Graduate Student Conflict Resolution Guidelines

In the context of graduate education, a conflict typically refers to a serious disagreement or prolonged dispute between a graduate student and their faculty advisor, especially related to academic expectations, employment responsibilities, or communication breakdowns. However, not all differences in perspective or decisions regarding funding qualify as conflicts. For instance, during certain semesters—such as summer—faculty members may pause financial support due to funding limitations and advise students to seek alternative opportunities (e.g., internships or external fellowships). These types of pre-agreed, circumstance-driven arrangements do not constitute a conflict.

Conflicts between graduate students and their faculty advisors can arise for various reasons, particularly when students are employed as Research Assistants (RAs) or Teaching Assistants (TAs). This guideline is designed to help students navigate such situations effectively, ensuring that conflicts are resolved in a timely and constructive manner while minimizing unnecessary escalations. The goal is to provide students with clear steps to address concerns, explore their best options, and maintain professionalism throughout the process.

1. Understanding Expectations

Graduate students are responsible for fulfilling their assigned duties as part of their RA or TA roles. To prevent misunderstandings, students should:

- Proactively discuss their job expectations with their faculty advisor and research team.
- Clarify deliverables, workload, and specific responsibilities related to their role.
- Maintain regular communication with their advisor and respond to emails within 24 hours, unless an emergency occurs or prior arrangements have been made.
- Recognize that these expectations vary by research group, and students should refer to their advisor for specific guidelines.

2. Performance Evaluation and Documentation

- Student performance is assessed **on a semester basis** by the faculty advisor.
- Evaluations are formally documented through an established department mechanism to ensure transparency and track performance over time.
- Students are encouraged to keep personal records of their progress, feedback, and any concerns that arise.

3. Handling Funding Cuts and Employment Termination

- If a faculty advisor decides to discontinue financial support (RA/TA funding), the student **must receive at least a three-month notice** to allow sufficient time to secure alternative funding. If a student chooses to resign from their RA/TA

position mid-semester, they will be responsible for repaying any tuition or fees covered as part of their assistantship.

- If termination of employment is being considered, students are encouraged to first **have a direct discussion** with their faculty advisor regarding performance concerns and possible resolutions.
- If the issue persists, students should **consult with the Graduate Advisor and the Director of Graduate Studies** within the department for guidance.
- The department will **not be responsible** for securing funding for the student but will assist in providing information on degree completion requirements and alternative options (e.g., internships, external funding, or transferring to another advisor/university).

4. Resolving Conflicts Professionally

- The best approach is to focus on finding a practical solution that allows the student to continue their academic and professional development, whether by improving communication, adjusting expectations, or seeking alternative opportunities.
- If a conflict remains unresolved after department-level discussions, students may explore additional university resources as needed. While students may seek support from various university offices (e.g., Office of the Dean of Students, Graduate School, HR, International Student & Scholar Services), escalating conflicts through multiple channels may not always lead to effective resolutions.

Mastren Lab Graduate Student Expectations & Information

This description of expectations is intended to ensure that we have a clear understanding of what we expect from one another, and to provide resources that may help in career planning. I am in a University position because I enjoy teaching people how to do science by engaging in real research projects with them and helping them to develop a professional approach to scientific research. Many students begin their work with a thesis advisor without a clear idea of what to expect, and without a clear idea of what it takes to succeed in a graduate program. This document is intended to provide a clear framework for our professional interaction. Read this and discuss any questions, issues, or suggested changes. Remember that our professional relationship is a two-way interaction, and you should inform me of your hopes and goals in undertaking a project as well. Reading this should make you feel that you are embarking upon a challenging experience. It should not make you feel that I am unreasonable and rigid and should not make you feel that this challenge will be a miserable experience!

Goals

Your reasons for entering our graduate program might include a desire to discover whether you like research enough to pursue a career in academia or government, to enter employment in private industry, or to pursue other objectives. Regardless of your exact reason(s), your major goal should be learning how to be a professional scientist, and my major role as a mentor is to help you learn how to develop into a professional scientist.

I will provide advice and direction on your research project, including direction in choosing and designing a thesis topic, researching the background information, planning and conducting field and/or laboratory analyses, writing and revising proposals, abstracts, and publishable manuscripts, and giving professional presentations. *I select and design (and/or guide you in selecting/designing) research projects with the intent that the results will be sufficiently new and important to merit publication*, and I have selected you as a student because of your talents and promise. Seeing a project through to publication requires *enormous* commitment and self-discipline and will typically require significant work extending beyond the formal duration of your appointment. I will freely provide help, advice and suggestions; but you have the ultimate responsibility for completing your thesis satisfactorily.

