Advising & Mentoring PhD Students

Guidelines for Students, Faculty and Administrators at the University of Pennsylvania
https://catalog.upenn.edu/graduate/academic-resources/advising-mentoring/

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Sections of this publication are based on “Graduate Supervision Guidelines for Students, Faculty and Administrators” (2002) produced by the School of Graduate Studies at the University of Toronto. We are grateful for their willingness to allow us to use and revise this work.

Comments on this publication may be directed to the Vice Provost for Education at provost-ed@upenn.edu.

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Introduction
This publication is being distributed to graduate students and faculty members throughout the University of Pennsylvania. It is intended to provide graduate students, faculty, and graduate groups with guidelines that promote good mentoring relationships between faculty advisors and graduate students. And by clarifying expectations and responsibilities, we hope to reduce frustration and conflicts, which should foster more productive research experiences for our doctoral students.

While models of mentoring relationships can vary across graduate programs at the University of Pennsylvania, there are general guidelines, policies, and approaches that apply everywhere. These guidelines provide students with direction on choosing an advisor, establishing a dissertation committee and maintaining productive working relationships. Students and faculty can find information about their respective roles and responsibilities in this important relationship as well as advice on conflict resolution and links to important policies.

This publication, based on one produced at the University of Toronto, is intended to promote conversations between faculty and students regarding their mutual expectations. While it focuses almost exclusively on the dissertation stage, recent studies indicate that good advising and mentoring that begin early in the student’s career facilitates expeditious degree completion. Generally, each graduate program will provide a program-specific handbook detailing course and examination requirements, regulations, procedures and expectations of both students and faculty, from matriculation through graduation. Our hope is that this publication will support that effort and can serve as a starting point for further action.

Beth Winkelstein
Vice Provost for Education
and
The Council of Graduate Deans
CHOOSING A DISSERTATION ADVISOR

While some graduate groups may assign an advisor to a student upon admission to the program, in many graduate groups the responsibility for finding a dissertation advisor rests with the student. The choice of a faculty member who will supervise the dissertation work required to fulfill degree requirements is one of the most critical decisions a graduate student will make. A student will spend several years working with the faculty member of choice, and that choice will significantly affect the direction of the student’s career. Choosing a dissertation advisor, therefore, is an extremely important decision for doctoral students, although it is not immutable, as will be discussed later.

A student undertaking dissertation work needs an advisor who will be not only academically competent in a particular area but also willing to act as the student’s advocate when necessary. It is important that the student be able to work and communicate effectively with the advisor and not feel overwhelmed or intimidated in the relationship. Dissertation work can be lonely and isolating. Each student requires the guidance of someone who will stimulate thought, who has sufficient interest in the student’s topic to produce new insights jointly, and who will challenge the student to think in a novel manner about the research.

OBTAINING INFORMATION ON POTENTIAL ADVISORS

Students who are responsible for finding their own advisor should be familiar with the University rules about who can advise dissertation research and serve on the dissertation committee. Several resources and strategies can help students identify an appropriate faculty advisors, as follows.

The graduate group website or handbook is a valuable source of information on potential advisors. Many graduate groups have developed websites that profile affiliated faculty members, including their areas of research, recent publications, and other academic activities. Literature searches can provide further information on the publications and preferred journals of particular faculty members. The graduate group chair can also provide valuable advice on potential advisors and can help students to become familiar with any specific graduate group policies on supervision.

Students can get to know potential advisors by taking a course, doing a lab rotation, acting as a teaching assistant, and/or attending seminars and other presentations by the faculty member.

Graduate students working with the potential advisor are an invaluable source of information. Students who are currently working or have worked with a particular advisor can be asked about their experience with that advisor and about the advisor’s expectations and working methods. Getting to know these students is also useful because with anyone choosing to work with a faculty advisor would likely have close, future interactions with their students. Talking to multiple students is always encouraged given the possibly strong and differing opinions one might hear.

Students should make an appointment to see potential advisors. Meeting a potential advisor is an essential step in determining whether a faculty member would be a good fit in terms of mentoring and interpersonal style and research interested. The following is a list of issues that might be covered in such a meeting:

- How many graduate students do you advise? (Students may not want to pick a faculty member who has too many students already.)
- Typically, how often do you meet with your students?
Typically, how much time do you expect students to take to complete their dissertation?

