

Expectations for Graduate Students

(adapted from materials shared by Sheila Patek)

The process of achieving a Ph.D. in graduate school is unlike any other form of "school" that you've previously experienced. For a start, you are being paid to go to school! This is a big clue about the different expectations for graduate students in this area of academia compared to college or other graduate programs that students pay to attend. The fact that this is a paid position, indicates that it is a job, not simply "going to school". The job consists of a form of apprenticeship in which specific tasks are being performed (e.g., teaching as a teaching assistant, or performing a research assistant position) and new skills are being acquired (independent and collaborative research, production of papers and grants, coursework, lab meetings, and conferences). The culmination of graduate school for students in the Nunn lab is a dissertation consisting of independently performed research and a suite of additional skills and achievements that enhance the student's potential future success on the job market.

Thus, the expectations for graduate students in the lab are fundamentally different than in other "schools." Here are some things you need to be aware of.

The time between semesters over the summer or around the new year is not entirely vacation. Think of this like a job that has a specific number of vacation days, sick days, and personal days. Plan those out, let Charlie know your vacation days (and long strings of sick or personal days), and plan to continue doing your research even during the times that undergraduate instruction is not happening.

A number of policies also apply to graduate students. See this document for Duke graduate school's financial policies for graduate students: <https://gradschool.duke.edu/financial-support/financial-policies-forms-and-resources>

Graduate students are expected to be present in the lab during the work week. Charlie will consider requests for occasional or regular days of working from home or a cafe etc., but that should be discussed with him rather than assuming it is ok.

That said, on a normal week, you should not feel pressure to work on weekends, or on evenings, unless that fits with your needs and plans for work-life balance. Charlie expects replies to emails or other requests fairly quickly during regular work hours, roughly 8-5 on weekdays, but is more flexible in evenings or weekends, unless there is a time crunch on some particular project (e.g. grant submissions, preparing for a presentation, paper revision deadlines, etc.).

One of the challenges for graduate students is understanding the variable nature of their appointments. Some graduate students perform teaching assistantships, others have research assistantships, others have their own fellowships. Each of these positions has different details in terms of expectations, vacation benefits, etc. It is the responsibility of the graduate student to follow the terms of these paid positions.

The student work performed in the lab is subject to regular evaluations and oversight, including at the departmental level. Students who do not meet these job expectations may be asked to leave the program.

The role of the PI in this scenario is complex. Here is an example mentoring plan. I encourage students to work with me independently to develop their own mentoring plan.

My two primary goals as a mentor to graduate students in my lab are to:

- Identify the research area that most interests the student and inspires their best work, then guide the student to do the best quality work in this area, whether in my lab, another lab or in multiple laboratories.
- Foster intellectual ownership by the student and, ideally, passion about the research program.
- Help the graduate student become an independent scientist who is capable of conducting impactful independent research.
- Maintain an ongoing conversation about career goals and how their current activities, productivity, successes, and research area match these longer term goals.

My commitments to graduate students are:

- Meet one-on-one at a frequency that is most productive for research and intellectual development. This may vary over time. Right now, the meetings occur approximately once per week for 30 minutes, with opportunities for additional brief meetings throughout the week as needed.
- Involve the student in all aspects of the laboratory activities to the level desired and conducive to research productivity and career development. This includes attendance at lab meetings, interacting with other students, helping and receiving help from lab members, and attendance at social events.
- Support the research intellectually and through my staffing at the highest level possible and fund the research (including publication costs) at a level that is mutually agreed upon given independent and lab funding.
- Provide constructive feedback on grants, papers and conference presentations in a reasonable time period.
- Promote networking with appropriate individuals at Duke and beyond, including Charlie's other collaborators.
- Advocate for the student's success and demystify grad school/academia to the best of my abilities.
- Celebrate the student's achievements along with the other successes in the lab.
- Encourage the student to follow creative and novel insights while also providing strategic advice for getting the research done efficiently, at a high quality, and in a way that is publishable/appreciated by the broader scientific community.

Authorship:

Given the intensive nature of this graduate student mentoring, it is expected that I will be an author on graduate student research projects. This is always open to discussion, but that is the general rule of thumb. This expectation arises from the fact that the biggest stumbling block for most graduate students who want to go forward in science is publishing. Furthermore, publishing the work is often the most difficult and time-consuming part of the scientific process. My involvement in the writing, review process and final publication of graduate student work nearly always reaches the level of authorship.