

## **Academic Advising or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Clear Expectations**

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Hello! I am so happy you are here. Academic advising is one of my favorite parts of this weird academic gig and it is a pleasure to be working with you.

In the interest of making explicit the hidden curriculum, this document outlines my philosophy on academic advising, your obligations and entitlements as my student, and my idiosyncratic preferences about communication.<sup>1</sup> It is not meant to be a binding contract, but rather, a set of ground rules to start the conversation. It is also meant to help provide clarity around academic advising so that you feel comfortable making appropriate “asks.”

I see my role as a faculty mentor or advisor as helping you to transition from a student/learner to a producer of scholarly knowledge. Most importantly, I want you to discover the kind of academic or scholar you want to be in the world and to support you in that process. There are lots of different kinds of academic jobs, different research models within sociology, and engaging work outside of academia. Your job in graduate school is to figure out the path you want to follow (and, eventually, trailblaze!). My job is to facilitate this journey, providing examples of the different models, critical (but constructive) feedback on your research, and advice about the process. The goal of the Ph.D. process is for you to emerge with a strong grasp of the scholarly literature, a deep methodological toolkit, and your own distinctive sociological voice.

Remember that the Ph.D. process is inherently self-driven. Faculty provide mentorship and some gate-keeping, but \*you\* pick your advisor, your committee, your questions, your methods, etc. If one or some of those things aren't working for you (e.g. an advisor or committee member who doesn't support your dissertation or agree on a vision for the work), it is time to reevaluate. Unlike a lot of disciplines, Sociology usually doesn't operate on a “lab” model where you're beholden to just one, fixed faculty person. Take advantage of this flexibility and find the right fit with your advisor, and develop secondary relationships and side projects with faculty and peers. I'm always happy to have a conversation about who would be a good fit, whether or not I've been your advisor in the past.

This document is intended for several audiences, including:

- Ph.D. students who are my primary advisees
- Ph.D. students who have asked me to be on their committees
- Ph.D. students who are collaborating with me on research projects
- Undergraduate students working on graduate-level research or RA-ing on projects

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<sup>1</sup> This document was adapted from [Dan Hirschman's advising document](#). Thanks Dan!

Below, you will find information for each of these relationships, as well as general communication expectations and preferences.

### **What Can You Ask of Me?**

I find many students are hesitant in asking faculty for “favors.” Doing our job is not a favor! That said, faculty are often juggling many students alongside their own teaching, research, and service (and lives outside of work). So there may be times where we are not able to provide you with assistance in a timely manner. Bottom line: Ask us to read your work, expect there to be some wait time, and try not to stress if folks (occasionally) say no. If faculty are regularly saying no or never returning your emails, something has gone wrong in the mentoring relationship.

Here are some general guidelines for setting expectations:

- **Questions.** Students can (and should) send general queries at any time. These queries can cover just about anything (within professional norms), including: dissertation-related questions, reactions to recent publications, advice on funding applications, whether you should present at a conference, how to juggle kids and an academic job, etc. Depending on the question, I will email you back or we can set up a meeting to discuss.
- **Forming Committees.** If I am not on your committee or your advisee, but you want me to be, you should ask! When students ask, I appreciate it when they can articulate: a) the project (or kinds of projects) they want to pursue and b) what I would contribute as advisor or committee member (i.e., why I’m a good fit for the project). It is a good idea to brainstorm these things before requesting a meeting. Ideally, your committee will be a productive blend of faculty, some of whom provide relevant substantive area expertise, others with methodological advice, etc. You also want at least one “cheerleader” and one (friendly) “critic” to keep you balanced.
- **How many papers should I send?**
  - If you are my advisee, you should be regularly sending me research papers, prelim chapters, dissertation plans, etc. to review and provide feedback on. The pace of this feedback will vary by the semester, but typically, I am happy to review up to 2-3 major pieces of work per year (i.e. 1 article or chapter per semester). It’s usual to review more than this during the prelim, prospectus, job market, and defense stages. For these kinds of critical documents, I expect to read and provide feedback on multiple drafts before they go to the whole committee.
  - If I’m on your committee (but not your chair), I expect to only provide feedback on the (near-)final prelim and dissertation proposal, not multiple early drafts. However, I’m happy to chat about these documents as they are in-process. I will also read 1-2 major pieces of work per year outside of this (e.g. draft articles), as well as shorter documents (grant proposals, cover letters, etc.).
  - Even if I’m not on your committee, you can still send me an article, chapter, or grant proposal draft to provide feedback on one time per year. I accommodate all such requests when possible. It’s helpful to know where you are at with the draft and what in particular you are looking for feedback on.
- **Strong Chair Model.** If I’m on your committee, I will generally defer to your chair in cases of disagreement about the direction of your research (unless I hold some specific

expertise relevant to the specific question and/or have a very strong concern). You should not have to constantly negotiate between divergent faculty opinions; If you are hearing opposing advice, it is often helpful to schedule an “all committee” meeting so that we can discuss as a group.

