

Graduate Student Task Force on Graduate Advising Excellence:
Department, Advisor, and Student Recommendations

The present document is the result of a collaborative effort of graduate students across multiple colleges and departments who were brought together in the Spring of 2016 through a task force charged by Dr. Jodie Hanzlik, Dean of the Graduate School. The purpose of this document is to identify advising and mentoring recommendations that may lead to increased student success and the timely completion of graduate degree programs.

There are unique and shared mentoring and advising responsibilities that fall on the department, advisor, and student throughout the student's graduate program. Although many departments, advisors, and students have already identified and are acting on positive practices, the recommendations below are meant to serve as an additional resource and/or starting point, with opportunity to tailor as needed.

RECOMMENDATIONS for DEPARTMENTS

The following section describes what academic departments or schools (referred to as “departments” below) may consider to best serve graduate students in their program:

At the beginning (or possibly even before the start) of the program, new graduate students may benefit by receiving:

- A clear description of departmental and graduate school requirements including coursework, qualifying/preliminary exams, and instructions including due dates for important forms.
- A timeline of the program reflecting the typical major milestones or steps for students, including the average time to completion.
- Updated/current statistics on how students in the program are typically funded (e.g. percentage of student on Graduate Research Assistantships (GRA), number of Graduate Teaching Assistantships (GTA) the department offers each year, what students do if they do not get funding through a GRA or GTA, etc.) and the general requirements/expectations for each funding option.
- Information on how the department chooses students for GTA positions and the specific number of hours per week required for the position.
- Details regarding which costs/fees are to be paid by the student and which are paid by the department and/or primary advisor (if the student is funded versus unfunded) and how applying for in-state residency can affect these costs.
- If they are international students, additional information on applicable employment laws and visa requirements.

- If they are first generation or international students, the department is encouraged to recognize special understanding may be called for, as students may be less familiar with typical practices and policies of graduate education.

The above information may be disseminated through a regularly updated and widely available handbook. Departments could also explore using RAMweb and/or the departmental website as a tool in making sure this information is available to all students - current and prospective.

- The opportunity to meet in person department staff, such as the graduate student coordinator and department head/chair.
- Explicit introduction to the above information and knowledge of where additional details can be found.
- Introduction to the many on-campus resources available to graduate students including those offered by the Graduate School, Health Network (including health and counseling services), Institute for Learning and Teaching (TILT), Writing Center, Resources for Disabled Students (RDS), Student Case Management, Adult Learner and Veteran Services, Career Center, Off-Campus Life, Student Legal Services, Graduate Student Council (GSC), Conflict Resolution and Student Conduct Services, Office of International Programs, and the many cultural/resource centers under the Division of Student Affairs.

The above points may be accomplished through a brief orientation program once students are on campus.

Throughout the program, graduate students may benefit by receiving:

- Knowledge of departmental and Continuous Registration policies, procedures, and resources related to leaves of absence (such as that for serious health or family issues).
- Familiarity with the courses of action available to students if issues arise with their primary advisor including any internal departmental policies, the Research Integrity & Compliance Review Office (RICRO), Conflict Resolution and Student Conduct Services, and the Graduate School.

The department is encouraged to support students in utilizing the above resources and ensure that they do not face any negative consequences/retaliation for doing so.

- The opportunity to provide feedback on program/department in general.
- The opportunity to anonymously provide feedback on quality of current advising efforts in the department.

Departments could collect this feedback as part of an annual (or per semester) departmental-level review, utilizing the information only to explore ways to improve the program. If the assessment on current advising is below what is deemed acceptable by the department, this could trigger a seminar and/or training session for all primary advisors. At the discretion of the department, this training could be mandatory and cover topics such as the following:

- *Advising and Teaching Techniques*
- *How to Give Supportive but Critical Feedback*
- *Understanding and Respecting Diversity*

➤ *Assisting Students in Crisis*

➤ *Research Ethics*

- A formal written review of their progress that is completed by the primary advisor.
- A remediation plan/process if not meeting program/advisor expectations.

