

Graduate Student Expectations in the Kirby Lab

Kirby lab mission statement: *Our goal as a lab is to reveal new insight in to the biology of the brain using empirical approaches, to provide a welcoming and rigorous training environment for dedicated scientists, and to improve the world around us through the discovery and dissemination of scientific knowledge.*

Getting a PhD is a fantastic way to improve your research and critical thinking skills while you conduct experiments that push forward the boundaries of scientific knowledge. In becoming a part of the Kirby lab, you are joining a group of scientists at a variety of levels of training who value the pursuit of science in an encouraging environment. As our mission statement shows, we not only want to conduct and disseminate meaningful research that improves the world. We also want to train the next generation of scientists. As a PhD student, that means you. During your training, there are things that will be expected of you, and things that you can expect of us and of me as your PI and mentor.

What you can expect from me and the lab:

Mentoring: My job is to help guide you both toward getting your degree and towards creating meaningful research of which you can be proud. My personal philosophy is to focus on the latter because the creation of meaningful research all but guarantees that your degree will happen. As your mentor, I will be focused on helping you become a better experimentalist in the lab and better critical thinker than you were when you arrived. I will be available to meet with you regularly. You can show me complete experimental failures, your greatest results and everything in between. I will help you wade through the research process whether it is going well or poorly. I will also read and critique your drafts of manuscripts, fellowship applications, and any other writing you need to produce in pursuit of your research or funding.

My mentoring style: My goal as a mentor is to make your training an experience in controlled, instructive failure. Research is littered with failures, big and small. No matter how good you are, you will have experiments fail. My mentoring goal is to allow you to fail but in ways that will help you learn something useful. This means I will not be looking over your shoulder for the most part. But that does not mean I will forget about you either. If you feel you need more help or guidance, talk to me.

Support and promotion of your work: I will support the presentation and dissemination of your work. Assuming funding allows, I will financially support attendance at one conference per year where you present your first author work from this lab. If there are more conferences in a particular year that you think warrant your presence and presentation, we can discuss that on a case-by-case basis. I will also attend conferences regularly and present your work with proper credit to you as the scientist who spearheaded it. I will also support the presentation of your publication quality findings in manuscripts submitted to peer-reviewed journals where you are first author. My support means helping you create a storyline, commenting on drafts and helping select an appropriate journal for submission.

Support for your transition beyond the Kirby lab: Your time in the Kirby lab is designed to end. You will graduate and go on to other, better things. I will support your transition beyond this lab whether it be to an academic postdoc, a teaching position, an industry position, a job in the public sector or even a non-scientific job. I will provide appropriate reference letters/phone calls as you need them and help you evaluate options in areas where I have personal or professional knowledge of the landscape.

A welcoming workplace: We welcome researchers from all backgrounds, races, ethnicities, ages, religious or philosophical leanings, sex, gender identities and orientations. Everyone in the Kirby lab is entitled to a welcoming workplace.

What is expected of you:

Become an independent researcher: This is the whole point of your PhD. In my view, this means taking ownership of your project. Find and read literature relevant to your topic. Design and conduct experiments. Be thinking about next steps and next questions. When we meet, you should have a few ideas about what you will do next that we can discuss. Your view of your project should never end after the experiment you are working on now.

Present your results: Part of our lab mission is not just to find new knowledge but to share it. To do that, you need to present your work. As mentioned above, if funding allows, I will reimburse one conference per year where you present your first author work from this lab. Though you may not find it worthwhile to go to a conference every year of your graduate training, you should do this at least a few of the years. Presenting your work also means writing up your findings in first-author manuscripts to be published in peer-reviewed journals. I will edit drafts but the main responsibility for writing and preparing figures lies with you. You should have at least 1 first author publication in revision, ideally accepted, before you graduate. Whether “in revision” will suffice for graduation will depend on how large or complex the paper is and any extenuating circumstances.

Apply for funding: Graduate students are expected to apply for external funding as they are eligible for it. This is not just to save money for the lab on your stipend and tuition (though that would be nice). Writing these applications provides you with valuable experience in grant writing and if you receive an award, it will strengthen your CV/resume no matter what path you choose. First and second year students who are US citizens or permanent residents should apply for the NSF GRFP and the DoD NDSEG fellowships (if your project can be portrayed as relevant to military goals). Third and fourth years who are US citizens or permanent residents should be accumulating data and applying for a F31 NRSA predoctoral fellowship from the NIH. All students should keep an eye out for funding announcements that apply to their particular situation. I will help craft proposals and edit writing but the primary responsibility for tracking deadlines and writing lies with the student.

