

PROCESS FOR CHANGING RESEARCH ADVISORS

Guidelines & Procedures for Graduate Students Changing their Research Advisors

*Approved by UNMC Graduate Council 02/04/2021
Revised for applicability to M.S. students and approved by UNMC Graduate Council 06/03/2021*

Several scenarios may result in an M.S. or Ph.D. student needing (or choosing) to change their advisor. The most common scenarios are outlined below along with guidelines and procedures for handling these situations. Because the nuances of each situation cannot be anticipated, some degree of judgment may be required to effectively manage these situations.

Students **not** supported by graduate assistantships or research assistantships should ignore portions of this document related to stipend support – specifically, section **I.2.C.** and aspects of section **III.3.**

The process of changing advisors can be challenging for both students and advisors. All parties involved should maintain the highest Standards of Academic Integrity and Responsible Conduct as outlined in SECTION II of the **University of Nebraska Student Code of Conduct** (<https://catalog.unmc.edu/general-information/student-policies-procedures/code-of-conduct/>). Retaliation against anyone involved in the process of a student changing advisor is strictly prohibited. Incidents of perceived retaliation should be reported to the Director of Graduate Studies and will be referred to the appropriate Dean for investigation and potential disciplinary action.

Definitions

Advisor = a student's research advisor and chair of their advisory committee (M.S. students) or supervisory committee (Ph.D. students). Often referred to as the student's mentor or PI.

Advisory or Supervisory Committee = the committee (chaired by the student's advisor) responsible for supervising an individual student's work toward earning the M.S. or Ph.D. degree

Graduate Program Committee = the committee responsible for the general supervision of a graduate program (IGPBS = the doctoral program graduate committee; MSIA = the sub-plan advisory committee; Nursing = the CON Ph.D. Affairs Council)

Graduate Program Director = chair of the graduate program committee. (IGPBS = the doctoral program director; MSIA = the sub-plan director)

Research Rotation = a trial period during which the student joins a potential advisor's research team (even if the team is comprised solely of the advisor) for a defined period of time in order to gauge whether or not permanently joining the team would represent a good fit for the student, the potential advisor, and the entire research team. A lab rotation is a type of research rotation. Although "lab rotations" are often a critical component of identifying a new research advisor in the bench research fields, this is not the case for all biomedical or public health fields; hence,

this document broadly refers to the process of identifying a new research advisor as "research rotations."

I. Request to change advisor triggered by the advisor's departure from UNMC

I.1. Options

A change in advisor is not necessarily required when a student's advisor leaves UNMC. The main options are provided below.

I.1.A. Option A: The student may complete his/her research project at the advisor's new university, while remaining a UNMC student. Unless the advisor's new university is located in the Omaha metropolitan area, the need for the student to relocate along with the advisor usually makes this option practical only for students who have completed their didactic coursework. This option requires that the student's advisor retain University of Nebraska Graduate Faculty status,[1] (p.) which is necessary to chair the student's advisory/supervisory committee.

I.1.B. Option B: If the necessary resources[2] (p.) can be left at UNMC to ensure completion of the student's project, then the student may remain at UNMC to continue their project under the supervision of a UNMC Graduate Faculty member designated as the new advisor (with the former advisor serving as co-chair of the student's advisory/supervisory committee). In this situation, the new advisor is typically a member of the students' advisory/supervisory committee who is already familiar with the research project. This option is available to Ph.D. students who have been admitted to Candidacy, as well as to M.S. students with permission from their graduate program committee. This option also requires that the student's advisor retain University of Nebraska Graduate Faculty status,[1] (p.) which is necessary to co-chair the student's advisory/supervisory committee.

I.1.C. Option C: If the necessary resources[2] (p.) cannot be left at UNMC, the student cannot relocate along with the advisor, or the student is ineligible for Option B, then a new advisor should be identified through the process described in Section **I.2.** (below). Changing an advisor in this scenario does not necessarily mean that a student must restart his/her thesis or dissertation research. The student's advisory/supervisory committee should determine if it is reasonable to continue the project or perform complementary research with a new advisor for completion of the project in a timely manner.

