Finding an Advisor and Developing an Effective Working Relationship with Them

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Link for Captions
Finding an Advisor
Exercise: Ask Faculty Member to Work with Them

• Pair up with a partner
• You will role play talking with a faculty member in their office and ask them if you can join their research group.
• Take 2 minutes to do this, and then switch roles.
When student, what were you trying to find out?

Funding

Project ideation

Advising style: hands on or hands off

Be systematic when seeking out potential advisors
When faculty, what were you trying to find out?

- Funding
- Advising style: mentoring
- Project availability

Reflect on fit
What do we consider when admitting/advising students?
How to find a good advisor/mentor

Get to know your potential advisor(s)
- Meet them @ conferences
- Chat virtually (but don’t be offended if advisor can’t meet)
- Know their research
  - read their papers (but propose your own ideas)
- Be persistent (but don’t pester)

Get to know their lab culture
- Talk to multiple grad students in the lab/research group!
  - including graduated students
  - ex-students?
- Understand expectations
  - funding structure
  - work style
  - project ideation
Managing the Advisor-Advisee Relationship
A PhD program is an Apprenticeship

An ideal advisor is ....

- a good research advisor
- a good mentor (as *one part* of your mentor team)
- a good fit
Communication is key to management

• Multiple vehicles for communication
  – Regular meetings
    • Networking
    • Group meeting - lab, research group, project
    • One-on-one - research progress, feedback
    • Multiple advisors
  – Emails
    • Keep emails short and direct
    • All messages are (should be) read → responses may be slow
    • Be mindful of response timing expectations

• Ask for more time (early) if you need it
Make the Most of Every Interaction

• **Outline** the meeting
  – Identify discussion points
  – Verify/validate the motivation behind each discussion point
  – Send out an agenda before the meeting

• Make sure expectations and assumptions are clear, ask for feedback regularly

• Maintain project archives
  • Take notes, organize them, and send out summaries
Discussing Change
Exercise: Hard discussions with your advisor

- Find a partner. Pick a scenario and assign roles (student, advisor).
- Role play for 2 minutes.
- Switch roles after 2 minutes.

Scenarios:
- (1) Tell your advisor you would like to work on one of the other projects in your group.
- (2) Tell your advisor you feel you should be a co-author on a paper your labmate is working on.
- (3) Tell your advisor you are thinking about switching advisors.
HARD DISCUSSIONS

What was the most difficult part?

What were some successful strategies you/your partner used?
What if it’s not working….

Sometimes, despite all your good efforts, things don’t work. How to handle it depends on the situation

• poor working style fit
• poor research fit
• something more serious is wrong

Try to remember, changing advisors is NOT the end of the world:

• Often, if you feel there is a problem then your advisor likely feels that way as well
• While changing advisors may cost some time, it may be less than you think and may be made up by better results/outcomes
What if it’s not working....

Changing institutions

- if no other advisors are a good research fit
- if you can find a better fit

How to prevent this from happening

- select institutions where there are at least 2 faculty members of interest
- regular check-ins with your advisor
- mutual feedback sessions
What if you need to add an advisor?
Wrap Up

• How to find an advisor?

• How to maintain your relationship?

• Discussing change with your advisor!
Questions?

Resources

A site with some good tips (some of which we’ve adopted & adapted for this talk):

https://greatresearch.org/2013/08/14/managing-your-advisor/
Back Up Slides
Take home messages

Do your research! Look for

• A good research advisor
  – Productively engaged in research you are passionate about
  – Willing and able to effectively teach and guide you in research
  – Able to help fund your research

• A good mentor
  – Cares about your career & effectively supports your success

• A good fit
  – Personalities, research style & philosophy, lab structure and people

• It takes a village: You may need more than one advisor and mentor

• It’s a two way street: Communicate to your advisor the support that you need & try to work out problems
Finding advisors for interdisciplinary research

• One, two or more advisors and mentors? Often, it takes a village.

• Do they appropriately balance breadth vs depth of research?

• Do they have a core identity that supports or overlaps with yours?

• Are they open-minded and enthusiastic about learning from other fields?

• Can they provide financial support for interdisciplinary research?

• Will you find a community of researchers that support your work?