

Introduction

This School of Medicine compact between a graduate student and their thesis/dissertation advisor, based in large part on a template developed by the VCU Graduate School in 2024, is an agreement that codifies guiding principles intended to support a positive mentoring relationship and student success. A successful student-advisor relationship is the shared responsibility of the student and advisor. In the context of this document, advisor refers to a faculty member who guides a master's or doctoral student to completion of a research project leading to a thesis or dissertation.

This document describes a set of commitments that are meant to initiate discussions and foster on-going conversations between students and advisors. Sections I and II represent the respective commitments of the student and the advisor as defined by the VCU Graduate School. Section III provides additional commitments of the student and advisor (including a customizable section) along with a conflict resolution framework defined by the School of Medicine. Section IV describes key resources available to all SOM students and advisors. The student and advisor provide signatures indicating adoption of the compact in Section V.

Best practice is for this compact to be discussed, revised (as needed) and DocuSigned upon the initial match of the student and advisor, with subsequent review and revision annually (as needed). The DocuSigned compact will be distributed to the student, advisor, student's graduate program director and the advisor's chair. Additionally, the DocuSigned compact will be stored in the School of Medicine Office of Graduate Education.

Many thanks to our students and advisors for their proactive engagement in student success.

Aron Lichtman, Ph.D.
Director of Graduate Student Affairs

Mike Grotewiel, Ph.D.
Associate Dean for Graduate Education

School of Medicine
Virginia Commonwealth University

Suggested improvements to the compact should be sent to the most relevant graduate program director or the associate dean for graduate education in the School of Medicine who will discuss potential revisions with the School of Medicine Graduate Programs Committee.

SECTION I: COMMITMENTS OF THE PH.D. STUDENT

- 1. I acknowledge that I have the primary responsibility for the successful completion of my degree.** I will be committed to my graduate classes, research, and all other program activities. I will maintain high levels of professionalism, self-motivation, initiative, and ethical standards. I will be civil and respectful of my advisor, research group members, study participants, and all other members of the research community.
- 2. I will meet regularly with my faculty advisor to provide updates and results of my coursework, research, and professional and career development activities.** I will be open and honest with my advisor and will seek help or resources if I find myself struggling in my research or courses.
- 3. I will work with my faculty advisor to develop a thesis/dissertation project.** This will include establishing a timeline for each phase of my work. I will strive to meet the established goals and deadlines. I will make my advisor aware immediately of any timelines required by a sponsor.
- 4. I will work with my faculty advisor to select a thesis/dissertation committee.** I will meet with this committee at least annually (or more frequently if recommended). I will discuss my progress and will evaluate and change my project plan, based on advice and constructive criticism from my committee.
- 5. I will be a good citizen of my research group.** I agree to take part in shared research group responsibilities and will use resources carefully and frugally. I will contribute to an environment that is safe, equitable, and free of harassment.
- 6. I will maintain detailed, organized, accessible and accurate research records.** I acknowledge that original notebooks, data, digital files, and tangible research materials belong to the institution and must be available to the lab. I will abide by all VCU research policies that affect graduate students.
- 7. I will be knowledgeable of and will abide by the policies and requirements of my graduate program, graduate school, institution and sponsor.**
- 8. I will discuss policies on work hours, academic demands, medical leave, and vacation with my graduate program and faculty advisor.** I will obtain permission from my advisor in advance of any planned absences, and inform my advisor as soon as possible of any unexpected absences due to illness or other issues. I will apprise my faculty advisor as soon as possible of any issues that would affect my academic progress.
- 9. I will work with my advisor on applicable deadlines and to communicate/publish all relevant research results in a timely manner before completion of my degree requirements.**
- 10. I will participate purposefully in meetings, seminars, and other professional development opportunities provided by my program.**
- 11. I acknowledge that I have the primary responsibility to develop my own career path.** I will develop my individual skills, values, and interests to achieve my desired career goals. I will seek resources for career guidance from my advisor, thesis/dissertation committee, career services, another resources, as appropriate. I will actively identify, network with, and seek advice from those in careers of interest to me.