[1] (p. 5) See the *Graduate Program Director's Manual* for the policies and procedures on how to arrange for the former advisor to retain Graduate Faculty status.

[2] (p.) Funding (including stipend support, if the student is a graduate assistant or research assistant), critical equipment, supplies, etc.

I.2. Finding a new advisor

M.S. students in Molecular Genetics & Cell Biology (MGCB): Because this program employs direct recruitment of students to laboratories or research groups, students enrolled in this program will not be given an opportunity for research rotations when changing advisors except in unusual circumstances. Hence, sections **I.2.A.** and **I.2.C.** (below) are not

applicable to M.S. students in MGCB, who must follow program-specific guidelines and procedures for changing advisors.

I.2.A. If the student wishes to remain in the same graduate program at UNMC, then he/she should be allowed to identify a new research advisor.

- i) M.S. students in MGCB must follow program-specific guidelines and procedures.
- ii) All other students should be allowed up to 3 months to complete research rotations (typically, 3 rotations with each lasting approximately 1 month) in order to facilitate the process of identifying a new advisor.
 - (a) The student's Graduate Program Director or their designee, will serve as the student's temporary advisor during the research rotation period.
 - (b) To assist with identifying a new advisor, the Graduate Program Director should provide the student with a list of graduate faculty members who have indicated their willingness to host student rotations. Before embarking on each rotation, the student should verify with the potential new advisor that adequate resources are available should the rotation result in a mutual agreement that the student pursue his/her thesis or dissertation research under the faculty member's supervision.
 - (c) During the rotation period, the student should provide the Graduate Program Director with weekly email updates regarding progress in setting up and conducting research rotations. Lack of progress in this endeavor may jeopardize continued stipend support for graduate assistants and research assistants.
 - (d) If the student finds a new advisor after 1- or 2-months' time, then the rotation period should be discontinued at that time.
 - (e) Decisions to extend the 3-month research rotation period should be made on a case-by-case basis by the student's Graduate Program Director, and are reserved for situations in which the student needs a relatively short extension due to circumstances beyond their control that prevented completion of rotations during the designated 3-month period (e.g., faculty schedules, winter break).

I.2.B. If a student wishes to identify a new advisor in a different graduate program at UNMC, then he/she may explore this option with permission from the Dean of Graduate Studies and the targeted graduate program.

I.2.C. Stipend support during research rotations (for students holding research assistantships or graduate assistantships; not applicable to M.S. students in MGCB).

- i) Ph.D. students supported by a UNMC Assistantship/Fellowship: Per UNMC Graduate Studies policy, UNMC Assistantships/Fellowships funded by the Graduate Studies Office are awarded to students, rather than to the advisor or the research program. Hence, if a student supported through this mechanism changes advisors, the stipend stays with the student and will continue to support him/her during research rotations and pursuit of a new research project under the direction of a new advisor until the designated end date of the Assistantship/Fellowship. Delays in progress toward the degree

resulting from the student changing advisors will not result in an extension of the Assistantship/Fellowship duration.

ii) Students whose graduate assistantship is the equivalent of a teaching assistantship or involves working on a research project overseen by a faculty member other than their advisor: Stipend support during research rotations shall continue according to the terms of the signed graduate assistantship agreement.

iii) Students supported by a stipend provided by the original advisor:

(a) For students remaining within the same graduate program—

The original advisor is responsible for providing (or negotiating with his/her department chair or the student's doctoral program to provide) continued stipend support during the entire 3-month research rotation period or until the end of the originally specified stipend agreement (whichever comes first).