How will we agree upon my research topic?

Are there sufficient funds available for the research project?

What will be the sources of my stipend/funding? What are ways you can provide assistance for finding additional funding if/when my stipend expires?

What level of independence is expected of your graduate students?

Is there any specific knowledge I need to have before starting to work with you?

Will I have the opportunity to attend conferences? Publish papers? Present work at colloquia? Are there funds available for me to do so?

Are you planning a sabbatical leave soon? If so, what arrangements for continued supervision will be made during your absence?

What opportunities would I have in this area of research when I graduate?

How do you typically assist students on the job market?

Will guidelines be drawn up for working together?

How will I receive feedback on my progress?

These questions are designed to help the student and the potential advisor determine whether a good match exists. Where appropriate, the student may also want to ask about the order of authorship on publications and intellectual property issues.

The choice of a dissertation advisor is a decision to be made with a great deal of care and consideration. Discussion of the topics listed above will also give faculty members a sense of what students expect in terms of meetings, feedback, turn-around time on submitted work, etc. Taking time to explore these issues should result in a productive relationship for both student and advisor that culminates in a piece of original research, completed within a reasonable time period.

**CHANGING ADVISORS**

There may be situations in which a student must change advisors. Some situations are beyond the student’s control; for example, when an advisor leaves the university or otherwise becomes unavailable. In other situations, the student may want to choose a different advisor; for example if the focus of the research project changes to something outside of the current advisor’s expertise, or if works styles do not mesh well.

In these latter situations, students should understand that while there can be risks in changing advisors, it usually can be negotiated in a positive manner. Students deciding to pursue this option should be sure to consult the graduate group for any specific policies and procedures that apply to changing advisors, and be sure to ascertain if funding may change under a new advisor. Students should always be professional and respectful in interactions with the current advisor and potential new advisor, and be certain that another member of the faculty is willing to add them as a new advisee before discussing a change with the current advisor. Students should focus discussions on interests and goals and not on negative incidents or difficulties. The potential new advisor, as well as leaders or other members of the graduate group, may have advice regarding how to broach this change with the current advisor.
EXPECTATIONS, PROVISION OF STRUCTURE, AND TIMELINES
The provision of structure by dissertation advisors is crucial at all stages of a graduate student’s work, but is particularly important during the initial phase of dissertation work. It is essential that advisors and students have a shared set of expectations. Each needs to understand the constraints that operate on the other and the effects that these may have on the mentoring relationship. Good advisors make their expectations clear to students on issues such as the need for regular meetings, mastery of methodological skills, conference publications and conference presentations, timelines for degree completion, etc. Once these expectations are clearly outlined, it is much easier to develop a positive, productive relationship.

The following are suggested topics to cover in initial discussions between student and advisor:
- Frequency of contact.
- Preferred communication method (e.g., e-mail, phone calls, Skype, in person).
- Timelines for each stage of the research, including publications and conference presentations.
- Type and frequency of feedback expected.
- Whether students work in the graduate group or at home/library. Hours of work.
- Nature of any directed reading program.
- Monitoring, evaluation, and reporting of progress.
- Additional training, fieldwork requirements.
- Any authorship/collaboration or intellectual property issues.
- The establishment and membership of the dissertation committee.

THE DISSERTATION COMMITTEE
The academic experience is greatly enhanced if faculty members other than the direct advisor are readily and formally available for consultation and discussion with the graduate student. To provide this element of supervision, a dissertation committee should be put in place for the Ph.D. student early in the dissertation stage. The graduate group is responsible for monitoring the progress of the student through the dissertation committee, as follows:
- A dissertation committee should consist of at least three faculty members (including at least two members of the graduate group). While some graduate groups require all members of the dissertation committee be members of the graduate group or affiliated department, others encourage/require appointment of a faculty member from another department, to encourage an interdisciplinary perspective. Be sure to review the policy about the composition of dissertation committee as you are building your committee.
- It is required that the dissertation committee meet with the student, as a committee, at least once per year to assess the student’s progress in the program and to provide advice on future work.
- The committee submits a written report to the graduate group chair, at least once per year, detailing its observations of the student’s progress and its recommendations.
- The student must be given the opportunity to respond to the committee’s report/recommendation and to append a response to the committee’s report.
- Copies of the report shall be given to the student and filed with the graduate group office.

