



Cornell University Graduate and Professional Student Assembly

Best Practices for Faculty Advisers

The following is a list of best practices prepared by the Graduate and Professional Student Assembly for faculty advisers. While not exhaustive, and not always applicable based on requirements of a program, it serves as a baseline by which to evaluate the level of advising individual students experience at Cornell. We hope this will help guide young faculty as well as provide a set of expectations for both faculty advisers and their advisees. It is fully acknowledged that these practices carry responsibilities for students as well as their mentors. In addition this document, all students and faculty advisers are encouraged to make themselves familiar with all procedures and policies relevant for their individual fields.

Students and Faculty are both encouraged to use this document to start a conversation on their advisee-adviser relationship. If any student feels that they have a very dysfunctional relationship with their adviser, they are encouraged to speak to their Director of Graduate Studies, the Assistant Dean for Graduate Student Life (<http://gradschool.cornell.edu/life-cornell/office-student-life>), the Ombudsman (<http://www.ombudsman.cornell.edu/>), or the Student Advocacy Committee of the Graduate and Professional Student Assembly.

Section 1: Communication

- 1) Advisers and advisees should make every effort to reply to emails or other forms of communication from each other within a reasonable time frame. The exact definition of a reasonable time frame will vary based on the situation, and both parties should take into account demands on the other's time. However, long delays in communication can set back progress and create tension when expectations become unclear. Across disciplines students may experience different levels of autonomy, but in all cases students still require guidance. Expectations related to a reasonable time frame go both ways, if either person expects a reply within a certain period of time then they must reply within the same period of time.
- 2) Face to face meetings allow for students and advisers to quickly and succinctly eliminate the need for prolonged correspondence. As such, both advisers and their advisees should regularly schedule meetings in person.
- 3) In addition to good communication with the chair of their special committee, students at Cornell also benefit from interactions with other special committee members. The

**This document in its current version does not fully reflect the nature of advising for Doctorate of Veterinary Medicine Students*

faculty adviser should encourage interactions between minor members and the student, be prepared to facilitate this communication if necessary. Further, if other members of the committee are not adequately fulfilling the requirements the position entails, and the student has been unable to address the issue themselves, the faculty adviser should be prepared to step in and assist.

- 4) The result of these good communication practices should be clearly expressed goals for projects taken on by the student. In addition, there should be clear communication between adviser and advisee on progress towards such goals. Should progress not be satisfactory to either, there should be open communication to help work through any potential problems in a timely manner. The Director of Graduate Studies should be a resource for both faculty and students to help work through such issues.
- 5) In all communications between adviser and advisee it is expected that there be a high level of mutual respect. While certain mentors or trainees may adopt a more informal style, it is important that offensive or otherwise derogatory language be avoided.

Section 2: Work expectations

- 1) Faculty at institutions such as Cornell devote all their energy to their work, and may rightfully expect the highest commitment from their students. However, it is important that faculty allow for and encourage their students to take ample time for rest and relaxation in a workweek. Except when called for by time-sensitive projects, effort should be made to keep work days to no more than ten hours, and no more than six days in a week. Time for rest and relaxation will allow a student to maintain better focus, energy, and enthusiasm in the long term.
- 2) In order to maintain good mental health, advisers should make it abundantly clear that students are entitled and encouraged to take a reasonable number of vacation days during the year. For international students, it should be expected that trips back home may involve two or three weeks away, and complications with visa renewals may extend this time unexpectedly.
- 3) Graduate school often requires self-motivation on the part of students, but sometimes this motivation may wane with time. Advisers should be able to encourage their students to achieve their potential, and this encouragement should be done through positive reinforcement rather than punitive measures. It is also of utmost importance that advisers realize that diminishing effort can be a sign of distress in a student's life, and should guide students to counseling services on campus should this be the case. Advisers should feel comfortable inquiring about a student's mental state, and are

encouraged to take advantage of resources such as their DGS to ensure they are capable of assisting students through trying times to the best of their ability.

