

# Policy for Changing PhD Advisors in NERS

(October 18, 2024)

Students may change advisors for many reasons: as they solidify their research interests, as they discover their advising needs, or as they realize that a mismatch exists between themselves and their advisor. In all cases, it is expected that NERS faculty members will support the transition process.

This document describes the principles and recommended practices for changing PhD advisors in the NERS department. The practices and expectations listed in this document may not be suitable for all circumstances. If either students or faculty have experiences that lie outside of what is described in this document, please contact the NERS Graduate Program Coordinator, the NERS Graduate Chair, the NERS DEI Leads, or the NERS department Chair.

## Our principles

1. PhD students can choose whether to continue to work with their advisors or to work with another advisor.
2. Faculty should be clear and transparent about their expectations when taking on students, ideally through published statements outlining policies and practices in their research group.
3. Students should be encouraged to speak with other faculty about their activities and interests in a free and open manner, with or without the intent of consideration of changing the PhD thesis advisor. Faculty advisors should actively encourage such cross-faculty engagements.
4. When switching advisors, ideally, the student, new advisor, and previous advisor should all participate in a discussion about the transition prior to the transition. When a decision is made to move forward with a new advising relationship, the previous advisor will be informed by either the student and/or new advisor. In rare cases, the student may not be comfortable informing their previous advisor. In these cases, the new advisor or Graduate Chair can discuss the transition with the previous advisor.
5. Advisor transitions should be handled in a timely manner to minimize delay and disruption to PhD studies. Transition issues may ideally be worked out cooperatively among the student and their old and new advisors, with facilitation as needed from the department.
6. The department shall provide support so that international students do not have to worry about losing their visa or their immigration status if they decide to work with another advisor.
7. It is important to acknowledge that changing advisors can be stressful and can cause anxiety, which affects a student's progress, feelings of self-worth, and progress with their degree. Students are encouraged to reach out to any and all sources of advice and support. This includes other faculty members, who should be expected to hold discussions in confidence if requested (subject to mandatory reporting requirements which may hold for

some faculty and some categories of issues). The sources of student support include NERS Graduate Coordinator, NERS Graduate Chair, NERS Non-affiliated Advisor, NERS DEI Leads, NERS department Chair, the CoE CARE Center, and the CoE Graduate Office, among others. For certain kinds of conflict, the [Rackham Conflict Resolution Office](#) and/or [Office of Student Ombuds](#) may also provide a valuable avenue for resolution.

8. Retaliation in response to switching advisors, including actions such as unjustly placing students on probation or assigning students unfair grades, is strictly prohibited. If the student has experienced or suspect retaliatory behavior during or after the advisor-switching process, please contact the NERS Graduate Chair, DEI Lead, NERS department Chair, CoE CARE Center, CoE Graduate Office, or the confidential Rackham Resolution Officers. The department is committed to addressing and resolving conflicts impartially, in accordance with the [university](#), [college](#) and [department policies](#).

## **Best practices for changing advisors**

This section outlines various components of the advisor change process and describes the responsibility of students, faculty, and the department as well as some best practices during the process. It is important to remember that both the student and the advisor are unique individuals. Each transition should be thought of on a case-by-case basis.

1. Graduate Coordinator and Graduate Chair shall be informed through an advisor change form (attached at the end of this document), initiated by the PhD student.
2. Previous advisor, current advisor, and student should collectively work out issues that may include the status of papers in progress or in the pipeline, completion or handing off of responsibilities for ongoing sponsored projects, and transitioning resources, codebases, etc.
3. Previous advisor may not cut off GSRA funding during a semester based on declared or anticipated advisor switches. However, continuation of GSRA funding does require that the student continue to perform on the associated project that is funding the GSRA appointment. See the funding section at the end of the document for more details, including available emergency transition funding when the continuation of GSRA responsibilities is not possible.
4. When a student switches to a new advisor's research group, it is generally good practice to allow for a transition period during which the student learns about the group's research, available projects, and background literature. It is recommended that the transition starts at the beginning of a new term. However, this may vary by situation. GSRA funding to support this transition period should generally be provided by the new advisor or the department.
5. A student should feel empowered to speak to multiple faculty members and students about research areas. It may also be beneficial to discuss advising style and group dynamics. Students may enter these discussions with the intention of continuing to work in an area that is similar to their current area or with the intention of transitioning to a new area. We remind that advising transitions, even those where the new topic is like the student's original focus, will generally extend time to degree. Ideally, these conversations

should proceed in an open and transparent manner, including the student, current advisor, and potentially new advisor. At the same time, we remind faculty that advising relationships do have an entrenched power dynamic. Students may or may not be interested in sharing their experiences and motivation for leaving a previous group and may ask the potential new advisor for discretion. Further, some students may not want to inform their current advisor of their decision to switch groups until they have reached a decision and finalized details.

