

Visual Studies Mentoring and Advising Best Practices and Guidelines

There are different styles of advising. This offers a guide to campus policies as well as program best practices and guidelines. In addition, it clarifies certain rights and responsibilities for students and faculty mentors.

Campus policies

UCI has an official Graduate Policies and Procedures, available as a PDF here:
<http://www.humanities.uci.edu/visualstudies/program/advancement.php>

Graduate Division has resources for mentoring, available here:

<http://www.grad.uci.edu/academics/mentoring/index.html>

Visual Studies best practices

Agreeing to be an advisor or committee member

- Students decide whom they would like to serve as their advisors and committee members. It is expected that students will approach and formally ask faculty to serve as their advisors or committee members, even in cases when there was an implicit “fit” between students and faculty from the admission stage onwards. Advisors are not assigned, nor do advisors pick their advisees.
- Students are required to confirm their primary advisor by the end of their first year in the program. Confirmed advisors sign each student’s Degree Audit Form, which is kept by the Graduate Coordinator in the student’s file.
- Students are expected to confirm their dissertation committee members (typically three faculty) prior to the advancement defense (with a minimum of five faculty).
- Faculty have the right to decline to serve as advisors or committee members but should do so in a timely and ethical manner.
- Faculty should not invite themselves onto committees; students may feel like they cannot say no.
- Since not all faculty teach every year and coursework lasts less than two years, students may not have been able to take courses with their intended mentors. Students should be proactive in cultivating relationships with their intended mentors, and mentors will likely want to make themselves available for directed readings with the student to lay a foundation for future mentorship.
- Co-chairing for the dissertation is possible when appropriate; the two faculty members and the student should discuss a plan for communication, workload, and feedback that maintains transparency and equity.
- Faculty and students each have the right to terminate or change (such as asking an advisor to become a committee member and vice versa) their relationship without fear of retaliation. Changes should be communicated to the Graduate Coordinator and recorded in the student’s file.

MA paper

- Guidelines for the MA paper are available online here:
<http://www.humanities.uci.edu/visualstudies/program/awardingma.php>
- The MA paper is shepherded by a primary faculty mentor, and reviewed by two additional faculty. The primary mentor gives feedback on a full first draft, which is expected to be revised before submission to the full committee. Feedback from committee members is expected within three weeks of receiving the paper, as stipulated in the MA paper guidelines. Faculty committees typically request at least one round of revision; revision is an important part of the process.
- Faculty may want to present their feedback in the form of a “reader report” to model the process of submitting an article for review at a journal. Faculty may request a brief response or revision plan prior to or in lieu of revisions.
- Faculty may suggest students identify a journal where they would like to send their revised paper.
- The MA paper is an opportunity for original research, as well as one to imagine a readership beyond one professor.
- The MA paper is one of the best indicators for the likelihood of future success at the dissertation stage. If the research and/or revisions do not indicate that the student is prepared for continued Ph.D. study, or if completing the MA paper indicates significant struggle that bodes poorly for success at planning, researching, and writing a dissertation, faculty should recommend a terminal MA.
- It is ultimately more kind to recommend a terminal MA than to be "nice" and pass a student who is likely to languish in the dissertation planning and writing phase.

Exams

- Exam bibliographies should provide coverage of a legible field or subfield of study that is broader than the specific topic of a student’s dissertation.
- Faculty may find it helpful to begin the exam reading process with a discussion about the purpose of the list, such as for filling gaps, for teaching, and/or for dissertation literature.
- Faculty may encourage students to develop the first draft of their exam bibliography to give the mentor a sense of their knowledge of the field and ability to conceptualize it. Faculty will likely suggest revisions, fill in gaps, and indicate both essential canonical and exciting new work in the field for inclusion.
- It may be helpful to start by asking students to identify three questions they want to be able to answer by the end of the exam reading.
- Faculty commonly request reading notes for each cluster of readings and commonly meet to discuss the readings. The number of meetings may vary, but cumulatively it averages out to about 9-10 total hours (the equivalent of one hour per week of an academic quarter).

- Faculty may incorporate the training of efficient reading techniques as part of the exam reading.
- Faculty may ask for a final synthesis and/or a mock syllabus at the conclusion of the reading quarter.
- Faculty may ask the students for sample exam questions at the conclusion of the reading quarter; these questions may or may not be used for the actual written exam.

Dissertation topics, prospectuses, and writing

- Faculty may suggest that students brainstorm a few different potential dissertation topics, including preliminary argument, objects, and chapters to test the viability of the topic.
- At the topic stage, faculty will likely need to be proactive in guiding students to the right scale for the project and to helping them determine if their project is original.
- Faculty may suggest that students write a sample case-study chapter prior to developing their prospectus in order to test the project and/or get a head start toward writing.
- During the writing process, it is expected that the advisor will read and comment on first drafts of chapters, which should be revised at least once before they are given to other committee members.
- Students should consult committee members to inquire whether they would prefer to read the dissertation chapter-by-chapter in progress or only when there is a complete revised draft. Typically committee members prefer to receive the dissertation when there is a full draft that has been approved for circulation by the advisor.
- For students who are experiencing anxiety, depression, personal issues, or health problems, it is important to direct them to counseling or the other appropriate services. Faculty are not trained therapists and should not be expected to act as such. But these issues also often directly impact dissertation writing and progress, which faculty do supervise. Faculty may define their own boundaries, and may request more or less boundaried communication from advisees.
- It may be helpful to suggest a range of writing guides, strategies, or processes to students, with the recognition that research and writing are not one-size-fits-all processes. Students may feel like they are failing if one suggested model doesn't work for them. The first year may be a process of trial-and-error to find the most productive personal strategy for writing. It's also important to help students develop realistic deadlines so that they don't set themselves for failure or compounded frustrations with their progress. A number of writing guides are available to be checked out from the VS library collection in the program coordinator's office.
- For students who are stalled or who are intimidated by the scale of a dissertation as a whole, it may be effective to suggest that they focus on