The Graduate Group is responsible for recording the membership of the dissertation committee in the Student Information System (SRS). The graduate division office at the home school will monitor compliance with this requirement through SRS reports and an annual audit of the official student file.
OPEN ACCESS PUBLICATION OF DISSERTATIONS

The culmination of the research project will be a dissertation. All Penn PhD dissertations are published by ProQuest and a hard copy is placed in the Penn Library once the student graduates. Penn also requires open access publication of dissertations in the institutional repository, Scholarly Commons. Open access publication provides a much wider audience, can help to market ideas to potential employers, and can help make plagiarism or theft much easier to detect. The open access dissertation will be available via the internet, including full text searching through search engines like Google. The same legal and copyright protections pertain to open access publication as to traditional hardcopy publication.

In cases where papers are in press, patents are pending, or where there are other intellectual property concerns, it may be beneficial to delay publication (commonly referred to as an "embargo"). Students should discuss with the advisor whether a delay in publication is necessary or advisable. If the student and advisor agree that it will be advantageous to embargo the dissertation, embargo preferences can be entered when submitting the dissertation using ETD Administrator. Note that different embargo options are available for traditional publishing (in ProQuest: 6 months, 1 year, 2 years) and open access (in Scholarly Commons: 3 years initially). A request for a three-year delay in open access publication through Penn’s Scholarly Commons will be granted automatically when requested. Requests for additional delays – which must be made in advance of the embargo expiring -- require approval by the Graduate Group Chair and in some cases the school’s Graduate Dean or Associate Dean for Graduate Studies.

EXPECTATIONS & RESPONSIBILITIES OF STUDENTS, ADVISORS AND GRADUATE GROUPS

RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE STUDENT

Good mentoring practice entails responsibilities not only of the advisor but also of the student. When a student enters a doctoral program, that student commits time and energy necessary for research leading to a dissertation that makes a substantial and original contribution to knowledge. It is the responsibility of the student to conform to University and program requirements and procedures. Although it is the duty of the advisor to be reasonably available for consultation, the primary responsibility for keeping in touch rests with the student. The student’s responsibilities include the following:

- Becoming familiar with, and adhering to, the rules, policies, and procedures in place in the graduate group, home school, and the University as outlined in available resources such as graduate group student handbooks/web sites and the University’s policies. Of particular importance are rules around Academic Integrity.
- Knowing and following the rules and policies of the graduate group and the University. Adhering to all deadlines and policies regarding registration, leaves of absence, limitations on time and recertification, dissertation submission and graduation.
- Selecting and planning an original research topic that can be successfully completed within the expected time frame for the degree program; in some cases, this will be done in consultation with the thesis advisor.
- Preparing a research plan and timetable in consultation with the advisor as a basis for the program of study, including any proposed fieldwork.
• Learning and adhering to responsible conduct of research standards for your field. Acquiring the necessary health and safety skills for undertaking the proposed research.
• Meeting with the advisor when requested and reporting regularly on progress and results.
• Establishing a dissertation committee, with the assistance of the advisor, early in the dissertation stage, as required by the graduate group.
• Keeping advisors informed on how they can be contacted and informing them of any significant changes that may affect the progress of the research.
• Maintaining good records of each stage of the research.
• Be a good citizen of the research group, laboratory, department, or other entity that requires cooperation from its members (e.g., lab chores).
• When necessary, planning to seek additional funding as needed well in advance.
• Thinking critically about career trajectory and mindfully pursuing opportunities to support career goals, for example, through teaching, publishing, presenting, externships, etc. (See Appendix A: Skill Building for more information.)

RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE FACULTY ADVISOR
Within the context of their role as advisors, a faculty member’s primary task is to guide and inspire his or her students to reach their scholarly potential. At the same time, each advisor must try to ensure that each student is in compliance with the rules and regulations of the University. The advisor should promote conditions conducive to a student’s research and intellectual growth and provide appropriate guidance on the progress of the research and the standards expected.

