

Guidelines for Advisor – Graduate Student Interactions

Penn State Department of Physics

Effective mentoring, open communication, and ethical professional conduct are essential for a high quality graduate education and research environment. Effective research advising must be based on a commitment to provide every student access to supportive guidance on a range of professional, ethical and collegial issues. A productive research mentorship requires that students are treated respectfully and fairly, and that the research advisor serves as a role model—upholding the highest ethical standards. These guidelines embody many of the best practices used by the majority of our faculty here and elsewhere. They are intended to provide a heightened awareness of the need to consciously establish an effectual relationship that starts with trust, courtesy, and shared expectations.

Faculty Research Advisors/Mentors will:

1. provide an environment that is intellectually stimulating, safe, and free of harassment;
2. be supportive, equitable, accessible, encouraging, and respectful;
3. recognize and respect the cultural backgrounds of students;
4. be sensitive to the power imbalance in the student–advisor relationship;
5. avoid assigning duties or activities that are outside students’ academic responsibilities or are detrimental to the timely completion of their degrees;
6. respect students’ needs to allocate their time among competing demands, while maintaining timely progress towards their degree;
7. advise graduate students on the selection of a thesis topic with realistic prospects for successful completion within an appropriate time frame;
8. assist students on selecting and forming a thesis committee;
9. set clear expectations and goals for students regarding their research and thesis;
10. discuss policies and expectations for work hours, vacation time and health contingencies;
11. meet regularly and individually with students to provide feedback on research progress and expectations - weekly meetings are recommended;
12. provide students with training and oversight in the design of research projects, the development of necessary skills, the use of rigorous research techniques, and all other aspects of research;
13. arrange for the on-campus supervision and advisement of graduate students during extended absences, as well as regular contact (e.g. by phone, Skype, email, etc.) when possible;
14. provide and discuss clear criteria for authorship at the beginning of all collaborative projects;
15. encourage participation in professional meetings and try to secure funding for such activities;
16. provide career advice, help with interview and application preparation, and write letters of recommendation in a timely manner;
17. ensure students receive training in the skills needed for a successful career in their discipline, including oral and written communication and grant preparation;
18. support students who wish to pursue careers outside of academia and/or outside their research discipline in achieving their chosen career goals;
19. schedule at least one meeting per year to discuss topics other than research, such as professional development, career objectives and opportunities, climate, laboratory personnel relations, and so on;
20. be a role model by acting in an ethical, professional, and courteous manner toward other students, staff, and faculty.

Graduate Students will:

1. acknowledge that they bear the primary responsibility for the successful completion of their degree;
2. exercise the highest ethical standards in all aspects of their research, including the collection, storage, analysis, and communication of research data;
3. complete to the best of their abilities all tasks assigned by the department, including teaching duties;
4. be informed about regulations and policies governing graduate studies at the department and graduate school levels and take responsibility for meeting departmental and graduate school deadlines;
5. set up meetings with their mentor and communicate regularly with their thesis committee;
6. prepare their annual graduate student evaluation forms in a timely way, soliciting input from their research mentor;
7. be considerate of time constraints and other demands imposed on faculty and staff;
8. take an active role in identifying and pursuing professional development opportunities;
9. clearly communicate with their advisors regarding their career preferences;
10. be proactive about improving their research skills, including written and oral presentation skills;
11. inform faculty mentors of potential and or existing conflicts and work toward their resolution;
12. seek mentoring and support resources beyond their faculty advisor, including other faculty mentors, peers, and organizations;
13. consult outside help from ombudsmen, graduate chairs, or other faculty if conflicts arise with your advisor;
14. be aware that if they feel compelled to change advisors or research direction, they may have options and should consult with their mentor or department;
15. always act in an ethical, professional, and courteous manner toward other students, staff, and faculty.

Departments and Programs will:

1. provide students with up-to-date information that includes policies, practices, degree requirements, and resources;
2. assist students with selection of their advisor, and provide students with contacts and resources for potential conflict resolution (e.g. ombudsperson, director of graduate studies, department head);
3. provide pedagogical training and regular assessment of their teaching activities;
4. monitor graduate student progress towards their degrees and professional development, including mentoring meetings, committee meetings, exam completions and other benchmarks appropriate to their discipline;
5. provide and monitor training in the ethical conduct of research;
6. provide appropriate infrastructure to allow students to complete their education and research in a timely and productive manner;
7. provide opportunities for professional development that will be relevant to students seeking careers outside academia and/or their research discipline;
8. establish and communicate policies for emergencies and unplanned situations that may disrupt the work of students and/or faculty;
9. encourage and monitor student and faculty adherence to these guidelines.