

## Nelson Institute Graduate Student Guidelines for Working with Your Faculty Advisor

### **Purpose**

Your Nelson Institute Grad Student Representatives, with input from faculty and staff, have designed these informal guidelines to help graduate students in the Nelson Institute (NI) foster open communication with their advisors. We know some of these points may seem obvious, yet, in an interdisciplinary program like the Nelson Institute with a mix of students on professional and academic tracks, potential advisors and students often have very different goals and visions for a student's graduate program. While your advisor may be aware of these informal norms and guidelines, it is up to you as a graduate student to take the lead in communicating your goals to your advisor. Addressing these issues up-front can ensure that you find an advisor who shares your priorities. There are additional people in the institute who can serve as a resource for you: the student representatives (<http://www.nelson.wisc.edu/grad/roster/rep.htm>), the graduate program chairs (CBSD, EM, ER, or WRM), and/or the chair of Academic Programs. These folks can help you figure out how to get the most out of your time here at the Nelson Institute. The most important thing to remember is that **you should take charge of your own education goals while you are here!** Your faculty advisor and advisory committee are here to help guide you, but it is your responsibility to make sure your needs are being met.

### ***I. Choosing an advisor:***

There are a variety of approaches to finding a faculty advisor. Some students enter their program with an assigned preliminary advisor who serves as a guide for the first semester. Other students enter with an advisor who has offered full funding. Still others begin the program with no advisor at all. No matter what your situation, we encourage you to consider the following suggestions:

- 1) Find a few potential advisors – check out faculty websites or ask staff members for advice on which faculty members may be a good fit for your interests. Read a few papers the person has authored, ask to meet with him or her, and ask to meet with a few of their current students. Make sure that your working styles are compatible – **ask other students** about their working relationships with the advisor and ask how to be a successful student in the group. Research interests, yours and your advisor's, will impact your interactions, and having a good relationship involves a combination of matched research goals, work expectations and ethic, and personality fit.
- 2) Remember that your faculty advisor is equal in importance to your coursework, if not more important. This is the person who will help you develop your future career and can offer guidance on funding, publishing, and finding a job. Also remember that **your advisor has an interest in your success** and that you are adding to their career as well. This is even more so where your advisor is also your funding source.
- 3) Realize that you may have more than one “advisor” - depending on your situation, you

may end up with multiple advisors. If the faculty advisor you have chosen is a great fit for you intellectually, but he or she does not have funding available to support you, consider the relationship you build with your RA, PA, or TA supervisor as an opportunity for obtaining another advisory committee member. **With an interdisciplinary focus, it is rare to find all the resources you need in one person and seeking out these new relationships is also part of being a graduate student in the Nelson Institute.**

## *II. Departmental Forms and Requirements*

It is important that **you take the lead in understanding your degree program requirements.** Many faculty advisors, even though they are affiliated with the NI, are more familiar with the requirements of their home departments. So it is in your best interest to know your requirements so an advisor doesn't mistakenly send you down the wrong path. Also, take the lead in reminding your advisor of upcoming deadlines, your needs for successfully completing requirements, etc. You can find the Nelson Institute program requirements at <http://www.nelson.wisc.edu/education/being/requirements.html>.

## *III. Basic Support*

Once you have selected your advisor, schedule a time to meet to discuss the nuts and bolts of how you will work together. The following questions can help you determine how to have an open and productive relationship with your advisor. You don't have to ask them all, and many of these things will become apparent without ever having to ask, so you may want to just keep them in the back of your head to figure out how to foster a successful relationship with your advisor.

### *Meetings*

- Does your advisor have a regularly scheduled "group" or "lab" meeting that you should attend?
- Are you required to present your research plans and progress to your peers within your advisor's group or department?
- Who should initiate scheduling a meeting to discuss research ideas one-on-one?

### *Workspace and Computer Support*

- Does your advisor or their department have office space for you?
- Are there computers available for you to use?
- Is there a computer support person who will help you with software or other equipment?

### *Committee Development*

- Who chooses the members who will be on your advisory committee?
- At what point should the committee be finalized? (Note: ideally you should have your committee finalized by the middle of your second semester for an MS and before your qualifier for a PhD)

### *Professional Development (these questions will take time to answer – even a few years!)*

- What professional societies or conferences should you become familiar with, and at what

- point should you submit abstracts to present at conferences?
- What are the expectations for publishing, and how should you approach co-authorship with your advisor and/or other faculty?
  - Are there any research or field techniques that you should become acquainted with, even if they will not be a major component of your own research?
  - Should you seek international experiences?
  - Does funding exist to support any of your professional development goals?

