

Statement of Mutual Expectations for Dissertation Students and Dissertation Advisors

Purpose

The dissertation is one of the most significant scholarly experiences of a doctoral student's education. Successfully completing a dissertation depends upon a productive mentoring relationship built on mutual respect, professionalism, communication, and shared responsibility.

This Statement of Mutual Expectations is **not a contract**, but rather a framework for discussion between doctoral students and dissertation advisors. Its purpose is to encourage open communication, establish shared expectations, and support students in making timely progress toward degree completion.

The document should be discussed when the dissertation advisor is formally appointed and revisited periodically throughout the dissertation process.

Mentoring Philosophy

The University of Memphis Graduate School believes that exceptional doctoral education is grounded in meaningful mentoring relationships that foster intellectual growth, scholarly independence, and professional development. The dissertation represents the culmination of a student's doctoral education and is both an opportunity to make an original contribution to knowledge and to develop as an independent scholar.

The relationship between a dissertation student and dissertation advisor is a partnership built on mutual respect, open communication, shared responsibility, and a commitment to academic excellence. While dissertation students are responsible for driving their own research and progress toward degree completion, dissertation advisors play a vital role in providing guidance, constructive feedback, mentorship, and support throughout the research process.

Effective mentoring recognizes that students develop into independent researchers through collaboration, thoughtful guidance, and increasing autonomy. Likewise, successful dissertation advising requires clear expectations, regular communication, and a shared commitment to addressing challenges constructively as they arise.

This Statement of Mutual Expectations is intended to promote conversations between students and dissertation advisors about their respective roles and responsibilities. It is not a contract or evaluation tool, but rather a resource to encourage productive mentoring

relationships, support timely progress toward degree completion, and foster a positive graduate education experience.

The Graduate School encourages dissertation students and advisors to revisit this document periodically throughout the dissertation process as research projects evolve and mentoring needs change.

Shared Responsibilities

The dissertation advisor and doctoral student share responsibility for creating a productive, professional, and respectful mentoring relationship. Together, they commit to:

- Foster an environment of mutual respect, professionalism, and collegiality.
- Communicate openly, honestly, and respectfully.
- Discuss expectations early and revisit them as circumstances change.
- Maintain regular communication regarding dissertation progress.
- Address concerns promptly before they become larger issues.
- Work collaboratively to establish realistic goals and timelines.
- Recognize that dissertation research often evolves and remain flexible when adjustments are necessary.
- Promote the student's development as an independent scholar while providing appropriate guidance and support.
- Maintain the highest standards of academic integrity and ethical research.
- Work toward timely completion of the dissertation while recognizing that unforeseen circumstances may occasionally require adjustments.

Responsibilities of the Dissertation Student

The doctoral student is expected to:

- Take primary responsibility for the progress of the dissertation.
- Develop and maintain a realistic timeline for completing major milestones.

- Schedule meetings with the dissertation advisor as needed and come prepared with questions, drafts, or specific issues for discussion.
- Submit written work that reflects careful preparation before requesting feedback.
- Respond thoughtfully to feedback and revise work in a timely manner.
- Communicate regularly regarding progress, challenges, or circumstances that may affect dissertation work.
- Meet Graduate School and program deadlines and complete required forms.
- Conduct research ethically and comply with applicable policies governing research, including IRB, IACUC, laboratory safety, data management, authorship, and research integrity where applicable.
- Demonstrate initiative, professionalism, and increasing independence throughout the dissertation process.
- Seek assistance early if academic, professional, or personal challenges begin to interfere with progress.

Responsibilities of the Dissertation Advisor

The dissertation advisor is expected to:

- Provide scholarly guidance throughout the dissertation process.
- Help the student establish realistic expectations and an achievable timeline.
- Meet with the student on a mutually agreed-upon schedule.
- Provide constructive feedback on submitted work within a reasonable timeframe whenever possible.
- Encourage timely completion of the dissertation and defense.
- Clearly communicate expectations regarding the quality and completeness of work before review.
- Guide the student in understanding disciplinary standards, research ethics, and professional expectations.
- Encourage the student's development as an independent researcher and scholar.

- Inform the student of Graduate School and program requirements related to dissertation completion.
- Identify concerns about insufficient progress as early as possible and work collaboratively with the student to develop strategies for improvement.
- Foster an inclusive, respectful, and supportive mentoring environment.

Communication Expectations

Students and advisors should discuss:

- Preferred methods of communication.
- Expected response time for emails and messages.
- Frequency of meetings.
- Expected turnaround time for dissertation drafts.
- The level of completeness expected before drafts are submitted for review.
- Plans for communication during sabbaticals, conferences, vacations, or other extended absences.

Agreed-Upon Communication Expectations

Dissertation Planning

Students and advisors should establish anticipated milestones and review them periodically.

Example of Milestone Planning

Milestone	Target Date
Advisor Appointed	_____

Dissertation Committee Formed	_____
Proposal Approved	_____
IRB Approval (if applicable)	_____
Data Collection Completed (if applicable)	_____
Data Analysis Completed (if applicable)	_____
First Complete Draft	_____
Committee Review	_____
Dissertation Defense	_____
Final Submission	_____

Feedback and Revision

Students and advisors should discuss expectations regarding:

- Turnaround time for drafts.
- Number and scope of expected revisions.
- Appropriate intervals between draft submissions.
- Committee review before scheduling the dissertation defense.

Agreed-Upon Expectations

Research, Authorship, and Data (When Applicable)

For collaborative research projects, students and advisors should discuss:

- Authorship expectations.
- Data ownership and stewardship.
- Publication plans.

- Conference presentations.
- Intellectual property considerations.
- Expectations if the student leaves the program before completing the dissertation.

Notes

If Challenges Arise

Despite everyone's best efforts, concerns or misunderstandings sometimes occur during the dissertation process. Students and advisors are encouraged to discuss concerns directly and respectfully as early as possible.

If concerns cannot be resolved through direct communication, assistance may be sought from the Graduate Program Coordinator, Department Chair, Program Director, or the Graduate School. The goal is to resolve concerns constructively while supporting student success and maintaining a productive advising relationship.

Annual Review

Students and advisors are encouraged to revisit this document annually, or whenever there is a significant change in the dissertation project, advising relationship, or timeline.

Date Reviewed: _____

Acknowledgment

We have discussed the expectations outlined in this document. We understand that it is intended to facilitate communication, clarify mutual expectations, and support a successful dissertation experience. This document does not constitute a contractual agreement.

Student Signature: _____ Date: _____

Dissertation Advisor Signature: _____ Date: _____