

# Strengthening Graduate Mentoring Culture

**VCU & Virginia Tech**



*Institutional Models for Advisor–Advisee  
Compacts and Expectation-Setting*  
**Jeffery Wilson, VCU Associate Dean**  
**Aimee Surprenant, VA Tech Graduate Dean**  
**Bill Huckle, VA Tech Assoc. Dean**

# Why Mentoring Matters

- Graduate student success is tied to quality of mentoring relationships.
- Breakdowns often stem from unclear expectations or miscommunication.
- Institutions can shape culture by providing structured mentoring tools.



# Data

**VCU:** Survey results

**VT:** Ombudsperson data



# Comparison Snapshot



<b>Category</b>	<b>VCU Compact</b>	<b>Virginia Tech Resources</b>
<b>Purpose</b>	<i>Clarify expectations; guide mentoring relationship; prevent conflict</i>	<i>Promote communication and accountability; encourage student engagement</i>
<b>Timing</b>	<i>Signed at advisor assignment; revisited annually</i>	<i>Reviewed each term or milestone as appropriate</i>
<b>Components</b>	<i>Communication, milestones, work-life balance, conflict resolution</i>	<i>Goals, deliverables, meeting frequency, responsibilities</i>
<b>Institutional Role</b>	<i>Collected and retained by graduate programs</i>	<i>Integrated within mentoring culture and graduate school initiatives</i>

# Data

## VCU: Survey results

Figure 89. Were you able to select your faculty mentor/advisor? (N=478)

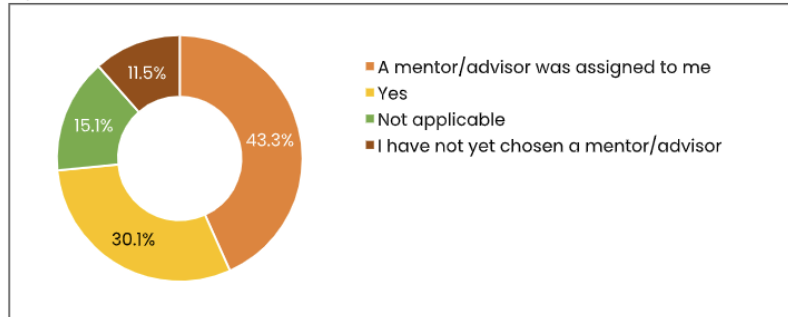


Figure 90. Did you and your faculty mentor/advisor have an initial and ongoing conversation about expectations for your relationship and work together? (N=347)

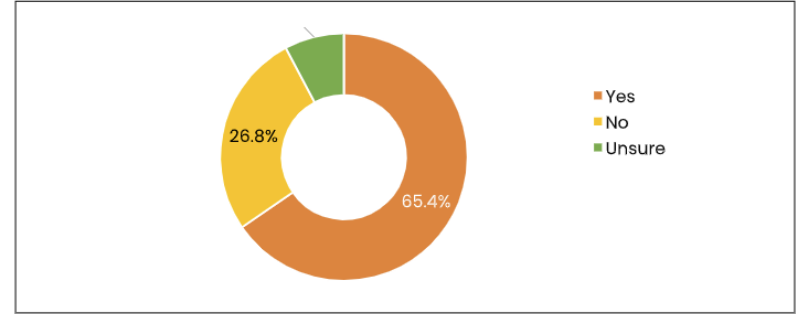
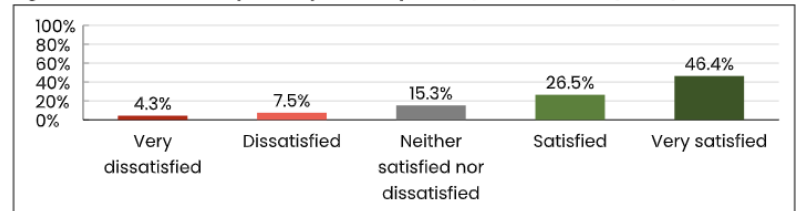


