

Principles and Guidelines for Mentoring Graduate Students

School of the Environment

Washington State University

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This document provides a summary of the goals, expectations, and practices to which we as the faculty in the WSU School of the Environment strive to adhere in our role as graduate student mentors.

Mentoring Mission Statement

Our goal as SOE faculty members is to facilitate pathways to success for **each** SOE graduate student. We strive for fairness, transparency and accountability in our role as mentors, and resolve to hold our students and ourselves to high academic standards. We also resolve to embrace individual differences across our academic community. We recognize our responsibility to provide guidance and advice to our mentees, in cooperation with their advisory committee, as well as our collective responsibility to support every SOE graduate student. Thus, we strive to make ourselves individually available to any SOE student who seeks information or guidance on any academic or relevant professional matter.

Guidelines for Mentoring SOE Graduate Students

The role of Major Advisor to graduate students in SOE spans multiple domains, including co-navigating WSU Graduate School and SOE graduate program requirements, supervising and enabling graduate students' thesis and/or dissertation research, and supporting their professional and personal development. The sections below provide broad guidance for faculty when acting in these diverse roles.

I. Recruiting and Onboarding Graduate Students

Recruiting graduate students is an important element of mentoring. Wherever possible, offers of funding and expectations of the student's responsibilities should be clear and transparent before the student accepts a position at WSU. Potential students should be clearly informed about the distinctions between funding and duties associated with Research Assistantships (RA), Teaching Assistantships (TA), and Graduate Assistantships (GA). Potential students should be told what funding is in-hand and how funding is likely to be provided during both regular semesters and summer. Funding type, purpose and duration should be made as clear as possible. If funding is for teaching-related tasks, the typical range of associated workloads and tasks should be explained. For research funding, the delineation between work to be completed by the student for the Major Advisor's research project versus work completed specific to a student's own thesis or dissertation should be discussed. In addition, students supported by a GA might work in another unit on campus (e.g., Center for Civil Engagement, University Recreation) on tasks unrelated to SOE teaching and research, but the Major Advisor and prospective student should also clearly understand those job duties and the duration of that support. If future funding is uncertain, the nature of that uncertainty should be clear and ideally described in writing.

Setting clear expectations with graduate students early in their degree is important for student success. Faculty have different mentoring styles, and there is more than one way to successfully mentor a graduate student. However, it is important for mentors to communicate what their expectations are when graduate students begin their graduate studies. An introductory, first meeting when students arrive on campus is a great time to have a frank discussion about expectations for graduate study and the mentoring relationship. Some faculty find using a template with a list of discussion topics useful for this meeting (examples are available online and from the SOE Graduate Coordinator). Make sure they know who to contact on your campus/location for setting up office space and other important logistics such as building access and payroll. The advisor and student should come to an understanding concerning the frequency of their one-on-one meetings early in the student's program and this can be adjusted as the need arises.

II. Fulfilling Graduate Program Requirements

The SOE Graduate Student Handbook and the SOE Graduate Program By-laws provide details on the specific requirements for graduate students in each SOE graduate program and should be referred to for details. Below are key aspects of mentoring graduate students as they navigate important steps along the pathway to their degree.

A. Establishing and Working with their Advisory Committee

The composition of a graduate student's advisory committee can have far-reaching implications for their research and their professional development. Therefore, a Major Advisor should work closely with their student to identify potential committee members and to strategize how to approach the conversation they have with each prospective committee member wherein they invite each potential member to participate. It can also be helpful for students to include their initial study plan or ideas for their thesis or dissertation in their invitation to potential committee members, thus advisors can play a valuable role by working with their students to prepare an effective study plan overview or proposal. Establishing an advisory committee and holding the first committee meeting should occur sufficiently early so that the Advisory Committee can provide feedback on the 1.) Program of Study before it is due (no later than the third semester for Ph.D. students, and the beginning of the semester preceding the semester of graduation for M.S. students), and 2. the student's study plan before much of the research has been conducted.

