28 bullet points, departments are responsible for 19, and the School of Graduate Studies (SGS) is now responsible for only 6. Even if these proposed Guidelines had been properly negotiated with UTFA and the offloading of such a broad set of responsibilities to individual graduate supervisors could be justified, it would still be true that not all faculty members are equally endowed with the capacity (within their current workload, for example) or resources to comply with such requirements, nor are departments and other units comparably resourced across the University to support this work.

Again, we invite you to let us know what you think of the proposed Guidelines by writing to us at faculty@utfa.org.

Sincerely,

Sherri Helwig
Vice-President, Grievances

Ariel Katz
Vice-President, Salary, Benefits, Pensions, and Workload (SBPW)

Terezia Zorić
President

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