

Best Practices for Dissertation Advisors and Advisees
University of Massachusetts Boston
Office Of Graduate Studies
Office for Faculty Development
2019

Best Practices for Dissertation Advisors

The dissertation advisor, along with the Dissertation Committee, the Office of Graduate Studies, and the Graduate Program Director, plays a critical role in a student's completion of the doctorate. The following guidelines are intended to help dissertation advisors understand and fulfill this role.

Communication and Feedback

1. Provide clear, timely, and honest communication about dissertation work. Communicate frequently with advisees about expectations and responsibilities, ensuring with each communication that there is mutual understanding. Discuss the dissertation's strengths and weaknesses; offer strategies for addressing the weaknesses. *Written* feedback is especially important although it should never replace face-to-face meetings. Meet one-on-one with advisees on a regular basis. When in-person meetings are not possible, connect through email, video chat, or phone. Frequency of meetings will vary by field and the student's stage in the dissertation.

2. Help advisees to plan, set attainable goals, and establish a timeline for completion of the dissertation. Though a plan may change, having one ensures that an advisee sees a path forward. Support advisees during the dissertation-writing phase, and provide advice about productive writing processes, the value of writing groups, and other forms of peer support. Use OGS dissertation tracking forms to monitor each advisee's progress. (*See * below for information regarding tracking forms.*)

3. Assist advisees in matters concerning the dissertation committee. Help them to select their dissertation committee and assure that the committee meets at least annually to review the student's progress (A committee may meet more frequently, depending on program guidelines or student needs.)

4. Decode or demystify departmental and OGS policies, requirements, and terminology regarding the dissertation. Help with IRB processes and compliance. Explain ethical standards for research and authorship.

Respect for Advisee

5. Provide an environment that is intellectually stimulating, emotionally supportive, safe, and free of harassment. Encourage openness about any challenges or difficulties that may impact an advisee's progress on the dissertation and work with the advisee to resolve them. Create environments that foster help-seeking and more importantly, minimize barriers to honest communication. You should not require advisees to perform tasks unrelated to their academic and professional development.

6. Understand and respect that each advisee brings different perspectives, experiences and interests. Different backgrounds warrant thoughtful advising approaches as well as sincere effort to understand individual experiences and interests and how these affect the advisee's progress.

7. Listen to and support an advisee's scholarly and professional goals. Advisors must realize that an advisee's goals will not always align with their own goals for a student. You should not place your own personal and professional goals over the advisee's goals for the dissertation.

Career Advising

8. Prepare an advisee to be competitive for future careers inside and beyond the academy, eg:

- Recognize and promote an advisee's contributions to research in publications or presentations in conferences;
- Support the development of teaching skills when relevant to career goals;
- Acknowledge the advisee's service as, for example, mentors and graduate student peers, etc.
- Connect an advisee to your own professional networks and support opportunities for the advisee to cultivate professional and technical skills that may open up broader career outcomes;
- Be realistic, open, and honest about career prospects and options.

Best Practices for Dissertation Advisees

Along with the dissertation advisor, an advisee has responsibilities in forging a productive and professional relationship. The following guidelines are intended to help advisees understand and fulfill their role.

Communication and Feedback

- 1. Take primary responsibility for completion of the dissertation and for communicating with your advisor toward its completion.** Work with your advisor to develop a project, set goals and a timeline. Strive to meet deadlines. Take advantage of resources that facilitate productive and consistent writing practices.
- 2. Communicate clearly with your advisor about questions regarding his/her feedback. Try to reach a point of mutual understanding.** Be available for face-to-face meetings and use other means when this is not possible. Maintain a high level of responsiveness and professionalism in your communication with your advisor.
- 3. Work with the dissertation advisor on matters concerning the dissertation committee.** Seek your advisor's help with its selection. Expect to meet with your committee at least once a year and take its advice seriously.
- 4. Be knowledgeable about dissertation policies and requirements.** Read available materials and seek clarification of any unclear policies, requirements, or terms. Take responsibility for understanding and practicing high ethical standards in research and authorship.

Respectful Collaboration

- 5. Expect and contribute to a working environment that is intellectually stimulating, emotionally supportive, safe and free of harassment.** Discuss promptly with your advisor any challenges you are facing that may affect your progress. If you experience an uncomfortable working environment, see: https://www.umb.edu/titleix/student_procedure
- 6. Help your advisor to understand your scholarly and professional goals.** The advisor should respect your individuality in relation to your interests and topic choice. In turn, you should be open to the dissertation advisor's perspective on a scholarly topic. Try to negotiate a plan that accommodates your goals and the program's standards.

Career Preparation

- 7. Take primary responsibility for developing a career following the completion of the doctoral degree.** Be open to your advisor's assistance in preparing you for a career through conference participation, contributions to publications, networking connections and guidance in basic career skills such as grant writing, oral and written communication, lab management, and animal and human research policies.

*** Dissertation tracking forms should be completed by the advisor and submitted to OGS each step of the way. The GPD completes form 1; the advisor completes forms 2-5. The forms can be found here:** https://www.umb.edu/academics/graduate/info_for_faculty/forms

This document draws heavily on similar documents from Brown University and the University of Iowa. It was prepared by Judith Goleman, Director, Office for Faculty Development; Rita Kiki Edozie, Assoc. Dean, MGS; Corinne Etienne, GPD, Applied Linguistics; Andrea Leverentz, GPD, Sociology, Heath MacIndoe, GPD, Public Policy and Public Affairs.

