

Advising

Pre-Doctoral Advising Committee (PDAC) Comments

Professors are not available for meetings; they do not prioritize the PDAC program very highly at all.

I have enjoyed my PDAC committee as a venue to get to know other faculty [members], and for them to get to know me. But any time when an issue of disagreement I was having with my boss was raised, the response was generally along the lines of “Well I wish there was something I could do... but you know how this department is...”

It is nearly impossible to schedule time with other professors. I once had an appointment 4 months in advance, only to be cancelled the day before and rescheduled for 8 weeks later.

The PDAC system is a good one, but I feel intimidated in contacting the professors to form a committee. I am afraid they will see interaction with me and my project as a burden.

The multi-advisor system does not seem particularly helpful, and I am not convinced that any adviser rather than the research adviser will care about what I am doing.

The PDAC is a good idea in theory, but in reality the research advisor is the one who holds all the power. Nothing has changed in this regard.

Every time I try to meet with the people on my PDAC, they ask why I'm there.... I don't blame them either. We're all busy. I don't feel the need to check in with other professors that are unfamiliar with my work. They don't care until I defend, and frankly, I don't care what they think. I stopped caring what they thought when I learned their priorities placed money atop of educating their students.

[I met] once, it was not helpful

I heard PDAC was a joke so I didn't form one.

It was difficult for me to form my PDAC because there are few professors in the department whose work overlaps with mine. In fact, one of the members of my Committee has moved to a different university entirely. I've had more interaction with faculty from other departments (and even from other universities) than with faculty from this department.

My complaint with the professors is not their accessibility (though there are some that seem to make themselves rare to their students). My complaint is with the depth at which they participate in a student's project. The professors seem to be somewhat distracted with their biotech companies and institutional empires. The result is that the professors get so far removed from the bench, they do not have a good feel for what the true issues are concerning a project. As a result, they often propose somewhat irrational projects to young students, or make unreasonable suggestions for current problems a project is facing. You can't really make helpful suggestions about a project if you've only spent 5 minutes thinking about it. As a result, many students I know run “submarine” projects because they do not have faith in any of their professor's suggestions. Many avoid their professor to avoid getting derailed from their project. I also don't like the way professors make students meet with them as “sub-

groups” since these tend to breed competitive environments in terms of productivity, rather than breeding cooperation. I’d much rather have one-on-one meetings with professors, which would force the student and professor to actually have a meaningful dialogue instead of having to present to an entire group. Nobody wants to take up everybody’s time with minutia, but sometimes discussing minutia with your professor is necessary.

PDACs are somewhat well intentioned, but getting a meeting with other faculty was impossible. I had to go to the physics department to even get feedback on my research. Not one member of the chemistry department responded to my e-mails to discuss my projects when I needed to get signatures on my G6 plan of study. Any attempt to force faculty to meet with students outside of their research group will only be met with resistance from both students and faculty because students will feel that they are wasting the time of the faculty members.

PDACs are useless unless they are mandatory; it is unlikely a troubled student is going to discuss their lack of success with another faculty member here, considering the lack of personal connection between faculty and students.

The quantity of graduate advising isn’t as important as the quality. Advising needs to be proactive and address difficult issues such as what to do when a project isn’t working and what a student is gaining as part of his/her graduate experience.

What does one say to a PDAC committee member? Hi, my advisor doesn’t have time for me so will you guide me although you do not fund this research, know the details of this research, and already have a large group of your own students to worry about.

PDAC members do not seem to want to meet often or at all.

I think that required PDACs would be very beneficial. In addition (and this is a stretch), I would love to see training courses for faculty (especially new ones) on how to best manage and teach students. I think most professors here are not good managers/educators, whether by ignorance or lack of time/motivation. I do not know any easy way to fix this problem since I am sure students [in] most labs do not communicate their dissolution to their professors out of immense fear; they might not even know a lot of us feel this way.

My advisor is not available to meet with his students very often. I don’t see the benefit of having multiple advisors in the Chemistry department regarding my particular projects. I do, however, consult with other professors outside the department on occasion. I find them to be a helpful addition even though they are not formal advisors.

