

Expectations in Advising



Department of Computer Science & Engineering, University of Washington, Oct. 2005

A note from the chair

The success of UW Computer Science & Engineering depends enormously on the success of our students, which in turn depends on active and thoughtful advising relationships between students and their advisors. This document is based on a tremendous amount of work by our graduate students, including extensive discussions, surveys, and a session at the 2005 annual departmental retreat. The goal is to make us all better participants in the advising relationship by increasing the clarity of the responsibilities and by increasing our mindfulness of this critically valuable and important process.

My personal advising and mentoring philosophy is drawn from my own Ph.D. advisor, Nico Habermann, who said to focus on graduating terrific students, which guarantees terrific research – focusing on terrific research may or may not lead to the graduating of terrific students.

The material in this document contains wonderful advice for students, and I recommend you read it carefully and keep it around to refer to now and then.

Best of luck in finding an advising relationship that can help you reach beyond your own expectations – we know you can, and we're ready to help!

- David Notkin

CSE Dept. Chair '01-'06

Communication is the key

Your advising relationship is the most important academic relationship that you have during your graduate career. The success of this relationship depends on many factors: personalities, interests, styles, and most importantly, communication. Getting an early start on building an open relationship with your advisor increases your chances of being successful and of enjoying graduate school.

As a graduate student, you will learn more than you ever thought you could about computer science, research, education, and hopefully, relationships. You will meet many new people and form personal bonds that will last a lifetime. Undeniably, with regards to your success in graduate school, none of the relationships you form in graduate school will affect your career more than the one you form with your advisor.

An advisor and student craft their relationship over the course of many years, creating a trust that centers around the meeting of expectations that

each one has for the other. Therefore, it is absolutely essential that you understand what you can expect from your advisor, and what he or she can expect from you.

Above all, it is important to remember that the biggest driving factor behind your success in graduate school is you. It is your responsibility to take charge of your own career and its direction. Faculty members, and your advisor specifically, while supervising your progress, cannot help you advance without you giving 100% effort.

At the 2005 faculty retreat, a committee of students held a session on communication and expectations in advising relationships. Endorsed by the faculty, this handout is the result of that session.

What you can expect from your advisor

The first thing you should understand about advisors is that each is unique. Each advisor has his or her own ideas about everything from quals, to publishing, to making pizza. You cannot expect your advisor to be exactly like any other, just as you are not like any other student.

What you can expect, however, is for your advisor to communicate his or her thoughts and ideas to you, especially when they pertain directly to your life. When your advisor is not communicative about key topics, you should feel right at home approaching him or her for clarification.

Communication: Communication is the most important facet of your working relationship with your advisor. Your advisor should clearly communicate his

or her expectations. Your advisor's expectations regarding the following things are especially important.

- **Quals:** Timeframe, publishability, scope
- **Generals:** Timeframe, style, scope, communication during the exam, relationship to thesis
- **Progress:** Milestones, publications

How you and your advisor communicate with each other is also important. You can expect your advisor to adhere to the following ground rules.

- **Regularly scheduled meetings**
- **Active consideration of your ideas during meetings**
- **Prompt email response**

Feedback: Receiving feedback from your advisor will help you to adjust your performance to meet his or her expectations. Expect:

- **Honest feedback**
- **Constructive criticism**
- **Positive feedback**
- **An occasional "kick," for encouragement**

Mentoring: A major role of faculty members is to mentor students. From the faculty side, mentoring involves:

- **Helping you choose career direction, research direction, and professional activities**
- **Knowing your educational, cultural, and employment background**

If there's a problem...

We always hope that things go well. Sometimes, they don't. Here's what to do.

1. Don't wait. Deal with it NOW. Problems in advising relationships, just as in any other relationship, cannot be resolved without good communication.

2. Poll your officemates, mentors, and groupmates. Chances are, your older officemates have been there. Leverage that experience when you can.

3. Talk to the Grad. Program Coordinator, David Notkin (notkin@cs). David is this year's GPC and he is more than happy to lend his expertise to helping resolve your problem.

4. Talk to Lindsay Michimoto (lindsaym@cs). Lindsay, as we all know, is one of the most valuable resources we have as graduate students. If you are unable to resolve a particular conflict, let Lindsay weigh in on your problem.

5. Talk to Hank Levy, Dept. Chair. A faculty member for many years, and Hank Levy has experience with all facets of the advising experience. He also happens to be a nice guy.

- **Knowing your educational and professional goals**

Part of mentoring is creating well rounded students. Expect your advisor to guide you to:

- **Plan and perform research**
- **Teach in a classroom setting**
- **Communicate your research and ideas effectively**
- **Work on service committees**
- **Mentor younger students**

What you can expect from your advisor

Top five...

1. Clear communication
2. Constructive criticism
3. Positive feedback
4. Career mentoring
5. Regular meetings

Mentor vs. Boss

What's the tone of your relationship?

Our department culture fosters the idea that students and faculty are colleagues, an idea most students prefer. However, reality dictates that faculty are "colleagues with authority." It is important to maintain balance in your advising relationship.

