Best Practices in Advising and Mentoring Graduate Students

Relationships between faculty advisors/mentors and graduate students are integral to graduate education at UNCG. The University has recognized this by adopting formal policies and procedures that govern these relationships, which conveys general expectations for both faculty and graduate students. Many departments have also developed their own guidelines. In addition, there are policies that govern particular dimensions of these relationships:

- Academic progress, grade appeals, or any other issue related to a graduate student’s formal academic program. See the Graduate School Bulletin.
- Academic misconduct. See the Dean of Students website.
- Protected-class discrimination, sexual harassment, or undue favoritism. Such grievances follow the University Policy Manual and are filed with the Dean of Students.

Because many elements of the advising and mentoring relationship are too complex and differentiated to be effectively codified on a campus-wide basis, the Vice Provost for Graduate Education requested that the Graduate Studies Committee and the Graduate Student Association develop and endorse a set of “Best Practices” aimed specifically at faculty in their roles as advisors and mentors to Graduate Students. These are intended to supplement and clarify, rather than replace, existing policies at the College and departmental levels.

One goal of the document is to inform faculty of the behaviors and attitudes that the University community endorses and expects them to aspire to in their roles as advisors and mentors. The document does not enumerate faculty requirements or responsibilities in these activities, however, because the effective implementation of best practices is often specific to departments and/or disciplines and therefore should be tailored to each individual situation. The document is designed, instead, to elicit reflection and discussion that leads to improvement in the quality and effectiveness of faculty advising and mentorship of graduate students within the UNCG community.

A second goal is to provide graduate students with a realistic and balanced view of the behaviors and attitudes they should expect from a faculty advisor or mentor as well as behaviors and attitudes that should be expected of graduate students themselves. A careful reading of the document will reveal that there are often inherent trade-offs between individual elements of best practices; that different combinations of best practices must be implemented for different students; and that advising and mentoring is only one of many claims on a faculty member’s scarce time and resources. Graduate students should also learn that these best practices can be effective only when advisees and mentees are responsive and responsible in their own behaviors and attitudes towards their faculty counterparts.

Despite all efforts to the contrary, problems, tensions, and misunderstanding will sometimes arise between faculty advisors/mentors and graduate students. A third goal of this document is to provide a general set of guidelines that can be used by both faculty and graduate students to identify, discuss and resolve issues that arise between an individual faculty advisor/mentor and an individual student. UNCG provides a framework to assist in the resolution of these matters that is described in the Student Grievance and Appeals Policies and Procedures.

The best practices described here are divided into five areas:

- Best practices in the general conduct of mentors and advisors.
- Best practices for mentors and advisors within thesis and dissertation committees.
- Best practices for mentors and advisors in the Professional Development of Students.
- Best practices for mentors and advisors when Administering Financial Support.
- Best practices for graduate students when interacting with mentors and advisors.

This structure has been adopted to provide clarity and focus. Some relationships between advisors or mentors and graduate students involve all four dimensions; in other cases only one or two will pertain. But faculty should recognize and embrace their collective responsibility to assure that each relevant dimension is recognized and addressed for every student.

Best Practices in the General Conduct of Mentors and Advisors

In academic units, faculty advisors support the academic promise of graduate students in their program. In some cases, academic advisors are assigned to entering graduate students to assist them in academic advising and other matters. In other cases, students select faculty advisors in accordance with disciplinary interest or research expertise. Advising is manifold in its scope and breadth and may be accomplished in many ways. A student’s academic performance and a faculty member’s scholarly interests may coincide during the course of instruction and research. While advisors help guide students to choose appropriate coursework and assist them in understanding the requirements of the university, a mentor takes a more holistic approach to assisting the student. This includes helping the student assimilate into the culture of the profession by engaging in activities that might not be a formal part of the curriculum of the program. The mentor helps the student plan a trajectory that will lead to a professional identity that will culminate in successful placement in the job market. Often this may lead to a life-long interest in the graduate’s professional career. Through interaction with the student during his or her academic career, advisors often transition into becoming mentors. Students are encouraged to seek out mentoring relationships with faculty as they progress through their academic studies. Often a circle of mentors is needed to guide the student through the various stages of academic and professional development and may include persons outside the university along with family.

Investment of Time

The consensus among excellent mentors is that mentoring requires a significant time commitment on the part of both the mentor and the mentee. Faculty should develop reasonable expectations for themselves in terms of time and effort. By making a commitment to devote time to their students, they are helping to ensure success. Faculty should strive to find ways that maximize efficiency and thus save time but not at the expense of a student’s progress. Also, faculty should expect mutual commitment: time put into advising and mentoring should correspond with the time the student devotes to his/her work. If a faculty member
believes an issue is beyond his or her capability or training, he or she should refer a student to an appropriate person or service or work together to investigate possible solutions. Faculty should not impede a graduate student’s progress toward the degree in order to benefit from the student’s proficiency as a teaching or research assistant. They should refrain from requesting students to do personal work (mowing lawns, baby-sitting, typing papers, etc.) without appropriate compensation. In the classroom, lab, or studio, faculty should strive to create supervisory relations with students that stimulate and encourage them to learn creatively and independently.