smaller tasks with manageable deadlines and/or to approach the project chapter-by-chapter rather than being overwhelmed by the dissertation as a whole. Some students, in contrast, may work better by multitasking and working on chapters concurrently.

- Students are ultimately accountable for their dissertation progress.
- According to our program guidelines, “The recommended length for a dissertation is 200-250 pages of text and notes, not including bibliography.” Three or four case-study chapters, plus introduction or conclusion, is standard; there is no set rule for the number of chapters or chapter lengths. Program guidelines are available here:
<http://www.humanities.uci.edu/visualstudies/program/dissertation.php>
- With the 5+2 program, there will now be 2-year and 3-year funding tracks, decided at advancement. Advisors should consult with students about these two options, their feasibility, and what is best suited for their projects.

Professionalization and Support

- Advisors are expected to consult with and mentor students about presenting at conferences and publishing throughout their time in the program.
- Students likely will get minimal benefit from traveling to graduate student conferences, though presenting at the UCI conference or local graduate conferences may provide helpful, low-pressure environments to practice.
- Topical or small-to-mid-sized conferences may be productive for students in building intellectual community and networks—and can be easier places for this to happen than large conferences. But these should be encouraged selectively.
- Students should be encouraged to apply to the large professional society conferences once they are at the prospectus or ABD stage.
- Students should be advised against going into debt for traveling to conferences, and also against not overextending themselves with too many conferences.
- Students should be advised of the need to publish at least one major, well-placed article in a peer-reviewed venue if they intend to pursue an academic job. They will not be competitive on the job market without a publication. This will likely be related to a dissertation chapter. Typically no more than 2 dissertation chapters should be published as articles if a student plans to develop the dissertation into a book.
- Students should be advised to be selective about publishing smaller or online publications. In some cases exhibition reviews may increase their visibility and professional contacts, as does participation in online journals (such as Artforum.com, In Media Res, Flow, or Media Fields). But students should be selective so that such writing does not take up time and energy that should be focused on their dissertation or on writing more substantive publications. Additionally, they should be judicious about how many short or online publications they list on their CVs.
- Faculty advisors are expected to give feedback on student CVs and cover letters for fellowship and job applications.

- Faculty advisors should give as many leads and as much guidance as possible on job openings. Students should also be directed as to where they might search for job ads.
- Faculty advisors should encourage students to take advantage of the various professionalization workshops, offered by VS, the Humanities Commons, and by the Graduate Resource Center.
- Faculty advisors are expected to help prepare advisees for preliminary (Skype, telephone, conference) interviews, as well as campus visits.
- Among common advice for interviews: research the department faculty and curriculum; try for a “smart, warm energy” that is neither fake nor cocky nor disengaged; listen to the questions asked and clarify if necessary to make sure you are answering what is being asked; give substantive but not rambling answers, and talk about ideas, concepts and examples of your own rather than just referring to other scholars; have questions of your own about the department, the curriculum, the resources, and the location; present polished rather than new work for a job talk (usually about 40 minutes of presentation or about 18-20 double-spaced pages, plus Q&A); present a substantive research chapter rather than an overview; never wear anything new; do not drink more than one alcoholic beverage at meals.
- Beyond graduation, advisors and committee members often continue to be asked to write recommendation letters and/or give advice. The mentoring relationship does not end at graduation.

Faculty responsibilities and limitations

In addition to the above, there are also practices that are *unacceptable, inappropriate, exploitative, or negligent that faculty must not do*. Graduate students often feel vulnerable to faculty and will sometimes agree to exploitative tasks out of fear of retaliation.

- Faculty may not ask students to do personal favors, chores, or errands.
- Faculty may not ask students to do personal research for the faculty member unless the student is a paid researcher or credited collaborator (such as a co-author).
- Students have the right to decline personal requests from faculty without hostility, threats, or retaliation.
- Faculty should conduct at least 50% of meetings with the student in person unless one or the other is long-distance for an extended period (such as a student who is not in residence or a faculty member on sabbatical away from UCI). This rule is flexible during summer session.
- Faculty are not exempt from advising or letter-writing responsibilities while on sabbatical.
- Faculty are expected to respond to their advisee’s emails in a timely manner and to make themselves available to students they have agreed to mentor.

- Faculty are expected to give feedback to students on their work in a reasonable amount of time (within one-to-three weeks for an MA paper or chapter draft, within a month for a full dissertation draft).
- Faculty are expected to submit letters of recommendation by the deadline if they have agreed to write in support of a student or former student.

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