- Does your advisor treat you as a colleague rather than an employee?
- Does your advisor help you make decisions that are in your best interest?
- Does your research involve you implementing your advisors ideas or more joint brainstorming and collaboration?
- Does your advisor respect your personal non-work time?

In an ideal world, every student's advisor would be his or her mentor. However, this may not always be possible or beneficial. In the case that your research advisor is not mentoring you well, it would be beneficial for you to discuss this with your advisor, or to seek advice from another faculty member.

Networking: As is often true elsewhere, it's not what you know, it's who you know. Expect your advisor to:

- Advocate for you, both inside and outside the department.

Joint advising?

One advisor isn't enough? Perhaps consider a co-advising situation with complementary faculty members.

- At conferences, to take the time to introduce you to his contacts
- Utilize his or her professional network during job searches
- Nominate you for fellowships and awards you deserve

Research Advising: One of your top priorities here will be research. Expect your advisor to:

- Know your research goals
- Provide research direction according to your level, ambition, and independence
- Assess your individual needs
- Save state between meetings
- Communicate about conferences and publishing
- Give direction/help with technical problems

Meetings: Face to face interactions allow collaboration, progress reporting, and mentoring time for students. Expect your advisor to:

- Meet with you regularly
- Be available for extra face time within a couple of days of a request.
- Respect your time by showing up on time
- Not read email during meetings
- Schedule/cancel meetings at least a day in advance, when possible
- Tell you if he or she is leaving town

Logistics: Program milestones and funding can be sources of confusion for younger students. Expect your advisor to:

- Understand the program milestones that you must pass.
- Make your funding status very clear
- Help you find other sources of funding such as TA-ships or fellowships should an RA-ship not be available

What your advisor can expect from you

By understanding your advisor's expectations and by meeting or exceeding those expectations, you are helping to assure your success in graduate school.

So, what can your advisor expect from you?

Communication: As we've continually stressed, communication is the key to success. Your advisor expects you to:

- Speak up if problems arise

What do you like about your advisor?

The following are direct responses from a survey of graduate students.

- "My advisor genuinely cares about his students - both professionally and personally."
- "He is pleasant and funny and we make jokes frequently."
- "...great at discussing research and publications."
- "I like his willingness to share ideas."
- "...being considerate, not only on research, but also on my career and personal life."
- "My advisor is very encouraging and keeps me motivated and directed."

What your advisor can expect from you

Top five...

1. Own your own career
2. Accept constructive criticism
3. Honest progress reports
4. Initiative
5. High quality work

- Listen to what he/she says
- Respect his/her ideas
- Accept constructive criticism
- Provide honest progress reporting
- Respond promptly to communication

Performance: Each advisor has different expectations about the performance of his or her students. Keep in mind the following expectations your advisor has for you so things run smoothly.

- Show initiative
- Do what you've promised
- Produce high quality work
- Regular progress
- Meet agreed-upon goals

Meetings: Just as you can expect your advisor to meet with you face-to-face, you'll find that

faculty also have expectations regarding meetings.

- Prepare appropriately, otherwise reschedule
- Show up on time
- Attend all group meetings and relevant 590's
- Meet on advisor's request, with reasonable notice

Professional Development: You are in graduate school to become world-class researchers as well as well rounded potential faculty members. You're expected to:

- Own your own career
- Actively consider future research directions
- Be willing to mentor younger students (grads and undergrads)
- Write paper reviews
- Attend conferences/workshops
- Stay updated on relevant research

Grunt Work: Let's face it. This place does not run itself. As a graduate student, faculty expect you to:

- Maintain labs, software, and hardware for your group

- Document your research, designs, code, and meetings
- Be a TA, especially for niche subjects

Personal issues: We are all human. We all know that school is not the only thing in our life. However, faculty have expectations regarding your priorities and vacation time.

- Make CSE your number one priority, especially regarding consulting, outside jobs, etc
- Take vacation, but schedule it appropriately
- Stay interested in your work
- Understand that faculty members are juggling a lot: teaching, research, advising, committees, and their families, too!

A big transition

From consumer to producer

Graduate school is your time to make the transition from knowledge consumer to knowledge producer. It is a difficult transition that everyone makes in their own time. Acquiring the skills necessary to make this transition is something that can only happen through interaction with experienced researchers, like your advisors.

Involved in the making

Seth Bridges (chair)
seth@cs.washington.edu

Shani Jayant
cjayant@cs.washington.edu

Mausam
mausam@cs.washington.edu

Kasia Wilamowska
kasiaw@cs.washington.edu

Scott Saponas
ssaponas@cs.washington.edu

Brian Van Essen
vanessen@cs.washington.edu

Sarah Schwarm
sarahs@cs.washington.edu

Julie Letchner
letchner@cs.washington.edu

Mira Dontcheva
mirad@cs.washington.edu

Aaron Shon
aaron@cs.washington.edu

The CSE Faculty