Frequent and Consistent Communication

- Faculty should communicate face-to-face with students as much as possible, especially for difficult conversations. For communication between regular meetings or on last-minute issues, e-mail and phone conversations are entirely acceptable, but there is no substitute for face-to-face communication. It is prudent for both parties to follow-up “in-person” meetings with written summaries and confirmations. This technique allows both parties to clarify, summarize, and document all important interactions.
- Faculty should clarify expectations and requirements early and explicitly, preferably in writing, including relevant department procedures. Students should acknowledge expectations and requirements. Faculty should provide clear maps of the requirements that each student must meet, including course work, languages, research tools, examinations, and thesis or dissertation, and they should help students to delineate the amount of time expected to complete each step.
- Faculty should be as transparent as possible as often as possible, explaining to students the context of their progress within the program and how their progress affects or is affected by departmental decisions, especially regarding budget considerations, appointments, and long-term strategic planning. Such transparency can avoid misunderstandings based on assumptions and can help a student plan and be motivated to make progress.
- Faculty should acknowledge student contributions to research presented at conferences, in professional publications, or in applications for copyrights and patents.
- Faculty should stay in contact with their colleagues about graduate students. The graduate studies committee chair, department chair, and TA supervisors or administrators may have valuable information about a student or an important process that can save time.
- Faculty should address problems when they arise. The mentoring relationship is a relationship like any other, involving both satisfying and difficult interactions. Sometimes a face-to-face conversation between regular meetings is necessary and useful to address specific problems, real or perceived.
- Early communication regarding potential problems and written documentation of all related interactions is essential. All communication, especially written, should be deliberate and considerate. Remember that e-mail is a public record. Do not hesitate to contact the Graduate School (336-334-5596) or University Counsel (336-334-3067) with questions or concerns.

Such collaborations are encouraged and are a desired outcome of the mentoring process.

Clear Goals and Reasonable Expectations

Faculty should set clear goals and outline reasonable expectations. In order to help predict and monitor a student’s academic progress, faculty should consider what work will need to be done for a student to complete his or her program, and students should be encouraged to break this work down into the number of years, then semesters, then months, that it will take to finish in a timely manner.

Cultural Differences

Cultural differences can easily and unexpectedly lead to miscommunication about expectations and procedures. Contact the Graduate School (336-334-5596), the Office of Multicultural Affairs (336-334-5090) or the International Programs Center (336-334-5404) for assistance.

Varieties of Student Goals

Students come into graduate programs because they want to contribute something to the discipline and to society. Faculty should be aware of these external motivations and should be prepared to help students identify a variety of paths that are not limited to careers in academia.

Valuing Commitment to Graduate Advising and Mentoring

If programs wish to improve their advising and mentoring practices, formal recognition of the time and effort faculty spend on these duties is recommended. No matter how obvious the inherent value of good advising and mentoring, it can be difficult to make such time- and energy-intensive practices a priority if they are unrecognized by departments or administration or if they take time away from other, more professionally visible activities. However, the long-term benefits of quality mentoring to the progress of the field, to the competitiveness of the program, and to the development of individual UNCG faculty as scholars and educators are worth the investment.

- Faculty are encouraged to start conversation in their departments about how better to inform colleagues of advising responsibilities and how to recognize and support each other in these major commitments.
- Faculty should be sure to include all stakeholders in these conversations. There is often a lack of communication between the TA supervisors and faculty advisors, even when both parties are mentoring the same graduate students. Faculty should look for ways for to work together closely with staff, individual advisors, TA supervisors, and Graduate Studies Committee Chairs when communicating about students.
- Faculty should encourage a departmental culture of recognition for excellence in advising and mentoring, recognizing the time and effort required to be a good advisor or mentor through such activities as a departmental or college-level awards and documented consideration of mentoring and advising activities in tenure, promotion, and hiring decisions.

Best Practices for Mentors and Advisors within Thesis and Dissertation Committees

Structured and Predictable Environments

Faculty can best foster effective communication, efficient use of time, and consistent progress by developing and maintaining a structured and predictable environment for their graduate students. When both parties
have a clear idea of what to expect and when, it is easier to prepare for exchanges. Faculty should familiarize themselves with policies that affect their graduate students.