- 4) Sometimes, a student's own motivation may push them to extremes in terms of work hours. Advisers should strive to recognize when such things occur and discourage their students from overexerting themselves.
- 5) While research is typically the primary motivation for students at Cornell, programs often have other requirements such as teaching and coursework. Such requirements are fundamental to a graduate school education, and as such advisers should adjust the number of research work hours expected of students so that they can devote adequate time to these other requirements.
- 6) The main focus of a student's research work should be the completion of their thesis. While students often take on side projects or aid in their peer's research, a faculty adviser should do their best to ensure the student is not handed excess work to the point that progress towards their own thesis suffers.
- 7) While graduate students often benefit from the experience of mentoring undergraduates, this is an endeavor which can take a large amount of time. While an undergraduate is being trained, it is to be expected that a graduate student's progress will be slowed. As such, advisers should exercise caution in assigning too many mentees to any graduate student, or allowing them to take on too many, either at once or consecutively.
- 8) Graduate students often have other dependents such as young children or other family members they are responsible for. In addition, some students choose to start a family while in graduate school. Advisers should do what they can to ensure they are not inadvertently punishing students who have families or other dependents. While they may have additional responsibilities to attend to, these students are still entitled to the same level of attention as other students.
- 9) When funding is not sufficient to fully cover a student's living expenses, some graduate students choose to supplement their income with other employment. Advisers should take this into consideration when it comes to work expectations. Also, students in this situation may face highly inflexible schedules that will occasionally conflict with research activities.
- 10) In addition to encouraging a healthy life away from research or other academic work, faculty advisers should do all they can to foster a nurturing and inclusive work environment, which takes into account the needs of graduate students as persons rather than just as researchers.

Additional Resources:

- Office of Faculty Development & Diversity
(<http://www.facultydevelopment.cornell.edu/>)

- Office of Inclusion and Student Engagement (<http://gradschool.cornell.edu/inclusion>)
- Center for Teaching Excellence (<http://www.cte.cornell.edu/programs-services/faculty/faculty-institute-for-diversity.html>)
- Inclusive Excellence Academy (<http://diversity.cornell.edu/content/cornell-university-inclusive-excellence-academy>)
- Cornell Policy 1.3 – Graduate Student Assistantships (https://www.dfa.cornell.edu/sites/default/files/policy/vol1_3.pdf)

Section 3: Navigating Cornell University

- 1) While students are responsible for proactively seeking out information related to policies and procedures at Cornell, a student's first point of contact is usually their own adviser. As such, advisers should be knowledgeable about navigating the Cornell bureaucracy where students are concerned. They should be knowledgeable about timelines and other program requirements to assist their students as they progress in their graduate education.
- 2) Faculty may not always know every detail about policies affecting students. However, it is expected that faculty advisers be able to provide some guidance in seeking out the best people to talk to about specific policies, procedures, etc. Cornell University is a complicated place at times, which can be intimidating. Support from an adviser goes a long way to alleviating stress in a student's life when they have to navigate the more complex parts of the university.
- 3) Faculty advisers with international students should try to familiarize themselves with the resources available to international students. While not expected to be experts on visas and other legalities of being a foreign student, they should at least be able to help their students find those individuals who will be able to effectively help international students with these types of issues.

Additional Resources:

- Graduate School Website (<http://gradschool.cornell.edu/>)
- Office of the Ombudsman (<http://www.ombudsman.cornell.edu/>)
- International Students Office (<http://isso.cornell.edu>)

Section 4: Research interests

- 1) Students within different programs have different levels of autonomy when it comes to designing research projects. In cases where students have less autonomy, advisers should take the interests of their students into consideration when assigning projects.
- 2) Where students have greater autonomy, advisers should ensure the projects that students design for themselves have goals that are attainable within an appropriate period of time.
- 3) In order to be on the forefront of research, it is important to take on projects with a high level of risk. While all preliminary results should be considered before serious time and money are invested in a hypothesis, eventually a particular project may need to be terminated. When this happens, the faculty adviser should do their best to recognize the project is no longer productive and redirect the student's efforts. Additionally, students should feel comfortable about approaching their adviser when they believe a specific project should be terminated, and advisers should take such concerns very seriously. All reasons for a project's termination should be considered, but it is not acceptable that all blame be placed on the student. Instead a failed project should be taken as a teaching opportunity, and a learning opportunity for the faculty adviser as well.
- 4) When designing projects, it is of the utmost importance that funding restrictions be taken into account in addition to other concerns. Most students have no more than five years of guaranteed funding, and this time must be considered when helping to design a student's thesis project. If it is expected that a student will be largely supported through teaching fellowships, this restriction on their time available for research work must also be taken into consideration when designing a project that may be completed within restrictions set by funding availability.

