

2023 Public Description of Work for Action Collaborative on Preventing Sexual Harassment in Higher Education

University of California, Davis

Process for Changing Major Professors

Relevant Rubric Area(s):

1. Remediation: Reducing Power Differentials
2. Remediation: Reintegration Strategies and Programs

Description of Work:

Graduate education at UC Davis is decentralized, focused in one of the hundred graduate groups and programs. Each group/program, operating within Academic Senate-approved degree requirements and bylaws, has its own advising approaches, funding structures, requirements for graduation, and resources. Every Ph.D. and thesis-based Master's student works with a major professor, who is the faculty mentor with whom the graduate student works most closely (often their principal investigator). The major professor guides the graduate student through the process of identifying a desired area of focus, building skills in that area, honing in on a research topic and developing a research plan, completing the research, and preparing for a career after graduate school.

Depending on the graduate group/program, students can be guaranteed funding for the full length of their program independent of their major professor, be fully reliant on a major professor for funding, or have a combination of funding sources and security (including self-funding). Resources to help students vary by department and graduate group, as do procedures for changing major professors.

A student whose funding (and visa) status is mostly dependent on a single major professor is much more vulnerable to discrimination, including harassment, and mistreatment (e.g., bullying) than a student who is independently funded and can switch those funds to start a new project with a new major professor. In most cases, students need substantial guidance through the process of finding a new major professor, a new project, and possibly new funding sources, preferably without damaging an important professional relationship with their former major professor.

NEW PROGRAM

The purpose of the Process for Changing Major Professors is to address student vulnerability. The process seeks to diffuse hierarchical and dependent relationships between students and faculty, improve advising and mentoring of graduate students, and guidance on securing transitional funding for students changing major professors.

The process is designed for students who are choosing to change their major professor for one of the following reasons:

- A crisis in the mentoring relationship (including issues related to sexual harassment and other forms of harassment/discrimination)

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- A major professor leaving the university
- A change in research focus (student choice or faculty direction)

This program is not at this time for students who are facing disciplinary measures that have removed them from a mentoring relationship.

Key components of the Changing Major Professor Process for Year One are:

- Ability to smoothly transition from one Major Professor to another without penalty or the need to provide exhaustive evidence justifying the reason for changing.
- A designated contact in each graduate program/group and a staff member at Graduate Studies to help students through the process.
- Financial and non-financial support from the graduate program/group
- Academic accommodations, including flexibility around degree requirements, and formal protections overseen by the student's graduate program.
- Mentoring support for transitioning research projects, materials, and publications.
- Mental health and other resource support for students contemplating and undertaking significant changes in their graduate education.
- A procedural guide and training for Faculty Graduate Advisors and Staff Graduate Coordinators outlining the steps for a student/transition mentor to consider as they move towards transition (see Appendix A)

The process was developed from Spring 2022-Spring 2023 in a committee comprised of faculty, graduate students, postdoctoral scholars, and also staff from Graduate Studies; Academic Affairs (on two campuses); Office of Compliance; and the Center for Advocacy, Resources, and Education. We spent time developing scenarios in which a graduate student might need to change Major Professors in order to explore the various possible remedies and considerations that needed to be incorporated into our guide.

We subsequently developed two checklist-style guides, one from the perspective of the student and one from the perspective of the program, to illustrate the process and identify the considerations and contacts at each stage.

Graduate Studies has begun using this process when working with a student who needs to change Major Professors and is also sharing it with Graduate programs. It will be integrated into trainings starting in the Summer and supported on a resource page that will also include a link to offer feedback. We will also be recording a video to support the training and host it on a new resource page that we are developing for Graduate Advisors.

Key components of the Changing Major Professor Process for Year Two will be:

- Developing a tracking process for identifying problematic mentors whose behavior is uncovered through the process of helping students change their Major Professors
- Working with mentoring support initiatives in Academic Affairs and Graduate Studies to address problematic mentors
- Advocating with Academic Affairs to integrate markers of mentoring into faculty

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merit and promotion cases

We will evaluate the success of the process in the following ways:

1. Feedback form permitting anonymous response to the following questions:
 - a. Was your experience of the process timely? How long did it take?
 - b. Were the options that were presented helpful?
 - c. Were there financial repercussions?
 - d. Did you encounter any retaliation or microaggressions?
 - e. Did the ability to switch allow you to successfully complete your degree?
2. Adding a question to the Doctoral Exit Survey and newly developed Master's Exit Survey given to all students that asks: Did you change major professor while at UC Davis and, if so, how supported did you feel?

Appendix A

CHANGING MAJOR PROFESSOR GUIDANCE

The University recognizes that there are valid reasons for a student to change Major Professor, including lack of funding and change in the direction of dissertation/thesis project. There are also unhealthy mentoring relationships, caused by bias, discrimination, or other violations of University policy. If a student should choose to request a change in Major Professor, their program will make every effort to facilitate that process, with the understanding that multiple changes in Major Professor over the course of a graduate degree become increasingly difficult to accomplish.