After the committee is established, the Major Advisor will work with the student to set expectations for student committee meetings, including their frequency (at least once per year, but twice a year is often a better practice), and who schedules and leads them. In addition, before each committee meeting, student and advisor should discuss the format of the meetings (e.g., formal presentations vs informal discussion). The advisor should help the student prepare for committee meetings (including all needed paperwork), ensure that everyone's time is well spent, and provide the needed guidance for each stage of program development.

Other members of the Advisory Committee should be respectful of personal, professional and disciplinary differences with the student and their primary advisor and) speak up for a student in case they observe a lack of mentoring, progress and support on the part of the student's primary advisor.

B. Developing the Program of Study (POS)

The Major Advisor will guide the development of the student's POS for acceptance by the advisory committee and submission to the Graduate School, and work with the student to ensure that it complies with relevant rules (e.g., required credits). Selecting an appropriate suite of courses that will provide students with the necessary knowledge and skills to conduct their research is critical to a student's success. Advisors should review the course catalog with their student and discuss which courses meet the student's needs and interests and when these courses are likely to be taught. Graduate courses are often offered only every other year, so planning ahead is critical.

C. Annual (and other) Review of Student Progress

Evaluation involves not only the formal annual review of student progress, but also feedback on abstracts, presentations, proposals, reports, and other academic work. Such feedback should be timely, appropriately detailed, constructive and given with an eye toward helping students develop and improve academic performance and standing. In particular, the annual review process is an opportunity for both the Major Advisor and student to discuss academic progress, to "take stock" of how the mentoring relationship is going, and, importantly to identify challenges, goals expectations for the upcoming year.

D. Preparing for Preliminary and Final Examinations

As detailed in the SOE Graduate Student Handbook, the Major Advisor and committee will establish the expectations for, and format of, both the written and oral components of the preliminary exam (in the case of PhD students), and expectations for their student's thesis or dissertation final exam. These exams are particularly important, and often stressful, milestones in a student's graduate career. Therefore, it is especially important for the advisor to work with their student to help them prepare for and successfully complete these examinations. For example, the advisor can assist the student by discussing how to prepare for the preliminary or final exam, when the examination should occur in the student's program, and by suggesting resources. The Major Advisor is responsible for ensuring that the thesis or dissertation appears defensible before submitting the Examination Scheduling Form to the thesis committee.

III. Supporting Graduate Student Professional Development

A. Guiding the Research Progress

Major Advisors, in conjunction with Advisory Committee members, will guide and assist graduate students through all steps of the research process, from the development of proposals, to obtaining funding, data collection (if necessary), analysis, writing and scientific publication. Each of these steps requires considerable faculty time, particularly on the part of the advisor. The frequency of one-on-one meetings between the advisor and student, as well as lab or group meetings, will vary with the nature of the project and the student's stage in the research project. Often, the frequency of meetings should be highest at the beginning and end of a student's program, to guide the development of research focus in the beginning and the write-up process at the end. Best practices suggest that these meetings occur at least monthly, but in many situations weekly meetings are ideal. Moreover, the student has a right to expect to be able to call a meeting on relatively short notice (e.g. a week or less) should the need arise. Major Advisors

might also want to explain to students that other faculty in SOE, WSU, and elsewhere, whether they are on the committee or not, can be useful resources for professional development and research questions.

B. Workload and Compensation

Although compensation of students on TA, RA, GA, and hourly appointments varies across campuses, locations, colleges and disciplines, every effort should be made to achieve fairness and equity in graduate student compensation within a lab group and on a particular campus. Students employed on assistantships may be paid to work up to 20 hours/week during the academic semester on teaching or research that may not directly contribute to completion of their own thesis/dissertation project. With permission from The Graduate School, students on an assistantship can get approval to work an additional 5 hours a week. However, advisors will consider and manage such workloads with care, so that the student's own thesis work receives adequate priority. This process might include discussions with the student and TA supervisor if time spent in teaching duties routinely exceeds 20 hours a week. No student will be asked to work for more hours than they are being compensated on projects other than completion of their own thesis/dissertation.

