

Report and Recommendations: Mutual Expectations between Research Advisors and Advisees

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Recognizing that the most frequent issue raised by graduate students at Georgia Tech is the advisor-advisee relationship, Vice Provost Susan Cozzens conducted two focus groups on the topic in spring 2014. Attendees were asked to describe factors that contribute to successful advisor-advisee relationships. Mixed groups of students and faculty then outlined what students should expect of faculty advisors and what faculty advisors should expect of students. Underlying themes throughout the discussions were the need for open, clear lines of communication and respect for each other. Participants also voiced that they each have multiple roles with sometimes conflicting expectations, as student/advisor, employer/employee, and mentor/mentee. Based on these ideas, Cozzens drafted the “The Mutual Expectations of Advisors and Advisees” document in summer 2014. This document was expected to stimulate dialogue and clarify expectations.

In the spring of 2015, the Office of the Vice Provost for Graduate Education and Faculty Development invited faculty, graduate students, and postdoctoral scholars to four “Forums on Advising” (see Appendix for the Invitation and agenda). Each forum was structured as a focus group-type discussion, and this time graduate students and postdocs met separately from faculty. Cozzens started each session by presenting the “Mutual Expectations of Advisors and Advisees” document to set the context for the conversations. Attendees then discussed the document in groups of 4-6, and were asked to complete the input form (see appendix). At the end of the discussion, each group was asked to verbally report their major concerns. After this, there was a brief presentation and discussion on Individual Development Plans. A total of 28 graduate students, 19 faculty, and 7 postdocs attended the four forums, and a subset of 23 graduate students, 13 faculty and 6 postdocs completed written feedback forms. Conveners of the forums also took notes on the discussion.

Perspectives of Graduate Students

When asked about the greatest challenges in the advisor-advisee relationship, graduate students most frequently talked about communications-related issues, reasonable expectations for duties and deliverables, the effectiveness and accountability of the advisor, and experiences with conflict resolution. When asked about their expectations of faculty, graduate students rated clear communications, guidance on research, and respect as most important. Students’ expectations of the advisee’s role in maintaining a successful advisor-advisee relationship focused on communication skills and fulfilling expectations.

Communications and transparency on both sides were identified as key to maintaining a successful relationship. Graduate Students would like for advisors to let them know the preferred mode and frequency of communications early in the relationship. Regular one-on-one meetings were preferred by most students; one group also requested that Georgia Tech issue guidance on the frequency of meetings that should be expected. Students stated that explicit, mutually agreed upon expectations and goals, including realistic timelines for major tasks, are essential. Timely feedback on students’ work was also

identified as critical, as this impacts students' progress toward publication(s) and other scholarly outputs, and ultimately the ability to successfully land a job after graduating.

Focus groups pointed out a number of factors that can impact the advisee-advisor relationship, as well as the interpersonal dynamics of the research team. First, graduate students said they were most likely to have open, candid conversations if they think that the advisor respects the student's individual situation, training level, personal time, and career goals. Second, the culture, ethnicity, and/or gender of each party can impact communication styles. Finally, graduate students are keenly aware they are very dependent on the attention, approval, and support of faculty, and they are afraid to jeopardize their professional futures. Even faculty with open door policies and reputations for kindness and flexibility still hold this power.

Graduate Students want there to be accountability for effective advising at Georgia Tech. This includes advising by academic faculty members as well research faculty and staff assigned an advising role. An anonymous venue where graduate students and postdocs could give feedback on advisors was suggested in multiple focus groups. It was also suggested that faculty should accept only as many students as they can reasonably support, with regard to both time available for individual advising and funding for GRA/GTA stipends. Additionally, co-advising relationships, large research groups, and collaborations need to be well structured and managed by advisors. In these situations, students experienced times when differences of opinions on the priorities and timelines led to conflicting expectations of the student.

Graduate students are unsure whom to contact when issues arise that cannot be easily resolved via discussion with the advisor or research team. While some Schools have designated a faculty contact for conflict resolution, students generally did not know this, nor were they aware of the Ombuds Program. Additionally, many students stated that they would feel uneasy talking with any designated faculty member, because they perceive faculty as being more sympathetic to the needs of their colleagues than the needs of students.

Perspectives of Postdoctoral Fellows

Postdocs generally agree with students on the factors that are important to a successful advisor-advisee relationships; clear communication, mutual respect, and reasonable timelines for deliverables. Postdocs expect to be more independent and productive than they were as students, and want to have the license to manage their own research and time. They say they need less frequent guidance from faculty on their research. Instead, postdocs desire guidance on how to successfully transition to a professional career. If the faculty supervisor cannot fulfil that need, postdocs see the need to recruit additional mentors.