- Faculty should hold regular, frequent meetings.
- Faculty should set students’ expectations for regular meetings explicitly and from the beginning, making it clear that if a student wants him or her as an advisor, the student must commit to regular meetings as standard procedure. Faculty should explain and demonstrate the rationale and usefulness of such meetings, and they should gather feedback and assess their relevance and usefulness.
- With input from the student, faculty should develop a written plan or progress agreement document which clearly outlines goals, deadlines for each goal, and steps for achieving them.
- Faculty should help students divide larger goals and projects into small manageable tasks. For instance, students may find it useful to divide large projects into units of time worked (i.e. 2 hour blocks with a 10 minute break in between) rather than by task (i.e. finish chapter 2).
- At the end of each semester, faculty and students together should review the written plan and discuss which goals were met and unmet. Based on that discussion, they should adapt and develop goals for the next semester’s progress.
- Faculty should excuse themselves from serving on graduate committees when circumstances of undue favoritism exist (see University Policy Manual) that could result in a conflict of interest.
- Faculty should serve on graduate student committees and impartially evaluate student progress and performance in regular and informative ways consistent with the practice of the field, regardless of religion, race, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, or other criteria that are not germane to academic evaluation.

Timely and Consistent Written Feedback
Predictable, consistent feedback encourages students to maintain an active level of production and accountability. The lack of regular and timely feedback can slow the student’s momentum and disrupt his or her progress toward the degree. Faculty should communicate clearly the turnaround time students should expect for feedback on written work; for example, four weeks is not an uncommon turnaround period for a standard dissertation chapter.

Writing Groups and Sponsored “Boot Camps”
Faculty should encourage students to seek information about Graduate School boot camps, which take place over several days or a week and offer graduate students the opportunity to write at a dedicated time and place for an extended period. Faculty mentors as well as colleagues are available to discuss writing with students. The Graduate School and a number of the academic programs also support formal and informal peer writing support groups on an ongoing basis. For more information, contact the Graduate School.

Best Practices for Mentors and Advisors of Students’ Professional Development

Demonstrating Interest
Faculty should demonstrate interest in graduate student projects and research activities. If faculty devote time to students and communicate with them clearly and regularly, this interest will be evident. There are other things faculty can do to help advisees become well-rounded and competitive colleagues.

- Faculty should model and maintain professional and ethical standards of conduct with students, colleagues and staff at all times. Unethical behavior such as discrimination, harassment, special relationships unduly influencing advising or committee composition, personal rivalries or lack of civility is unacceptable under any circumstances.
- Review UNC’s Policy Manual
- The UNCG Office of Research Integrity web site helps faculty and students stay current on issues of conducting ethical research.
- Faculty should help students locate the best resources for their graduate education progress. The following are important resources:
  - The Graduate School’s Current Students’ Page for Thesis and Dissertation Manual;
  - Graduation Application and Information;
  - Teaching Assistant Handbook;
  - Health Insurance;
  - On-Campus Employment
  - Workshops and Forums.
- Faculty should help teach students about the importance of networking outside the lab, outside the subfield, and outside the department.
- Faculty should encourage students to avoid becoming too compartmentalized and isolated during their graduate studies both in a personal and in a disciplinary sense by encouraging them to find appropriate professional and community networks and support groups. These groups may be within their graduate student cohort or department or a student or community group.

Professional Development
Faculty should encourage and support the professional development of graduate students, providing them with as much information and assistance as possible regarding programmatic and professional opportunities and decisions. Such support includes networking and document/skill development. The Graduate School, Faculty Teaching and Learning Commons, Career Services Center, and The Counseling and Testing Center regularly offer free workshops and services for graduate students. If faculty are interested in similar workshops focused on a department or college’s specific needs, they should contact the Graduate School. Faculty should also:

- When appropriate, encourage graduate students to participate in professional meetings or perform or display their work in public settings.
- Stimulate in each graduate student an appreciation of teaching.
- Create an ethos of collegiality so that learning takes place within a community of scholars.
- Prepare students to be competitive for employment that includes portraying a realistic view of the field and the market at any given time and making use of professional contacts for the benefit of their students, as appropriate.
- Assist graduate students to develop grant-writing skills, where appropriate.
- Help students develop artistic, interpretive, writing, verbal, and quantitative skills, when appropriate, in accordance with the expectations of the discipline.

Identifying Areas for Improvement
Although it can be difficult to discern and confront the line between
1. appropriately providing resources and help and
2. identifying a student who may lack the ability to succeed in a
   program, sometimes perceived shortcomings can be related to
   cultural or other differences.

In such cases, faculty should try to identify areas that need improvement
and help build up a student's skills in those areas specifically.

- Writing style and ability is a common area of concern. The Writing
  Center offers support for writers at all levels to address writing
development. However, every advisor/mentor should be able to
  assess writing "problems" and determine whether the issue involves
  editing and proofreading or, more broadly, the student's ability to think
  and write successfully at the graduate level.