I wish we had an advising system that could be enforced by the front office.

Let’s face it, advisors don’t give [...] about other professors’ students. This is a fact supported by countless pieces of anecdotal evidence.

I need to see my advisor more often than now.

It is a good idea to have a system in place for people who are flailing. However, these persons will be less inclined to meet because of their flailingness, and the advisors would be less

inclined to listen knowing that it would not be as stimulating or enjoying. Most of the proposed changes to the PDAC system would in the end be lateral and of little consequence.

Since it is not mandatory and there is no suggestion for students who will be proper on the committee, it is hard to make every student to participate and benefit from this program

I never formed a PDAC because I never felt there was extensive faculty support for it; those faculty [members] that did seemed to be inundated with other students already.

I entered into the PDAC with the best of intentions, but organizing annual meetings was prohibitive and not warmly received.

You NEED to make that compulsory for it to have any beneficial effect at all!

[A] principal advisor is vital in the research. As to other professors, not sure whether they are willing to put time meeting with the students.

I will try to form my PDAC by the end of this semester

I met with a PDAC member who is outside the department. I was given what I feel to be very judicious advice, both scientific and graduate-school related. I met with my PI a few days later, where I was given advice in complete and polar opposition to that given by the PDAC member. I was informed that I would not receive a PhD if I didn't do as my advisor "suggested". I did not inform my advisor about my PDAC meeting. Advisory committees are useful whenever there are potential conflicts of interest, such as is possible during the course of graduate research, provided: (1) they are unbiased and (2) they, or another, have the power to act on their recommendations. Under the current system, where PDAC members are impotent and the Thesis "Committee" exists in name only, the PDAC serves little purpose other than cheerleading.

Proposed Advising Reform Comments

If the professors will hold the meetings; this program will be great. It is vitally important for graduate students to maintain relationships with faculty other than their adviser, but too often the adviser controls all aspects of the students' experience.

The most important thing is to have a productive relationship with your primary advisor. Attempting to change the advising system will not alter this fact; however, relationships with other professors would be helpful in considering career options, and in having a place to go if your research group turns out not to be right for you.

The professors should not be dragging their feet in such a way.

[The new system] must be mandatory or no one will do it.

Try enforcing it.

Meeting every year is better.

One major problem with PDAC and the PhD program in general is a lack of structured "mileposts". It is often hard to feel progress and easy to feel lost.

It's unwise to make a program mandatory for those who aren't interested in participating.

The PDACS are a step in the right direction, but I am somewhat doubtful as to their real world relevance. People are under the impression that a PDAC would never override the primary professor's opinion, for political reasons. Many seem to view it as just a few signatures on a piece of paper. Maybe people are just too cynical.

It would be useful to require meetings with advisors, so that these meetings actually happen. Otherwise, people tend to get involved and busy with other activities and a meeting like this may fall deep into the "to do" pile and not happen. I think students should be required to meet with their committee once a year and that these meetings should be taken seriously by the faculty.

I don't think it's happening or working yet. The department needs to implement this ASAP.

The specific structure of an advising system is not important, other than it being mandatory. What is important is that both faculty and students participate, and that decisions are made and acted upon.

Doubtful it will work. Forcing meetings is only half the problem. What are the points of the meetings? How are they to be conducted? If I were to knock on a professors' door once in two years, how helpful is that 5-30 minute conversation going to be. If it is just a formality it will only frustrate the faculty to schedule X number more hours of meetings for which they do not have the time, and second it will frustrate many students who wait two years for a meeting in which they expect sincere advisement and only to feel more confused or disappointed with the meeting with the feeling that they are suppose to wait 2 more years for something else.

Something set up automatically in such a manner would mean it would actually happen, and so it would be more valuable than the current system in which not everyone feels motivated to set up a PDAC.

Any multiple advising that would be enforced would be useful.

[A] default selection of advisors could be a drawback--student would have to tell a faculty member they were not wanted on the PDAC in order to make a change

I am in favor of anything that forces the professors to show up. My suggestion has always been to set aside a date on which all faculty must be in Cambridge and available to serve on committees. Otherwise, they will always find a way to weasel out. My guess is that your agreement with the faculty is non-binding, so they can still not participate without penalty. Such agreements are as worthless as UN resolutions.