Postdocs feel particularly vulnerable when conflicts with the faculty supervisor(s) and team members arise. The faculty supervisor is the postdoc's employer, and can have a great impact on the postdoc's future career. In addition, international scholars, who make up 60% of the postdoctoral population at Georgia Tech, know that their visas depend on continuing employment. Thus, bringing issues to light can be particularly stressful, especially given that information on how Georgia Tech handles grievances from postdocs is not easily located. Postdocs also perceive a lack of accountability for effective mentorship and training. Faculty supervisors seem to be accountable only to their funding agencies for postdocs' success, not to Georgia Tech, and then only for research productivity and placement of trainees into faculty careers.

Perspectives of Faculty and Graduate Program Staff

Advisors expect communication, commitment, and responsibility from their graduate students and postdocs. They expect the trainee to be productive and provide regular updates on the research, including what is and is not working. Faculty saw their own role as being transparent in their expectations and giving clear guidance to students and postdocs on their research. They pointed out that there is a need for flexibility in advising and communication styles because there is no one-size-fits all formula that works in every case. Moreover, the advisor-advisee relationship is constantly evolving as the advisee progresses through the training program and towards independence. Faculty were aware of the contradiction expressed in the student expectations between calls for detailed instructions and respect for student professional status.

The need for ethical and responsible treatment of graduate students was emphasized by graduate program coordinators. They pointed to the inherent tension between the need for research deliverables to satisfy funding commitments and at the same time provide professional development for students. There is also a need to clarify the distinction between GRA/GTA expectations and the student's research deliverables to meet degree requirements. It was suggested that training on effective practices for communications and mentoring would be helpful to faculty at all levels. The College of Sciences New Faculty Mentoring Program¹ was highlighted as a model.

Faculty mentioned frequently that the pathways to resolve conflicts are not well understood by either students or themselves. Faculty would like for trainees to feel comfortable discussing issues with the advisor and/or the graduate program director before moving to formal means for conflict resolution. However, they did understand that there is a hierarchy and that their position can be intimidating to students. Faculty also debated the need for a set of transparent procedures to follow when a student or faculty member wishes to terminate the advisor-advisee relationship.

Previous Initiatives and Recommendations

The Office of the Provost has recognized that conflict resolution is a concern across campus and is actively working to address it. Associate Professor Laura Hollengreen took up duties as the newly created Assistant Provost for Academic Advocacy and Conflict Resolution on March 1, 2015. Her charge is to oversee a comprehensive process to address and resolve student, parent, administrator, and faculty member inquiries, complaints, and grievances consistent with related policies and procedures. Two ombuds are available to address conflicts involving either graduate students or faculty: Russ Callen, a professor emeritus in Electrical and Computer Engineering, and Leigh Bottomley, who brings to the position extensive experience as an advisor, instructor, and TA coordinator, most recently in the School of Chemistry. The Provost's Office has also revamped the Conflict Resolution & Ombuds website², which details the Ombuds program and provides links to relevant policies and reporting tools.

During Fall 2014, in partnership with the Graduate Student Government Association (SGA), the Office of Graduate Studies piloted "Grad Groups," an extended orientation series; the series is continuing in Fall 2015. Approximately 80 new/incoming graduate students have been placed into small groups of 8-10 students. Each group is led by a team of two peer leaders, recruited and selected by the executive board of Graduate SGA. Each group met 4-5 times over the course of the semester for pre-arranged presentations in a variety of areas, including career development, stress/time management, mentoring

¹ College of Sciences New Faculty Mentoring Program: <http://www.cos.gatech.edu/facultyres/mentoring>

² Conflict Resolution & Ombuds: <http://www.provost.gatech.edu/reporting-units/conflict-resolution-ombuds>

and the advisor/advisee relationship, work/life balance, and financial literacy. The Office of Graduate Studies is continuing to partner with the Graduate SGA leadership to expand and manage the program.

The Mental Health Task Force Report³ published in October 2013 included two recommendations that the focus groups reiterated:

- “Design and implement a periodic comprehensive survey of undergraduate students, graduate students and post-docs that asks questions pertaining to mental health, quality of life, and faculty engagement and/or mentoring.”
- “Encourage the timely distribution of Graduate Teaching/Research Assistantship information to graduate students to allow them to explore other options if their department is not able to provide financial support for the upcoming academic year. Also, designate a point of contact in each school/department so graduate students know whom to contact with questions/concerns regarding financial questions.”

