

What to expect from your PhD training and your relationship with your advisor

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The mentee/mentor relationship is a two-way street, and that means that both students and faculty bear responsibility to make sure that each student receives high-quality training. The responsibilities on both sides are perhaps best summed up by the following affirmations from the Association of American Medical College's *Compact Between Biomedical Graduate Students and Their Research Advisors*¹:

For the student:

I acknowledge that I have the primary responsibility for the successful completion of my degree. I will be committed to my graduate education and will demonstrate this by my efforts in the classroom, the research laboratory, and all other related academic and professional activities. I will maintain a high level of professionalism, self-motivation, initiative, engagement, scientific curiosity, and ethical standards, including complying with institutional and research group standards for contributing to an inclusive research environment.

For the advisor:

Throughout the graduate student's time in my laboratory, I will be supportive, equitable, accessible, encouraging, and respectful. I will foster the graduate student's professional confidence and encourage intellectual development, critical thinking, curiosity, and creativity. I will continue my interest and involvement as the student moves forward into a career.

As a PhD student you are undergoing an intensive apprenticeship in how to conduct scientific research. PhD training should also include guidance on effective teaching, and although it is not the main topic of this document, the general guidelines outlined here are relevant for teaching too. As a trainee, you will be seeking and receiving active training from your advisor in their area of expertise,

¹ *This and other documents describing Mentee-Mentor compacts are [available](#) on the Biology department webpage.

as well as advice about how to be a successful professional, whether in non-academic or academic careers. On the advisor's side, this means:

- One-on-one meetings between advisor and student. A "best practice" for this type of training is to schedule regular weekly or bi-weekly meetings, even if you decide that they are not always needed.
- Timely response to the student's emails and phone calls.
- Regular meetings of the lab group (typically weekly or bi-weekly).
- Collaborative work on grants and manuscripts, including training on writing, in grant and manuscript form, and feedback on the development of ideas.
- Active teaching of techniques relevant to your research, or careful delegation of such training if the advisor lacks the expertise.
- Feedback on practice talks and posters.
- Promotion of the student's career in ways that are appropriate to their stage:
 - Informing the student of funding or research opportunities.
 - Nominating the student for relevant awards.
 - Submitting appropriately detailed letters of recommendation in a timely manner.
 - Assisting the student with networking by introducing them to relevant colleagues, postdocs, and other graduate students, at Duke and elsewhere.

On the student's side, this means requesting meetings when you need them, keeping your advisor (and your committee) updated on your research progress, asking your mentors for feedback on your writing (including both papers and grant proposals) and your oral presentation skills, requesting letters of recommendation in a timely manner, and being available and responsible when working with the advisor on collaborative projects.

More generally, we urge you to find out as much as possible about your potential advisor's effectiveness on all aspects of training before you join a lab, so that you can think in advance about how to get the most out of your training. Relatedly, to reduce misunderstandings, we encourage students and faculty members to discuss their mutual expectations of one another (on communication, work schedule, etc.)

explicitly before declaring a formal mentee/mentor relationship. Jointly producing an [Individual Development Plan and/or a Mentor/Mentee Compact](#), and revisiting them frequently, are good ways to ensure that expectations in both directions are clear to all.

In addition to these general guidelines, we have developed specific **minimum** expectations of PhD advisors and committee members in Biology at Duke, which are outlined below. If you consistently find that your advisor or a committee member does not meet these minimum requirements, it is important for you to contact the DGS and/or DGSA for a confidential consultation to assess the help and support you need. In fairness, and because the mentee/mentor relationship is a two-way street, we have also developed specific minimum expectations of Biology graduate students, which are found below.

Minimum expectations of the advisor and committee members:

- 1) Oral, electronic, or written replies to a student's oral, electronic or written queries within 3 business days when the advisor is in state or within 10 days at all times. If, however, the adviser knows that they will be unavailable for >10 days for work-related activities (e.g., fieldwork in a remote location devoid of any cell signal or internet) or due to personal matters, they should make students aware of these circumstances in advance so that the student and advisor can prepare accordingly.
- 2) "Live" meetings (in person, by phone, or on Zoom) between advisor and student on a reasonably frequent basis; meetings should take place at least monthly (except in circumstances as described above). For early-stage students, we strongly encourage weekly meetings during the student's first semester (and ideally entire first year) in the program; these meetings could take place in conjunction with a tutorial. If regular meetings have not been previously scheduled, an advisor or committee member should schedule a "live" meeting within 10 business days of a student's request to have a meeting.