The default committee doesn't make a lot of sense; it creates the possibility of uncomfortable situations if the student wishes to change PDAC composition. Also, not everyone would necessarily want a PDAC, so forcing it would waste the time of both those students and the faculty.

I think this system would be helpful for some, an annoyance for others, and I am uncomfortable with the idea of making it mandatory unless the faculty agreed that this system

was the best way to foster a successful graduate education. It would be fantastic to foster talking about our research with faculty members, but I am hesitant about making it mandatory...

Don't mandate it. You can't. I know why you would mandate it, but each student at this point just has to take responsibility for him/herself.

I believe that more advising would be good for me, but so would more lima beans.

Depends on how easy it is to change the committee.

Being mandatory is useful. Only one meeting in two years is way too few.

I agree that this should be mandatory.

Getting advising from multiple professors should be a priority for the department! A voluntary system seems insufficient, as it makes it too voluntary for the faculty.

I'm not sure why any meeting that takes place at the end of the first year would be valuable.

1,3,5 seems to set the bar low; the minimum advising for the dept.

They should make it **COMPULSORY** to meet every year. There should be no obligation that the rotation advisors should be the ones in the committee since very few students feel comfortable about changing committee members. That involves unpleasanties.

Good idea, but misguided due to the reasons mentioned in my response to the PDACs. There is certainly no scientific drawback to receiving advice from fellow scientists. However, as long as ones' PI has all the power for thesis approval, advising is moot and will result in lots of pointless head nodding. First requirement would be to enforce that which has already been enacted nominally, the thesis committee. Perhaps the only way to truly enforce the committee would be to remove the students' PI altogether. This will pressure both the student and the advisor to weigh the advice of the committee and would grant power to the committee. Sadly, this is also why neither this proposal nor the above will be enacted.

Related General Comments

The perception among grad students here at CCB has not changed much over the years I've been here. They still feel like their advisor has sole authority over their Ph.D and the direction of their career. One question that hasn't been asked much is, is this actually true or is it a mistaken belief? Is their power real or imagined? How can we find out the answer to this? Maybe they don't have as much power as we think. Or maybe they actually do. If it's all in our minds, how can we change the perception of the majority of grad students? If it is true, and their power is real and that they do control our future, how can we help grad students cope with this? Could we change the power structure? I'd like to hear seminars from people who were kicked out of Harvard CCB. How are they doing now? What about people who got actual chemistry jobs without their advisor's help? What about people who got academic jobs without their advisor's help?! What about people who switched advisors and still got a CCB Ph.D.? It would be nice to hear some stories like this. Thanks for all the work you have put into this.

I doubt that the QoL will have anything besides limited success in my remaining time here. If we are truly concerned about creating an advising system that provides an open line of dialogue between each student and multiple faculty advisors, we are going to have to play hardball. We are also negotiating from a position of weakness. Our time is less valuable than that of the faculty. Our jobs are at risk; their jobs are safe. They have shown that they don't especially care to create an effective departmental advising system, most likely because they have little to gain from it. Perhaps our only strength is that this department can ill-afford to have another public relations nightmare. If hints are dropped that we have seen little change since the death of Jason Altom (besides a new pool table--what a load of crap!) and that the NY Times would be interested to hear from us, then maybe they would care. A less coercive plan would be to demonstrate to the faculty that their obstinacy and apathy is fostering significant depression and resentment among students. They might listen, knowing that if yet another student commits suicide, this department will be raked over the coals in the scientific community and in the courts. It would be very costly and is something the faculty would be eager to avoid.

Professors in the department lack scholarship and ethics.

The department already tried hard to improve the graduate students' research and life.

Sadly, I feel this department is much better at producing cynics than producing good scientists. I cannot dismiss the cynicism simply as frustration because it seems to infect even the successful students. Recent advice I was given by one of the most successful students in the dept started, "It's all a scam..."