IGPBS students only: If the student cannot identify a new advisor in the same IGPBS doctoral program or wishes to switch IGPBS doctoral programs as well as advisors, then he/she should meet with the IGPBS co-directors to discuss the possibility of the IGPBS office providing stipend support for 3 months of research rotations outside of the current doctoral program.

Stipend support should not be discontinued prior to the end of the 3-month research rotation period, except in the following situations:

- # The student is not making satisfactory progress in setting up and conducting research rotations (see **I.2.A.ii.c.**); or
- # The student identifies a new advisor after 1- or 2-months' time (see **I.2.A.ii.e.**), at which point the new advisor becomes responsible for the student's stipend.

Decisions to extend stipend support for research rotations beyond the 3-month period should be made on a case-by-case basis by the Graduate Program Director, in accord with the stipulations detailed in section **I.2.A.v.**

(b) For students changing graduate programs—

Because a student choosing this option will be leaving their original program, he/she will not receive stipend support from their original program during the process of identifying a new advisor or new graduate program (including research rotations). In this situation, the student is responsible for finding a means of financial support (e.g., personal funds).

Once a student has been accepted for transfer into a new graduate program, the new program has the option of providing the stipend during research rotations.

I.2.D Once the student has identified a new advisor, the student is responsible for requesting an official change in their advisory/supervisory committee chair. This is accomplished by sending an email to the

Graduate Studies office (unmcgraduatelstudies@unmc.edu) stating the name of their original advisor and the name of the Graduate Faculty member selected as their new advisor. Both of these individuals, as well as the Graduate Program Director (and, if applicable, the IGPBS co-directors or the MSIA Program Director) should be cc'd on the email request.

I.3. Failure to find a new advisor

I.3.A. If a student cannot find a new advisor through the processes outlined in I.2.A. or I.2.B., then the student can voluntarily withdraw from the program.

I.3.B. If a student cannot find a new advisor through the processes outlined in I.2.A. or I.2.B., but does not voluntarily withdraw from the program, then the process for Termination of Graduate Students will be initiated by the student's graduate program. In this scenario, termination will be sought on the basis of failure to identify a permanent advisor. The process for termination due to conditions other than failure to satisfy scholarship requirements is defined in the UNMC Graduate Studies guidelines: (<http://catalog.unmc.edu/graduate-studies/guidelines-termination-students/>)

II. Request to change advisor initiated by the student's advisor

II.1. Documentation of problem(s) and resolution efforts

II.1.A. If an advisor is considering initiating a request that a student find a new advisor, the advisor should discuss with the student his/her view of the student's performance and potential. The advisor and student should consider asking someone deemed by the student to be neutral to be present at this conversation (e.g., student advocate, student ombudsperson (<https://www.unmc.edu/academicaffairs/institutional/ombuds.html>), the Graduate Program Director, or a member of the student's advisory/supervisory committee). Following the conversation, the student may decide to seek a new advisor (see Section III) or may decide to seek to remain with the original advisor (see below).

If the student wishes to remain with the original advisor, this conversation (and subsequent ones, if necessary) should be followed up by an email from the advisor to the student summarizing the substance of the conversation and including a clear description of any specific, identified problem(s) as well as suggested solution(s) and timeline(s) for addressing the problem(s). If the advisor does not believe that the situation is remediable, he/she should explain clearly to the student why that is the case. The student's Graduate Program Director should be cc'd on these email communications.

II.1.B. If the efforts described in II.1.A. fail to achieve resolution, then the student's advisor should issue a formal warning to the student at a meeting with the student and his/her advisory/supervisory committee. When issuing a formal warning, the advisor should again clearly articulate the concerns/problems that form the basis of the warning. A remediation plan should then be developed to provide a clear road map for the student to address the concerns. This plan should provide specific benchmarks for assessing satisfactory progress on achievable goals in an appropriate time frame and outline all conditions of the remediation plan. The advisor must send the meeting minutes and the proposed remediation plan via email to the student, the advisory/supervisory committee, and the Graduate Program Director. All parties must approve the remediation

plan, after which time the student must upload the approved minutes to Seguidor.

i) Two weeks after receiving a formal warning, the student should meet with his/her advisory/supervisory committee to assess progress on resolution of the problem. The advisor must send the meeting minutes that include a clear statement regarding progress on resolving the problem via email to the student, the advisory/supervisory committee, and the Graduate Program Director. If the problem has been resolved satisfactorily at this time, this should be stated in the minutes. If the problem has not been resolved, but progress toward addressing it has been made, then the committee can meet again in another two weeks to determine if the problem has been fully resolved.