SECTION II: COMMITMENTS OF THE ADVISOR OF THE PH.D. STUDENT

- 1. I will be supportive, equitable, accessible, encouraging, receptive, civil, and respectful of my graduate students.** It is my responsibility to cultivate a culture of acceptance among the entire research group. I will create an environment that is safe and free of harassment. I will be transparent and timely in delivering information about financial resources that are or are not available to support the student. I will abide by VCU policies that affect graduate students. I will actively participate in professional development opportunities to advance my cultural competence and mentoring skills.
- 2. I will be committed to meeting one-on-one with the student on a regular basis. I will regularly review the student's progress and provide timely feedback and goal-setting advice.** My written and oral feedback will be honest and be delivered in a civil and professional manner. I will grade the student fairly, accurately, and in a timely manner for their research credits. I will answer the student's emails in a timely manner. I will make my expectations for the student clear and put them in writing. If the student is under-performing in research, I will establish a written developmental plan to address this as soon as possible.
- 3. I will be committed to the graduate student's thesis/dissertation research endeavors.** I will work with the student to help plan and guide the research project, set reasonable and attainable goals, ensure fiscal feasibility of the work, and establish a timeline for completion. I will respect the student's time, prioritize degree completion, and make myself available for milestones such as the final defense.
- 4. I will assist the graduate student with the selection of a thesis/dissertation committee.** I will ensure that this committee meets at least annually (or as recommended by the program) to review and discuss the graduate student's progress and future directions. I will respect the ideas and suggestions of my colleagues on the committee. I will assist the graduate student in navigating any disagreements among the committee members.
- 5. I will refrain from requiring the graduate student to perform tasks that are unrelated to their own coursework, training, and professional development.**
- 6. I will discuss authorship policies regarding papers in advance with the graduate student.** I will acknowledge the graduate student's contributions to the work, and facilitate timely publication of the student's work.
- 7. I will be knowledgeable of and guide the graduate student through the requirements, deadlines, and, milestones of the graduate program and the institution.**
- 8. My expectations related to leaves of absence, including medical, family, and/or general leaves, as well as parental accommodation, will be in accordance with VCU policy, and will not be more stringent than those of the Program/School/College/University.** I will respect the student's need for time away from their research in order to work on their courses and other program requirements, such as qualifying exams, comprehensive exams, etc.
- 9. I will encourage the graduate student to attend and present their research at professional meetings and make an effort to secure funding for such activities.** I will provide networking opportunities for the student to discuss their research findings with fellow researchers.

- 10. I will encourage the graduate student to obtain professional skills needed for a successful career, including oral and written communication, management and leadership, collaborative research, teaching, and mentoring.** I will also encourage the graduate student to seek professional development advice from other faculty and colleagues, professional organizations and available university resources, consistent with their individual development plan.
- 11. I will create an environment in which the student can openly and regularly discuss academic matters and explore career opportunities and paths that match their skills, values, and interests, and be supportive of their career path choices.** I will provide advice and feedback on career goals, and actively assist the student in finding others who can help them explore careers. I will provide letters of recommendation for the student's next phase of professional development and will continue to provide support as the student moves forward in their career.
- 12. If I will be on leave for an extended period of time, I will provide alternative supervision and advising for my graduate student.** If it becomes necessary for my student to change advisors for any reason, it is my responsibility to help cultivate a smooth transition for my student to another advisor.