For the Student:

Step 0: Considering a Change

- Depending on your reason for exploring a change in Major Professor, you may want to consult first with one of the following confidential resources: CARE, Counseling Services, Ombuds. Conversations with others on campus, including faculty advisors and graduate coordinators, about certain topics, such as sexual misconduct or discrimination, will require reporting to University offices.
- You may also prefer to consult with someone outside your program before requesting a change in Major Professor. Non-confidential resources include: the Graduate Student Association Vice President (for a peer consultation) and the Associate Dean for Graduate Students and Postdoctoral Scholars.
- Meet with your Graduate Academic Advisor to discuss options available and the possible consequences if you change Major Professors, e.g., possible change in your stipend, time-to-degree, course work, publications, etc. Other possibilities include changing your degree objective (such as from Ph.D. to Master's) or transferring to a different graduate program.
- Write a summary of these discussions and email them your Graduate Academic Advisor to ensure you have a clear understanding.

Step 1: Deciding to Change Major Professors

- Ask your Graduate Academic Advisor for help identifying a new Major Professor. It is

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useful to suggest some possible new faculty mentors, especially if you have made a connection with one who might serve in this role.

- Participate in meetings with new prospective Major Professors. You may ask your Graduate Academic Advisor for help with crafting email requests to faculty members and setting up meetings.
- Discuss academic goals and funding options with prospective new Major Professors. It can be helpful to present a progress update and proposed timeline for completion to guide the discussion.
- If you have additional concerns about the Graduate Advisor's suggestions or recommendations, or if you cannot find a new mentor, the Program Chair and/or the Associate Dean for Graduate Students and Postdocs can be consulted.

Step 2: Completing the Formal Steps

- Consider the appropriate timeline for transitioning from one Major Professor to another, taking into account the available and potential funding support.
- The Graduate Academic Advisor, and/or the student, should inform the student's current Major Professor and the program chair that the student wishes to change Major Professors.
- Meet with your Graduate Coordinator to reconstitute your thesis committee or change your degree objective or program.

Step 3: Starting with a New Major Professor

- ☐ Discuss questions regarding intellectual property rights and responsibilities to funding agencies with your former Major Professor before beginning new research. If needed, include your Graduate Academic Advisor in these discussions as a "neutral third party." If unresolved questions remain, consult with the Program Chair.
- ☐ Complete an orderly transition. This may include returning to your former Major Professor:
 - ☐ all lab notebooks,
 - ☐ all research records and reports,
 - ☐ all computer programs,
 - ☐ all experimental data,
 - ☐ all equipment, lab supplies, and lab keys associated with your former research project.

Note: You are allowed access to data and other pertinent information in the lab notebooks and/or other research records if needed for dissertation/thesis preparation or publication purposes. Make sure you keep copies.

- ☐ Upon completion of the transition tasks, your former Major Professor may be asked to email the Graduate Academic Advisor to notify them officially of the completion of the transition.
- ☐ Begin your new mentoring relationship by aligning your expectations with that of your new Major Professor. Consult the Graduate Studies Director of Mentoring and Academic Success Initiatives for tools and support.

For the Program:

Step 1: Receiving a Request for a Change in Major Professor

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- Graduate Advisor meets with the student to discuss concerns, provides advice on possible solutions, including reconstituting the thesis committee. Advisor should review past Student Progress Assessments and 299 research grades in advance of the meeting to have additional context. Questions to consider during and after the meeting:
 - o Can the relationship be repaired?
 - o How close is the student to completing their degree?
 - o Is there another faculty member who might be an appropriate major professor? Has the student talked with this faculty member?
 - o Are there co-authored papers with the current Major Professor?
 - o Does the student have at least 3 faculty members who can write letters of recommendation for future positions?
 - o Should the student consider changing degree objectives or changing degree programs?
 - o Are there issues that must be reported to HDAPP, OSSJA, or Academic Affairs regarding violations of campus policies?
 - o Are there employment issues as well as academic ones?
 - o How is the student funded? What are funding options if this student needs to transition to another Major Professor?
- Graduate Advisor informs program chair and/or program master advisor of the situation to ensure that the program can be aware of emerging patterns and also to assist in avoiding retaliation or the appearance of retaliation. Advisor and Program Chair discuss possible academic adjustments (such as extended timeline) that the student may need.

Step 2: Facilitating the Search for a new Major Professor

- Graduate Advisor makes suggestions for new Major Professors, reaches out with introductions as needed and offers to help student craft inquiry emails.
- Together, student and Graduate Advisor establish a timeline for securing a new Major Professor
- Graduate Coordinator helps student explore transitional funding options, including TAs, within the program and affiliated programs.
- In cases where the student has additional concerns about the Graduate Advisor's suggestions or recommendations, the Program Chair and/or the Associate Dean for Graduate Students and Postdocs can be consulted.

Step 3: Completing the Transition to a new Major Professor

- Graduate Advisor facilitates conversation between former and new Major Professors. Questions to consider:
 - a. How will previous research be incorporated into the thesis?
 - b. How will the student communicate as needed with the former Major Professor?
- Graduate Program Coordinator meets with student to assist with paperwork, advice, employment changes. Questions to consider:
 - a. What is the new advising structure?
 - b. How will the student pay for tuition and fees?
 - c. Academic progress timeline?
- Graduate Advisor consults with Director of Mentoring and Academic Success Initiatives to obtain and pass along mentoring support resources to the student and Major

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Professor.