



VCU GRADUATE SCHOOL

Our Mission

Engage. Advocate. Inspire. Lead.

The Graduate School is committed to cultivating an inclusive environment where we:

Engage: Collaborate with campus partners to enrich the graduate student experience at VCU

Advocate: Champion graduate student success from acceptance to graduation

Inspire: Promote the delivery of high-quality graduate education, scholarship, training, and innovation

Lead: Provide expertise and guidance on graduate policies and best practices, using data-driven decision-making

Guided by the university's strategic plan, Quest 2028: One VCU Together We Transform, the Graduate School at Virginia Commonwealth University has identified three pillars of emphasis in its strategic plan.



These three equally important pillars are student success, growth in graduate enrollment and diverse student engagement. Student success drives the reputation of VCU's graduate programs, which in turn drives growth in enrollment and diversity of its student body. Diversity of the student body is essential to attract and retain more talented students and thus it drives student success and overall enrollment. These three pillars are therefore strongly connected to each other.

Guidance on Graduate Student-Faculty Expectations and Commitments

INTRODUCTION

The success of graduate faculty and graduate students at Virginia Commonwealth University is grounded in its mission to promote real-world learning, research improving the quality of human life, interdisciplinary collaboration and community partnerships, and core values of diversity, inclusion and equity to provide a safe, trusting, and supportive learning and research environment. The graduate student experience is integrally connected to establishing positive working relationships with faculty and other graduate students. The Graduate School and key VCU stakeholders developed this *Guidance on Graduate Student-Faculty Expectations and Commitments*. The aim is to provide advice about how to develop strong positive relationships between graduate students and faculty and to help mitigate possible conflicts that may arise during the course of graduate study. The spirit of this document is to promote an understanding of graduate student and faculty roles and responsibilities and to avoid and resolve potential academic conflicts. This document was created drawing from the work of peer and aspirational institutions such as [Virginia Tech](#), [UCLA](#), [UCSD](#) and [Penn State](#).

EXPECTATIONS AND COMMITMENTS OF GRADUATE STUDENTS AND FACULTY

The Graduate School encourages graduate faculty and students to use the *Discussion Guide: Expectations for Faculty and Students* below as a discussion aid to establish their working relationship. An understanding of the expectations and responsibilities of each party should reduce conflicts and increase solutions. Students and Faculty advisors should also discuss and sign the *VCU Compact between Graduate Students and their Thesis/Dissertation Advisors*. The *Compact* establishes a suggested framework for aligning graduate student mentor-mentee mutual expectations. The *Compact* was created with input from VCU graduate students, graduate program directors, graduate faculty and graduate program staff. The *Compact* is available on the Graduate School website, and should be reviewed and signed upon the initial match of the student and faculty advisor, reviewed annually, and collected by graduate programs. The *Compact* is generally applicable to all students and their advisors, but includes space for commitments specifically recommended by the program, or discussed by the advisor and the student.

DISCUSSION GUIDE: EXPECTATIONS FOR FACULTY AND STUDENTS

The following recommendations are meant to stimulate discussion between graduate faculty and students to assist in building healthy and productive working relationships. A core component across the recommendations is timely and effective communication between the parties. Agreement about expectations and timely and effective communication together can reduce the likelihood of a conflict between a student and faculty member. The following list of topics could be covered during a series of regular meetings between the student and advisor.



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Many of these same topics are also covered in the VCU Compact between Graduate Students and their Thesis/Dissertation Advisors available on the Graduate School website. It is recommended that the Compact is discussed and signed by graduate students and their advisors upon their decision to work together towards the student's degree.

1. Students and faculty should discuss communication preferences with each other, considering modality and frequency of communications. In establishing standards for communication, faculty should provide guidance about standard communication practices in the student's field of interest and also consider the student's preferences for communication.
2. Students and faculty should discuss how to develop and maintain a respectful, civil and collegial relationship.
3. Faculty advisors should be familiar with core departmental curriculum and be available to discuss academic progress and modifications to a plan of study.
4. Faculty advisors and students should determine frequency of meetings designed to determine goal attainment. Academic milestones (such as core course requirements, qualifying exams, thesis/dissertation projects and progress, etc.) should be identified and progress towards them regularly discussed.
5. Students and faculty should discuss that it is primarily the student's responsibility to progress through their degree program.
6. Students should regularly update faculty advisors about their academic progress.
7. Students and faculty should discuss expectations related to vacation time, accommodations required for religious observance, maternity/paternity leave, medical leaves, etc. in accordance with applicable university policies.
8. Faculty and students should discuss academic/work life balance.
9. Faculty and students should discuss professional development opportunities and what funding sources may be available.
10. Students and faculty should discuss and know the sources for pertinent university policies and academic program requirements.
11. Students and faculty should discuss and have a plan for how they would approach resolution of conflicts should they arise, including identifying the person they will go to if they cannot resolve differences (for example, the graduate program director).

RESOLUTION OF CONFLICTS

When an academic conflict arises between a graduate student and a faculty member or their thesis/dissertation advisor, the first step should be a sincere attempt by both parties to resolve the conflict informally between themselves. The student may consider discussing the conflict with a thesis/dissertation committee member, another trusted faculty member, the office for student advocacy, or the ombudsperson for support before or after speaking with their advisor.

If the parties are not able to resolve the issue to each party's mutual satisfaction, either one may request assistance in resolving the conflict from the graduate program director and/or the chair of the department that is home to the program. If either the program director or department chair cannot consider the conflict impartially, for example, because of a close professional or personal relationship with the faculty member, then the other will consider the conflict. The program

director or department chair may refer the matter to another university official as required by an applicable School/College or University policy. If no referral is proper, the program director or department chair will attempt to resolve the conflict.