6. Students may transition between advisors at different points within their graduate career. This may range from just after arrival at U-M to multiple semesters in. As a result, the needs of the student during this transition process may also vary. It is important that the new advisor is flexible to these needs. The student retains credit and prerogative to include their work in their thesis when transitioning to a new group upon consultation with and written approval by the previous advisor. The new advisor will provide the final version of dissertation to the prior advisor for review and approval before signing off student's graduation and publishing of dissertation. Similarly, students and new advisors must request approval from the previous advisor when proposing to use any significant product developed with the previous advisor's input that is not entirely in the public domain, such as specialized simulation and analysis codes. When approved, such contributions made by prior advisor and prior GSRA funding support need to be credited in publications, presentations, and dissertations. If there are questions or concerns, please reach out to the NERS Graduate Chair.
7. The benefit of a smooth transition is that it helps to maintain a positive relationship with the previous advisor. In a smooth transition, the new and previous advisors, in consultation with the student, discuss the transition and come up with a transition plan. Students should do their best to wrap up research in their previous group. This plan may include decisions about the student finalizing deliverables (e.g., software, papers) from the previous grant that funded them. This may also include research papers that are in the pipeline. If the research from the previous group was at an early stage, and if the expertise of the new advisor is relevant, and if the previous advisor agrees, it may make sense for the new advisor to actively participate in the old project. If the paper is in submission (or nearly in submission), the new advisor may see their contribution, if anything, as editing/refinement without expecting to be added as a co-author to the manuscript. It should be acknowledged that some students will be leaving a toxic working relationship with their previous advisor and may not be willing or able to continue to work on the previous project. The final transition plan must be clearly communicated to the student.

## **Logistics**

Students need to complete the advisor change form in which their new advisor officially acknowledges the relationship and the financial responsibility. Ideally, the previous advisor is part of the discussion. At the minimum, the previous advisor must be informed about the switch before the paperwork is finalized.

Students should not be expected to transition from their existing desk immediately when they change advisors. Desks are not assigned by group and students need not shift as they transition although the department will help to make the transition when it is necessary and possible.

The current advisor, previous advisor, and the student will work out how infrastructure (e.g., desktop, laptop, monitor, etc.) are handled as this may vary.

## **Extending time to degree**

A common student concern is that changing advisors may cause a delay in a student's degree progress. It is important that a new advisor work with an incoming student to minimize delay due to the change in advising, while acknowledging that it may not be possible to eliminate the delay. One way that new advisors can decrease the impact of advisor switching on the new student is by working with the new student to maintain the student's prior research topic area or, if that is not possible, to potentially incorporate the previous research into the new topic area. If the switch in area is substantial, it may not be possible to include the student's previous work in the final dissertation.

## **Student funding**

It is expected that the new advisor will take financial responsibility for their new advisee. This funding may include either GSRA or GSI funding.

If it is necessary to transition to a new advising relationship in the middle of a term and the new advisor does not have funding, or the student refuses or is unable to continue performing duties of the current GSRA appointment, the student and the new advisor may apply for an emergency support from the department and/or College of Engineering ([additional information](#)).

**NOTIFICATION FORM FOR ADVISOR CHANGE/UPDATE**

STUDENT NAME: \_\_\_\_\_ UMID: \_\_\_\_\_

UM Email: \_\_\_\_\_

I am requesting a change or update of advisor(s).

Current **academic / research** advisor(s) is:

\_\_\_\_\_.

New/updated **academic / research** advisor(s) is: \_\_\_\_\_.

*(If you are adding a co-advisor, please list both advisors here.)*

Proposed time for transition: \_\_\_\_\_

Student Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Previous Advisor: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

[Required check box for new research advisor only] The new advisor(s) will financially support the student, which means attempting to provide GSRA funding or assisting the student in procuring GSI or other sources of funding.

New Advisor: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_