

Advisor/Student Expectations Worksheet

This worksheet is meant to facilitate important conversations between students and advisors, to explicitly communicate expectations that are often unclear to students, and to encourage healthy, productive advising relationships. Keep in mind that advising relationships can sometimes involve multiple advisors, including postdocs, older graduate students, or faculty in other departments or at other institutions. When appropriate, these people should be involved in the discussion of expectations.

Instructions

1. **Independently, read through the list of questions**, think about your responses and priorities. Think about additional questions you may like to add to the discussion.
2. **Identify when you have specific expectations, but also when you have a lack of expectation** (e.g. no preference for whether students work from home). It is ok for some answers to be 'I don't know yet,' especially if you also discuss how and when an answer will be obtained.
3. **Together, discuss the selected list of questions** and record your expectations. The manner in which you record the expectations is up to you, with suggested formats including:
 - a. Writing synopses of discussions below the selected questions/sections.
 - b. Filling out the premade google form version of this document:
<https://forms.gle/MQsnm3rPg6e28f6W8>.
 - c. Developing a custom format that best suits your advisor/student relationship.
4. **Reevaluate your advising agreement** at the start of each academic year or when significant changes occur, whichever comes first.

Guiding Questions

Note: Questions marked with an asterisk () may be constrained by department/university policy.*

Introduction

1. What name/titles does the advisor prefer? (i.e. first name, Prof., Dr.?)
2. What name does the student prefer?
3. What pronouns does student/advisor use?
4. Is there any other information student/advisor would like to share?
5. What is the expected length of this advising relationship?

Communication

1. What are the preferred methods of communication?
2. How quickly are the student/advisor generally expected to respond to messages?
3. Are the student/advisor expected to respond to messages outside of work hours?
4. How often should the student and advisor meet one-on-one?
5. Who is expected to initiate meetings?
6. What is the preferred method of tracking progress, work, and code?
7. What types of questions should be brought directly to the advisor, and which should first be asked of post-docs/peers?
8. How should the student/advisor communicate when they need to miss a meeting or event?
9. Are there exceptions to these expectations?

Funding

1. What are student/advisor looking for in terms of funding?
2. Is the advisor responsible for working to find funding for the student?
3. Is the student responsible for finding and applying for external fellowships?
4. Will the student be involved in writing proposals and grants?
5. When will the student be notified of changes in funding?*
6. Should the advisor:
 - a. Suggest fellowships for the student to apply for?
 - b. Proofread fellowship applications?
 - c. Write letters of recommendation for fellowship applications?
7. How often should the student expect to TA?
8. What funding is currently available to support the student?
9. Will the student be funded by the advisor for the coming quarter/year?*

10. Are there exceptions to any of these expectations?

Research Project

1. Should there be a specific timeline for when projects will be completed?
2. What is the expected timeline of this project? Of future projects? Is there a contingency plan?
3. Is the student allowed to work with other advisors on other projects?
4. Should the student have the opportunity to advise undergraduates?
5. What are the roles of other mentors, such as post-docs, joint advisors, or external collaborators?
6. To what extent should work be results-based (i.e. working directly towards a paper) vs. learning-based (i.e. reading papers, learning a new coding language)?
7. How much flexibility is allowed by the student's funding source?
8. Are there exceptions to any of these expectations?

Co-curricular Activities

1. Which meetings and events is the student expected to regularly attend (e.g. group meetings, journal clubs, colloquia)?
2. How many conferences can the student expect to attend?
3. If grant funding for conference travel is unavailable, how will the advisor support the student in advertising their work and networking?
4. Are there any expectations for student participation in outreach or other non-research activities?
5. Are there any expectations about the student taking on additional teaching opportunities?
6. Are there exceptions to any of these expectations?

Feedback

1. How will the advisor provide feedback to the student and at what frequency?
2. How will the student provide feedback to the advisor?
3. How should the student/advisor communicate instances of discomfort?
4. How much advance notice should the student provide when requesting a letter of recommendation from the advisor?
5. How and when should the advisor notify the student if they perceive the student to not be on track to pass the candidacy exam?
6. How and when should the advisor notify the student if they perceive the student to not be making sufficient progress towards the completion of their degree?

7. How will the advisor communicate when feedback is just a suggestion vs. a required action?
8. Are there exceptions to any of these expectations?

Classes

1. How is the student expected to select courses?
2. What fraction of their time should the student dedicate to coursework?
3. Does the advisor have expectations of grades in coursework that must be obtained generally, or in any particular course?
4. What changes to the advising relationship (if any) should be expected during quarters in which the faculty advisor is teaching?
5. What changes to the advising relationship (if any) should be expected during quarters in which the student is TAing?
6. Are there exceptions to any of these expectations?