In addition, the Mental Health Task Force’s recommendation to “Review and recommend faculty awards to highlight faculty for their positive student interaction or mentoring.” has already been implemented. The inaugural “Outstanding Graduate Academic Advisor Award” was created and first presented in 2015 to recognize the contributions of staff to graduate student advising. This complements the “Outstanding Doctoral Thesis Advisor”, which has been presented since 1987. We would recommend expanding the faculty/staff honors program to include an award for excellence in mentoring postdoctoral scholars as well.

Summary and Recommendations

All stakeholder groups identified open communications, explicit expectations, and respect as essential to effective advisor-advisee relationships. The focus groups suggested a number of practices that can help facilitate advisor-advisee communications, which have been incorporated into the “Effective Practices” section of the revised “Mutual Expectations of Research Advisors and Advisees” (see Appendix). Accountability and conflict resolution were highlighted as areas of concern, which are addressed in the recommendations below. Transparency was an overarching theme across all areas. Transparency is essential within the advisor-advisee relationship. Graduate programs and the wider Georgia Tech administration also need to be transparent in communicating their expectations, processes, and policies.

We offer the following recommendations to further address the issues raised by the advising forums. Figure 1 illustrates how these recommendations align with the key themes.

1. Graduate Student Government and the Faculty Senate should be asked to endorse or adopt the revised “Mutual Expectations of Advisors and Advisees in Research-based Graduate Programs”. The Institute Graduate Curriculum Committee should be asked to provide input.
2. The mutual expectations of postdoctoral scholars and their advisors also need to be addressed. A possible venue for this is the “Postdoctoral Appointment Guidelines” currently being drafted by the Office of Postdoctoral Services.
3. Mentor training sessions/resources should be available to faculty, as well as postdocs and graduate students who mentor junior researchers, including training in cross-cultural communication.

³ 2013 Mental Health Taskforce Report (opens pdf): <http://www.news.gatech.edu/hg/file/89241>

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4. A task force should be convened to consider how stakeholders will be held accountable for meeting the expectations presented in the mutual expectations documents. This should include a means for students and postdoctoral scholars to provide anonymous feedback on the quality of advising.
5. A comprehensive guide on how best to navigate research advisor-advisee relationships at Georgia Tech should be developed.
6. Pathways for reporting and resolving grievances need to be clear and easy to locate.
7. Students and postdocs should be encouraged to draft Individual Development Plans (IDPs) that outline their individual career goals and to discuss the IDP with their advisors. Providing example IDPs for various points in the career would be helpful to promote understanding of SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound) goals and the steps needed to progress towards publication.
8. The Faculty Senate should consider requiring Responsible Conduct of Research (RCR) training for all postdocs, and possibly visiting scholars. While all doctoral students must complete RCR training, along with master's students completing theses, postdocs are only required to do so if they are supported by certain NIH and NSF grants.

Figure 1. Alignment of Key Themes and Recommendations

Recommendation	Communications	Transparency	Explicit Expectations	Accountability	Conflict Resolution
1. Adopt Mutual Expectations	✓	✓	✓		
2. Define Expectations for Postdocs	✓	✓	✓		
3. Mentor Training/Resources	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
4. GT Mentor/Mentee Guidebook	✓	✓	✓		✓
5. Accountability Taskforce		✓		✓	✓
6. Clarify conflict resolution pathways		✓			✓
7. Individual Development Plans	✓	✓	✓	✓	
8. RCR training for all postdocs	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Appendices

Appendix A: Invitation to Advising forums

Appendix B: Introduction and Agenda Slides

Appendix C: Input form

Appendix D: Mutual Expectations of Research Advisors and Advisees, revised draft

Provide Your Input at Upcoming Advising Forums

Faculty: Do you want to use your time with your advisees more productively?

Students and Postdocs: Do you want a better relationship with your advisor or mentor?

The Offices of Graduate Studies and Postdoctoral Services are holding a series of interactive forums on the mutual expectations of faculty advisors and research advisees. The forums will provide opportunities to do the following:

- Provide input on Georgia Tech's draft Mutual Expectations document.
- Learn about Individual Development Plans (IDP) and IDP tools.

