

Guidelines for Graduate Students and Advisors
in the
Nelson Institute for Environmental Studies
at the
University of Wisconsin-Madison

Updated Aug. 30, 2017

The Nelson Institute's Environment and Resources (E&R) program requires a research thesis of all M.S. and Ph.D. students. For any graduate thesis work, the student-advisor relationship plays a large role in student success.

The Nelson Institute has unique characteristics affecting graduate advising. Nelson Institute faculty advisors are drawn from over 40 departments on campus, offering our graduate students a wide range of potential academic and research experiences. Each student can connect with an advisor that fits his or her learning goals and work style, and can engage additional faculty expertise through the thesis committee or as co-advisors.

This interdisciplinary richness is a strength, but there are challenges. Some advisors may not have had experience working with interdisciplinary students, and may bring different departmental cultures and disciplinary norms to bear on the advising relationship. This may increase the risk of mismatch in expectations, especially around funding, accountability, authorship, and the differing roles of students within a research group. These characteristics of interdisciplinary programs may compound recognized challenges in graduate advising such as advisor feedback on student work, disagreement among committee members, authorship on publications, rate of student progress, appropriate boundaries for personal relationships, work environment, and sexual harassment¹.

The UW-Madison [Office for Equity and Diversity](#) (OED) provides general guidance and several specific resources for student-advisor relations, including an anti-bullying policy currently under development. Students and advisors may also wish to review national resources such as the National Academy of Science's "[On Being a Scientist: A Guide to Responsible Conduct in Research](#)."²

Here we set forward the expectations and norms for Nelson Institute graduate advising. By ensuring that both students and advisors understand the basic tenets of graduate advising within the Nelson Institute, all members of the community have a basis for building successful and productive advising relationships.

¹ <http://chronicle.com/article/Dealing-With-a-Difficult/64035/>

² http://www.nap.edu/openbook.php?record_id=12192

For Students

- * **Communication is key.** If you feel you are unable to have frank and helpful conversations with an advisor on subjects related to your program and your prospects after graduation, you should probably consider changing advisors. You have a right to do this, though you should be respectful and courteous in the process.
- * **Take responsibility for your program.** Your advisor is expected to be a supportive mentor. Part of that should include being aware of your progress, encouraging you when things are going well, and expressing concerns if problems are perceived. However, you have primary responsibility for getting through your program. Many significant problems will not be apparent to an advisor, and it is your responsibility to come to them (or to someone) with your concerns.
- * **Do not expect your advisor to know the rules or to be aware of or be sensitive to deadlines.** This recognition is especially important if your advisor has not advised many E&R students in the past. You are responsible for scheduling meetings with your advisor, and for keeping track of deadlines and requirements. You are responsible for keeping your committee members informed as to your progress. **Be aware of the major milestones for your degrees and the associated requirements.** Also note that for Ph.D. students, the nature of the qualifying and preliminary exams is not fixed by the E&R program. The structure of these exams is specified by the student's advisor and dissertation committee.
- * **Lay out, with your advisor, a plan and a schedule for your progress through the program,** to be revised as appropriate. This is always important, but it becomes crucial as you approach the final stages of your program. One reason is that the final stages require coordination with your committee. Make sure you have realistic self-imposed deadlines and that your advisor and committee members agree to your proposed schedule for reviews of and feedback on your thesis. Recognize that faculty have many responsibilities, so please provide adequate time for their responses. You may benefit from using the Graduate School's process for developing an Individual Development Plan (<http://grad.wisc.edu/pd/idp>). If you are funded through a grant from the National Institutes of Health, you are actually required to develop an IDP.
- * **Ask questions,** and consider the work relationship early in the research and grad school process. Recognize that **advisors will have different expectations for your working relationship.** Different academic cultures have different norms about graduate student independence, authorship of work, and financial support for graduate students. Some advisors may provide written agreements about aspects of the advising relation. Make sure you understand all the tenets, whether expressed in written or oral form. Ask your advisor about research and teaching opportunities if you want to practice those skills. Sometimes they have data on which you can hone your statistical, analytical, and written skill sets.
- * **Talk with advisors about the expectations for funding,** both prior to enrolling, and throughout the graduate process. Students should understand the connections between funding and the nature of their work. In general, the more independent you wish to be, the

less likely it will be that an advisor will be able to provide funding for you. Some fellowships provide support for independent research, but even in these cases your success will require the mentorship and engagement of your advisor. Some advisors expect that a student will work on a project of the student's own choosing, whereas other advisors expect that a student will work on a research activity that is already underway, or on a research project designed and managed by the advisor.

*** Some advisors may expect research contributions or professional activities beyond your thesis or formal coursework.** For example, you may be expected to attend the advisor's lab meetings, to assist in organizing visits by visiting scholars, or to write parts of papers for publication. If you feel these expectations are unreasonable, or that they interfere with your education, discuss your concerns first with your advisor. If you are unable to do this, or if the outcome is not satisfactory to you, you may consult with your committee members or program staff in the Nelson Institute Academic Programs Office.

* All students have **the right to work in a safe environment**. If you feel uncomfortable with your work environment, the OED web site encourages being proactive, "... consultation is not escalation. Timely discussion of people's concerns may allow resolution before alternatives become limited. The university will protect confidentiality to the extent possible under the law." The university provides information online <http://www.oed.wisc.edu/sexual-harassment-information.htm>, and for your particular case talk with your advisor, committee members, advising staff or leadership in the Nelson Institute, or UW-Madison deans (contacts below).

* Talking with someone is the first step if you feel your academic or personal rights have been violated, or you have been sexually harassed. Even if you simply feel uncomfortable, our staff and trained faculty can help you think about next steps.