(a) The time interval between these meetings and the number of meetings can be extended by the advisory/supervisory committee to fit the specific situation. Decisions by the advisory/supervisory committee regarding extending the number and timing of future meetings in which resolution of the problem will be assessed must also be documented in the meeting minutes.

(b) The advisor must send via email the minutes of the second and any additional meetings to the student, the advisory/supervisory committee, and the Graduate Program Director, and (if applicable) the IGPBS co-directors or the MSIA Program Director. The minutes should include a statement that the problem has (or has not) been resolved or that progress is (or is not) being made toward resolving the problem. The approved meeting minutes should be uploaded by the student to Seguidor.

II.2. Request to change advisor

II.2.A. If the above steps fail to address the problem(s) satisfactorily, then the advisor can formally request that the student find a new advisor. To initiate the process, the advisor should provide a written request for change via email that includes a) documentation of the problem(s)/reason(s) for initiating the request that the student change advisor, b) a summary of efforts made to address the problem (including above meeting minutes), and c) a timetable of key events and communications related to this decision. The written request should be submitted to the Graduate Program Director and the graduate program committee. When appropriate, the written request should be cc'd to the IGPBS co-directors, the MSIA Program Director, the COPH Associate Dean for Academic Affairs, or the CON Associate Dean for Academic Affairs.

i) If the student's advisor is the Graduate Program Director (an obvious conflict of interest), then another member of the graduate program committee will be responsible for overseeing review of the request for change. (For IGPBS students, the vice chair of the doctoral program graduate committee serves that role.)

II.2.B. The graduate program committee is responsible for reviewing the written request to change advisor and ensuring that the process outlined above for documenting the problem and attempting to resolve the problem has been followed. However, as noted in the introductory paragraph of this document, some degree of judgment may be needed for optimal management of these situations. Consequently, with documented permission from the student involved, the Graduate Program Director, IGPBS co-directors, or MSIA Program Director can deviate from

this detailed process if an alternative approach seems to be the best course of action for that student.

i) Multiple factors may impact a student's ability to adequately address the concerns outlined in a formal warning and successfully complete the remediation plan. As such, failure to fully address the concerns of a first warning and/or successfully complete the associated remediation plan are not considered sufficient justification for student termination from the program. Rather, failure to fully address the concerns and/or successfully complete the remediation plan should normally result in the student being given the opportunity to identify a new advisor. However, alternative outcomes may result in the following situations:

(a) If the same problem recurs with a new advisor and results in a second formal warning that is similar in nature to the first warning, this may be considered grounds for recommending student termination.

(b) Recommendations for termination would also be considered for a student who successfully completes a remediation plan developed following a formal warning but then fails to sustain the improvements required by the remediation plan, resulting in a second formal warning from the original advisor or advisory/supervisory committee.

II.2.C. It is the advisor's responsibility to inform the student that he/she is requesting that the student find a new advisor.

II.3. Finding a new advisor

The process and timeline for finding a new advisor, and details regarding stipend support (when applicable) during the research rotation period, are described in sections I.2.A. through I.2.D.

II.4. Failure to find a new advisor

The consequences for failure to find a new advisor are described in sections I.3.A. and I.3.B.