Work-Life Balance¹

1. Are there specific hours during which the student/advisor are expected to be available for meetings/responding to messages (e.g. business hours)?
2. Are there expectations for when the student/advisor will begin/end the work day?
3. Is the student expected to work a certain number of hours per week? (If yes, how many hours?)
4. Is the student expected to work from the office? Can they work from home when they want?
5. Do either party have major structured time commitments that will shape their working hours and availability (such as other positions or part time jobs, childcare or caregiver responsibilities, etc.)?
6. When is it appropriate for the student to take vacation time or time off? What is the procedure for asking for time off?
7. What holidays can be expected to be taken off?
8. Are there exceptions to any of these expectations (e.g. crunch periods, observing)?

¹ This section [Work-Life Balance] refers to “hours of work”. It is important to acknowledge that the majority of academic positions are not paid hourly, and the productivity expected in a given hour will depend heavily on the individual. That said, hours are a useful concept for discussing work-life balance. Additionally, neither student nor advisor should feel obligated to explicitly describe their personal responsibilities.

Thesis

1. When should the student form a thesis committee?*
2. What is the role of the thesis committee?
3. How much time should the student spend writing up the dissertation and preparing for the defense?
4. What is the expected timeline for completion of the degree (PhD/Masters)?
5. Are there exceptions to any of these expectations?

Future Plans

1. What are the student's goals and plans for the future?
2. What sort of career planning support should the advisor provide, and when?
3. How would the advisor support non-academic career goals?
4. How would the advisor support the student in applying for academic jobs?
5. What level of collaboration does the student/advisor expect after graduation?
6. Who has ownership of joint projects, pieces of code, etc., and in what cases is authorship on work using these products deserved (especially post-graduation)?
7. Are there exceptions to any of these expectations?

Additional Resources

Expectation scales example:

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1oTPu_6GOEAHjuKGBE-TEgcAacj9P7mp1/view?usp=sharing

Mentoring agreement example:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Zeoh5jxwu8jWE3C8vgNmqHKepsMGJZk7/view?usp=sharing>

Mentoring compact:

<https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1UwBUDb5Njw2THuNXKA2sjvFXGVFpTNFo?usp=sharing>

Individual development plan:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1HWCD4nxMSBCOWEYh1YNG7AtztQoQCYyB/view?usp=sharing>

FAQ

What is the goal of the expectations agreement?

The agreement should facilitate explicit discussion between students and advisors, take the burden off of students to clarify expectations, and remove barriers to healthy, productive advising relationships.

Why do we need a form to communicate expectations?

Often students are not clear on simple expectations related to topics such as work hours, funding, vacation time, and communication. These misunderstandings are often caused by the gray area of what it means to be a student, as this role falls somewhere in between student/researcher/employee. Raising these questions can be intimidating for students, particularly those who experience a larger power imbalance relative to their advisor (e.g. BIPOC students). On the other hand, advisors often assume that these expectations (or lack of expectations, in some cases) are understood.

Who benefits from an expectations agreement?

The expectations agreement benefits both student and advisor, by clarifying expectations and facilitating the establishment of a productive advising relationship. These agreements are intended to especially benefit students who are unfamiliar with academic relationships (e.g. first-generation academics) or who otherwise experience larger power imbalances relative to their advisors (e.g. BIPOC students).

Do I need to include questions like ‘How many hours is the student expected to work per week?’ if I do not have a preference?

Yes. It is important to not only communicate specific expectations, *but to also communicate when there is a lack of expectation*. For example, advisors should specify if they have no preference on student work hours or vacation time.

Is the expectations agreement intended to be a binding legal contract?

No. This is an informal agreement between a student and advisor that is not meant to be legally enforceable.

What is the value of an agreement that is not legally binding?

The primary purpose of this agreement is to facilitate communication. The hope is that if both students and advisors are clear on expectations, potential sources of conflict will be avoided. However, both parties are expected to keep to these expectations. If they do not, we encourage the student and advisor to discuss why expectations have not been met. If students need assistance in resolving conflict with their advisors, please see the following question.

What should I do if I need help resolving a conflict with my advisor?

It can be uncomfortable to raise concerns directly with your advisor. If you would like outside support, we encourage you to reach out to the following contacts with even minor concerns.

Suggested contacts:

- Peers/peer mentor
- Faculty mentor/thesis committee
- A&A/KICP ombudsperson (Leslie Rogers and Daniel Holz)
- The Assistant Chair of Academic Affairs (Fausto Cattaneo), the Academic Affairs Administrator (Julia Brazas), the Graduate Student Affairs Administrator (Laticia Rebeles), and the Department Chair (John Carlstrom)
- The PSD Dean of Students (Bahareh Lampert)

Do I have to use this list of questions to create my expectations agreement?

No. You can create your own list of questions in any format. We provide examples of other types of expectation agreements under “Additional Resources.”

Who should be involved in this discussion?

This discussion should take place between the student and their primary advisor. We also suggest including secondary advisors, such as postdocs or other collaborators, in the discussion when appropriate. We also recommend having separate discussions with any additional research advisors (for e.g. side projects).

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This document was developed by members of Inclusion, Diversity, and Equity in Astronomy (IDEA) and the Department of Astronomy & Astrophysics and the Kavli Institute of Cosmological Physics at the University of Chicago in response to the [petition to support Black astronomers](#).

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