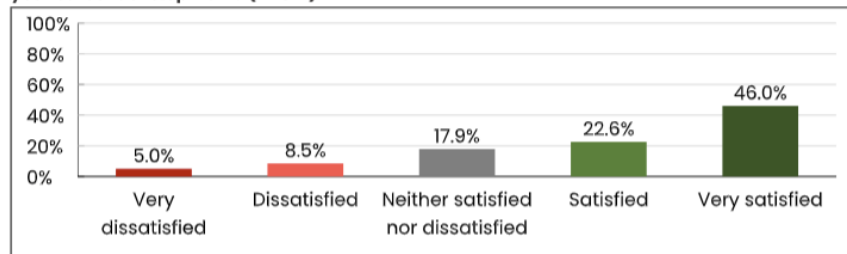
Figure 91. How satisfied are you with your faculty mentor/advisor match? (N=347)



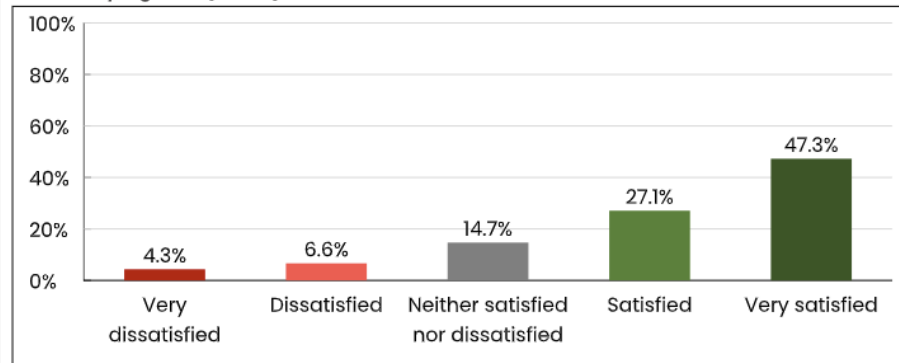
# Data

## VCU: Survey results

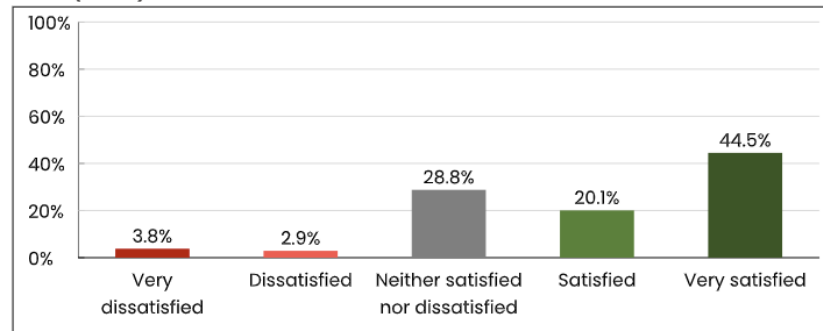
**Figure 94. How satisfied are you with your faculty mentor/advisors' mentoring with respect to your career development? (N=341)**



**Figure 92. How satisfied are you with your faculty mentor/advisor's responses to questions about the program? (N=347)**



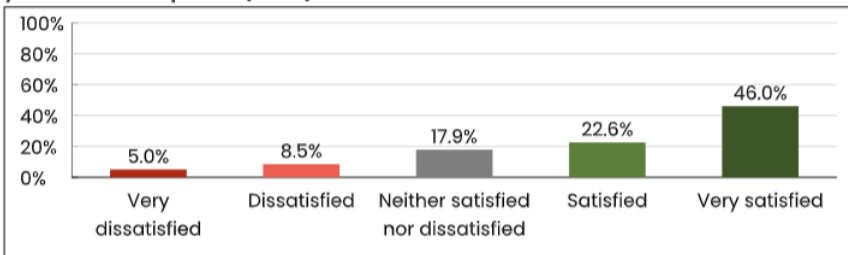
**Figure 93. How satisfied are you with your faculty mentor/advisor's responses to your research ideas? (N=344)**



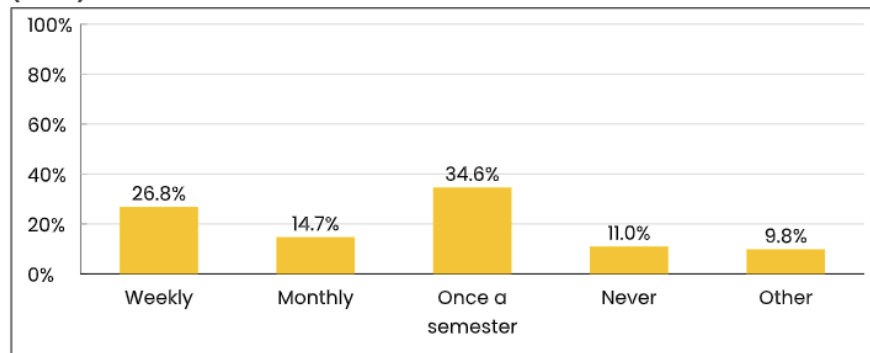
# Data

## VCU: Survey results

**Figure 94. How satisfied are you with your faculty mentor/advisors' mentoring with respect to your career development? (N=341)**

