Tips for Working with Graduate Students and Graduate Assistants

- **Establish realistic advising limits for yourself.**
  Carefully consider how many students you can advise, and set realistic limits for yourself. Graduate students often flock to new professors, and you easily can become overcommitted, which serves neither you nor your students. Create projected graduation schedules for your students to determine when you may be busiest and when you can take on new students.

- **Seek mutually beneficial relationships with graduate students.**
  Working with graduate students can be one of the most rewarding aspects of your job, but it is important that you establish relationships that are mutually beneficial. When a student approaches you about serving on his or her committee, carefully consider if your interests align with his or her interests. Do not be afraid to say no when the fit is not there. When you do say yes, seek ways to capitalize on the relationship (e.g., joint projects, co-authored presentations and publications, co-teaching).

- **Find an advising system that works for you, and make sure that all your graduate students understand and follow it.**
  At a minimum, meet formally with each of your graduate students at least once per semester to discuss course registration and monitor overall progress. More frequent meetings will be needed as students progress to discuss projects, research, and writing. Keep good records, and document your decisions. Avoid making appointments or doing business in the hallways; things may slip through the cracks. You may find it helpful to meet with students only on certain days of the week, at certain times of day, and in proportion to the meeting’s purpose (e.g., 30 minutes for class registration or to discuss a problem, 1 hour to talk about research and writing). Settle on what works for you, and make sure your students understand your system and abide by it.

- **Set parameters regarding your availability and responsiveness.**
  Clearly communicate to your graduate students when you are and are not available to assist them. Graduate students often do work during breaks in the academic calendar, because they have free time then, and they may expect you to review their work then. If you will not be available to review graduate students’ work during break periods, such as the semester break or summer, let the students know that in advance. Establish your policies for timely submission of student work and turn-around time; as a general rule, students should submit work to faculty members for review at least two weeks in advance of a scheduled meeting (e.g., prelim or proposal defense). Do not feel compelled to provide immediate turn-around on work submitted late; lack of planning on the student’s part does not constitute an emergency on your part.

- **Set realistic expectations for your graduate students, and be sure they are accountable.**
  Set goals and expectations for your students and help them to keep on task. When a student signs up for independent study (590) or dissertation credits (699) with you, each credit hour should translate to about 50 hours of work. Develop a contract or otherwise set requirements for what they should accomplish. Require students to show evidence of their work by producing a product or otherwise documenting progress. Avoid passing a student who has done little or no work just to be nice. If a student fails to follow through, don’t be afraid to give a poor grade or an Incomplete. In cases of serious lack of progress, consider sending a warning letter to the student from your program.
• **Become familiar with graduate policies and procedures.**
  Make yourself familiar with graduate policies and procedures by reviewing the Graduate School’s website, the Graduate Bulletin, and the online COE Graduate Handbook ([http://www.education.purdue.edu/gradoffice/facultyhandbook/index.html](http://www.education.purdue.edu/gradoffice/facultyhandbook/index.html)). Look for opportunities to serve on a committee before chairing one. If you have questions about policies and procedures, ask your colleagues and/or the Graduate Office for help.

• **Communicate policies and procedures to your graduate students, but require that they assume responsibility for knowing the requirements and following through.**
  Don’t repeat the same basic information to each graduate student. Instead, direct students to available online and print information about graduate policies and procedures. If your program area has little documentation for graduate students, work with your colleagues to create appropriate informational materials. Use a program area mailing list or email distribution list to send important information out to your graduate students. Hold students accountable for knowing the rules; ignorance is not an excuse. Require students to do the legwork to schedule committee meetings, get copies of materials to the committee to review, make sure forms are completed, etc.

• **Get graduate students engaged as soon as possible.**
  Talk with students about their research interests and passions. Try to involve them early on in research projects, writing, and other activities that will help them to grow and develop. Orient them to the academic culture of your program and field. Share readings. Talk about research. Encourage them to join professional organizations and attend conferences in your field. Ask them to provide regular updates of their activities (e.g., annually updated CV).