Good mentoring practice includes the following:
• Guiding the student in the selection and planning of an original research topic that can be successfully completed within the expected time frame for the degree program.
• Establishing with the student a realistic timetable for completion of various phases of the program.
• Being accessible to give advice and provide feedback, while also establishing for the student a realistic timeline for receiving feedback. Feedback should be professional and constructive and provide concrete guidance for improvement.
• Ensuring that students have an understanding of the relevant theories and the methodological and technical skills necessary for the research, including provision of information through an ethical review process where applicable. Ensuring that students adhere to responsible conduct of research standards for your field.
• Establishing with the student a dissertation committee early-on in the dissertation stage (e.g., after the qualifying exam) and ensuring that the committee meets with the student at least once a year, as a committee, and provides an annual written report of the student’s progress.
• Making arrangements to ensure continuity of supervision during leaves or an extended period of absence.
• Encouraging participation in graduate group seminars and colloquia.
• Encouraging and assisting students to attend and present work at local, national, or international conferences and to publish their work in appropriate journals.
• Advising on matters of career options, job market, preparation of the CV, and strategies for launching a career in research.
• Contributing to the student’s professional development through letters of reference and general advice.
• Advising the student on seeking additional funding, as needed.
Ensuring that the research environment is safe, equitable, and free from harassment and discrimination.

Avoiding personal or business relationships that may constitute a conflict of interest.

Being sensitive to academic needs and concerns that may arise for international students, students from underrepresented groups, students with disabilities, and/or students with family responsibilities.

Communicating in a timely manner if the student’s academic performance is not meeting expectations, providing an outline for what actions need to be taken in order to return to academic good standing, and a timeline for doing so. While dealing with inadequate academic performance can be difficult, it is in no one’s best interests to prolong a program of study if success is unlikely.

Serving as an advocate for the student.

Students sometimes experience personal difficulties. These can include family difficulties, problems in personal relationships, cultural adjustments, financial pressures, medical issues, and problems associated with employment. The importance of these various problems should not be under-emphasized. Advisors should not act in a counseling capacity with their students, nor should they intrude into the personal lives of their students with unwanted advice. However, advisors should try to ensure that their relationships with students are such that students will be comfortable telling advisors that they are having significant personal difficulties. Sometimes a timetable can be rearranged or a referral made to appropriate campus resources.

RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE GRADUATE GROUP

The graduate group chair, the graduate group coordinator, and other support staff play key roles in the lives of graduate students. The graduate group must endeavor to create an environment within which scholarly work by graduate students can flourish, and problems can be resolved in an effective manner. Students should take the time to get to know the graduate group administrators. In this way, students can stay current with regulations and graduate group activities and events.

Responsibilities of the graduate group include the following:

- Producing a handbook/brochure/web site that outlines program requirements, regulations and procedures, financial support and information on faculty members and their area of research/expertise. If requirements change, past versions of the information should be maintained for students admitted under the previous requirements.
- Having procedures in place to facilitate the search for an advisor and to allow a change in advisor in the unlikely event that this becomes necessary.
- Establishing an effective communication system with graduate students (i.e., mailboxes and/or e-mail lists) and workspace, where possible.
- Providing orientation sessions for both new and continuing students. Information conveyed in these sessions should include: overview of program policies and requirements, areas of faculty expertise for research supervision, expected performance and timelines for completion of degree requirements, intellectual property policies, publication and authorship issues, scholarship/funding information, information on policies regarding the proper conduct of research, sexual harassment, safety and workplace regulations, and procedures for complaints and appeals.
- Providing responsible conduct of research training as appropriate for your field.
- Ensuring that the student’s dissertation committee meets University guidelines and that the membership is documented in the student’s official file.
- Ensuring that the committee meets once a year and that an annual written progress report is filed in the official student file at the graduate group office.
- Providing a mechanism for resolving problems, which may arise between graduate students, advisors and/or members of the dissertation committee.
- Establishing a graduate group appeals process to review formal complaints from students.
- Ensuring a safe, equitable and fair working environment for students and informing them of all relevant safety and work regulations.
- Being sensitive to academic needs and concerns that may arise for international students, students from underrepresented groups, students with disabilities, and/or students with family responsibilities.
- Disbursing financial support in a fair and equitable manner that is consistent with the graduate group’s funding policy.
- Being knowledgeable about University resources in place to support students, and making referrals when appropriate.