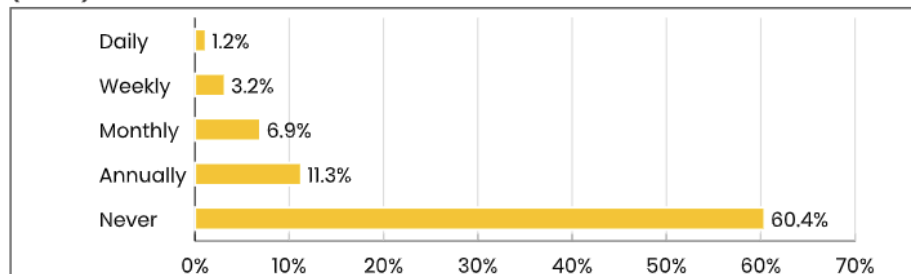


**Figure 95. How frequently do you meet with your faculty mentor/advisor each semester? (N=347)**



For respondents who chose "Other" when asked how frequently they meet with their faculty mentor/advisor each semester, a follow-up question asked respondents to specify further. Open-ended responses to this follow-up are available in Table 75 of the Appendix.

**Figure 96. How often do you experience conflicts or tension with your faculty mentor/advisor? (N=346)**



# Data

## VCU: Survey results

Figure 97. What are the sources of any faculty-graduate student conflicts that you have experienced? (Check all that apply) (N=344)

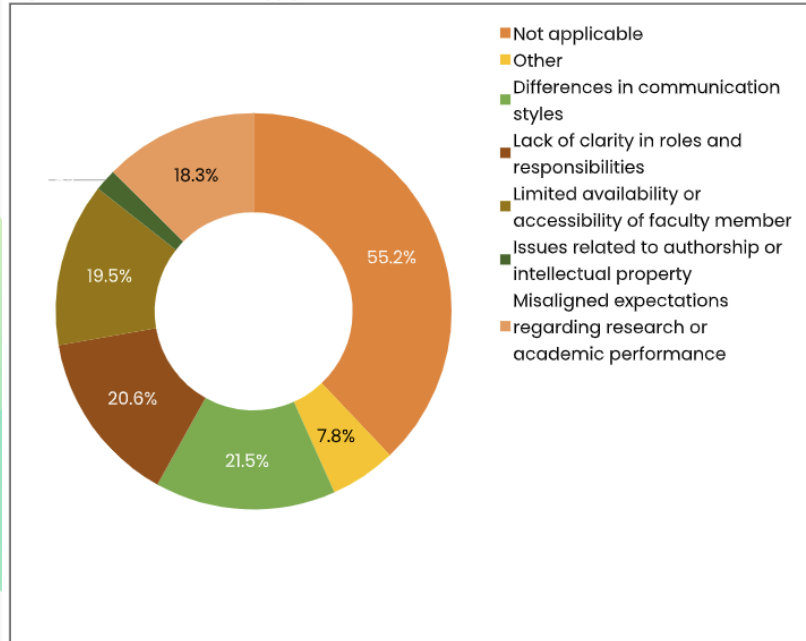
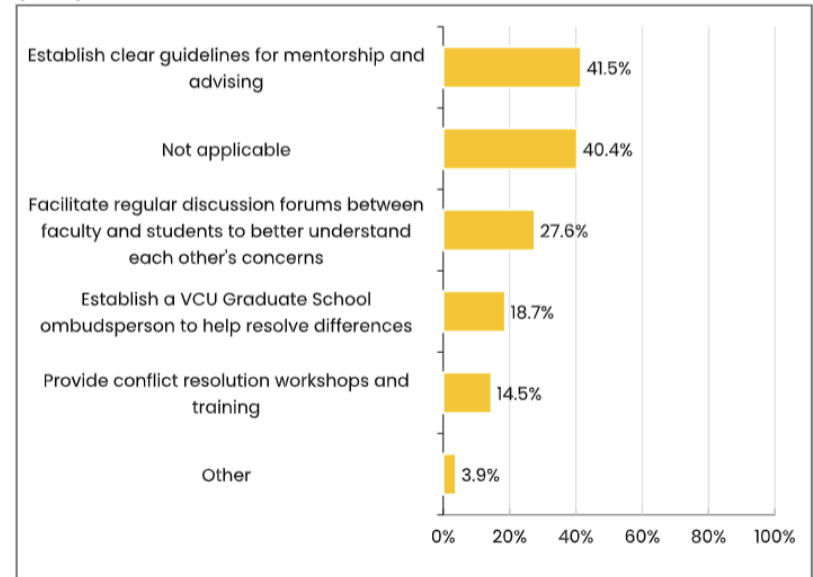