3) Letters of recommendation/evaluation to be submitted on time, especially when requested 30 days in advance. The advisor should alert the student when the letter has been submitted.

4) Funding awarded directly to the student as primary PI is to be administered by the student; faculty may not demand use of these funds for costs outside the student's project.

5) No verbal or other forms of abusive treatment will be tolerated.

Additionally, advisers and dissertation committees together are expected to ensure:

6) Facilitation of scheduling of annual committee meetings. These are mandatory, not negotiable. The advisor in particular needs to help the student to schedule these meetings.

7) Promotion of the student's completion of the PhD within a reasonable time frame (notably, within the 6 years of guaranteed support, if not sooner). The PhD should be awarded based on the student completing a previously determined number of chapters of original research, not the completion of additional work to further the advisor's research program.

8) Encouragement of the student's scholarly productivity. This includes: efforts to encourage publication of the student's research over the course of the Ph.D. project; guidance towards the presentation of talks or posters at national meetings; bringing funding opportunities to the attention of the student followed by assistance with crafting research proposals, both large and small.

9) In accordance with the policy of the Graduate School, graduate students who are funded by research projects on a twelve-month stipend schedule are allowed a minimum two weeks (ten academic days) of vacation each academic year. Students who wish to take vacation must apprise their advisor of their intentions at least two weeks before the planned absence.

Faculty who fail to meet these minimum adviser expectations, as assessed by the DGS and department chair, may be temporarily blocked from admitting new graduate students (through Biology and all affiliated programs). Faculty given such blocks may appeal such a decision to the departmental Graduate Affairs Committee; a majority vote of that committee will make the final determination.

Minimum expectations of graduate students:

Graduate students are expected to:

1. Be aware of the [milestones](#) for the PhD program and meet them on time; if circumstances (e.g., personal matters, health challenges, or research setbacks) will make it difficult to meet a milestone, it is the student's responsibility to discuss the matter in advance of the deadline with the advisor and/or DGS;
2. Keep their advisor informed regularly about their research progress and any challenges to that progress they face;
3. In collaboration with the advisor, schedule and attend required annual committee meetings on time, and circulate a progress report to the committee at least one week prior to those meetings;
4. Respond by the deadline to all emails from your advisor, the DGS, the DGSA, or the Chair requesting information (e.g., updates on research progress, teaching assignment preferences, future funding expectations, etc.); for any such emails without a deadline, students must respond within three business days;
5. Complete all Graduate School requirements (e.g., responsible conduct of research training, English training for students who are not native speakers) on time;
6. Request letters of recommendation from their advisors, committee members, and the DGS with sufficient lead time (ideally at least two weeks, preferably a month); after requesting a letter, it is imperative that students send to the advisor timely

reminders that include the details of the program, submission mechanisms, and title of the fellowship or grant being submitted;

7. Make good-faith efforts to seek out and apply for funding (fellowships and research support) for which they are eligible; this does not mean students are expected to apply for every possible grant, but that they should develop their grant writing skills by applying for the most appropriate grants and fellowship at the least; any funding students obtain in their own name must be used solely as intended by the funding agency.

8. Act in a professional manner when serving a teaching assistant, which includes keeping all appointments (including attending lectures, labs, and office hours), performing all duties (e.g., grading, conducting review sessions, etc.) on time and at or above professional standards, and exerting sufficient effort and interest to enhance student learning;

9. Attend regularly and actively participate in intellectual exchanges in meetings of the lab as well as seminars in the student's discipline;

10. Refrain from verbal or other forms of abusive treatment toward faculty, other graduate students, or undergraduates;

11. 9) In accordance with the policy of the Graduate School, graduate students who are funded by research projects on a twelve-month stipend schedule are allowed a minimum two weeks (ten academic days) of vacation each academic year. Students who wish to take vacation must apprise their advisor of their intentions at least two weeks before the planned absence.

Students who fail to meet these minimum expectations risk termination of their support and a decision that they must leave the graduate program.