

# CHOOSING A DISSERTATION ADVISOR

## Introduction

While some graduate groups may assign an advisor to a student upon admission to the program, in many graduate groups the responsibility for finding a dissertation advisor rests with the student. The choice of a faculty member who will supervise the dissertation work required to fulfill degree requirements is one of the most critical decisions a graduate student will make. A student will spend several years working with the faculty member of choice, and that choice will significantly affect the direction of the student's career. Choosing a dissertation advisor, therefore, is an extremely important decision for doctoral students, although it is not immutable, as will be discussed later.

A student undertaking dissertation work needs an advisor who will be not only academically competent in a particular area but also willing to act as the student's advocate when necessary. It is important that the student be able to work and communicate effectively with the advisor and not feel overwhelmed or intimidated in the relationship. Dissertation work can be lonely and isolating, and support from an advisor can be a crucial connection. Each student requires the guidance of someone who will stimulate thought, who has sufficient interest in the student's topic to produce new insights jointly, and who will challenge the student to think in a novel manner about the research.

## Obtaining Information on Potential Advisors

Advisors generally serve as the dissertation supervisor. Students should be familiar with the University rules (<https://catalog.upenn.edu/pennbook/academic-rules-phd/>) about who can supervise dissertation research and serve on a dissertation committee. Several resources and strategies can help students identify an appropriate faculty advisor, as follows.

The graduate group website or handbook is a valuable source of information on potential advisors. Many graduate groups have developed websites that profile affiliated faculty members, including their areas of research, recent publications, and other academic activities. Literature searches can provide further information on the publications and preferred journals of particular faculty members. The graduate group chair can also provide valuable advice on potential advisors and can help students to become familiar with any specific graduate group policies on supervision.

Students can get to know potential advisors by taking a course, doing a lab rotation, acting as a teaching assistant, and/or attending seminars and other presentations by the faculty member.

Graduate students currently working with the potential advisor are an invaluable source of information. Students who are working or have worked with a particular advisor can be asked about their experience with that advisor and about the advisor's expectations and working methods. Getting to know these students is also useful because anyone choosing to work with a faculty advisor would likely have close, future interactions with their students. Talking to multiple students is always encouraged given the possibly strong and differing opinions one might hear.

Students should make an appointment to meet potential advisors. Meeting a potential advisor is an essential step in determining whether a faculty member would be a good fit in terms of mentoring and interpersonal style and research interested. The following is a list of issues that might be covered in such a meeting:

- How many graduate students do you advise? (Students may not want to pick a faculty member who has too many students already.)
- Typically, how often do you meet with your students?
- Typically, how much time do you expect students to take to complete their dissertation?
- How will we agree upon my research topic?
- Are there sufficient funds available for the research project?
- What will be the sources of my stipend/funding? What are ways you can provide assistance for finding additional funding if/when my stipend expires?
- What level of independence is expected of your graduate students?
- Is there any specific knowledge I need to have before starting to work with you?
- Will I have the opportunity to attend conferences? Publish papers? Present work at colloquia? Are there funds available for me to do so?
- Are you planning a sabbatical leave soon? If so, what arrangements for continued supervision will be made during your absence?
- What opportunities would I have in this area of research when I graduate?
- How do you typically assist students on the job market?
- Will guidelines be drawn up for working together?
- How will I receive feedback on my progress?

These questions are designed to help the student and the potential advisor determine whether a good match exists. Where appropriate, the student may also want to ask about the order of authorship on publications and intellectual property issues.

For students who are able to pick an advisor, the choice of a dissertation advisor is a decision to be made with a great deal of care and consideration. Discussion of the topics listed above will also give faculty members a sense of what students expect in terms of meetings, feedback, turn-around time on submitted work, etc. Taking time to explore these issues should result in a productive relationship for both student and advisor that culminates in a dissertation of original research, completed within a reasonable period of time.

## Changing Advisors

There may be situations in which a student must change advisors. Some situations are beyond the student's control; for example, when an advisor leaves the University or otherwise becomes unavailable. In other situations, the student may want to choose a different advisor; for example, if the focus of the research project changes to something outside of the current advisor's expertise, or if work styles do not mesh well.

In these latter situations, students should understand that while there can be risks in changing advisors, it usually can be negotiated in a positive manner. Students deciding to change advisors should be sure to consult the graduate group for any specific policies and procedures that apply and be sure to ascertain if funding may change under a new advisor. Students should always be professional and respectful in interactions with the current advisor and potential new advisor and be certain that the proposed new advisor is willing and able to add them

as a new advisee before discussing such a change with the current advisor. Students should focus discussions on interests and goals and not on negative incidents or difficulties. The potential new advisor, as well as leaders or other members of the graduate group, may have advice regarding how to broach this change with the current advisor.