

Mutual Expectations between Research Advisors and Advisees

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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 work together. This document articulates key contributions from each partner to an advisor-advisee relationship that leads to mutual benefit.

The Advisor

Advising doctoral students is part of the job expectation for almost all Georgia Tech faculty members. Research students build the faculty member's research record and reputation by contributing to the advisor's research outcomes. This situation carries an inherent conflict of interest: 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 main job on campus is to earn a degree, which represents scholarly knowledge and research competence gained. Participation in the research process is an essential requirement for all Georgia Tech doctoral students and many master's students. In this part of their education, the student's duty is to put best faith effort into the assigned contribution to the research process. At the same time, GRAs and GTAs are also employees, team members who must 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 conflict of interest, 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. 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. A few become close friends.

Mutual Expectations

We asked Georgia Tech faculty and graduate students to describe the mutual expectations that characterize successful advisor-advisee relationships. The following points are based on their discussions.

Students Expect:

Respect both as student and as PhD student; valuing the student's time and professional level

Guidance on research:

- How to solve the problems they encounter, how to plan and carry out research projects and turn them into publications
- Proper training and resources to fulfill obligations, including equipment, software, research methods, etc.
- Training on professional standards

Guidance on completing the degree:

- Advice and guidance on how to be successful
- Informal knowledge of how things actually work
- Continuing advice and support on academic progress through the degree
- Review and feedback on the student's work

Guidance on a research career:

- What influences success
- Career opportunities
- Building professional networks

These expectations may be best met through the following practices

- An initial meeting with advisor to discuss and plan the student's graduate experience
- Clear expectations for success in the research relationship, revisited regularly
- Clear articulation of the expectations for commitments in the laboratory or research group
- Information about the culture and work process of the laboratory or group: hours expected, results expected, communication expected from the student, special requirements of this group's sponsor
- Discussion of preferred modes and frequency of communication
- Clear and realistic deliverables and timeline
- Continuing constructive, open communication; both positive and negative feedback; acknowledgement of improvement
- Review of the working relationship periodically to ensure it is working productively for both
- Regularly scheduled meetings
- Timely information about any change in funding and support for finding new arrangements

Drawing a distinction between GRA/GTA duties and the student's own educational responsibilities; no expectation of research in GTA positions

No tolerance for misconduct; support for reporting it; knowing and communicating what resources are available in case of problems or conflict

Advisors Expect:

Respect both as professor and person; recognizing the value of their time and their responsibilities outside the university

Open and clear communications:

- Regular Progress Reports including what the student has and has not done
- Reviewing work flow periodically to ensure it is working productively for both

Commitment

- Steady effort to make progress towards mutually agreed upon results and deliverables in the research team
- Learning and progress through the program
- Research effort should respond both to GRA requirements and research requirements of program

Responsibility

- Safe, ethical, efficient use of resources
- Abiding by professional and safety standards
- Good records and documentation, allowing someone else to replicate the results

Teamwork

- Working well with others
- Support others in the team
- Carry a fair share of the responsibility
- Understand the common intellectual property principles involved in teamwork
- Meeting deadlines
- Thoughtfully reviewing the work of others, including the advisor

Reasonable expectations

- Reasonable time frame to give feedback, review results

Responsiveness

- Knowing the advisor's expectations
- Taking feedback seriously; revise in response

Productivity

- Student produces scholarly outputs
- Producing deliverables and keeping to timelines