For your convenience, sessions will be held in several locations around campus. The first part of each session is just for faculty and the last part just for students and postdocs, with a shared pizza lunch in between. Please RSVP [here](#) for the session you want to attend (so we will know how much food to order):

- **Thursday, Jan. 29, 114 GTMI (formerly MARC)**, 11–11:50 faculty only; 11:50–12:10 pizza; 12:10 – 1:00 students and postdocs only
- **Tuesday, Feb. 3, Klaus 2100**, 11–11:50 faculty only; 11:50–12:10 pizza; 12:10–1:00 students and postdocs only
- **Monday, Feb. 23, ES&T L1120**, noon–12:50 faculty only; 12:50–1:10 pizza; 1:10–2:00 students and postdocs only
- **Tuesday, March 3, 317 Montgomery Knight Building (Cherry and Ferst)**, 11–11:50 faculty only; 11:50–12:10 pizza; 12:10–1:00 students and postdocs only
- **Tuesday, March 17**, noon–2 pm, location to be announced

The RSVP form is available at <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/advisingforums>.

The Mutual Expectations draft is available at <http://b.gatech.edu/17YCv2C>. Send comments to vpgefa@gatech.edu.



Introduction

- Susan Cozzens, Vice Provost for Graduate Education and Faculty Affairs
- Jana Stone, Director of Postdoctoral Services
- David Bamburowski, Director of Graduate Studies
- And you?



Why today's session?

- Most frequent issue raised by graduate students is advisor/advisee relationship.
- We are working on the Mutual Expectations document to
 - Stimulate dialogue
 - Clarify expectations
 - And eventually post in the Policy Library
- Two focus groups last spring provided the content for the draft.
- Today we want to hear from you.



What will we do today?

- Review of main points from the August 21 draft
 - Introduce some other points that have been suggested or appear in similar documents from other campuses
- Break into small groups for your discussion
 - Fill in your input forms
- Come back together for an introduction to Individual Development Plans



Here is my input on the draft “Mutual Expectations between Research Advisors and Advisees”

I am _____ faculty _____ student _____ postdoc _____ grad program staff

My three greatest challenges in the advisor / advisee relationship are

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

The 3-5 most important items to keep in the current draft are (circle your choices or fill in the blank)

Expectations for what faculty do	Expectations for what students do
Respect	Open and clear communications
Guidance on research	Commitment
Guidance on completing the degree	Responsibility
Guidance on a research career	Teamwork
Clear communication about expectations	Reasonable expectations
Subitem:	Responsiveness
Subitem:	Productivity
Subitem:	Subitem:
Subitem:	Subitem:

Other items I think should be included:

Name (optional):

Mutual Expectations of Research Advisors and Advisees

DRAFT November 8, 2015

The relationship between advisor and advisee is central to the experience of students in research-based graduate programs. Both partners in this relationship must contribute for it to succeed. Successful advisor-advisee relationships enhance the careers of both partners. The relationship can take on three dimensions: advisor-advisee; supervisor-employee; and mentor-mentee. In the best cases, the three dimensions work together. This document articulates key contributions from each partner to an advisor-advisee relationship that leads to mutual benefit.

The Advisor

Advising graduate students in research-based programs is part of the job expectation for almost all Georgia Tech faculty members. Graduate students build the faculty member's research record and reputation by contributing to the advisor's research outcomes. This situation carries an inherent tension: the faculty member's success depends on the student's success. The faculty member is responsible to outside sponsors for completing research projects. Nonetheless, as an educator, the advisor's duty is always to protect the student's interests as well as his or her own in the research relationship.

The Advisee

The student's defining motivation is to earn a degree, which requires the acquisition of scholarly knowledge and research competence. Participation in the research process is an essential requirement for all Georgia Tech doctoral students and many master's degree students. In this part of their education, the student's duty is to put a best faith effort into his or her assigned contribution to the research process. At the same time, Graduate Research Assistants (GRAs) and Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) are also employees who help the advisor and research group meet the requirements of a contract or grant. As with the faculty advisor, this situation sets up an inherent tension between the student's educational goals and his or her employment responsibilities.

Mentoring

When these potentially competing responsibilities have been successfully blended into a productive research partnership, the advisor may also become a mentor to the student. Mentors go beyond academic advice and good supervision to provide perspective and guidance on thriving in research and creative endeavors while at Georgia Tech, and beyond graduation. Beyond the formal responsibilities, mentors and mentees care about each other and support each other in a variety of professional ways. Many researchers maintain relationships with their mentors throughout their professional careers.

