How to Make the Most of Student-Advisor Relationships

Margaret Martonosi
Princeton University

Maya Cakmak
University of Washington
Link to captions

Quick Poll

Who is currently a PhD student? (vs MSc)
Who already has a grad/research advisor? (vs in the process of selecting one)
How to Make the Most of Student-Advisor Relationships

What is the role of the advisor?
What is your role as the student?
Navigating challenging situations
How to Make the Most of Student-Advisor Relationships

What is the role of the advisor?

What is your role as the student?

Navigating challenging situations
Two (Extreme) Advising Relationships

Hands-off

Hand-holding

Neither is ideal.
Communication and agency are key!
Your advisor is a guide

Guidance on:

• Research topics
• Publication venues
• Career planning
• Courses to take
Your advisor is a teacher

Teach you:

• Research skills and strategy
• How to evaluate existing research
• Communication and presentation skills
• Professional and ethical behavior
Your advisor is your promoter

• Foster and promote your career
• Enable career opportunities, visibility, and awards
• Support and encourage you through your job hunt and beyond
Your advisor is your network seed

• Your advisor can expose you to opportunities for networking at conferences and other events.

• Their colleagues and your research lab peers will become important nodes in your network.
Activity

[THINK] Work alone to make a list of your **priorities and preferences** in what you expect from an advisor (1 min)

[PAIR] In pairs or triples, discuss **your lists and why they are important** to you. Do you have **similarities or differences** in your answers? (4 min)

[SHARE] Volunteer one or two items you discussed to the larger group (3 min)
How to Make the Most of Student-Advisor Relationships

What is the role of the advisor?

What is your role as the student?

Navigating challenging situations
What is Your Role as a Student?

• Manager of your graduate experience
• Need to be proactive and organized
• Need to effectively communicate
  • Goals
  • Areas for growth
  • What does and does not work for you
  • How advisors and mentors can help
  • Meeting cadence and preferred ad hoc communication mechanisms
• Need to seek out and take advantage of other resources
• Need to be open to your advisor’s feedback and guidance
Manage Regular Advising Meetings

• Bring a written plan (e.g., slides, agenda document)
• Start with context
  • Problem you’re working on and why it’s important
  • Target deliverable
  • Progress made so far
• Discuss recent accomplishments
  • New definitions, related work, insights, progress on implementation, experiments, data, proposed solutions, …
• Discuss problems or challenges
  • Bring detailed examples
Manage Regular Advising Meetings (cont.)

• Agree on what to accomplish next
  • Propose next steps
  • Discuss and revise accordingly
    • e.g., too ambitious, too limited, pursue some intermediate steps or totally new direction
  • Discuss concrete products for next meeting
  • Provide written summary on next steps
• Maintain research notebook
Manage Discussions of Longer Term Plans

• Discuss longer term goals and strategies for achieving those goals
  • Paper submission
  • Acquisition of skills or experiences
  • Career goals

• Review your overall progress
  • Ask if you are making adequate progress
  • Discuss your strengths and weaknesses
    • How you can build on your strengths
    • How you can address your weaknesses
  • Ask about specific opportunities
    • Internships, workshops, fellowships, teaching opportunities
Navigate Your Own Path

• Find and explore opportunities to develop your skills
  • Take courses on research methods, statistics, data visualization, etc.
  • Attend workshops on specific technology needed for research
  • Attend writing workshops
  • Attend teaching workshops
  • Give talks (including practice talks)
  • …
Activity

[THINK] What are some areas of growth for you regarding your responsibilities in the adviser-student relationship? (1 min)

[PAIR] Discuss your responses and how you plan to work on making improvements. Do you have similarities or differences in your answers? (4 min)

[SHARE] Volunteer one or two items you discussed to the larger group (3 min)
How to Make the Most of Student-Advisor Relationships

What is the role of the advisor?

What is your role as the student?

Navigating challenging situations

What to do when the relationship has ups and downs?
Relationships Have Ups & Downs

• Conflict over
  • Mismatched working styles
  • Mismatched expectations
  • The relationship is one-sided
  • Lack of funding

• When problems become acute
  • Communication is breaking
  • Frequent arguments
  • Lack of interest from at least one side
  • Inconsistencies and contradictions
How to repair a relationship

• Open/frank communication
• Setting up boundaries
• Define common and realistic goals and expectations
• Define contingency plans
• Balance the effort
• Find a co-advisor
• Talk to your peers in your research lab
• Talk to your peers in other labs
• Learn about campus resources such as counseling center, ombuds office, etc.
Activity

In pairs, one of you play the student and one the advisor. Consider a scenario in which you are discussing how much to work over the upcoming holiday to meet a paper deadline.

>> As the advisor, you are junior faculty, and this submission is extremely important to your tenure case.

>> As the student, you are going home to see family for the first time in 3 years.
Despite all intentions, the relationship can still fail
How to break up with your advisor

• You don’t need to stay on an unhappy situation
  • Find another advisor on your same department
  • Switch programs/universities

• The way in which you make your exit matters!
  • **Best case scenario:** your old advisor is an ally, participates in your committee, writes a recommendation letter
  • **Worst case scenario:** you made a lifelong enemy, whose only goal in life is to ruin your career

• Do NOT burn all the bridges
  • Communicate, be polite, be helpful
How Do You Find Additional Support?

• Create or join peer networks
  • Paper reading group
  • Qualifying exam study group
  • Thesis writing group
  • Online student groups
  • Conference student groups

• Find additional mentors
  • Senior research member of group
  • Research group alumni
  • Industry researcher in your area
  • Former research mentors
  • Teaching faculty mentor

• How do you create connections?
  • Volunteer to present your work
  • Ask for feedback on preliminary research
  • Ask questions after a talk
  • TA for a faculty member
  • Do an internship
  • Participate in “Meet a Senior X” programs
Questions?

• Come talk to us or email
  • mrm@cs.princeton.edu
  • mcakmak@cs.washington.edu

• More advice on student-advisor relationships
  • UW Allen School Advising Guide
  • Brown Graduate Advising and Mentoring
  • Y. Kohno’s “Advice on advice” (and more)
  • N. Feamster’s “Managing your Advisor” (and more)
  • D.A. Patterson’s “Your Students Are Your Legacy”
  • J.D. Ullman’s “Advising Students for Success”
  • M. DesJardins’s “How to Succeed in Graduate School: A Guide for Students and Advisors”