- Writing Groups offered through the Graduate School are open to MA
  and Ph.D. students and candidates in any discipline. Each group, led
  by a doctoral student, will be composed of up to eight writers who
  will meet three hours per week at an appointed time determined by
  their availability. These regular, collaborative, and collegial meetings
  are a great way to encourage motivation, keep in contact with other
  graduate students, and receive careful, individualized feedback on
  your work from colleagues. For more information, students look
  online, register online at the beginning of the fall or spring semester,
  or contact the Graduate School.

Resources for Professional Development at UNCG

- The Graduate School's Graduate Student Life and Professional
  Development Page: (workshops, programs, and resources for
  graduate students and faculty on topics related to the dissertation
  process, academic career development, careers outside academia,
  publication and other scholarly pursuits, IRB guidelines, and the First
  Friday program)

- Faculty Teaching and Learning Commons: assessment and
  consultation services for faculty and TAs; workshops and services on
  teaching techniques and portfolio development and documentation.

- Career Services Center: on-line tools; resources and personal
  consultation services for self and career exploration; academic and
  non-academic job searches; document development; interviewing
  and negotiation.

- Counseling Center: stress management workshops; personal and
  group psychological and psychiatric counseling.

- Human Resources: insurance; benefits; leave policies.

- Preparing Future Leaders Program: Preparing Future Faculty and
  Preparing Future Professionals prepare students for careers in
  academia or in business, industry, government and non-profit
  agencies.

Best Practices for Mentors and Advisors
in Administering Financial Support

Clarity about Funding

Faculty should inform students about how funding in individual
departments operates. Graduate students should be made aware that
financial support can come in the form of assistantships, scholarships,
fellowships, and student loans. Financial support here refers to funding
available through departments such as assistantships, fellowships,
scholarships, and travel funds. Faculty members who administer financial
aid should explain to students when a financial award is contingent for
any reason and emphasize that these contingencies need to be taken
into account in a student's personal financial planning. Departments
and faculty members should to provide students with prompt notice of
funding availability and awards.

When funding is initially offered to graduate students, departments
should communicate:

- How much funding is being offered?
- How long this funding should be available (i.e., for one semester, for
  one year).
- Expectations for receiving or continuing to receive this funding,
  including performance expectations and any evaluations of work
  that can be expected. Departments should also carefully differentiate
  between the expectations for different types of funding (e.g.
  fellowships, scholarships, assistantships, etc.).
- How stable the funding is (e.g., does it come from a relatively stable
  endowment or grant? Is it contingent on state funding?).

This information may be difficult to provide because of fluctuating state
and university budgets, but departments should be as transparent as
possible with students about both the current and the anticipated future
funding situations.

Timely Information about Funding

Faculty should provide information about funding as soon as possible.
Faculty should be cautious, however, not to offer funding to students
that is not yet approved by the university. Once funding is approved and
departments know how it will be allocated, students should be promptly
notified via the appropriate channels.

Best Practices for Graduate Students
When Interacting with Mentors and Advisors

Graduate Student Conduct

It is essential that graduate students conduct themselves in a mature,
professional, and civil manner in all interactions with faculty and staff.
They should recognize that

- The faculty advisor provides the intellectual and instructional
  environment in which the student conducts research, and may,
  through access to teaching and research funds, also provide the
  student with financial support.
- Faculty have broad discretion to allocate their own time and other
  resources in ways which are academically productive.
- The faculty advisor is responsible for monitoring the accuracy,
  validity, and integrity of the student's research. Careful, well-
  conceived research reflects favorably on the student, the faculty
  advisor, and the University.

Students must exercise the highest integrity in taking examinations
and in collecting, analyzing, and presenting research data. They should
acknowledge the contributions of the faculty advisor and other members
of the research team to the student's work in all publications and
conference presentations, and maintain the confidentiality of the faculty
advisor's professional activities and research prior to presentation or
publication, in accordance with existing practices and policies of the
discipline. Graduate students should also take primary responsibility to
inform themselves of regulations and policies governing their graduate
studies.
Graduate education is structured around the transmission of knowledge at the highest level. In many cases, graduate students depend on faculty advisors to assist them in identifying and gaining access to financial and/or intellectual resources which support their graduate programs. In some academic units, the student’s specific advisor may change during the course of the student’s program. The role of advising may also change and become a mentoring relationship. The reward of finding a faculty mentor implies that the student has achieved a level of excellence and sophistication in the field, or exhibits sufficient promise to merit the more intensive interest, instruction, and counsel of faculty.

To this end, it is important that graduate students:

- Devote an appropriate amount of time and energy toward achieving academic excellence and earning the advanced degree.
- Be aware of time constraints and other demands imposed on faculty members and program staff.
- Take the initiative in asking questions that promote understanding of the academic subjects and advance the field.
- Communicate regularly with faculty advisors, especially in matters related to research and progress within the graduate programs.

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