Getting the Most from Advisors and Mentors

Advising can be defined as offering constructive counsel and guidance to graduate students in order to assist them in meeting their academic and professional goals. An advisor helps to evaluate students’ skills, talents, and performance as well as assists in the selection of coursework and other academic and training programs that will further their academic and professional development. Advisors play a central role in supporting the development of a dissertation project as well as supervising the student’s progress on the dissertation. Advisors also support a student’s career post-completion. Advisors collaborate with the graduate program’s Director of Graduate Study (DGS) to make sure that all parties are aware of relevant expectations for progress through the program.

Mentoring is an active process by which faculty establish and foster relationships with graduate students by offering guidance, support, and encouragement aimed at developing their competence and character. Mentors listen actively to mentee’s concerns and care about their personal and professional well-being. Mentors want to help graduate students further develop their strengths, work through challenges, achieve academic excellence, and advance professionally in career paths of the student’s choosing. Mentors act as advocates and role models for their mentees and are committed to helping graduate students meet their personal and professional goals.

While a student should always have an “official” advisor, graduate students generally benefit from having a broader network of mentors with complementary strengths. Graduate students are encouraged to build a network of mentors.

As you think about your advising relationships, you may find it helpful to keep the following points in mind:

1. **Choose a principal advisor carefully.** While the potential advisor’s research area and projects are often the dominant consideration in selecting an advisor, also consider what qualities are most important to you in an advisor. Doing so requires reflecting on yourself, your personal and professional goals, your work style, how you like to receive feedback, how self-directing you are, etc. Familiarize yourself with a potential advisor’s past and present research and scholarship. Talk to other graduate students, to graduate program staff in the department, and to past advisees to get a sense for an advisor’s advising style.

2. **Understand and respect that each advisor and mentor brings different perspectives, experiences, strengths, and interests.** When it comes to mentors-mentees or advisors-advisees, it is rare to have a perfect match of experiences, expertise, perspectives, work style, and philosophies. Good advisee-advisor relationships (or mentor-mentee relationships) are not defined by
perfect matches in identity and interests, but rather mutual respect, understanding of expectations, strengths, responsibilities, and goals, as well as a commitment to the relationship.

3. **Recruit multiple mentors and advisors.** The unpredictability and dynamic nature of graduate school life requires that you surround yourself with a team, rather than just one person, who can assist you through various parts of the journey and your goals. Know that the team and its members can and will change over time—throughout your graduate career at Brown and beyond. Although your primary advisor may or may not evolve into a “mentor”, the primary advisor is a key part of your academic development in graduate school. Whether or not, they’ve become your mentor in the fullest sense of the term, they will still be part of your team.

4. **Be proactive.** Do not hesitate to reach out to faculty advisors, other graduate students, program staff, and your DGS when you have questions about academic requirements and policies, about a scholarly topic, about professionalization, or about other aspects of graduate school life.

5. **Communicate clearly and frequently with an advisor about expectations and responsibilities, ensuring with each communication that there is mutual understanding.** Be aware of your advisor’s preferred mode of communication and how an advisor prefers to be addressed. Don’t assume that all advisors want to be addressed by their first names. Seek, from the first meeting, to ensure that expectations regarding time spent on research and other academic activities are clearly conveyed and mutually understood. Particularly in laboratory settings, it is helpful for both parties to discuss time spent in the lab: when you are expected to be present in the lab and the time you will start in the lab (if you are independently running experiments). If you foresee any circumstances and personal obligations affecting your time spent on research or other academic work, let your advisor know and work together to understand how to move forward. It’s generally best to address difficulties that impact your well-being and that ultimately dampen your productivity directly with your advisors, who may be able to offer practical help and/or advice.

6. **Meet regularly with your advisor to review progress, goals, challenges, and future plans.** Regular meetings with your advisor are necessary for staying on track and addressing challenges as they arise. When it comes to maintaining and sustaining your advising relationship, be proactive in scheduling your advising meetings. To help guide your meetings and maximize the time you have, consider preparing an agenda of goals, challenges, and progress you would like to discuss and get feedback on. You might propose approaches you can take to move through challenges and discuss them with your advisor. Aim to send written materials well in advance of your meeting. Exactly how far in advance you need to send materials will depend on the length of the materials as well as explicit recommendations from your advisor, but you should generally plan on at least one to two weeks.
7. **Work with your advisor to develop a timeline for completing academic requirements and meeting professional goals.** Having a timeline and plan of academic requirements and professional goals helps to keep you organized and focused. It is best to review your timeline of requirements and plan of professional goals frequently with your advisor; you may even consider this a key element of your regularly scheduled one-on-one meetings.

8. **Seek, welcome, and respond to feedback.** Make sure that you understand the feedback you receive. Ask questions to resolve ambiguities. Respond to feedback professionally regardless of whether the feedback was positive or negative. In some cases, it will be important to take time to reflect on the feedback before developing your responses. Learning to respond productively to feedback, even feedback with which you disagree, is an integral element of graduate education. Advisees should seek written feedback in addition to in-person conversations. Written feedback will be particularly helpful when writing publications and dissertation chapters and when planning to meet with advisors to discuss progress. Know that critique of your scholarly materials is not a critique of you.

9. **Address difficulties and issues you have in the advising relationship and other aspects of graduate student experience head on.** Although it is difficult to generalize, it is often best to address any miscommunications and misunderstandings with your advisor as they arise. If you feel uncomfortable mediating the conflict alone or need advice, seek the guidance of your program’s Director of Graduate Studies and/or a Graduate School dean.

10. **Be knowledgeable about departmental and Graduate School policies.** Your graduate program and the Graduate School handbooks may be helpful in addressing questions about policies, procedures, and academic requirements. If you need some clarification or have other questions, do not hesitate to seek the guidance of your DGS, program administrator, or a Graduate School dean.

11. **Take advantage of additional resources across the University and beyond.** Resources are available to support academic pursuits, build new academic and professional skills, help you foster healthy well-being and community, and navigate concerns while in graduate school. For help with navigating concerns with academic progress, seek help from your advisor, Director of Graduate Studies or a Graduate School dean. Graduate students in the Division of Biology and Medicine are advised to contact the Associate Dean of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies in the BioMed Division. For career advice and programs, visit the CareerLab. For more information on the breadth of these resources, see [Graduate Student Resources](#).