C. Supporting Professional Activities

The issues of data ownership, authorship, financial support of publication, selection of appropriate journals for joint publication and the financing of student attendance at conferences to present research results and network with fellow students and professionals in one's field are all areas of importance in student mentoring, and at times the source of possible misunderstanding between students and advisors. In addition, the Advisor and Advisory Committee are often a primary source of information and guidance as students transition from graduate school to the job market. Major Advisors should provide as much support and guidance in these areas as possible and appropriate for a given project and the student's stage in their academic program. Expectations about each of these topics should be clearly established between student and advisor early in a student's career and also revisited for each research project jointly undertaken.

IV. Supporting Graduate Students as People

A guiding principle of mentoring graduate students is the recognition that students are whole people with identities, interests, families, relationships and life challenges that extend beyond the academic workplace. Although the Major Advisor's role in mentoring is primarily focused on academics, it is important to be sensitive to all aspects of students' lives, including physical and mental health, when offering guidance and mentorship.

Students can face personal crises over the course of their graduate school career. In such cases, the faculty leadership role may involve sensitivity to such challenges, and referral to professional help and counseling where necessary. For more information and resources, see <https://studentcare.wsu.edu/mental-health>

A. Modeling Professional Behavior and Establishing a Positive Lab Culture

Social interaction between faculty and students outside the workplace is a normal part of the graduate school experience, and often a welcome opportunity for the Major Advisor and student to relax and get to know one another. In all cases, advisors should also remember that they hold a different hierarchical status than students. This should not prevent advisors from establishing positive and supportive relationships with their mentees, yet it is critical for advisors to be aware of their status as role models, to exhibit professional behavior, and to maintain appropriate social boundaries. Faculty should not exhibit favoritism in their interactions with students in their classrooms, labs or work groups, either inside or outside the workplace.

In addition to considering how to develop appropriate social relationships with students, Major Advisors should be aware of the culture they create in their lab and/or working groups. Such culture should be constructive, open, welcoming and beneficial to all students and group members, regardless of differences (e.g., academic, personal, and protected status).

B. Dealing With Differences

One of the most exciting and rewarding aspects of being a faculty member at a large research university like WSU is the opportunity to work with colleagues and graduate students from many different places and with many different backgrounds. These differences enrich our community and are the key to advancing research beyond traditional limits. It is important for faculty members to recognize and embrace the fact that not all graduate students share their own identity nor specific career aspirations. At times, negotiating these differences can be challenging for Major Advisors and graduate students. Often the key is to maintain patience and forbearance on all sides and to embrace this part of the job of being a faculty member in a rapidly changing society. Importantly, faculty involved with mentoring graduate students should continually seek opportunities to learn more about their implicit biases and how to promote success for all graduate students.

C. Handling Situations When Expectations are Not Met

There is an inherent power difference between faculty and students in any academic setting, including SOE. Major Advisors have various means of recourse including comments in student annual reviews (up to and including a recommendation that the student not be continued), less-than-favorable grades on research credits and, in extreme cases, dismissal from assistantship support if a student is not meeting reasonable expectations. Similarly, individual graduate students have recourse if their reasonable expectations of a specific faculty member or members are not being met. In addition to speaking with the faculty member, students can appeal to their entire advisory committee, the SOE Associate Director for Graduate Studies, the SOE Director and in the case of unresolved differences from these levels, the WSU Graduate School or the University Ombudsman. We in SOE strive for transparency, open communication and open doors and aim for the resolution of problems students may encounter in the most prompt and equitable manner as possible.

V. Web resources:

<https://grad.uw.edu/for-students-and-post-docs/core-programs/mentoring/mentoring-a-guide-for-faculty/>

<https://graduatestudies.uoregon.edu/academics/policies/faculty-staff/best-practices-mentoring>

<https://www.chronicle.com/blogs/profhacker/5-tips-from-academic-coach-taylor>
<https://learn.imentor.org/help/what-is-implicit-bias>