

## The Grad Student-Advisor Relationship Part I: Choosing an Advisor

The purpose of this article is to provide guidance to graduate students who are selecting an advisor. Most graduate students know to ask students or post docs in the advisor's lab about their experience with the advisor but clarifying for yourself what you are looking for in an advisor is important too. In addition to considering the professional reputation of the advisor and the nature of the work that is done in the advisor's lab, consider the following factors:

**The Advisor's Role:** An important consideration when choosing an advisor is to know how the advisor views their role with regards to grad students. Some advisors think of themselves as mentors and are very committed to "bringing a grad student along" and are available to provide this kind of mentoring. Other advisors value grad students who can work independently early on in order to get maximum research results. What do you expect from an advisor? Do you want someone who will engage in conversations with you with regard to your scientific ideas? Are you looking for someone who will give you lots of room to explore research possibilities on your own?

### **Supervision Style:**

In addition to how an advisor sees their role, how they enact their role is an important consideration as well. Advisors are often described as hands on or hands off, a broad generalization used to describe the kind of direction a grad student can expect from their advisor.

It's important to ask yourself: what style of supervision works best for me? Are you a person who relies on a supervisor to engage with you on a regular basis to discuss your work in order to stay on track? Do you prefer to work independently and look to the advisor as someone to provide guidance when you are stuck? Do you tend to avoid if you don't have results?

The most difficult situations I've seen graduate students face is when their personal styles don't match well with the advisor's style. The grad student may have chosen the advisor based on the advisor's professional reputation but the day to day experience in the lab can be made very difficult because of style differences. Sometimes grad students can languish and take too long to finish because they need more direction than their advisor normally provides. Other times students who are very independent end up working on projects their advisor has selected and they don't have the motivation to do the work.

Consider asking a potential advisor questions that address their supervisory style: Do they hold regularly scheduled meetings with each of their grad students? How do they prefer to be updated on progress, by email, in person? What if the grad students work gets stalled? How does the advisor prefer the grad student seek help and from whom when there are problems with the research? How are projects assigned, etc.?

### **Values and Expectations:**

The question of how long it takes a student to graduate from a particular lab may speak to the advisor's expectations, supervisory style, values, the nature of the work, or the student's work style. If an advisor is known for grad students taking a long time to finish, you should be asking other students in the lab why that is. Sometimes it's a question of the kind of work that is being done in the lab, sometimes it reflects how much is expected by the advisor or the advisor provides limited guidance. You should also consider asking a potential advisor what they see as a reasonable body of work that would constitute a Ph.D. It is hard to say what exactly constitutes sufficient work for a Ph.D. but you should get a sense of what the advisor values: is it a few publications in the best journals, lots of publications anywhere respectable, number of projects completed whether or not they all result in publications? What does the advisor consider a reasonable amount of time to complete a Ph.D.? Do they expect their students to be in the lab a certain number of hours a day, at a particular time (when the advisor is in lab?), how many days a week, or do they give the grad student the freedom to pick their hours as long as the work is getting done? What about the advisor's responsiveness to issues that come up that aren't related to academic work (i.e. Health concerns, family issues, etc). This information may come from other students in the lab as well as the advisor.

### **Communication:**

Good communication is often key to ensuring both the advisor and graduate student are satisfied. One thing that can get grad students in trouble is when they avoid conversations with the advisor, especially when the work isn't going well. It is true some advisors only want to hear from the students when they have results, but most times they're more than willing to talk with a grad student when the student's work isn't going well and they are stuck. In the end, it serves the advisor and the grad student if there are conversations happening when the work isn't. The advisor's expectations at these times are often more realistic than the grad student's and the advisor will be much more sympathetic if they are kept in the loop rather than hearing from a grad student after months of avoidance. In your meeting with a potential advisor try to assess how they communicate. Are they clear about their expectations? Is this someone you could imagine being responsive/helpful if there are problems with your work? Of course, students who currently work for the advisor are in a good position to comment on the advisor's communication style.

### **Resources:**

Ultimately the advisor, other faculty, the option representative, post doc's and other students serve as useful resources to a grad student. In addition to serving as a resource when selecting an advisor they can be a resource if, after you choose an advisor, the work isn't going well. At these times it can also help to talk with someone outside of your department who can provide advice and support. The Ombudsperson and the staff of the Counseling Center are here to help you with this challenge.

Part II of this article, written by Ornah Becker (Caltech's Ombudsperson), will focus on managing problems in the student-advisor relationship.