Mentoring others: At some point you should mentor a student with less training than you, most likely an undergraduate. In an ideal world, a student mentee will help propel your work forward and be a productive asset in your project. But even if that does not happen, you will gain valuable experience in mentoring that will serve you well in whatever career path you pursue. You are expected to train and supervise your mentee(s) in proper and safe experimental technique. They should only be allowed to work in your absence when you are certain they have the necessary skills mastered. The first priority is safety. The second is protecting lab resources from waste, damage or contamination. You need to gauge the abilities of your mentee and adjust their level of supervision with these 2 goals in mind. As a very broad guideline, most undergraduates will require your physical presence almost constantly for the first 1-2 semesters of work in the lab. I am available for advice and guidance in mentoring your student, as well as help with any external funding applications to support their work in the lab. You may bring your student to our individual meetings if you wish. If they want to do a thesis project, they should come to some of our meetings and start telling me directly about what they are doing in preparation for this more advanced level of independence.

Hours: Grad school is a complicated time where demands on your time shift dramatically from semester to semester. I do not keep track of people's hours. I have neither the time nor the inclination to do so. Broadly speaking, you should be around lab during daytime hours when classes or teaching do not interfere. This is so you can both learn from your colleagues and in turn be a resource for them. If you are writing or studying for exams and find the lab too distracting, by all means, work elsewhere. If you just finished a tough week and want to take off early, by all means, go home. You do not need to sit in lab just to fill hours of face time. But having your work day start at 4p and go in to the late night hours as a regular occurrence makes it difficult for others to benefit from your presence. We probably like you and would like it if you were around when most people are awake. If you are an extreme night owl, a different lab might be a better fit for you.

Vacation: Vacation is important. Everyone needs time away from lab. I do not track number of vacation days and as long as everyone keeps is reasonable, I hopefully never will need to. When you need or want vacation, just let me know when you will be gone and whether you will have access to email for emergencies. Before you leave, make sure your mice and your lab duties are cared for in your absence by others in the lab.

Obeying safety rules: Our highest priority for all lab members is conducting research safely. The lab has standard operating procedures (SOPs) that describe the handling of hazardous substances, which students are expected to read and follow. All lab members also complete a number of trainings provided by the college or ULAR (University Laboratory Animal Resources). Violating important safety rules is grounds for immediate dismissal from the lab, depending on the severity of the violation.

A welcoming workplace: Just as all members of the Kirby lab can expect a welcoming workplace, each member is expected to provide welcome to other lab members regardless of background, race, ethnicity, age, religious or philosophical leanings, sex, gender identity, or orientation.

Communication:

We use several platforms for communication in the lab. These will function best if we all understand the expectations for how they should work.

Routine communication during working hours: Aside from our in-person interactions, the lab communicates regularly via email. If you send an email that requests a response from me, I will generally respond within 1 working day to at least acknowledge the receipt of your email. If I have not responded within 1 working day, I encourage you to email me again to confirm I got your email. You are not bothering me. I welcome reminders. This also means that we as a lab generally expect responses from you within 1 working day. You need to check your email regularly on working days and respond generally within 1 working day to any email that requires your response. The response can be that you will respond in full later if the request is a complex one. But at least verification that you have received the email is expected within 1 working day.

Communication on non-working days: Many of us work a flexible schedule, including me. That means you may receive emails on non-working days because that day is a convenient time for someone else to be working. You are NOT expected to check or respond to email on non-working days (holidays, weekends). If I send you an email on a Saturday, I do not expect you to read it until Monday. Similarly, if

you send me an email on a non-working day, do not expect a response from me until the next working day.

Emergency communication: For matters that require immediate attention on working or non-working days, we use text messages to communicate. Examples of these kinds of events would be: freezer failures where we need help moving supplies, finding a piece of your work left out in a place where it might not be stable, calls for help such a filling in for someone who became unexpectedly sick or COVID+.

I have read and agree to these expectations for graduate study in the Kirby lab.

Graduate student signature:

Date:

Graduate student printed name:

PI signature:

Date:

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