* If you feel your professional relationship with your advisor has been compromised, regardless of the type of disagreement or negative interaction, the Nelson Institute will work with you to find an alternate advisor.

Contact points for students:

Nelson Institute Associate Director for Research and Education: Paul Zedler

Contact information: 608-265-8018; phzedler@wisc.edu

Nelson Institute Staff Advisor: Jim Miller

Contact information: 608-263-4373; jemiller@wisc.edu

UW-Madison Dean of Students Office

Ervin (Kipp) Cox, Assistant Dean: 608-263-5700; ervin.cox@wisc.edu

Kathy Kruse, Assistant Dean: 608-263-5700; kathy.kruse@wisc.edu

Harassment/Discrimination/Sexual Assault/Bullying

If you feel as though you or someone you know is a victim of one of these, or you just have questions, contact the Office for Equity and Diversity (OED).

Contact information: 608-263-2378; OEDcomments@gmail.com;
<http://www.oed.wisc.edu/>

You may also talk to any trusted staff or faculty member on campus if you feel they can help you deal with these issues.

Counseling/Psychological Health

If you are seeking personal counseling, contact University Health Services' Counseling and Consultation at 608-265-5600.

If it is an urgent mental health issue, contact 608-265-5600 ext 9.

If it is an emergency, then just dial 911.

Research Ethics

For questions about research ethics, go to <https://www.rsp.wisc.edu/ethics.html>

You can also contact Brian Fox for questions/concerns about research misconduct.

Contact information: 608-262-1044; RIO@research.wisc.edu

Grade Issues

Contact the instructor if there are grade discrepancies. If there are more issues, contact the program chairperson.

Program Chairperson: Sara Hotchkiss

Contact information: 608-265-6751 or 608-263-4076;

shotchkiss@facstaff.wisc.edu

Funding/Financial Aid

Talk to your advisor first about possible funding they may have available.

If funding is not available through your advisor and you are still searching, go to

<http://grad.wisc.edu/studentfunding/steps> to learn about other possible ways you might obtain it.

GradConnections Weekly is also a great resource. It is a weekly newsletter emailed out to all graduate students which often times provides available funding opportunities.

For Advisors

* Prior to accepting the responsibility of advising a Nelson Institute graduate student, **clarify your expectations and standard advising processes with the prospective student.** Written guidelines, informal emails, and/or candid discussions can all work to ensure that a prospect understands your expectations before joining your research group or student cohort.

* **Talk with prospective graduate students about funding opportunities**, both prior to accepting a prospect, and throughout the graduate process. Although **advisors are not responsible for providing students with funded assistantships**, you should be aware of your advisee's funding status and share information on funding opportunities. Provide timely notification of changes, particularly unexpected funding losses that will affect your ability to support a student.

* **Act in the best interest of your advisee. Be transparent and proactive** about your expectations. **Meet and communicate** with them on a regular basis to discuss courses, research, timelines, deadlines, professional development, and employment. You are expected to provide timely and substantive feedback on research design, methods, literature reviews, and thesis/dissertation drafts along with a reasonable timeline for each. Talk and **be clear about policies regarding authorship** with your student. Discuss your expectations for meetings, communication, feedback, timelines, deadlines, and authorship early in the advisor-advisee arrangement. **Expect to help your student with their job search** by talking about their options. **Be prepared to write them letters of recommendation and to advocate for them** in their quest for employment.

* **If you expect advisees to attend events or contribute work products beyond the graduate thesis** or specifically paid activities (like a TA or PA), **these should be clearly discussed and explained.** The student should know how his or her contribution will be recognized, and how this activity supports the broader educational or research goals.

* **For Ph.D. students, advisors are responsible for administering the qualifying exam, the preliminary exam, and the final dissertation defense.** The format and implementation of the qualifying exam and preliminary exam are at the advisor's discretion, and the Nelson Institute's Academic Programs Office can provide norms and guidelines to support your leadership of the Ph.D. committee.

* **For M.S. students, advisors are responsible for administering a final thesis defense.** Advisors are strongly encouraged to conduct an initial review of the thesis topic or proposal review with the student and entire thesis committee. This could simply be performed at the time of the student's certification meeting.

* **You are responsible for creating a safe work environment for your student advisees.** The advisor should keep in mind professional ethics and responsibility in both work and informal engagement. Avoid any actions or discourse of a personal nature that are

inappropriate to a professional relationship. As the overseer of a group of students, you should be mindful of interactions within your group as well.

* All advisors should be aware of UW-Madison sexual harassment policies and definitions, and keep in mind that even consensual romantic or sexual relationships present a conflict of interest when a student-advisor power differential is involved³. Advisors should be expected to read <http://www.oed.wisc.edu/sexual-harassment-information.htm>.

The following sections in quotations are from the OED web site:

“... if you are in a position of authority (E.g., principal investigator, supervisor, manager, department chair director, dean)

You are responsible for:

- taking reasonable steps to prevent sexual harassment in your unit,
- taking immediate and appropriate corrective action to stop harassment when you know or have reason to know it may exist,
- preventing its recurrence, and
- remedying effects that could reasonably have been prevented.”

*** You should expect intellectual engagement and professional respect from your student, and you should provide intellectual support, academic mentorship, and a professional work environment.** Resources within the Nelson Institute and across campus can help you deal with problems that arise in graduate advising. In conforming to the above principles, do not sacrifice professionally appropriate insistence on rigor and high academic standards. While each advisor-advisee arrangement is unique, the practice of frequent, clear, and open communication is crucial.

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³ <http://www.secfac.wisc.edu/governance/legislation/Pages300-399.htm#303>

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