#### ***IV. Setting time frame goals for degree completion***

Talk to your advisor early in your graduate career about your timeline goals for finishing your degree. Revisit these goals when appropriate. TIP: Revisiting your timeline goals at the end of each semester may help refocus your mutual energies.

#### ***V. Course of Study***

The courses you choose to take will play a major role in your time here at the Nelson Institute. Not only will your courses dictate how you spend your time, they may also determine how long it takes to finish your degree (e.g. if you choose courses that don't fulfill your program requirements), open doors to new research topics, and help you identify potential advisory committee members. Talk to your advisor early in your first semester to make sure that the courses you've chosen will meet your program requirements. Also, talk to other students about the courses they've taken and what they recommend. Ask your advisor:

- How will you and your advisor work together to develop a course of study that best prepares you for your research and career goals?
- How many courses/credits should you take each semester?
- Do you need to check with your advisor on every course you select?
- CBSD MS and ER PhD students: What, if any, previous course work would they allow you to use toward program requirements?

#### ***VI. Progress goals and accomplishments***

Beside your goal of completing the degree, you probably have other ideas of what you'd like to accomplish while a grad student. Maybe you want to become involved in a professional society, publish a peer-reviewed article, or develop your grant writing skills. All of these aspects of professional development can serve as milestones as you progress through your degree program. Discuss your interests and goals with your advisor early in your career to figure out how to best spend your time as a grad student. Some of these goals may also help you choose your coursework and advisory committee members. TIP: Report your accomplishments to your advisor once a semester to keep them aware of how you are doing to inform them what you need guidance on, and to provide them with information for a solid letter of recommendation when you finish your degree.

#### ***VII. Developing a Thesis or Dissertation Plan***

Work with your advisor to develop a research plan that will allow you to meet your collective goals (and also meet any requirements of your funding agency should you be lucky enough to

have support!). Make sure your advisory committee is supportive of the research plan as well, and that the final proposal reflects the input from each committee member. TIP: Share early drafts of your proposal with your advisor; share more developed drafts with committee members, and ask them for help in specific areas of the proposal that match their expertise.

### ***VIII. Developing a Funding Strategy***

Funding is difficult to come by, no matter what your area of research. You should ask your advisor for suggestions about applying for grants or fellowships, but also be open to research, teaching, or project assistantships from within or outside your advisor's department. Ask your advisor what role they expect to play in helping you secure funding for both your research and for covering tuition costs each semester. TIP: If you are interested in a particular fellowship or grant from outside the University, you may want to meet with Mary Mercier to see if Institute students have applied in the past. If so, how have they done, and does she have any insights or tips?

### ***IX. Advice on Resolving Conflicts with your Advisor***

So what happens if you've tried to keep an open line of communication with your advisor, but things just aren't working out? Don't worry – you're not alone! Sometimes students and advisors just decide their research interests really aren't the same, and they part happily with the student skipping off to work with another faculty advisor. On a few rare occasions, conflicts arise between students and advisors that can't be so easily mended. If that happens, you have several ways to remedy the situation: 1) Bring the problem you have straight to your advisor to see if you can fix the miscommunication and move on, 2) If that fails, try to find an outside mediator to bring a new perspective to the situation who may help repair the problem, 3) If that doesn't work, bring the problem to your program chair, and ask for their help resolving the issue, 4) If you decide that things really just aren't working out, find a new advisor. Remember that your relationship will take dips and recover, just like any other, and that the pressures on both you and your advisor can magnify what are really small concerns. While no one wants to waste energy in a relationship that isn't working, make a strong effort to resolve any issues. Switching advisors may not be the answer if you are not clear about what is wrong or what you want. Keep in mind that both you and your advisor are responsible for maintaining a good working relationship, so be proactive in preventing problems before they arise if at all possible.

*If any portion of this document is unclear to you, please feel free to discuss your concerns and questions with your student reps, your advisor, Nelson Institute staff, or your program chair.  
Good luck, and may your experience here in the Nelson Institute be productive and happy!*

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