

Mentoring and Grievance Policy for the PhD Programs in Mathematics and Atmosphere Ocean Science-Mathematics

Draft for discussion and review;
please send comments/concerns to [Ed Gerber](#) and [Esteban Tabak](#)

Why

The goal of this policy is to help you be successful at the Courant. We want to ensure an environment free from harassment and discrimination and to provide you the support, mentorship, and opportunities to reach your full potential.

Who

This policy is written for PhD graduate students. First, this policy is written for students who have and/or are experiencing a hostile or unwelcoming work environment. It covers cases where you feel that you have been discriminated against or harassed.

Second, this policy is written for students who are struggling in their PhD studies. Are you having difficulty finding a research advisor? Is your relationship with your advisor not working well? Do you feel isolated from your peers? To spin the ancient wisdom, It takes a village to raise a good mathematician, and you have more than your advisor to help you at the Courant.

We appreciate that often the distinction between discrimination and neglect is sometimes gray. Is your advisor simply overwhelmed, or does s/he/they not respect you because of your status? We want you to reach out sooner rather than later. Sometimes it is a situation where there is a mismatch of expectations -- with no harm intended -- but where intervention is needed. We are here to help you discern the nature of the problem and find a solution.

Finally, this policy is also written for students, postdocs, and faculty who are concerned about their classmates or students. If you are worried about a fellow student, please reach out to us.

What

This policy covers two kinds of issues.

- (1) Harassment and discrimination, including on the basis of sex, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, or any other personal identity.
- (2) An unsupportive work environment. This includes a lack of guidance on how to choose courses and find a research advisor, how to formulate and proceed with your thesis research, and how to prepare for your next career step, after you complete your PhD.

How

If your concern is not about your advisor (or academic mentor for students that have not yet chosen an advisor), we encourage you to talk to them first. They can both give you direct advice and help you reach out to the right person to remedy the situation.

If your concern is about your advisor or you wish to speak to someone else, you have several options. First, you can contact one of the following Official Points of Contact, reaching out to them in person, by phone/zoom, or by email, whichever form you feel most comfortable.

- Director of Graduate Studies in Mathematics ([Esteban Tabak](#))
- Director of Graduate Studies in Atmosphere Ocean Science and Mathematics ([Ed Gerber](#))
- Assistant Director of Academic Affairs, Graduate Program ([Michelle Shin](#))
- Department Chair ([Bruce Kleiner](#))

Second, you can also reach out to any faculty member or administrator that you trust. For example, this could be one of your course instructors, an unofficial mentor or PhD committee member, or an administrator who has helped you in the past.

Third, you can contact the Office of Equal Opportunity directly. Discrimination on the basis of sex and sexual misconduct in particular are handled by our Title IX office. [NYU's policy on sexual misconduct is detailed here](#) and the process for [contacting the office and filing a report is detailed here](#).

Fourth, counselling and wellness services are available 24 hours a day through the NYU Wellness Exchange, (212) 443-9999; the number is on the back of your ID card. [More details on counselling services and ways to contact them are detailed here](#).

Finally, if you feel that you or anyone else is in imminent danger, do not hesitate to [contact NYU public safety \(212\) 598-2222](#) or city emergency services (police, ambulance) by dialing 911.

What will happen

Potential cases of harassment and discrimination are taken very seriously. We follow the protocols and regulations established by [NYU's Office of Equal Opportunity](#). Sexual harassment and misconduct are investigated by [NYU's Title IX coordinator and office](#). Other forms of discrimination and harassment are governed by [NYU's policy on non-discrimination and anti-harassment](#). All faculty and administrators are legally bound to report potential cases of harassment to the OEO. This allows them to perform an independent and professional investigation of the complaint.

For cases where you are struggling with an unsupportive environment, our first goal is to listen. Where are you in your PhD studies? What are your concerns? What are your expectations?

The initial course of action is to ensure that we are following best practices, as detailed below in this document. In many cases, difficulty arises when there is a mismatch of expectations between a student and his/her/their advisor (or mentor, for students who do not yet have a research advisor). Clarifying expectations of communication and support is an important first step.