**CONFLICT RESOLUTION**

If a dispute or concern arises between a graduate student and advisor with respect to the mentoring relationship, the student and advisor should try first to resolve any difficulties amicably between themselves. If informal discussion does not resolve the problem, there are several avenues to pursue within the graduate group: in most cases, the graduate group chair should be consulted first. If the graduate group chair is unable to find a satisfactory solution, advice may be sought from the relevant associate dean of the student’s school or from the University Ombuds, which is a confidential, off-the-record resource that can help the student or the advisor explore options, identify resources, manage expectations, and express frustrations. Additionally, the University Ombuds offers informal mediation services provided by a professionally trained and certified mediator.

If all else fails, and if the nature of the issue is academic, a student may pursue a formal academic appeal by contacting the Office of the Vice Provost for Education.

Here are some further considerations related to conflict resolution:

- All conflict is not necessarily to be avoided. Conflict can result in creative solutions and when the conflict involves ideas, it can advance knowledge.
- There is a significant power differential in the student/advisor relationship, but the very nature of the relationship and the academic enterprise requires that ideas and assumptions may be challenged.
- Expectations should be clear and commonly understood on both sides; put them in writing, if necessary.
- Conflict should be handled early: it is easier to handle smaller issues as they arise, and sometimes options for resolution may diminish over time.
- The Office of Student Conduct’s conflict resolution program provides conflict coaching, mediation, and workshops on communication and conflict resolution skills.
- Not all conflict can be resolved informally. If you have tried your best but you have not resolved the issue, follow the recommended route to a more formal resolution.
SEEKING SUPPORT & REPORTING CONCERNS

ACADEMIC CONCERNS
Students who believe that their Graduate Group is not following recommended academic guidelines or University requirements (for example, annual dissertation committee meetings) should discuss their concerns first with the Graduate Group Chair. If the Graduate Group Chair is involved in the issue, or is unable to resolve the issue, students should next discuss the concern with the Graduate Dean in their school. Students who do not find resolution here should bring the concern to the University’s Vice Provost for Education at provost-ed@upenn.edu. Students uncomfortable with this process at any stage are encouraged to bring their concerns to the Director of the Graduate Student Center for advice and support.

CONCERNS REGARDING UNFAIR TREATMENT, BIAS, HARASSMENT, OR ANY FORM OF VIOLENCE

SORTING THROUGH OPTIONS
Recognizing that issues of bias, harassment and/or violence can be particularly sensitive, Penn provides several Confidential Campus Resources that can help students sort through options and decide whether and how to make a formal report. These include:
- African-American Resource Center
- Counseling and Psychological Services
- Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Center
- Office of the Chaplain
- The Office of the Ombuds
- Office of Penn Violence Prevention and Education
- Penn Women’s Center
- Special Services Department, Division of Public Safety
- Student Health Service

REPORTING
Students wishing to lodge an official complaint of discrimination, harassment and/or retaliation can pursue either formal mediation or a formal complaint of discrimination, harassment and/or retaliation through the Office of Affirmative Action and Equal Opportunity Programs. Affirmative Action maintains a Complaint of Discrimination, Harassment and/or Retaliation Form. Individuals may report having been treated in a biased or discriminatory manner by completing a Bias Incident Reporting Form. This form may be used to report incidents of bias involving Penn students, faculty, or staff. You are not required to provide your name or contact information. Confidentiality will be maintained to the extent possible.

215-P-COMPLY is Penn's confidential reporting and help line. As a member of the Penn community, you are encouraged to raise questions and concerns, particularly if you suspect violations of policies or legal requirements. To report a student engaged in misconduct, contact the Office of Student Conduct, which is responsible for matters of student discipline. Penn Violence Prevention provides support and information about options for reporting sexual violence, relationship violence, or stalking.
APPENDIX A: SKILL BUILDING AND CAREER DEVELOPMENT

PhD students will find that their academic research experience -- as well as their strength on the job market -- can be enhanced if they focus on developing important skills such as writing, teaching and management throughout their doctoral studies. Students may also want to explore careers outside of the professoriate. The University provides many services to help with these endeavors; all of the services outlined here are free to students at Penn.

