

Choosing a thesis advisor: conversations to consider

PBSE Graduate Student Council

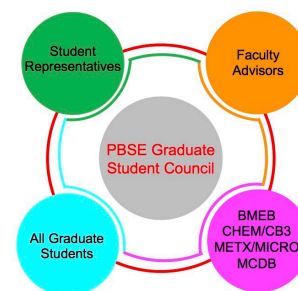
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What I Wish I Knew discussion panel

First year PBSE graduate students and a panel of experienced PBSE grad students

Panelists: Stephanie Aguiar, Juliana Nzongo, Roman Reggiardo, Atesh Worthington

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Choosing a thesis advisor and lab is potentially scary for first year grad students. There are so many conversations that need to be had before joining a lab. These conversations also need to be had throughout the time in the lab. It is important to discuss/make note of mutual interests between you and your mentor. However, it is also important to recognize and allow the space for these interests to change. The mentor-mentee relationship must be mutually beneficial. It is a personal and scientific relationship that makes progress in your advisor's research program AND trains you in becoming an independent thinking scientist.

Questions to ask prospective thesis mentor:

Technical Questions:

1. Given recent changes to the lab culture, what are your expectations for students in your lab?
 - a. Is presence in the lab important to you?
 - b. Do you expect students to work on the weekends?
2. How often do you like to meet with trainees? With the entire lab?
3. What is your preferred type of communication?
 - a. Do you prefer emails? Zoom?
4. Will you have funding for me?
5. Am I expected to TA? How often?
6. Are there particular directions you think I should explore in developing a research question?
7. Are there available projects that I would be expected to start with?

Mentoring Questions:

1. How would you describe your mentoring style?
2. In academia we are often not trained in equitable mentoring practices. How do you work with students to promote equity in the scientific training in your lab?
3. How do you navigate conflicts in the lab?
4. How do you motivate students?
5. How do you cultivate positive relationships in the lab?
6. How do you ensure student ownership of projects? How do you ensure projects are not overlapping too much?
7. How do you balance ongoing grant obligations with your trainees research interests?
8. How do you support trainees who have interests outside the scope of funded projects?

Career Development Questions:

1. What role do you play in your trainee's training/career goals?
2. Scientific writing is an important skill for graduate training. How do you work with students to develop these skills?
 - a. Do you have students apply to fellowships?
 - b. Do students in your lab write their own manuscript?
 - c. Are students involved in grant writing? I.e. Putting together R01s for the lab?
3. What is your policy for sending students to conferences?
4. What are some of the career outcomes of your previous graduate students?
5. How do you support various careers/roles in science?

Things to communicate to prospective thesis advisor:

1. Your values.
2. Your career goals/ training outcomes.

Questions to ask prospective lab-mates/previous lab members:

1. How would you describe your advisor's mentoring style?
2. Has your initial impressions of your mentor changed since joining the lab? How?
3. Has your mentor's expectations/style changed over time?
4. How does your advisor's mentoring style work for you?
5. How does your advisor's mentoring style NOT work for you? How do you navigate this?
6. What does it mean to be a successful graduate student in THIS lab?
7. How does the lab celebrate achievements?
8. Is this lab collaborative? Do you feel comfortable asking for help from lab mates?