The department is encouraged to inform students and advisors of the purpose of these reviews and set policies regarding the maintenance of completed reviews/student records. Advisors may benefit from guidance on effective ways to provide helpful feedback - both positive and negative. The department sets the required frequency of these reviews (annually or every semester) and also identifies standards to determine when a remediation plan is required for a student.

Departments may also consider organizing periodic professional development events where students can learn about topics and skills specific to their field. These events could include information on:

➤ *Applying for Funding*

➤ *How to Critically Review Articles*

➤ *Writing Strategies for Publications or Thesis*

➤ *Presentation Skills*

➤ *Introduction to Commonly used Software*

➤ *Finding a Job after Graduation*

At the completion/end of the program, graduate students may benefit by receiving:

- The opportunity to complete a formal exit survey.

The exit survey can be designed to collect candid feedback on both the department/program in general and the specific advising the student received while in the program. To promote honesty in student responses, it can be clarified that the results of the survey are kept at the department level and not sent to the advisor. If the feedback about an advisor is not favorable, the department may want to consider a method for addressing the issues with the goal of aiding future graduate students.

RECOMMENDATIONS for ACADEMIC ADVISORS

The following section describes what academic advisors (referred to as “advisors”) are encouraged to provide to best serve graduate students in their program. In the cases of students choosing or being assigned an academic advisor at a later stage in the academic program, clear guidelines can be in place which state the person or committee who serves as a temporary or interim advisor for incoming students.

Right after an advisor officially accepts the graduate student as an advisee, the following items may be discussed:

- Program and Graduate School requirements.

The advisor is encouraged to be aware of the departmental and graduate school requirements, and able to provide clarification. Elaborating on a detailed schedule including the submission of forms and exam dates can be helpful.

- The future career goals of the student.

Feedback on the feasibility of the student's choices regarding coursework can be provided as well as suggestions about any additional courses that could be considered helpful for the student to excel in an identified field of research. This may be most beneficial if completed within the scope of the student's long term goal. In this context, especially the more the student advances in the program, a conversation about expectations and opportunities for professional development may be considered

- Employee expectations and policies.

Written information can be provided which clarifies the advisor's expectations regarding the student. This document may be discussed in detail with the student and be made accessible. If this documentation does not provide laboratory and research policies, an additional document could be made available. The latter should at a minimum address regulations regarding necessary training to use equipment involved as part of the research process. Furthermore, if certifications or permits are indispensable to administer the research, their necessity and the accessibility can be illustrated. Guidelines on how expenses, for example costs for travels, and how their reimbursement are handled may be specified.

- Guidance in acquiring funding.

Directions to help the student find sources of funding both before and during the program can be very beneficial. This can be, but is not limited to, university intern funding as well as external funding such as grants and scholarships. This could also be considered in cases where students already have funding guaranteed through graduate teaching assistantships and/or graduate research assistantships.

- If applicable, co-advisor responsibilities.

In case the student has a co-advisor, it is important that the responsibilities of each advisor be clearly defined.

Throughout the program, advisors are encouraged to consider the following:

- Timely and consistent communication and meetings.

To guarantee a successful advisor-student relationship, regular communication is inevitable. This may include timely and consistent communication in the form of meetings. If one or more of these meetings need to be canceled by either the student or the advisor, it is important that the correspondence still happens through other channels of communication such as e-mail. It is suggested that timely manner is discussed and agreement attained regarding what turnaround time can be expected for, for instance, answers on questions regarding work or feedback on papers or a thesis.

- Timely feedback on overall progress and performance.

In order to improve the student productivity and effectiveness, it is helpful to provide a constructive, written annual review of the student. This could be made available to other committee members for the cases where student's progress is evaluated or shortcomings have to be addressed. This may assist in planning next steps for timely degree completion.

- Meaningful guidance on research projects.

The advisor is encouraged to assist the student to identify an acceptable research project, including guidance on the selection of a primary research project and the definition of the research goal. Continuous feedback is helpful addressing whether the students' research approach is targeting the research questions. If the student is deviating from the advisors foreseen track, guidance is required on how to refocus again so the most effective approach for solving the research questions is chosen, otherwise reevaluate the relevance of the research question and consider changing it.

- Committee selection assistance.