III. Request to change advisor initiated by the student

III.1.A. If a student becomes dissatisfied with his/her current advisor and wishes to seek a new one without attempting to resolve the problem(s) with the current advisor, then he/she can do so with approval from the student's Graduate Program Director (or, if appropriate, the IGPBS co-directors or the MSIA Program Director). Skip to section III.1.B.ii. for the procedure.

III.1.B. If a student would instead prefer to try to resolve the problem(s) with his/her advisor, then as a first step the student should try to resolve the problem informally with the advisor through one-on-one conversations. The student may invite a neutral party (e.g., student advocate, student ombudsperson (<https://www.unmc.edu/academicaffairs/institutional/ombuds.html>), the Graduate Program Director, or a member of the student's advisory/supervisory committee) to the meetings with the advisor. These conversations should be followed up by emails from the student to the advisor that summarize the substance of the conversations and include a clear description of any specific, identified problem(s) and suggested solutions and timelines.

The student's Graduate Program Director should be cc'd on these email communications.

i) Students are encouraged to seek assistance and input as needed with this informal resolution process from appropriate faculty or staff, including but not limited to:

- A member of the student's advisory/supervisory committee
- The student's Graduate Program Director
- IGPBS students: the IGPBS co-directors
- MSIA students: the MSIA Program Director
- Nursing Ph.D. students: the CON Associate Dean for Academic Affairs
- Ph.D. students in public health fields: the COPH Associate Dean for Academic Affairs
- Director of Graduate Studies (<https://www.unmc.edu/gradstudies/education/leadership.html>)
- Student ombudsperson (<https://www.unmc.edu/academicaffairs/institutional/ombuds.html>)

III.1.C. The requirement for students to pursue an informal resolution to a problem through one-on-one conversations with the advisor can be waived. Permission to waive this step can be granted by the student's Graduate Program Director (or, if appropriate, the IGPBS co-directors or the MSIA Program Director) and must be documented in an email to the student (cc to each of the others listed). The student must reply to the email to acknowledge receipt of permission.

If a student has filed a confidential complaint that leads to a grievance as outlined in the guidelines for conflict resolution, complaint reporting, and addressing inappropriate conduct (<https://catalog.unmc.edu/graduate-studies/student-grievance-resolution-procedure/>) then the requirement to pursue an informal resolution is automatically waived. This waiver will be documented in an email from the Institutional Official to the student and their program or subplan director.

III.2. Request to change advisor

III.2.A. If the process described in section III.1. fails to satisfactorily address the problem(s) or if approval to waive the informal resolution process has been granted, then the student can formally request to find a new advisor. In order to document a student-initiated request to change advisors, the student should provide a brief written request for change that includes reason(s) for initiating the request to change advisor (e.g., incompatibility between student and advisor). If the student pursued informal resolution of the problem with his/her advisor, the written request for change must include a summary of efforts made to address the problem and a timetable of key events and communications related to this decision. The written request should be submitted to the relevant Graduate Program Director (and, if appropriate, the IGPBS co-directors or the MSIA Program Director). If any of these individuals has a conflict of interest, as defined in section III.2.C., then this individual would not receive the written or verbal request.

i) The requirement for students to submit a written, rather than a verbal, request can be waived at the student's request. Permission to waive this step can be granted by the chair of the student's Graduate Program Director (or, if appropriate, the IGPBS co-directors or the MSIA Program Director), and must be documented in an email to the student (cc to each of the others listed). The student must reply to the email to acknowledge receipt of permission.

III.2.B. The Graduate Program Director is responsible for reviewing the written or verbal request to change advisor and ensuring that the process

outlined above for documenting the problem and attempting to resolve the problem has been followed (or that approval to waive this step has been granted).

