

## Managing Professional Relationships Between Graduate Students and Faculty

Healthy professional relationships are essential to the research and educational missions of UC Merced. Professional relationships between faculty mentors and graduate students are especially important to the health and well-being of our graduate community, but the norms and expectations of faculty/graduate student relationships are complex in terms of their inherent power dynamic, and their variability over time and across different contexts and disciplines. Graduate students may enter advising/mentorship relationships with one or more faculty members at any given time, and they may also enter into an employee/supervisor relationship with a faculty instructor or Principal Investigator. The supervisor may or may not be an advisor/mentor to the graduate student, and the faculty playing one or both of these roles are likely to change over time.

In all cases, establishing healthy faculty/grad relationships is critical to effective mentorship and scholarship, and healthy relationships promote the well-being and careers of all parties concerned. Often the most important and intensive faculty/grad relationship is between the Ph.D. advisor and advisee, so it is especially important to foster and maintain the health of these professional relationships. The following guidelines and resources are intended for faculty/grad relationships in general and advisor/advisee relationships in particular:

- Graduate groups and their faculty should set clear expectations and boundaries for graduate students in all settings, including the classroom, the lab, the research group, and 1:1 meetings. Consistent expectations and norms help to develop transparency and trust in graduate groups and faculty research groups. Normative expectations will vary across disciplines, so they may be codified in the policies and procedures of individual graduate groups as appropriate.
- Advisors and advisees may find it helpful to create an [Individual Development Plan \(IDP\)](#) for each graduate student to help clarify expectations, goals, and timelines for scholarly activities and advancing through the graduate program.
- Faculty and graduate students should communicate with each other clearly and regularly about academic progress and milestones. It is good practice to document any agreements about activities and timelines, and share documentation as needed. For example, a graduate student may send an email to their advisor after a meeting to summarize the discussion and confirm any action items, including who is responsible for what and when.
- Faculty and graduate students should review the [UC Merced Graduate Student Rights and Responsibilities](#), [Graduate Mentorship Guidelines](#), and [Principles of Community](#) to understand overall norms for healthy professional relationships in our graduate community. Graduate advisors and advisees may consider co-signing a copy of the Rights and Responsibilities document at the start of their relationship to mutually recognize the campus norms and ideals.
- Graduate students often benefit from networking with a team of mentors, which includes the qualifying exam and dissertation committees, but may also include other advisory committees, research teams, and scholarly affiliations. The primary advisor is often one of the core members of these teams, but teams may also include more senior graduate students, postdoctoral researchers, and faculty collaborators. A team of mentors can help support and enrich professional relationships between faculty and graduate students.
- Mentorship Training workshops (offered on campus or elsewhere) are recommended for faculty members, postdocs, and graduate students to learn best practices in mentorship.

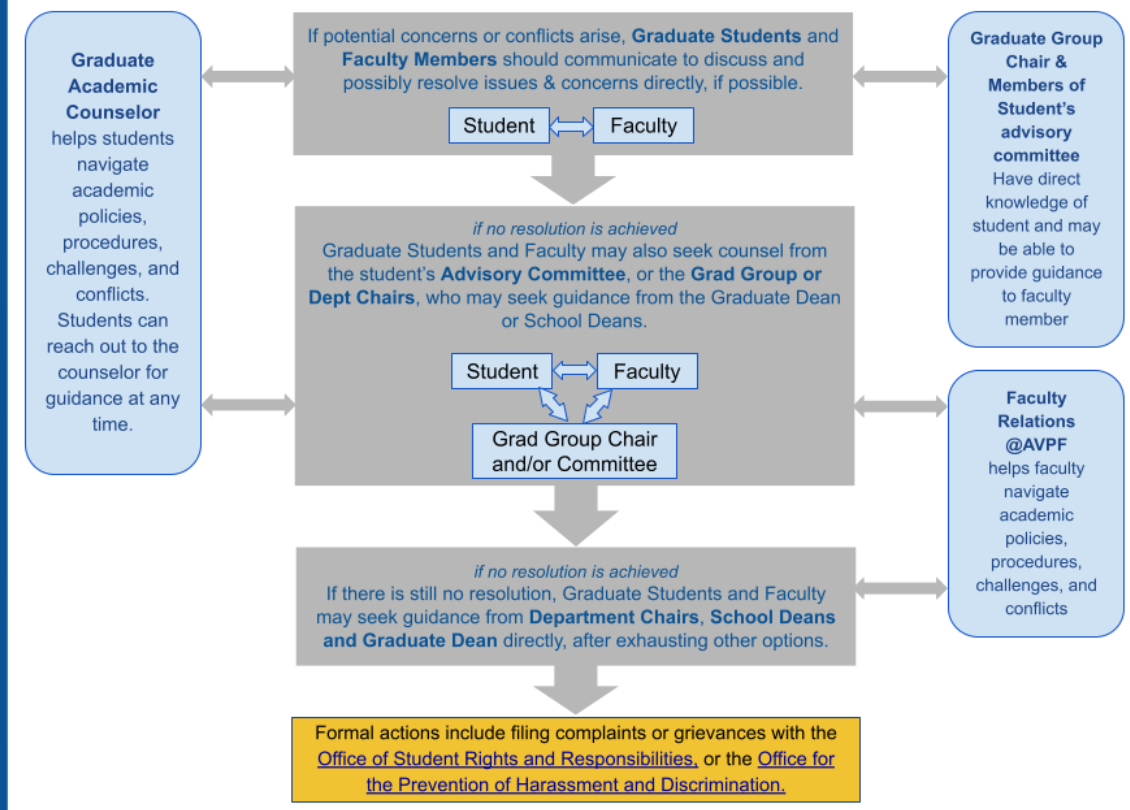
Success for faculty members is generally aligned with success for graduate students, and vice versa. Faculty benefit when mentorship leads to productive graduate students who go on to successful careers, and graduate students benefit from mentorship by successful faculty members who can help students network with research and professional communities. More broadly speaking, the department, university, and research community all benefit when faculty and graduate students succeed together in producing scholarship, advancing their field and contributing to the knowledge workforce.