Mutual Expectations

Students Expect:

Respect

- Respect as a person, student, and professional employee
- Recognition and respect for differences in culture, ethnicity, gender, and other dimensions of diversity
- Commitment of time, effort, and financial support; advising only as many students as resources permit
- Active efforts to communicate across power differentials; encouraging students to express any concerns

Open and clear communications

- Mutually agreed upon expectations for frequency and format of communications
- Timely review and feedback on the student's work
- Help resolving issues that arise, be they academic, research, or interpersonal in nature
- Notification of and appropriate resolution of issues that may affect the student's support, such as changes in funding or the advisor leaving or retiring

Guidance on research

- Guidance on planning and managing research projects from conception to publication, including advice on resolving any problems encountered
- Reasonable, mutually agreed upon expectations of the time frame necessary to produce results
- Proper training and resources to fulfill obligations, including equipment, software, research methods, etc.
- Training on professional and ethical standards

Guidance on completing the degree

- Advice on how to be successful; informal knowledge of unwritten/unspoken rules and nuances of the academic environment
- Continuing advice and support on academic progress through the degree
- Advice on and management of the thesis/dissertation committee

Guidance on career

- Advice on advancing professional goals in the direction most desired by the individual student
- Opportunities to participate in career development activities
- Help building professional networks; introductions to professional contacts and alumni
- Good references to potential employers

Advisors Expect:

Respect

- Respect both as professor and person; recognizing the value of their time and their responsibilities within and outside the university
- Understanding that mentoring is tailored for each individual student and adjusted for progress in the degree program

Open and clear communications

- Mutually agreed upon expectations for frequency and format of communications
- Regular progress reports including what the student has and has not done, including set-backs
- Reasonable, mutually agreed upon expectations of the time frame necessary to give feedback and review results
- Discussion of difficulties with advisor first, before turning to other means for conflict resolution
- Notification as soon as possible if planning to leave program or advisor sooner than expected

Commitment & Productivity

- Understanding of the expectations of the degree program, advisor and research team, and GRA/GTA responsibilities
- Learning and progress through the program, with progressively more independence as the student advances
- Commitment and steady effort to make progress towards mutually agreed upon results and deliverables; adhering to timelines and deadlines

Responsibility

- Safe, ethical, efficient use of resources
- Abiding by professional and safety standards
- Good records and documentation that would allow someone else to replicate the results
- Taking feedback seriously and revising in response
- When graduating or leaving the team, leaving behind the data, computer files, and tangible research materials

Teamwork

- Working well with others; supporting and mentoring others in the team
- Carrying a fair share of the responsibility
- Understanding the common intellectual property principles involved in teamwork
- Meeting deadlines
- Thoughtfully reviewing the work of others, including the advisor

Effective Practices

This section outlines practices that can help advisors and advisees navigate successful relationships, focusing on communicating regularly and establishing explicit, mutual expectations. Because there is no one-size-fits all formula, recommendations on methods and timeframes should be taken as advisory.

- An initial meeting to set mutually-understood, clear expectations, including:
 - Preferred modes and frequency of communication
 - Expectations for the path to success in the advisor-advisee relationship
 - Explicit information on the culture and work process of the research group: hours expected, results expected, special requirements of this group's sponsor, laboratory responsibilities, and so on
- Continuing open and clear communication that includes:
 - Regularly scheduled meetings; these will be most productive when student prepares an agenda of topics that needs to be discussed, and prioritizes them so that the most important items are addressed first. Suggested practice is a face to face meeting every two weeks, with new assignments given not more than once a week.
 - Discussion of progress towards research and academic goals
 - Constructive, positive, and negative feedback; acknowledgement of improvement. If performance problems develop that may lead to dismissal, the advisor must communicate these clearly and the student must be given a chance to improve.
 - Responding to communications and providing feedback in a timely manner. Suggested practice is one week for feedback from the advisor on written work that will be graded and three weeks for dissertation materials or articles for publication.
 - Review of the working relationship periodically to ensure it is working productively for both
- Explicit attention to culture and power
 - Discussion between advisor and advisee and within the research group on the ways that diversity affects communication
 - Active efforts to encourage communication across differentials of power
- Clear and realistic timelines and goals:
 - Development of a work plan that includes both short-term and long-term objectives and a series of deadlines for each step
 - Reasonable expectations of progress while student holds a GTA/GRA position that requires time spent on duties outside of thesis/dissertation research
 - Development of an individual development plan (IDP) in which the student outlines short- and long-term goals for career development and with annual updates and revision as appropriate
- Managing and resolving conflicts:
 - Communication of the resources that are available in case of problems or conflict
 - No tolerance for misconduct; support for reporting it

Appendix D: Mutual Expectations of Research Advisors and Advisees

- Discussing difficulties and conflicts with the advisor before moving to formal means for conflict resolution
- Timely information about any change in advising relationship (i.e. student or faculty leaving Georgia Tech) or funding, and support for finding new arrangements. Suggested practice from the student is two weeks' notice of change plus an orderly transfer of research responsibilities to the replacement. Suggested practice from the faculty member is a half-term's notice of discontinued funding or advisor relationship and cooperation between former and future advisors on work assignments.