Memorandum

Date: February 21, 2018

To: Faculty, PhD Students, Department of Economics

From: DGS Matthew Jackson


These notes are meant to help junior faculty become familiar with the role of an advisor to a PhD student, and also to provide all faculty and students with details regarding advising responsibilities that are specific to different points of our program. There will be separate guidelines issued by the Vice Provost for Graduate Education that will cover more general issues concerning advising relationships, while this guide is meant to complement that and be specific to economics.

Learning to do research by reading papers is like learning to swim by watching videos – students ultimately must do research in order to learn how. As such, the most important relationship that they have during their doctoral studies is with their advisors.

The key responsibility of an advisor is to help guide a student through the varied challenges of performing high-quality research, from the first stages of asking questions and figuring out approaches to answering them to the final stages of polishing, presenting, and submitting.

General notes: Students often gravitate towards senior faculty to find primary advisors, but they should be talking regularly with multiple faculty and it is fine for junior faculty to be primary advisors.

Here is a list of the specific responsibilities of the various advising relationships, year-by-year.

1st Year:
First-year students are assigned to an advisor in groups of four or five students, so that there are only a handful of first year advisors. First-year advisors should meet with students early in the fall quarter and
offer to help with any questions as the year progresses. Including the DGS, PhD administrator, student mentors, study groups, core course instructors, and the first-year seminar series, students have a variety of information sources. The advisor is simply another person to whom the students can turn to for basic and broad advice about the program. If a first year advisor sees a student struggling academically or personally, please ensure that they are connected to the help that they need, and if unsure of how to help please consult with the DGS.

2nd Year RAship:
The second year RA-ship is an opportunity for students to gain experience with research. The RA-ship is subsidized by the department and is 15 hours/week (rather than the 20 for standard RAships in later years). Please ensure that it is as educational as possible. Some students have fellowships and so will not need RA support, but will still seek advisors and should be given the same attention to ensure that their research is progressing.

2nd Year Paper:
The second year paper is due at the beginning of the fall quarter of the third year, and students have to agree with a faculty member to oversee that paper by the end of the spring of the second year. An advisor on a second year paper should make sure that the student is progressing on the paper during the summer by setting a timeline and meeting with them at key points. It is essential that this be finished on time so that students can move on to new projects or to further develop it during the third year. Students are encouraged to talk to multiple faculty, but the person who signs their paper should take responsibility. The student also has a responsibility to be seeking advice and communicating regularly with their advisor, both about progress and unexpected setbacks, both of which are inevitable in research. Note that second-year papers can be co-authored with other students and/or faculty.

3rd Year Advising:
The third-year seminar helps shepherd students through the transition to dissertation research; however, it is not a substitute for an advisor, but rather a complement. Students should clear their slides for their third-year presentations with their advisors before the presentations.
The advisor and student are both responsible for ensuring that they meet regularly and have set a clear timeline and goals for their research.

At the end of the third year, students meet with the DGS and present a form signed by someone agreeing to advise their dissertation research and should have plans for a dissertation and a committee. If a faculty member is advising a student during the third year and does not plan to continue that relationship, they are responsible for letting the student know early enough so that s/he can find a new advisor going forward. Occasionally, students who are getting substantial advice from more than one person may wish to designate co-primary advisors. This involves a serious commitment in terms of time and attention from all of the primary advisors, and should involve more than window-dressing.

4th Year and Beyond:
Advisors and students should be meeting regularly and having a clear plan and timeline for completion of a dissertation research and going on the market. The advisor’s role includes providing guidance concerning designing, implementing, conducting, writing, presenting, submitting (where, how...), and revising their research. The advisor should meet regularly with the student and inform the DGS if a student is languishing or falling behind in their research.

Advisors should be very clear with students about how their research is progressing and what they need to do to improve. Students are responsible for being broadly engaged, keeping their advisor regularly informed of their progress, and seeking advice from several faculty, attending and participating in conferences, regularly attending seminars, talking with other students, and more generally being regularly involved in research-related activities.

Faculty who are on a student’s dissertation committee must discuss the student’s job market prospects with him or her well in advance of the job market. It is essential to calibrate students’ expectations appropriately. If the student aspires to jobs for which a committee member feels s/he cannot write supportive letters, that faculty must make that fact absolutely clear to the student well in advance. The
faculty member must also confer with other committee members to
determine whether they are in agreement concerning the student’s
progress, job market plans and likely prospects. A dissertation
committee member whose assessment of a student is out of line with
the rest of the committee has an obligation to make their views known
to the committee well before the student enters to job market, and
should be willing to withdraw from the committee if it is in the student's
best interest. Committee members should therefore compare their
assessments, at the latest, by the start of the fall term during which the
student enters the job market.

Students need to become self-sufficient, however most of these aspects
of conducting and disseminating research are not learned via courses or
readings, but by doing - coupled with timely advice. It is the most
important, and rewarding, part of our PhD program.