Like a new year's resolution, it is only useful and going to happen if you actually want to make the change. Surface fixes and fluff do not address the problems in the department (financial, advising, happiness) only mask the problem. If the faculty do not want to get to the heart of the problems and make serious, life changes (less travel, less consulting, less venture capital companies) and make an honest change to their priorities than we shall expect more of the same as students (although I am not sure if those ventures are actually in our best interest as the more prestige and clout the faculty have from such ventures the easier it is for us to get a job or for the faculty to get grant money). At one point an early 1990's departmental review by outside faculty was floating around the student body. The major complaints listed then when interviewing students were classes, face-time with faculty, diversity (women especially) to name a few! These are the same issues addressed in this survey, with what appears to me as minimal if any improvements.

Events to improve Student/Advisor Relationships

Suggestions and General Comments

Wine and cheese(4), BBQ(2), picnic(3), going to a bar, coffee break, discussion seminars, Student-faculty speed mixing, hors d'oeuvres hour, don't know(2)

There is no small budget item that will entice professors to give up time from their schedules. Even billing it as a recruiting event isn't likely to work.

Have a social hour for the G1s and force the professors to attend. The department seems to be giving the impression that you can put a price on being social, and that the price is far too high to pay.

Stop bringing in new professors if you can't front the cost of a single meal between G1 students and the professors that are going to shape their intellectual development.

No clambake? Are you kidding? That's just disturbing. Maybe the professors should bring some food, pot-luck style.

The professors won't attend well if you have the event in the department. Buy some cheap sandwiches and beer, rent a bus, and go for a picnic. God forbid we get a little sun on our skin.

You should ask the professors what they'd be willing to attend- that's the difficult part.

To encourage interactions between professors and students of all years, professors should attend buffet dinners and beverage bashes.

An evening event in the library (although I think only slightly more than half the faculty came to the clambake my year anyway).

A tradition of a G1 vs. faculty game of some sort (like the volleyball game at the MCB retreat).

I don't see a way of getting my professor to a social event that would involve a substantial commitment of time, so the event should stay on campus or perhaps be held nearby at a professor's house... not sure what else to say.

I liked the clambake.

It'd have to be something professors have an incentive to attend. I can't think of any besides inviting a luminary whom they would want to rub elbows with.

Not social-based events. They won't work. They need to be science-based or else they probably won't work

Make them right after the seminar on Monday.

Choose something cheaper than lobster!

Invite Venrock Associates.

Retreat Comments

I think that a retreat, while fun, might not provide much interaction with our faculty. With other, more social faculty, this might work, but not in the chem. dept.

MCB successfully uses this as an alternative to the open house system. If such a retreat were to replace open houses, perhaps faculty could contribute financially to cover the costs.

Some people are trying to finish a project here. Taking a weekend off is not an option.

It sounds like a very expensive plan which would not necessarily change the atmosphere of the department. Regularly scheduled, informal social events like a weekly tea in the winter would be more helpful.

So....you say you can't afford to pay for a single meal for G1's and professors....but you can afford to pay for a department-wide retreat?

Organizing such an event will certainly be difficult considering professors' busy schedules, but it's such a good idea that it's worth the effort to try. Professors should be ashamed of themselves if they aren't willing to reserve one weekend each year to educate graduate students about their research and get to know students.

Getting professors and students out of the competitive environment of the lab would probably be a good thing. I would be surprised if this could actually happen.

A department retreat seems a bit strange to me. But, I haven't really spoken with people in biology that attend such things. It might be a good opportunity to get to know more people in an informal setting, but spending a weekend on a retreat with the whole department seems a bit creepy to me.

To be honest, spending the same amount of money spread over multiple on-campus events would be more effective in building lasting faculty-student relationships.

A weekend is a long time to give up. An afternoon or day is not as bad and more likely to get a larger attendance. I also would not make it mandatory as things which are mandatory bring out hostility from some which will often upset the rest. We are here to learn and become educated; if we choose not to take advantage of what is offered than that is our loss as students. If you fail to give us opportunities to become educated that is your loss and fault as a faculty.