SECTION III: SCHOOL OF MEDICINE ADDENDUM

III-A. Additional Commitments of the Ph.D. Student

- 1. I will be receptive to honest, respectful, constructive feedback from my advisor.** I will recognize and respect their research experience and scientific expertise.
- 2. I will make my advisor aware of upcoming training milestone events such as seminars and research presentations, preparation for and attendance at oral defense, practice job talks, and the final defense.**
- 3. I will share my career aspirations with my advisor and my advisory committee.** I will construct an individual development plan and discuss it with my advisor and advisory committee. This plan will be a living document that I will update annually or more frequently as needed.
- 4. I will respectfully express my professional, scientific, and ethical views and values related to research projects in my group.** I will be an active participant in lab meetings. I recognize the importance of my own training and that of others, and will therefore contribute to the training of others in my research group as needed.
- 5. I recognize that all data and materials generated during my training belong to VCU (in the absence of other formal arrangements).** I understand that my advisor is the steward of these items, and that the items must be available to my advisor during and after my training concludes. I will abide by all VCU research policies that affect graduate students. In a timely fashion, I will upload protocols, original data, data analyses, figures, manuscripts, research presentations, and final dissertation in a repository defined by my advisor.
- 6. I will meet regularly with my graduate program director to review program milestones and my progress toward degree completion.** I will register for

coursework that satisfies my program requirements as well as supports my research training efforts as determined through discussions with my advisor and graduate advisory committee. Via my program director, I will explore program, departmental, School of Medicine and VCU resources to assist me as needed.

7. **I will discuss authorship or other acknowledgment of my research output with my advisor.** I will discuss expectations for my participation in writing manuscripts, reports, grants and fellowships.
8. **Should a conflict develop with my advisor, I will follow the conflict resolution framework in this compact.**

III-B. Additional Commitments of the Advisor of the Ph.D. Student

1. **I will provide honest, calm, constructive advice to the student that furthers the student's thesis/dissertation project, professional development and career development.** If the student is struggling, I will generate a written development plan as soon as possible, and may include input from the student's advisory committee. Via the program director, I will explore program, departmental, School of Medicine and VCU resources to assist the student as needed.
2. **I will recognize and respect the student as an individual who is developing their research experience and scientific skills.**
3. **I will prioritize attendance and participation in student milestone events such as student seminars and research presentations, preparation for and attendance at oral defense, practice job talks, and the final defense.** I will provide timely feedback to the student on all of their work.
4. **I will encourage the student to express their professional, scientific, and ethical views and values related to their research project.**
5. **I recognize the student's autonomy in selecting their individual career path and will support the student's career aspirations, including networking and connection with appropriate resources.** I will read the student's individual development plan and discuss it with the student annually or more frequently as needed. I will provide letters of recommendation for the student's next phase of development after completing their degree and will continue to provide support as the student moves forward in their career.
6. **I will be respectful of the student's time and privacy when they are not performing research and/or take personal leave.**
7. **Should a conflict develop with my student, I will follow the conflict resolution framework in this compact.**

III-C: Optional additional commitments specific to the Student and/or Advisor:

[Example topics are provided. Final commitments to be determined by student and advisor]

1. Student advisor regular meeting schedule:
2. Laboratory data, materials and reagent storage policy:
3. Anticipated student milestones and time-lines:
 - a. Graduate advisory committee formation
 - b. Oral exam (i.e. defense of dissertation proposal)
 - c. Individual development plan
 - d. Graduate advisory committee meeting schedule
 - e. Student major research presentations
 - f. Doctoral fellowship submission
 - g. Dissertation defense and graduation

Optional Additional Comments:

III-D. Conflict Resolution Framework

If a conflict arises between the graduate student and the advisor, both parties will first strive to resolve the issue informally between themselves while adhering to other provisions of this compact such as being respectful, honest, calm and constructive.

If the parties fail to resolve the issue to their mutual satisfaction, the issue should be discussed with any of the following to explore a resolution: a) the graduate advisory committee; b) the graduate program director; c) the chair of the department that is home to the advisor and/or program. If the graduate advisory committee, graduate program director or department chair have a conflict of interest or cannot resolve the issue, then (i) the student should report the concern via the School of Medicine Graduate Education website and/or (ii) the advisor should discuss the issue with the Associate Dean for Graduate Education in the School of Medicine or their designee.

In the event that the graduate student and/or advisor decide that the conflict cannot be resolved and the conflict makes it impossible for the student and advisor to work together as a productive team, the student may need to identify a new dissertation advisor. The advisor, program director, department chair, and/or Associate Dean for Graduate Education (or designee) will assist the graduate student using all available