• **Encourage graduate students to develop mutual support groups.**
  Encourage students to get involved with other graduate students to form mutual support groups. This can occur informally within the program/department or through student organizations such as CIGSA, PAET, and others. Students can help each other to understand the academic culture of the department and learn what they need to do to succeed. In addition, graduate students can help each other by proof-reading each other’s work, giving feedback on research ideas, and working together on projects. This helps to build graduate student camaraderie, and it eases the burden on the faculty.

• **Form graduate student research groups.**
  Setting up a research group with your grad students often helps in a couple of ways. First, they experience the research that a group of motivated, focused individuals can develop if the project is something all have an interest in. Second, they can receive direct mentoring from you and other students. Third, it really helps them to feel a part of a group with a cohesive purpose. Finally, within those groups research may be the primary focus, but many other topics (e.g., how to get through grad school) are discussed. Many problems are solved by holding periodic research group meetings in which the students and you can discuss various issues.

• **Head off problems in advance.**
  Seek to resolve small problems before they become big ones. If you notice that a graduate student has problems (e.g., chronically late when submitting work, poor writer), talk with the student and take steps to remedy the problem early in his/her program (e.g., structure deadlines for submission of work, direct the poor writer to the Writing Lab or an editor). If a student needs a waiver of a graduate rule, pursue it in advance rather than after the fact. Discourage students from doing things that will impede their progress such as taking on too much work or accepting a faculty position before completing the dissertation.
• **Working with Teaching and Research Assistants** can have its own special challenges and rewards. When working with TAs and RAs, consider the following tips.
  o TAs and RAs are hired to do a job, and it is important to impress upon them the position carries the same demands and expectations as any other job. Being a TA or RA is not simply a means to get paid for being a graduate student; graduate assistants must be accountable for doing the work. Let your TAs/RAs know that they will be assessed on their performance, but help them to understand that this is a good thing.
  o Provide an orientation at the beginning of the semester/year for new graduate assistants. For TAs, provide information about the course that they will be teaching (e.g., syllabus, textbook, course materials), and for RAs provide information about the research project (e.g., project proposal, prior publications/presentations, other relevant literature, IRB requirements). Give them a clear outline of the expectations for their position.
  o Meet with your TAs/RAs on a regular basis to monitor their performance and to communicate about the course or project. For example, meet with TAs every week or two to ensure that they are prepared and to discuss any problems or potential problems in the course. Likewise, hold regular meetings with your RAs to clarify the short-term goals, what needs to be accomplished, and how short-term goals/activities fit into long-term goals.
  o If you do not already have one, consider creating a resource book for TAs in your course. Such a resource book might include relevant information about the course (e.g., schedule, assignments, readings, course procedures), sample lessons or tips for addressing content, background information about course topics, annotated grading rubrics, etc.
  o Encourage TAs to develop their own teaching style and approaches to the course content within the boundaries available in the particular course. Some courses permit more flexibility than others. However, closely monitor what TAs tell their students, because new TAs, especially, may convey incorrect information or inadvertently mislead their students. Encourage TAs to seek answers to students’ questions when they are uncertain of the right response rather than saying something that may be wrong.
  o Look for opportunities to mentor TAs about their teaching. Observe a TA teaching and offer constructive suggestions for improvement. If your schedule permits, do some co-teaching with the TA. If you teach a course with multiple TAs, have the more experienced TAs mentor and help those less experienced. Direct TAs to sources of on-campus support for teaching such as the Center for Instructional Excellence (CIE).
  o When working with RAs, make sure you have planned sufficiently well so that you can keep them busy. Require your RAs to keep time/activity logs to show you what they have been doing and where their time has been spent during a given period such as a week or month.
  o Make sure that RAs understand how to conduct research in an ethical fashion including making appropriate use of human research subjects, properly attributing others’ work when writing, and honestly reporting results.
  o Encourage RAs to pursue research on significant problems. Help the RAs to understand what is significant and what will waste their (and your) time.
  o As noted above, create a research group involving your RAs and other graduate students. Much of the learning will be generated by the students in the research group.