- **Letters of Recommendation.** If you work with me in any capacity, I am almost always happy to provide you a letter of reference. Please provide at least two to three weeks of advance notice if this is the first letter I have written for you and send me all of your application documents (CV, proposal, etc.). I’m happy to review these documents and provide feedback in addition to writing the letter. (If urgent situations come up with letters, I will do my best to meet timelines, but in general, try to provide advance notice so I can schedule the work.) PS: If you get the job, fellowship, or grant, let me know so I can cheer you on.
- **Funding.** If you are looking for graduate funding, please tell me! I typically announce any RA funding I have available to all of the students working in the area, but I’m always happy to know if you are looking for a RA position and to help you find a good match. Similarly, if you want to collaborate on one of my data collection projects or write something together, let me know. (There is no pressure or obligation to RA or collaborate on projects with me if you are my advisee, however. The two are separate.)
- **Social Events.** I try to schedule occasional social activities for my students to chat more informally (and often meet my kids). You are welcome to attend or not attend these events, as you are interested and able. They are meant to be a fun opportunity, not a requirement.
- **Positionality.** My own path through academia has been shaped by my identity and privileges as a middle class white woman. I grew up in Southern California, raised by divorced (but friendly) parents who both had business degrees (and yet are still confused about academia). The students I have mentored have come to Sociology via different paths, including students of color who have had to fight racism in education, first-gen students whose parents never navigated college themselves, returning students with criminal justice experiences, students who are primary caregivers to small children, etc. My goal in any mentoring relationship is that you feel comfortable enough to share your experiences, especially when hurtful and potentially different from mine, so that I can help you process those experiences and move forward in your own career.

### **What Will I Ask of You?**

- **Communication.** I typically expect students to remain in good communication (i.e. respond in reasonable time to emails, etc.).
  - For advisees: We will establish a regular monthly meeting to check in.
  - For RAs: We will establish a regular team meeting schedule.
  - Everyone else: If we are not in regular touch, please send me an update email at least once a semester on your progress. I’m also happy to meet once per semester if and when it is helpful to you.
- **Titles/Names.** When teaching undergraduate classes, I prefer to go by “Prof. Phelps.” In all other contexts (research collaborations, mentoring, etc.), you are welcome to call me by my first name. I default to using students first’ names, but if there is a title or address you prefer I use for you, just let me know.

- **You are your own boss.** You are responsible for managing your own graduate program. I'm happy to be your cheerleader in meeting department milestones, putting together a dissertation proposal, etc., but you need to be the primary engine. Graduate school only works if you are able to independently motivate and complete your work in reasonable time. If you are struggling to write, to meet deadlines frequently, etc., please come talk to me so we can trouble-shoot.
- **Learning from criticism.** Learn how to process constructive critiques on your writing and research. One of the most productive things faculty do is provide you with insights on your work that make it better. Making our writing better, clarifying the goals of our research projects, etc., is often hard work and it can be bracing, even the 100th time around. One of the most useful skills to develop for this process is a sense of distance from your own work--you want to be able to appraise it as an outside reader, seeing the strengths and weaknesses together.
- **Develop a support network.** Graduate school is tough--you need people in your corner (ideally including people who are not academics!). Get hobbies, spend time with loved ones, exercise and eat well, etc. Academia can be a long (and often lonely) slog. It is a marathon, not a sprint.
- **Providing Feedback.** Mentoring relationships are dynamic and ongoing. If there's support you're not getting, or you have questions and concerns about the academic advising process, the first step is starting a conversation. While it can be hard to provide critical feedback to faculty members, it is essential to improving our mentoring (for you and other students). These difficult conversations ideally will produce a better mentorship relationship moving forward.

### General Communication Preferences

People vary in their communication preferences. Mine are shaped by a couple of key factors. I have two young kids so I generally do not work much outside of normal business hours and I try to limit how often I commute to/from campus. I also set my entire schedule for the week, including writing time, the week before. This means I try not to adjust a given week's schedule once it is already in progress.

Here's what generally works best for me:

- Try to default to email requests. I typically try to respond to email within 48 hours (M-F 9-5). Feel free to nudge me again after that window if I don't reply. Please reply to my emails within a similar timeframe when possible. If something is urgent, I'll mark it as such. Otherwise, replying anytime in the next couple of days is fine. If I email outside of business hours, there is no pressure on you to reply before the work day/week begins again.
- Texts (on my cell phone) should only be used for urgent situations as they easily get lost and are distracting. (One exception: job market season.)
- Unscheduled office drop-ins for lengthy conversations should be reserved for urgent questions or issues that are hard to resolve over email. During semesters where I have office hours, however, you are welcome to drop in during those times.

- If you want to schedule a meeting, please consult the U's google calendar first and send some potential times via email that look clear on my schedule. Unless the question is urgent, these potential dates should be \*at least\* a week from the date of the ask. Once we decide on a day and time to meet, please send me a calendar invite with the day, time, and location. If it is not a day I'm coming to campus, we can meet via zoom video call.
- If you want to discuss written work at a meeting, I typically need 2 weeks advance notice (exceptions made for short documents on a quick timeline or special cases). Ditto written feedback--it usually takes me about 2 weeks to review. I'll usually let you know when you should expect to hear back.
- My default preference when providing feedback on written work is to edit/comment in Google Docs. Second choice is Word. Last choice is PDF. I don't use a Mac.
- If I promise some follow-up item during a meeting (e.g. sending you a resource) and do not reply promptly, please email me a reminder. Feel free to do this immediately after the meeting instead of waiting.
- Always send a confirmation in advance of an important meeting like a dissertation proposal defense (usually 24-48 hours before any big event). In your confirmation, include details about when and where it is happening and attach relevant materials (like the proposal).
- Your kids are always welcome to join us at meetings; I also understand if you need to reschedule due to caretaking obligations that crop up at the last minute.
- You are welcome to friend/follow me on social media (Facebook and Twitter) and I'll follow/friend back. You are also welcome to keep your social media accounts private; I don't initiate friend requests to students to defer to your preferences.

**Thank you for making it to the end of this document!** Please let me know if you have any questions, comments, or feedback. I hope this document will continue to grow and change over time, like all of us do.

You can find lots more advice on graduate school on my website, which has a collection of my favorite advice posts: <https://www.michellesphelps.com/teaching/misc-advice>. Scatterplot also has a nice post from Pam Oliver on [How to Be A Good Advisee](#). Not (but not least) Fabio Rojas has a great [Bill of Grad Rights](#). You've got this!

**-Michelle**