The MCB retreats are GREAT because most professors, students, and post-docs attend. The short talk format combined with posters brings everyone up-to-date on all the labs research. Plus, you actually get to know a lot of people in other labs and the professors. Please do this in Chemistry but make sure all the professors are committed.

It sounds like an excellent idea. I recommend we could go each year to a different local university to see what life is like elsewhere. We could also have it be a less academically oriented retreat to a park or business, etc.

I think the MCB dept and their significantly better social atmosphere is a good example of the value of retreats.

I don't know about this. I favor one-on-one interaction versus a large group setting.

Anything taking students out of town for more than a day will meet a lot of resistance. From my perspective, it seems like it would be more of a pain than it's worth.

For this program to be successful/worthwhile, there must be faculty interest.

[An] off-campus location is not convenient for majority of students.

It works for the MCB, but they have a very different mentality. I don't think it would work for us.

Sounds like a great idea!

On-campus will be more convenient for most students

This is a good idea, but I don't think profs will come. However, it is valid without them.

PLEASE do this!

I think some planning needs to be in place to make the event fun, but not a drunken party (like I've seen with other retreats at this school)

I know of no good argument against the scientific value of a conference or retreat.

Mental Health Comments

[With reference to the program formerly offered by CCB] We once thought this was "absolutely necessary", and then when we couldn't afford it, it was "counter-productive". While the latter may actually be true, in that the core problem is not addressed, ending the program under this guise when still not solving the problem sent a very poor message in my opinion.

There is much to like here: the research is very high quality, the department is well funded and many things work efficiently. However, we could all benefit from a more open atmosphere, which ultimately comes from people (students, faculty) themselves and not department programs.

I don't think our department is a particularly friendly, fun environment in which do science and learn as much as possible in our grad school careers. This is for reasons unrelated to psychological issues, but related to the way we do things in the department. People used to say how the "old Harvard" attitude was changing but I see no evidence of that.

Again, the attitude of the department seems to be that no suicides means everything is OK.

My happiness is my problem, not CCB's. The people that took advantage of subsidized (and expensive) counselling should be ashamed of themselves. You want it, you pay for it. Is this the reason we're broke?

I do not feel like CCB as a department takes an interest in the students and I think most of my classmates feel the same way.

Honestly, when you put a group of intelligent, driven, and competitive people in a position where their future is based largely on the subjective evaluation of a single person, you're going to get a lot of disgruntled people. Our department has a peculiar unwritten ethic of valuing diligence over well-roundedness, which needs to be changed. I'm not sure how, though.

Since CCB has discontinued the psychological help, it might be useful to find out which therapists at UHS are good. Finding an effective therapist can take a lot of persistence which is discouraging to those who need help. Also, since we don't have our own services anymore, perhaps our department can pay or work out something with UHS for more visits for students who need it, because, currently, UHS puts a limit on student visits.

I think the help was important in the old days and people seem pretty OK now. There are Harvard resources outside the department that seem to be available to students who are having trouble.

I agree with the current policy. If an individual believes they want more privacy than what Harvard offers they are free to pay for it themselves. The [psychological] therapy at Harvard is pathetic, several people have complained. I choose to pay for private sessions when I did not like my options. There is no cost to ones health and CCB does have one option and if you don't like it let people know they are free to go on there own and get private help at their own cost.

Psychological help previously much more beneficial than "togetherness" initiative or buffets. Closer involvement with PDAC might also alleviate a lot of stress.

Encouraging students to increase their mental health is certainly beneficial but paying exorbitant prices for professional help seems irrational when Harvard already provides good services to students.

[It] should be provided for those who need it

I think the QoL has done quite a lot to ensure that the trials and tribulations of the lab environment are mitigated by everything outside the lab.

I haven't used the services but I'm glad they are there.

Thin the herd.

It's always valuable for one's employer, particularly in high pressure environments, to provide easy and inexpensive access to psychological counsel.

I would describe the general level of happiness of every person in my group who has been here for more than a year as not happy at all. I think mental health, and specifically providing psychological help to students as the single most important aspect of what QoL could (and should) address.

I don't think the department should pay for this, just like I don't think they should pay for alcohol or Prozac.