I will expect to write letters of recommendation for you, upon your request. I will want to write as positive and honest a letter as possible, so keep me aware of your successes, and help me to find good things to say about you! Let me help you fix areas in which you are not successful and develop a professional attitude that keeps any insecurities in their proper place. You can trust me to write a letter of recommendation for you that describes your skills and ability as positively and honestly as possible. If you want me to write that you consistently do more than I expect, then make that effort; i.e., impress me.

Time Commitments and Project Milestones

The time commitment to research is an absolutely key issue for graduate students and mentors. **I expect you to construct and share with me a project timeline with specific goals at least once per year, and to meet these deadlines.** I will attempt to bolster your

progress and your written and oral skills by requiring regular presentations of your work in lab group meetings, a prelim and thesis proposal, and periodic meetings. You should let me know if problems arise in the course of meeting deadlines and expectations, such that we can find a mutually acceptable solution. Just as I am imposing demands on your time, you have a right to my time as well, in terms of mentoring you in your project progress. Accordingly, we will have periodic meetings to review progress and discuss any issues or concerns.

Most people struggle with time management issues, which is why I share my views here. I expect you to regard graduate school as at least a full-time job. Downtime for mental refueling is certainly necessary, but I expect the typical "good" graduate student to work hard, which may require weekends and evenings. This is the standard expectation for any good student in any decent program, and I impose the same demands on myself. I assume that a minimum workweek for a graduate student is 45 hours. Consider that 8-9 credit hours of (non-research) coursework require around 20 hours per week. A Teaching Assistantship (TA) requires 10-15+ hours per week. Research will require a minimum of 10 to >25 hours per week; **clearly, however, all of these numbers will shift and evolve depending on your stage in the program.** For example, as a beginning graduate student, your available time will be largely expended in non-project coursework and TA responsibilities, and your time available for research will be correspondingly less. As you progress through the program, your non-thesis coursework will diminish, and you should spend the majority of your time on research.

If you are on a Research Assistantship (RA) or fellowship (and thus funded by grant or School money), you should be spending >20 hours/week on research (during the school year), and full time if it is during the summer. Furthermore, if I am funding you on a RA, your duties may include both work related to your own thesis project **and** research tasks that I assign. Remember that a RA or TA-ship is a paid job, the funding that you are receiving is not easy to secure, and you should undertake the duties and commitments inherent to this job with a high degree of integrity and responsibility.

Use your time wisely and enjoy your free time immensely. Non-work-related email, the New York Times, Pong? Whatever it is, banish it from your *working* hours. Know when you are working and when you are playing and stay productive, happy and healthy by consciously making the most of both sets of time.

As a graduate student, you'll need to take responsibility for knowing when various university forms are due, securing the requisite signatures, and so forth. A good place to start the nuclear handbook https://www.civil.utah.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/nuclearhandbook918.pdf
Some major milestones that you should keep in mind include the following:

Target milestones (very generalized):

All Students:

• Year 1 – coursework; select research topic and 1st year committee members; conduct exploratory research and data analysis; begin literature review for research proposal; apply for research grants; present at group meeting,

PhD Students:

• Year 2 – coursework, take Qualifying or "Prelim" Exam, write thesis proposal, construct timeline and review with me, apply for student research grants, begin data collection, present at group meetings
• Year 3 - defend proposal to committee (beginning of year), update and review timeline, hold committee meetings for update, consider abstract submission / professional meeting presentation, complete data collection and analysis, begin outlining and drafting manuscript for first thesis chapters, present at group meetings
• Year 4 – draft of 2nd chapter; submit manuscript(s) for publication, hold committee meetings, present at group meetings
• Year 5 – draft of 3rd and possibly additional thesis chapters; submit manuscript(s) for publication; hold committee meetings, present at group meetings, complete thesis draft; defend; depart graduate school for gainful employment!

Masters Students:

Masters' students in Nuclear are non-thesis Masters. However, if you are receiving funding to work in my lab, I expect the following: construct timeline and research goals, literature reviews, conduct exploratory research and data analysis, attend scheduled one on one meetings and present at group meetings. I would like to see funded Masters' students receive one publication.

Time to degree: ~2.5 years (Masters), ~5 years (Ph.D.). It will go fast.

