**Student Mentor Groups: November 30th, 2016**

**Topics: Choosing Your Research Lab/ Choosing Your Research Committee**

**Check-In:**

* Discuss with your group if they want to still have practice for rotation presentations since the date falls on the same day as the final exam.
* If you are going to meet, have a prepared PowerPoint for next week’s practice presenations
  + should be in semi-finalized format
* GSO Meeting: December 1st, 12PM, CG-11

**Part 1: Choosing Your Research Lab**

An advisor should not be selected solely because he or she is the one researcher that happens to work on the precise focused topic that you think you are most interested in

**Main Criteria in Selecting a Mentor**

* mentorship ability (MOST IMPORTANT FACTOR!)
* scientific ability
* passion for science

**Scientific Ability**

**Goals of a PhD to Keep in Mind**

 To learn how to ask interesting and important questions

 To learn how to translate these questions into experiments that will produce verifiable results

 To learn how to critically evaluate the results of these experiments

 To learn how to present your ideas and data to the scientific world in written and oral form.

**Mentorship Ability**

**Keep In Mind**

\*You are spending at minimum, the next *three years* with this PI. Lab members change, but your PI will be with you for the duration of your PhD (if you do not switch labs).

Select a PI that you will get along with both inside and outside the lab as you will have many interactions and work closely together. Or, if your PI is rarely in lab, make sure you are okay with that.

1. Know your own learning style

* Do you want your mentor to be hands on or hands off?
* Do you want a PI with an open door policy or a PI that requires weekly scheduled meetings?
* Do you want a micromanager or helpful suggestions?

1. Mentorship ability includes the lab environment and organization that the mentor has created

* Do you like a crowded, noisy environment in a large lab (>8 people) or a quiet, relaxed environment with few lab members (~3-5 members)?
* Who would be training you: post docs, senior lab students, staff scientists?
* How would you learn basic techniques? Who would you go to for questions?
* Is there a lab manager? What is the lab managers role?
  + if there is no lab manager, who does the basic ordering and lab duties (dishwashing, cleaning, biohazard trash disposal, autoclave, ordering, stocking)?
* Are there many undergraduate students in the lab? Would you have to work with an undergraduate student or do you want to work with an undergraduate student?

1. Traits of a Good Mentor

* Can help the student formulate a good and tractable research question
* Guides the student to formulate good experiments to address the research question while encouraging the student to be increasingly independent over time.
* Does not put his student on a scientifically trivial question
  + determine if a question or research topic within the lab is “scientifically trivial” based on data searches and reading previous papers;
* Spends time with each student discussiong science:
  + how to design good experiments
  + how to interpret and analyze data
  + how to write research papers and grants (takes time to give back edits within a 2 week time frame)
  + how to review papers for journals, practicing talks, and providing career guidance (often done in lab meeting)

1. Speak with current or past trainees (one-on-one meetings are usually most beneficial)
   1. Is the PI a good mentor in terms of spending sufficient time with each student?
   2. Do they enjoy being in the lab?
   3. Is there team spirit in the lab?
   4. Are the students generally happy?
   5. What is the trainee track record (how many graduate students have they mentored, where are they now)?

**Junior Faculty**

* Typically smaller lab
* Usually the junior faculty has more time for hands-on training
* Will not have as strong of a track record of training graduate students
* You may bear more responsibility in the lab: ordering, keeping items in stock
* Some junior faculty are not tenured yet and may be under more stress when seeking tenure; it may be pertinent to ask if/when they are coming up for tenure

**Senior, Distinguished Faculty**

* Rarely will be in the lab space or showing techniques
* Most likely will have a very busy schedule & hard to schedule individual meetings

**Part 2: Choosing Your Research Committee**

It is okay to ask about choosing your committee when you are thinking about joining a lab. You can ask your potential PI how he likes to have his students select a committee. This way , you are aware of his/her preferences before you join the lab.

After joining a lab:

* Speak with your PI about your research committee. Purpose of committee members for some PIs is for networking and collaborating
* Think of how many committee members you want: 4 minimal, 6 maximum (these numbers include your PI + 1 external member)
  + Committee members can change, especially if there are extenuating circumstances, but ideally, youd like to have the same committee from start to finish
* Be aware that the External Membermust be present at every meeting; cannot be in your department or associated with your concentration

General Goals When Selecting a Committee

1. **Strengthen your professional network**: introduce you to potential collaborators, and possibly help with your search for a postdoc or tenure track position; and/or write a letter of recommendation for you
2. **Give valuable feedback on your work**: find scientists who will provide constructive feedback on experiments or are familiar with your field of study
3. Be **easy to work with** in the defense process: likely to be flexible on the date of your defense, and likely to sign off on your dissertation without demanding unrealistic changes
4. Choose a **Diverse Committee** consisting of one or multiple:
   * Expert(s) in your field of study
   * Basic scientist; a PI from the liberal arts college
   * PI(s) that you otherwise wouldn't interact with
   * PI(s) in other colleges: Vet Med, HPNP, MPH, Dental School, VA Hospital
     + Persons with MD, PhD, DVM, DMD degrees all bring value in different ways

Suggestions

* If you have more than 4 committee members in mind, email each committee member and meet with them individually to discuss your potential lab project and see if they are willing to serve on yoru committee or have any interest in your project
* Do not be offended if a committee member responds with a “no” ; many PIs are asked by many students to serve on a committee
* Email early! Once you join a lab, start thinking about who you want to email; the sooner the better so you can start forming contacts and get to know your committee members better

**Scheduling Committee Meetings**

* Hardest part of choosing a committee is scheduling committee meetings and finding a day that works for all 4 (or 5 committee members)
  + If you select a renowned scientist it is likely he/she will have to Skype or video conference in to your committee meetings & qualifying exams
* Block off 2-3 hours for committee meetings
  + Get to the room at least 15 minutes before to set-up
  + Dress business casual or business professional for meetings
  + Bring food/coffee/beverages if you would like (majority of students bring food items for their committee members)
* **You** are responsible for finding a room for your committee meeting.
  + Typically the conference room of your department, but if the room is taken on your day of choice, you will have to ask outside your department or have a back-up
  + It is never a bad idea to have a “back-up” room in case the room you booked has a last-minute issue (construction, display doesn't work, previous meeting is running late)
* Schedule committee meetings *first* with your PI and then with your members at least 1 month in advance so you have time to prepare your slides & can notify them
  + Doodle Poll works great for committee meeting dates
* Follow—up email each committee member immediately once you have scheduled a date/time/location for committee meetings . If you do not receive a response, it is okay to email again to confirm they put it in their calendar
  + Many times you will have to schedule committee meetings with the administrative assistant of the PI
  + stay in touch with the administrative assistant & ask to be placed on the schedule
  + CC the administrative assistant in all correspondence if scheduling is made through the administrative assistant
* Send a reminder email the day before (or morning of your committee meeting) to each committee member
* Email your concentration secretary for committee meeting paperwork once you have set a date/time/location
  + Committee meetings are cataloged in an online system and on paper
  + A form with signatures is required for each committee meeting
  + Form must be turned in to the concentration secretary at the end of each committee meeting

**Students are required to have two supervisory committee meetings annually at six-month intervals. There are no exceptions to this rule.** **A student’s perceived lack of new data or progress is not an excuse to avoid a meeting. Faculty members (chairs/mentors) do not have the authority to waive this rule.**

**See Student Handbook, Pg. 15 for more information.**