DEVELOP WRITING SKILLS

Good writing skills and habits are essential to a student’s success. Help with planning and writing academic papers is available from many places at Penn. The Graduate Student Center sponsors the “Navigating the Dissertation” workshop series and an intense “Dissertation Boot Camp.”

The Office of Learning Resources provides help in skills such as academic reading, writing, study strategies, and time management. This academic support is provided through a varied menu of services and programs, some specifically for graduate students and for international students.

The Marks Family Writing Center provides graduate students with feedback on seminar papers, proposals, manuscripts, and other texts, working on anything from conceptualizing to polishing a final draft, including how to plan and stage writing work.

DEVELOP TEACHING SKILLS

The Center for Teaching & Learning prepares graduate students to serve as TAs and/or to teach their own classes at Penn. In addition, CTL has a number of programs and services to help graduate students as they go on the job market and imagine themselves as future faculty.

The CTL Teaching Certificate provides doctoral students with support for improving their teaching as well as recognition for their commitment to developing as teachers. The CTL Teaching Certificate also offers a structure through which interested graduate students can prepare themselves to become faculty in the future. The certificate is noted on the student’s transcript, as a statement from the University of Pennsylvania that a graduate student has pursued advanced training in teaching.

DEVELOP LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT SKILLS

There are many opportunities on campus to develop leadership and management skills. PhD students can benefit from holding leadership roles in their school governments or GAPSA or other graduate student organizations. PhD students can also volunteer to serve on University committees.

There are also paid positions on campus which can provide management and leadership experiences. Examples include fellow positions at the Graduate Student Center, graduate associate positions in College Houses & Academic Services, and advising positions at the Weingarten Learning Resource Center.

A session with an advisor in Career Services can help students identify other important skills and opportunities to develop them.

FOR STUDENTS CONSIDERING CAREERS BEYOND ACADEMIA

The reality is that your faculty advisor is probably not well-equipped to help you explore careers outside of the professoriate. However, there are many other helpful resources at Penn to assist. Set up an appointment with a graduate student/postdoc career advisor at Career Services where you can get
guidance and resources specifically for PhD students exploring their many career options. In addition, you can tap into the vast network of PhD alumni who work in a variety of fields through QuakerNet. There are also many ways to research career paths taken by Penn alumni using LinkedIn. If you are looking for the best ways to take full advantage of these online tools, then call 215-898-7530 to set up a time to speak with career advisors who are specialized in working with PhD students at any stage of the career exploration and career development process. PhD students can begin the process of exploring relevant career paths by reading the Carpe Careers blog on the Inside Higher Ed website, written by PhD/postdoc career advisors from a wide range of academic institutions, and setting up free accounts with the following online tools:

- The Versatile PhD (for all academic disciplines)
- myIDP (for PhD students in STEM fields)
- Imagine PhD (for PhD students in humanities and Social Sciences)
- BGS Career Development (for PhD students in biomedical fields)

**APPENDIX B: POLICIES, RULES & RESOURCES**

**ACADEMIC POLICIES**

- Code of Academic Integrity
- Fairness of Authorship Credit in Collaborative Faculty-Student Publications for PhD, AM, and MS Students
- Patent and Tangible Research Property See section 2.1.4 Student Inventions
- Ethics & Original Research
- Dissertation Manual

**CONDUCT POLICIES**

- Code of Student Conduct
- Sexual Violence, Relationship Violence and Stalking Policy
- Sexual Harassment Policy
- Alcohol and Drug Policy
- Student Grievance Procedures

**ACADEMIC RULES FOR PHD STUDENTS**

- Curriculum
- Evaluations and Examinations
- Dissertation
- Public Presentation and Defense Examination
- Acceptance
- Publication and Submission
- Regarding Tutoring Students for Compensation
- Research Abroad
- Time Limits
- Petition for Readmission After Reaching the Maximum Time to Degree
- Recertification
- Tuition
- Transfer Credit
- Continuous Registration
RESOURCES FOR STUDENT SUCCESS

Penn provides many resources to help students thrive in graduate school. And we recognize that student overall wellness can fall within several dimensions including academic, emotional, physical, spiritual, and financial. The University offers a wide range of resources designed to support these many dimensions of wellness.