If your goal is indeed gainful employment at the end of all this work, your efforts should focus on the things that will help you in this regard: (1) developing skill as a professional scientist, writer, and speaker, (2) earning glowing letters of recommendation/references from me and other faculty or professionals with whom you interact, (3) strengthening your CV to reflect appropriate preparation for the job you seek (*curriculum vitae*: an extended resume highlighting your experience, published abstracts and papers. For an example of an academic CV, see mine at https://faculty.utah.edu/bytes/curriculumVitae.hml?id=u6018336)

Intellectual Property, Authorship, Writing

Plan to publish the results of your research in a peer-reviewed outlet. There are two important reasons for this – one that's important to you, and one that's important to me:

(1) You will spend significant effort on your project, and it is a wonderful feeling to see that effort translate into a high-quality publication that will benefit the scientific community, contribute to your personal CV, and make your advisor proud! If your work appears only in your thesis, it will collect dust in the university library. (Test this by inserting a $20 bill into the library copy of your thesis and checking back in 20 years to reclaim your cash). Further, there is no better way to learn scientific thinking and writing than to write a manuscript and receive reviews from experts in the field. Furthermore, as PhD students the department requires 2 publications for graduation. Accordingly, I require all my students to write their thesis as a series of manuscripts targeted for submission to peer-reviewed journals or equivalent (e.g. special publication). You should plan to submit a manuscript about the time you graduate (this might be the first

manuscript for a masters student, and the 3rd or 4th for a PhD student), *which means that revision and resubmission will continue for a time beyond your formal commitment in the graduate program*.

(2) A great deal of time and money (typically $50-100K per year) are invested in your thesis research, and this requires follow-through with publication of results. One reason is very practical: I must demonstrate results from funded research, or funding agencies will deny future funding. Furthermore, research is expensive, and someone – whether taxpayers (all of us), private corporations/donors, or scientific societies – commonly helps us pay for it. Hence, it is incumbent upon us to demonstrate appreciation for these funds via publication. Papers resulting directly from your thesis work are yours, and you will likely (and preferably) be first author on them. I will be corresponding author and all other individuals who have contributed significantly will be co-authors. First authorship means that you have performed the majority of the intellectual and physical effort, completed the project, and *conducted the majority of the writing*. If you cannot complete your work in a timely fashion, you forfeit your right to be first author.

Writing well is a key skill that you should develop and hone during graduate school. I will help you with your writing by requiring multiple drafts of outlines, proposals, abstracts and manuscripts, and providing you with prodigious feedback on these drafts. I strive to be constructive in my comments.

Part of your higher education includes developing or honing skills of "professionalism". Professionalism includes (1) taking responsibility for one's own actions and duties, (2) maintaining reasonable respect for and tolerance of other views, (3) a willingness to make reasonable compromises to meet shared goals, (4) a pleasant demeanor (genuine or projected), (5) a focus on accomplishing tasks as expeditiously as possible, and (6) an ability to escape, avoid, or ignore petty arguments and gossip. You should also strive to project a professional demeanor in appropriate circumstances (e.g. mock or professional presentations, interviews, etc.). Note that a professional relationship does not require friendship but should allow you to work reasonably well even with people you personally detest, or who detest you (although we all hope it never comes to that!).

A professional manner carries us through periods of disagreement and difficulty with minimal stress. It allows one to become displeased or angry with another yet avoid furious denunciation and accusation. It should allow one to calmly consider a situation and discuss it with others involved as a problem to be solved. It should allow one to invite and accept reasonable criticism as constructive rather than destructive. As a mentor, I expect to offer honest judgments about professional abilities, and to ignore issues that are irrelevant from a professional view (e.g., political or religious views).

Professional Enrichment

You should take every opportunity for professional enrichment during your graduate-school tenure, **as long as** it does not keep you from progressing towards the successful completion of your thesis and other duties. Some ideas for both networking and non-traditional learning:

• Professional Societies

Most professional societies offer great deals for student membership. Member fees are minimal, and you receive perks such as journal publications and meeting registration discounts.

• Professional Meetings and Workshops

Attending the national (or sectional/regional) meetings of professional societies is a fantastic opportunity for networking and developing interview and presentation skills, in addition to learning cutting-edge science. Each student should strive to present results of his/her research at a professional meeting at least once before departing graduate school. I will always do my best to help locate funding to enable you to attend a meeting at which you are presenting research I have supervised; in return, I expect you to do your best to be as reasonable as possible in expenses (e.g. choosing economical lodging, sharing hotel rooms, seeking good airfares, etc.). There are also many opportunities for travel grants, and reduced registration fees for fieldtrips and short courses. Other sources for aid include the University and professional societies. Always plan well in advance, since many travel grant applications have early deadlines.

• Student Research Grants

Many agencies offer graduate fellowships (such as NSF, NIH, DOE, DOD and NNSA) and I will strongly encourage you to apply for these, especially if other funding is unavailable. Preparing these grant applications provides a great opportunity for you to clarify your project in your own head, hone persuasive writing skills, and critically consider the resources you need to conduct the research. Awards also look great on your CV, and proposal-writing skills will serve you extremely well in many future jobs.