Broadening your support network is the next step. For students without an advisor, have you availed yourself of both your faculty and student mentor? For a student further along in their PhD, have you established a core PhD committee? This will provide you with at least one more co-advisor within the department, and potentially an external faculty member -- someone outside the Courant -- whom you can turn to for support and guidance. In addition, you need a supportive community: are you connected with the topic seminar series and affinity and interest groups within the Courant, the wider NYU community, and within the national research community?

In most cases, establishing communication, clarifying expectations, and developing a wider support network are the key to providing a supportive learning environment.

We acknowledge that there are situations, however, where there is a fundamental breakdown of the student-mentor relationship. When direct intervention is needed, the DGS will lead an effort to remedy the situation, including suggesting a formal agreement between the student and advisor on how to move forward, restructuring the student's thesis committee, or helping the student find a new advisor. We will do our utmost to limit any conflicts of interest; the DGS will recuse themselves from the process if conflicted, allowing the other DGS (math or AOS-math) to take over.

On confidentiality and privacy

We will strive to keep your concerns private to the fullest extent possible by law. [NYU's office of wellness has provided a detailed discussion of privacy and confidentiality, which do have distinct meanings.](#) There is a key distinction between faculty/administrators and counselors/mental health providers; the latter group can provide a higher level of confidentiality and privacy.

For potential cases of discrimination and harassment, all faculty and administrators are legally required to report this to the Office of Equal Opportunity (OEO). These include cases of sexual harassment, or where we have any reason to suspect that you or someone else is in physical danger.

Note that even if a case is reported to the OEO, they strive to maintain confidentiality to the extent possible. Once a faculty forwards a complaint to their office, the investigation is handled by OEO investigators outside the department to ensure an unbiased and independent investigation.

Counselling and wellness services are bound by different regulations and can offer greater confidentiality. They can be a first step if you are hesitant to speak with anyone in the department.

Best Practices for Student Mentoring

Your Faculty and Student Mentors

All incoming PhD students are assigned two mentors within the department: a faculty mentor and student mentor. Until you take on a research advisor, they are your first points of contact. It is important that you be in continuous conversation with your mentors. They (and your DGS) are there to help answer questions about course selection, exams, and finding an advisor.

Your Advisor

Once you have selected a PhD advisor, we recommend that you establish clear expectations for communication and guidance. What does s/he/they expect of you? What do you expect of them? *Putting these expectations in writing is a sure way of ensuring that you are in agreement.* Key points to consider are (1) the availability and means of communication, e.g., email/slack/office hours, and the expected response time, (2) expectations on meeting times and frequency for research updates, (3) expectations on your research progress, and (4) expectations on opportunities/responsibilities to present your research at conferences and meetings.

Your PhD Thesis Committee

You will ultimately defend your thesis before a committee of 5. *We strongly recommend that you establish a core PhD thesis committee of at least 3 as soon as you have selected a research advisor and thesis topic (year 2 or 3).* Ideally, this will include at least one other faculty member in the department (or a related department at NYU) and an external member from a separate institution. Your committee members are there to provide an independent assessment of your work, mentorship, and advice.

A Pre-Defense Meeting

We recommend that you meet with your core thesis committee *approximately a year before you plan to complete and defend your thesis*, typically at the end of your fourth year in the program. The goal is to present (i) the state of your current research, (ii) what you expect to have completed for your thesis, and (iii) a plan for the final year of graduate study to achieve this goal. This allows the full committee to give constructive feedback on your thesis at a point where you have ample time to account for their criticism. *At the final defense, it is past the time where you can really benefit from the expertise of your committee!*

In addition, the pre-defense meeting is an opportunity to discuss your post-graduation career plans. Now is the time to start exploring and planning for your next step, be it in academia, a research laboratory, industry, or otherwise. The plan for your final year of graduate study should include the necessary steps to find and secure your next position.