Section 5: Professional Development

- 1) Advisers should take a student's plans for after graduate school into account when it comes to helping to map out a student's graduate career. These conversations should happen early and throughout the student's time at Cornell, as most students' goals will change multiple times before they graduate.
- 2) If a student has aspirations outside of academia, it is important that advisers take this into account and encourage their student to seek out internships and other opportunities to build their resume to be appealing to a wide range of employers. For students expecting to continue in academia, advisers should provide opportunities for students to learn all that is required to succeed. This may include experience writing grants, mentoring undergraduates, and other professional development related to teaching.

- 3) Students should be encouraged to participate in conferences and other networking opportunities. Also, when it comes to communicating results to the broader community it is important that advisers allow students to take the lead in writing and/or presenting their research. Early career students should not be expected to automatically write at the level of Ivy League faculty, and will require more attention. However, by the time a student is preparing to graduate they should be fully able to communicate their results with minimal input from their adviser.
- 4) Advisers should encourage their advisees to seek out opportunities for involvement both on campus and in the local community. These opportunities include but are not limited to participation in the GPSA or other student organizations, or taking on roles as graduate resident fellows. Taking advantage of these opportunities is important to a well-rounded education regardless of career goals, and will benefit students in very holistic ways. These other activities often form a strong part of a student's identity, and thus should be encouraged to a reasonable extent by faculty advisers.
- 5) Graduate students often require their advisers to serve as professional references or to provide letters of recommendation. While it is expected that students provide their advisers with necessary materials to facilitate this process, it is also expected that advisers be willing to assist students in this way. If an adviser feels that they cannot recommend a student or serve as a reference, they must provide clear and concise reasons as to why. This should be an exceptionally rare situation, and one that may require review by the DGS.

Additional Resources:

- Help with mapping out scientific careers (<http://myidp.sciencecareers.org/>)
- Careers outside of academia (<https://chroniclevitae.com/news/1120-scenes-from-the-life-of-a-graduate.>)
- Career Services (<http://www.career.cornell.edu/>)

Section 6: Mental Health

- 1) Graduate school is by its nature a stressful environment. One of the primary factors in determining a student's mental health and wellbeing is their relationship with their adviser. Whenever this relationship breaks down, it can cause a great deal of harm and thus every effort must be made to repair dysfunctional adviser-advisee relationships.
- 2) Advisers must try and recognize signs of stress in students, and either encourage them to seek help or the adviser should seek out advice from peers when a student's stress level reaches unhealthy levels.

- 3) Advisers occupy a special role in a graduate student's life, and as such take on certain responsibilities for that person's wellbeing. Advisers must learn to deal with their students as people first and foremost. Each student requires a different level of attention and a different style of adviser-advisee relationship. However, in all cases these relationships must be built on mutual respect and understanding. Students should at all times feel comfortable bringing concerns to their advisers, and advisers must be willing to listen and try to work with the student to alleviate stressful situations.

Additional Resources:

- Recognizing and Responding to Students in Distress
(<http://www.aep.cornell.edu/research/upload/facultyreponse.pdf>)
- Notice and Respond
(<https://www.gannett.cornell.edu/notice/education/narprogram.cfm>)
- CAPS (<https://www.gannett.cornell.edu/services/counseling/caps/>)
- EARS (<http://ears.dos.cornell.edu/>)

Section 7: Diversity and Inclusion

1. Faculty advisers should examine their own behavior for unconscious bias that may inhibit working relationships with diverse students. When such biases become conscious, they should seek outside evaluation and feedback to strengthen their ability to advise all students thoughtfully and respectfully.
2. Faculty advisers should ensure all lab or office space they oversee or frequent are free of harassment. They should regularly invite feedback from their students to ensure that the students are not experiencing any harassment that the adviser is unaware of.
3. Students from differing backgrounds may have different sources of stress in their lives that a faculty member may or may not be aware of. While a faculty adviser may not be able to anticipate or understand all sources of stress or discomfort in a student's life, they should be willing to listen and accommodate students within reason.
4. Cornell University and the Graduate School both have opportunities for diversity and inclusion training. Faculty advisers are encouraged to take advantage of such training opportunities to ensure their advising program is as inclusive as possible.
5. As inclusivity is a dynamic process, faculty advisers are also encouraged to regularly reassess their advising program and seek periodic outside evaluation to ensure they are always contributing to an inclusive environment at Cornell.

Additional Resources

- Office of Inclusion and Student Engagement
(<http://gradschool.cornell.edu/inclusion>)