Conversely, it can be detrimental to everyone when problems arise in professional relationships between faculty and graduate students. Conflicts can grow to have adverse effects on the well-being and careers of faculty and graduate students alike, and problems in professional relationships can spread to affect other members of the graduate community. Therefore it is critical to recognize when problems arise and to address them as needed. Conflicts between advisors and advisees can be especially stressful because of the importance of these relationships in terms of academic progress and career advancement.

### **Informal Management of Conflicts Between Faculty and Graduate Students**

Problems in professional relationships between faculty and graduate students can usually be resolved when they are addressed before growing to become harmful to research, education, and professional development. Therefore, it is important to address problems up front when possible, without exacerbation or unnecessary escalation. The conflict management diagram below was created to help faculty and graduate students navigate academic and related problems that may arise. The overarching principle is to address conflicts as locally and informally as possible before they require intervention, and possibly grow beyond repair. In the case of advisors and advisees, problems may lead to dissolution of the professional relationship. Either party has the right to terminate the relationship, but the decision can be difficult because the advisor and advisee may have invested years of training, research, scholarship, and professional development. It can be costly to end an advisor/advisee relationship if the investment is cut short before fully maturing in terms of educational attainment, research productivity, and career development. Nevertheless, sometimes it is best to end the relationship after careful consideration.

## UC Merced Faculty / Graduate Student Informal Conflict Management



The conflict management diagram illustrates recommended steps for faculty and graduate students to consider when conflicts arise. The typical steps to follow are shown from top to bottom. Students and faculty may enter the conflict management process at different points, and may exit at any time when a resolution is achieved. They may also skip steps or circle back for various reasons, but the normative approach is to follow the guidelines from top to bottom, seeking resolution at each step and avoiding unnecessary escalation. The steps are summarized as follows:

1. As in other kinds of professional relationships, faculty and graduate students should communicate their concerns to each other respectfully, without threat of retaliation or other unprofessional behaviors. When possible, the parties should engage in good faith efforts to resolve problems while maintaining goodwill and continuing academic progress. That said, sometimes it is in the best interest of one or both parties to part ways, which may mean dissolving an advisor-advisee relationship as amicably and productively as possible.
2. Sometimes there are concerns or fears that prohibit individuals from addressing conflicts directly, or there is need for guidance on options, norms, or how to communicate concerns. Graduate students and faculty can seek guidance from the Graduate Academic Counselor or Faculty Relations in the AVFP Office, who keep their counsel

private when requested and appropriate. They may also or instead seek guidance from the student's advisory committee members. The Counselor and Faculty Relations representative are both trained to help navigate and mediate discussions regarding conflicts in professional relationships among faculty and graduate students (also see [here](#) for national guidelines and services). With permission of the student or faculty member, they may also consult with the Graduate Group and Department Chairs to better understand the constraints, opportunities, and resources that may be available.

In the case of advisor-advisee conflicts, if there is no other viable solution, the preferred course of action may be to dissolve the relationship. In this case, the graduate student may need assistance finding a new primary advisor. Finding a new advisor can be challenging, and graduate students should seek help from their Graduate Group chair. Sometimes the transition is smooth, but academic progress can be delayed as a result, and research projects may be adversely affected. Sometimes a new primary advisor is not available because of limits on faculty time or graduate student funding. If a new advisor cannot be found, the graduate student may not be able to continue in the program, and the faculty member's research program may be adversely affected. Therefore it is important to proceed carefully when considering a change in advisor.

3. In some cases, faculty and graduate students may wish to work directly with the relevant Department Chair or Graduate Group Chair. The Chairs have knowledge and access to resources that may help with solutions to conflicts and other problems. The Chairs may also seek counsel and support from the relevant School Dean or the Graduate Dean. The goal may still be informal resolution, and chairs and deans may offer to mediate discussions and negotiations with the parties concerned. The Department Chair and School Dean are especially important for issues regarding teaching assistantships and graduate student employment, and the Grad Group Chair and Grad Dean are especially important regarding graduate academic matters such as degree progress, policies and procedures, fellowships, and academic disqualification.
4. In rare cases, the above efforts at informal resolution may be insufficient. Faculty members or graduate students may wish to take more formal actions to address events or consequences that occurred in the course of their professional relationships. Regarding formal processes, graduate students may seek guidance from the Graduate Dean, and faculty may seek guidance from the Associate Vice Provost for the Faculty. Formal actions may include filing complaints or grievances with the [Office of Student Rights and Responsibilities](#), or the [Office for the Prevention of Harassment and Discrimination](#). These offices and their websites have guidance on when formal complaints and possible actions are appropriate and how to proceed. Further resources and summaries of them are available on the [Graduate Division website](#).