If the program director and department chair do not resolve the conflict to the satisfaction of both parties, then either party may request assistance from the Assistant or Associate Dean for graduate education or graduate student affairs, or the School/College Dean or their designee. If the student does not know whom to contact in their School or College, they can consult with the Graduate School for this information (gradschool@vcu.edu). The School/College Dean or designee will consider only cases where prior local resolution failed and the issue is not governed by existing university policies or procedures. Typically, the School/College dean is the final arbiter for the conflict resolution plan. Unless there are extenuating circumstances, the conflict resolution plan should be developed within four months of the initial attempt for conflict resolution between the student and their advisor. To reach this time goal, each university official is responsible for acknowledging a request for assistance in resolving the conflict within 5 working days and for proposing a resolution to the parties within 15 working days or as soon as reasonably practicable thereafter. If the official resolving the conflict determines that the student needs a new thesis/dissertation adviser, the official will assist the student in obtaining one.

Other VCU supportive resources that graduate students can contact for advice and counsel during the conflict resolution process include:

- Office of Student Advocacy, Division of Student Affairs (provides information to resolve issues and has expertise in applicable policies)
- University Counseling Services, Division of Student Affairs

Issues that are not reviewable by the conflict resolution process include decisions related to transfer, admission or readmission; standard evaluations of student academic performance/progress; and dismissal of the student from the graduate program. These issues are covered by the policies listed in VCU Bulletin.

APPEALS AND GRIEVANCES OF CONFLICT RESOLUTION DECISIONS

If a student is not satisfied with the final plan for conflict resolution provided by the Dean of the College/School, the student can appeal to the Dean of the Graduate School. The student should provide the graduate school dean with written notification of appeal via email, to include justification and all supporting documentation (letter and email correspondence and other documents pertaining to the decision for conflict resolution).

The Dean of the Graduate School provides the graduate program director and school/college dean with copies of the student's appeal and asks the graduate program director/dean/department chair to provide the Graduate School with their response, including copies of letters, email correspondence or other supporting documentation that led to their decision for conflict resolution.

After referral to the committee, the committee will convene as soon as reasonably practicable to hear presentations from and ask questions of the student and representatives of the school/department/program. The student may bring someone with them to provide support and advice but who may not speak for them or participate directly in the hearing.

After reviewing the materials submitted and the presentations by the parties, the committee will convene in closed session and decide, by majority vote, whether to recommend to the Dean of the Graduate School either (1) to uphold the conflict resolution mechanism or (2) alter the resolution mechanism, in consultation with the school/college dean. In the event of a less than unanimous decision, the committee will communicate both recommendations to the Dean of the Graduate School. The Dean of the Graduate School makes a final determination and notifies the student in writing of the outcome.

The normal cycle for the Graduate School appeal process is within one month after the documentation from the student, department, program and school/college are presented to the office of the Dean of the Graduate School.

If the conflict or issue falls within the scope of another VCU office, the matter will be referred to that specific office. Please refer to additional reporting resources included below.

OTHER REPORTING RESOURCES

Concerns related to Title IX and sex-based misconduct

Online Title IX and Sex-Based Misconduct Reporting Form

https://cm.maxient.com/reportingform.php?VirginiaCommonwealthUniv&layout_id=5

email: titleix@vcu.edu

Concerns related to accessibility concerns or requests related to university programs, services, activities

Online Campus Accessibility Concern Form:

https://cm.maxient.com/reportingform.php?VirginiaCommonwealthUniv&layout_id=7

email: ADAservices@vcu.edu

Concerns related to the Preventing and Responding to Discrimination Policy

<https://vcu.public.doctract.com/doctract/documentportal/08DA32A740D317171538135833B28B2F>

Online Discrimination Incident Reporting Form:

https://cm.maxient.com/reportingform.php?VirginiaCommonwealthUniv&layout_id=9

email: equit@vcu.edu

Concerns related to research integrity or research misconduct

<https://research.vcu.edu/integrity-and-compliance/integrity-and-ethics/research-misconduct/>

email: Research Integrity and Ethics orie@vcu.edu

Telephone or online reporting: [VCU Helpline 1-888-242-6022](tel:1-888-242-6022) or www.vcuhelpline.com

Concerns related to student misconduct or student academic misconduct

[Office of Student Conduct and Academic Integrity](#),

[Online reporting Honor System and Standards of Academic Conduct Reporting Form \(maxient.com\)](#); [Student Conduct Incident Reporting Form \(maxient.com\)](#)

Concerns related to the Preventing and Responding to Discrimination Policy

<https://vcu.public.doctract.com/doctract/documentportal/08DA32A740D317171538135833B28B2F>

Online Discrimination Incident Reporting Form:

https://cm.maxient.com/reportingform.php?VirginiaCommonwealthUniv&layout_id=9

email: equit@vcu.edu

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Concerns related to research integrity or research misconduct

<https://research.vcu.edu/integrity-and-compliance/integrity-and-ethics/research-misconduct/>

email: Research Integrity and Ethics orie@vcu.edu

Telephone or online reporting: VCU Helpline 1-888-242-6022 or www.vcuhelpline.com

Concerns related to student misconduct or student academic misconduct

Office of Student Conduct and Academic Integrity,

Online reporting Honor System and Standards of Academic Conduct Reporting Form (maxient.com); Student Conduct Incident Reporting Form (maxient.com)



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