Rewards

Research is hard work, and you need to be largely self-motivated. There are, however, rewards—both tangible and intangible. The tangible rewards include such "perks" as pay (albeit modest) for doing something you enjoy and that is related to your chosen field, as well as buttressing your resume/CV with a TA or RA position and all publications (abstracts, papers) that represent the formal fruits of your labor. Publications are absolutely critical for any student who thinks s/he might be interested in an ultimate position in academia or government and is a requirement for graduation. Traveling to meetings to present something new is another enjoyable by-product of research. Also, you can request letters of recommendation from me at any time, and I will do my very best to highlight your strengths in the most positive light. Intangibles include the intellectual reward of discovering something new! I hope you enjoy your research experience and learn from it.

General Lab Rules

You may access the lab at any time for research, quiet study space, computer use (including email), or research work requiring the lab (equipment or meeting space). Please obtain instructions before using any equipment. You are welcome to take over one of the drawers that is not already in use – please place your name on the drawer. Be respectful in use of lab space and equipment. **Keep work areas clean** and compartmentalize your workspace—do not monopolize large areas. Respect others'

workspaces as well. This applies to computer space and usage as well. Do not put extraneous items (programs, personal files, and especially no music/video files, etc.) on the computers. Please keep all of your files in a folder with your name on it in the "User Data" folder. Regularly back up the lab computers using the attached external hard drives, and **back up your personal computer and all data completely at least once per month, preferably once per week**. Please do not loan out your lab key or remove any equipment from the lab without consent from me. If a piece of equipment needs attention, let me know. Despite all of our best efforts at keeping the lab reasonably organized, it will need cleaning and organization now and then, so we'll hold a lab cleaning "party" every so often during one of the weekly group meetings. All data must be routinely uploaded onto the shared drive in your assigned UBox folder.

Note: If you are working after hours (after 6pm M-F or on weekends) it is a requirement that you let me know when you are in lab and when you are leaving. This is not meant to micromanage but working alone can be dangerous and it important that I know that you are in lab, what you are doing and that you have left the lab safely.

Note Taking and Research Notebook

Note taking is a critical skill that you should take seriously. You would never dream of making observations or having thoughts in the field or lab without recording them in your field or lab book, so don't waste your efforts searching and reading the literature, plotting data, or working on a Matlab code by failing to take careful notes on what you are doing. All students must keep a research notebook. Date every entry. Tape plots into the notebook at the end of each day and score and date the edge. Bring your notebook and your planner to every meeting so you can (1) update me on your progress and questions, (2) take notes on our discussions, and (3) record the list of deliverables for our subsequent meeting so we can refer back to it next time. Recording your work in one place keeps you efficient, helps us communicate, and makes your hard work and accomplishments tangible!

Weekly Group Meetings

My research group holds a weekly group meeting on Friday mornings at 9am. **These meetings are extremely important for our research group, and so attendance is required. If you must be absent for a group meeting, I need to know in advance.** The objectives of these meetings are several: (1) to give me a chance to hear how you are progressing; (2) to provide an opportunity for students to discuss any issues/problems; (3) to give students ample opportunity to make presentations during their tenure as graduate students; (4) to allow us to build on our knowledge of group and outside cutting-edge research; (5) to build a sense of community within our lab group. I hope that you find them as useful as I do. When you give a presentation, I expect that presentation to look professional and clean and void of any sloppy errors…it helps not to start at midnight the day before you present!

Safety

Ask before attempting anything that might cause you or others harm. Be sure you know

the rules before handling any type of chemical, biological or radiochemical agent, and apprise me of what you are dealing with so that we both know the procedures. There is a binder in the lab with current radiological, chemical and biological safety protocols. We will go over these protocols annually, however it is your responsibility to stay up to date on the current safety hazards and protocols. I expect everyone to be following the protocols that are in place for all safety hazards. **Furthermore, when attempting a new type of experiment, you must discuss with me the risks and how we can perform the experiment as safely as possible. We are all responsible for safety!** Please let me know of any safety issues in the lab immediately. Don't worry that I will worry; it's my job. I will not get mad at you, and I might even be able to help. All PhD students will be assigned some sort of safety roll and will be expected to aid the lab with those efforts.

Failure to Meet Expectations

If I feel that you are not meeting expectations as outlined in this document the first step will be a one-on-one discussion. If after that expectations are still not being met, you will be placed on probation with possible removal from the lab group if poor performance continues.

_____ _____

Graduate Student Signature Date

_____ _____

PI Signature Date