III.2.C. Conflicts of Interest

i) If the student's advisor is the Graduate Program Director (or, if appropriate, an IGPBS co-director, or the MSIA Program Director), then that individual is ineligible to receive or participate in the review of the request for change. In this situation, the student can select another member of the graduate program committee to review the request for change. IGPBS students may (but are not required to) select the vice chair or co-chair of the doctoral program graduate committee to review the request.

ii) Other relevant conflicts of interest

(a) IGPBS students:

If the student believes that their doctoral program graduate committee chair has some other relevant conflict of interest and should not receive or review the request to change advisor, then the student may discuss the situation with the IGPBS co-directors. Exclusion of that individual from the review process, if granted, must be documented in an email to the student and the members of his/her doctoral program graduate committee. The student can then select another member of the doctoral program graduate committee to review the request for change.

If the student believes that an IGPBS co-director has some other relevant conflict of interest and should not receive or review the request to change advisor, then the student may discuss the situation with the non-conflicted IGPBS co-director. Exclusion of that individual from the review process, if granted, must be documented in an email to the student and the members of his/her doctoral program graduate committee.

(b) MSIA students:

If the student believes that their sub-plan director has some other relevant conflict of interest and should not receive or review the request to change advisor, then the student may discuss the situation with the MSIA Program Director. The exclusion, if granted, must be documented in an email to the student and his/her sub-plan advisory committee. The student can then select another member of the sub-plan advisory committee to review the request for change.

If the student believes that the MSIA Program Director has some other relevant conflict of interest and should not receive or review the request to change advisor, then the student may discuss the situation with the Executive Associate Dean for Graduate Studies. The exclusion, if granted, must be documented in an email to the student and his/her sub-plan advisory committee.

(c) MGCB M.S. students:

Permission to exclude the Graduate Program Director from review of the request to change advisor due to some other relevant conflict of interest must be granted by the Chair of the Department of Genetics, Cell Biology

& Anatomy (GCBA), and documented in an email to the student and the graduate program committee. The Chair of GCBA will then select another member of the graduate program committee to review the request for change. # In the event the Chair of GCBA is determined to also be in conflict, permission to exclude the Graduate Program Director from review of the request to change advisor due to some other relevant conflict of interest must be granted by the Executive Associate Dean for Graduate Studies, and documented in an email to the student and the graduate program committee. The Executive Associate Dean for Graduate Studies will then select another member of the graduate program committee to review the request for change.

(d) All other students:

Permission to exclude the Graduate Program Director from review of the request to change advisor due to some other relevant conflict of interest must be granted by the Executive Associate Dean for Graduate Studies, and documented in an email to the student and the graduate program committee. The student can then select another member of the graduate program committee to review the request for change.

III.2.D. The student is expected to inform his/her advisor that he/she is requesting a change in advisor. The Graduate Program Director, IGPBS co-directors, MSIA subplan director, or MSIA Program Director (as appropriate) can assist with this communication as needed.

III.3. Finding a new advisor

The process and timeline for finding a new advisor are described in sections I.2. All aspects of sections I.2.B., and I.2.D apply to student-initiated requests to find a new advisor.

All aspects of Section I.2.A apply to student-initiated requests to find a new advisor EXCEPT that in situations where the request is associated with a grievance, a student may be granted an extension of the rotation period for up to 3 additional months (allowing for a maximum rotation period of 6 months). In such situations, decisions to extend the 3-month research rotation period should be made on a case-by-case basis by the student's Graduate Program Director and the Institutional Official. Such extensions will be considered upon the student's request.

All aspects of Section I.2.C. apply to student-initiated requests to find a new advisor EXCEPT that the department hosting the student's graduate program

[3] (https://catalog.unmc.edu/graduate-studies/process-for-changing-research-advisors/#_ftn1) is required to pay the stipend (or to ensure that the student stipend is paid) during the research rotation period for students remaining within the same graduate program (Section I.2.C.iii.a.). Any existing payback agreements would apply to these situations.

[3] (p. 5) MSIA students: the department in which the student's original advisor holds their primary appointment.

III.4. Failure to find a new advisor

The consequences for failure to find a new advisor are described in sections I.3.A. and I.3.B