I'm happy with my group, and don't really interact with CCB at all. I never used the psychological help but I think it's good to have

I don't know if there is much the CCB can do, besides let the students know about the UHS mental health services. The help provided by the UHS was superb, they changed my life.

I required “crisis intervention” two years ago. At that time, CCB was no longer funding mental health programs. In the end, I did get help through the CCB front office -- but not before much more grief and jumping through hoops.

Library Comments

SAVE THE LIBRARY! SAVE THE LIBRARY!! SAVE THE LIBRARY!!!

I am very disappointed that the library will be destroyed. While I do not know all the background of the situation, it seems that the department is creating more space for future faculty as an attempt to cover previous hiring mistakes. The library is a symbol of the intellectual vigor of the department, and the fact that it will be destroyed represents the priorities of the faculty and university.

The decision to destroy the library is a terrible one. The library is a department treasure, and gives an air of scholarship and reflection that is hard to see elsewhere around here. Even if it sees limited circulation, it is an impressive draw for visitors including prospective students, and is always a quiet place to study away from distractions. Shame on the department for destroying such a gorgeous treasure.

The department library is more than just a place to go find off-line journals. It is a quiet, outside-of-lab location to work on seminars and courses. For those of us who don't have private desks (all of the first-years, those in less-recently renovated labs) this is invaluable.

The bottom line is that in spite of the well-meaning efforts of the QoL, the professors here have entirely too much power. The library is a perfect example: I'm sure most students would oppose such a move, but this doesn't seem to matter as it looks like the decision has already been made. The professors here think that as long as nobody does anything drastic, then everything is OK. Even if something were to happen (like Altom's suicide) I don't think much has changed. Professors don't run things very differently and there is no checks and balances system in place to force them to do anything. There's also the matter of the dwindling funds: on the one hand the department likes to pat itself on the back saying how great all of the social events (like the clambake and the buffets) are at promoting a sense of togetherness, yet at the same time they are being taken away with no proposed replacement.

The impending loss of the CCB Library's reading room is a tragic consequence of the department's attempt to convert all possible space in our buildings to laboratories. The reading room itself is unlike much of what one finds at Harvard, the all-wood paneling reminiscent, certainly, of the quaint notion of this university as a center of learning. This Department also seems to be losing the sense that it developed in the late 90's that taking care of its graduate students is an important task. When I think about the asymptotic limit of this decay, I shudder to imagine funding for wellness-related programs being stripped completely and the Department returning to the dark ages from which it climbed out less than a decade ago.

Chemistry Department Library: I think the library is a very useful space for the graduate students and other members of the department. Although changing the location will still provide many of the services that current library provides, I feel the historical value of the library will be lost. Moving the library also does not address the long term problem of where to find research/lab space for new faculty members.

Destroying the library destroys an important part of the history and tradition of the department, something for which we are quite famous. This seems like a short term solution to a very long term problem, and other alternatives should have been found, even if it was just to save the “fireplace” section of the library. The library and quiet space that it provides is a valuable resource for students from year 1 to graduation.

Where did this idea to downsize the library and get rid of the stockroom come from? Our library is a historical and sacred place, and I have heard E.J. Corey describe it as “the crown jewel of the department.” Why are we throwing away a place where Robert Woodward did his famously thorough literature reading, where generations of brilliant students have studied, and where we have so much information right at our fingertips? There must be some way to build lab space elsewhere. Could some of the Naito attic be converted? Also, getting rid of the stockroom will be a serious inconvenience for students and will detract from productivity. Not having a good library and having all these complaints about no stockroom and sub par instrumentation facilities will hinder recruiting and ultimately will result in a decline of the department’s stature. Is it really worth the extra lab space?

With the dismantling of the library, which is extremely disappointing, it is important that we continue to have access to all of the resources it provided-- there are MANY journals to which we don’t have access to at least all back issues.

I was sad to hear about the loss of the library. It was a wonderful asset for the department, and I found it to be a very useful as a place to read and study. It will be hard for the new location to provide good reading areas because of the small amount of space. I wish the department had made the plans more public so that students had time to respond.