The advisor may be in the best position to provide recommendations for committee members. Further feedback is helpful to inform the student about the reasoning behind the recommendation. This could, for example, include a professor's expertise in a specific field of research or familiarity with certain techniques.

- Cultivating approachability and maintaining professionalism.

Students clearly benefit from a safe working environment where behavior based on mutual respect can be found. This also means that when necessary, the advisor functions as a mediator in situations where, for example, issues with colleagues arise. This could include the graduate student level as well as concerns that arise with faculty. Ideally, an advisor is understanding of the student's matters outside the university that might influence work life, such as family or health issues that can affect a student's performance. Likewise, an advisor is encouraged to respect a student's diversity including race, ethnicity, age, gender, etc. and remain considerate of issues that might come into play.

- Providing resources available to students.

Students may be provided with the resources that help them to become leaders in their field. Advisors are encouraged to make an effort to provide necessary materials and information which can be considered needed to fulfill the research tasks. If this has limitations due to, for example, availability of equipment or financial restrictions, the advisor may wish to consult others as appropriate. Resources for students can also include seminars, database access or conferences attendance.

- Assistance in post-graduate placement.

To be well prepared for the time after graduation, advisors may consider helping their students finding the right information and connections for placements after leaving the graduate program. This could consist of recommending events to students that focus on job search, encouraging conference attendance, introducing students to important people in the field or sending out recommendations. It is important that career goals be discussed with the student throughout the program in order to facilitate this process.

RECOMMENDATIONS for GRADUATE STUDENTS

The following section describes what graduate students (referred to as “students”) are encouraged to be responsible for in order to best succeed in their program:

At the beginning (or possibly even before the start) of the program, new graduate students are encouraged to:

- Seek out and understand relevant policies

Although the department and advisor are expected to communicate as much information as possible to students, students must ultimately ensure they are acquainted with necessary information by reading distributed information or asking questions. This includes requirements and expectations of the Graduate School, department, and the student’s advisor.

- Be acutely aware of all deadlines and paperwork from the Graduate School, your department, lab, etc.

- Formulate well thought-out goals and timelines for your program.

Students should become aware of typical timelines in their program regarding finishing classes, taking examinations, acquiring certifications, and graduation-related activities.

- If multiple departments are involved in the student’s education, they must understand which policies and deadlines they are expected to follow.

- If co-advised, clarify responsibilities of and to each advisor.

For example, specifying to whom the student should regularly report to and to whom documents and forms should be submitted.

Throughout the program, graduate students should:

- Actively aim for productivity in classes, research, and lab work.

- Practice effective communication.

Productivity in all areas can be augmented by effective communication with teachers, advisors, and coworkers. Work with advisor to schedule regular meetings and updates, and be well prepared for these meetings. Ask questions of the department, advisor, or peers as needs arise. Be open to constructive criticism from advisor and committee.

- Reach out to committee members and organize meetings when appropriate.

- Complete annual review of advisor.

In order to optimize the student-advisor relationship, it is helpful to provide a constructive, written annual review of the advisor which can either be discussed directly between student and advisor, or reviewed by the department. Departments and/or students may determine whether to communicate contents of the review to the advisors reviewed.

- Take advantage of available resources (discussed above in recommendations to the department) if professional or personal issues arise.

- Maintain professionalism in all aspects of education.

- Seek out opportunities for professional development such as conferences, seminars, symposiums, and/or internships.

- Stay informed through frequent Graduate School, department, and advisor communications.

In line with of the mission of the Graduate School to support positive and productive relationships between the students and faculty involved in graduate education, Dean of the Graduate School Dr. Jodie Hanzlik and Associate Dean of the Graduate School Dr. Tammi Vacha-Haase convened a task force of current graduate students to explore the concept of “best practices” in mentoring and advising graduate students. The members of the task force, in alphabetical order, were as follows:

David Baker - Mechanical Engineering
Katie Boyd - Graduate Degree Program in Ecology
Nicholas Greenfield - Sociology
Nabila Huq - Chemical and Biological Engineering
Arnold Päcklar - Chemistry
Nicole Ramo - School of Biomedical Engineering
Derek Young - Mechanical Engineering
Natalie Youngblood - Civil and Environmental Engineering

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