Figure 98. What could the VCU Graduate School do to alleviate tensions between faculty and graduate students? Please select up to three options that you believe would be most effective (N=337)



# Obstacles

## Personal:

- Time/competing demands
- Tenure pressures
- Incentive mismatch
- Mixed signals

## Structural:

- Mentoring can suffer
- Misaligned incentives
- Mentoring success part of T&P
- Measuring success (matrix) ex. What matrix would be helpful/attainable

# VCU Graduate Student–Advisor Compact

- Outlines guiding principles for advisor–advisee relationship.
- Addresses communication, academic milestones, work–life balance, conflict resolution.
- Signed at the start of advising relationship; revisited annually.
- Collected at the program level.



# Virginia Tech's Approach to Fostering Effective Mentoring Relationships

- **Overall organization**

- Centralized administrative support for admissions, academic progress, degree awarding
- Responsibility for curriculum, program management, assistantship assignment distributed to program/department level

- **Mentoring**

- Identify principles universally accepted as paramount
- Encourage, via outreach efforts, incorporation of those principles into policy and practice at degree program level
- Ombuds consulting service within Graduate School



Example of Grad School outreach to other units  
within Virginia Tech: “Mentoring Roadshow”

## Mentorship: Resources and Case Study Discussions

Kevin Edgar, Bill Huckle  
The Graduate School  
Virginia Tech  
March 21, 2025

Presentation COS Faculty Academy

# Mentoring Roadshow Features

- Recitation of mentoring principles and elements of good practice
  - A reminder of our principal responsibilities as university faculty members
- Sharing of resources available through Graduate School
  - “Expectation for Graduate Education” document
  - “Annual Review Good Practices”
  - Dean Surprenant’s brown bag discussions with junior faculty
- Case Study Discussion
  - Anonymized examples of situations derived from Kevin’s or my experience as advisors



# Graduate School Ombuds Office

- A resource for individual students in crisis or conflict
- A source of insight into broader issues that pertain to mentoring

## Case categorization (Ombuds 2024-25 Report)

IOA Category	Average 17-23	SY 2023- 2024	SY 2024- 2025	% of Total cases
Compensation & Benefits	18	45	57	13%
→ Evaluative Relationships	125	205	187	42%
Peer and Colleague Relationships	39	51	66	15%
→ Academic/Career Progression and Development	117	205	185	41%
Legal, Regulatory, Financial and Compliance	34	33	41	9%
Safety, Health, and Physical Environment	60	102	85	19%
Services/Administrative Issues	33	40	32	7%
Organizational, Strategic, and Mission Related	46	67	74	17%
Values, Ethics, and Standards	15	40	34	8%
<b>Total Cases</b>	<b>310</b>	<b>449</b>	<b>447</b>	



# Graduate School Ombuds Office

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Description of Sub-issue	24/25	% of total cases 24/25
Concerns with academic progression	128	29%
→ Concerns with communication in evaluative relationship	66	15%
→ Sense of lack of respect within evaluative relationship	65	15%
Concerns with work related stress and work-life balance	62	14%
Concerns with respect and mistreatment among peers	53	12%
Concern with compensation	51	11%
→ Trust/integrity concern within evaluative relationship	49	11%
→ Concern with performance appraisal within evaluative relationship	43	10%

(Ombuds 2024-25 Report)

# Graduate School Ombuds Office

- A resource for individual students in crisis or conflict
- A source of insight into broader issues that pertain to mentoring – **pointers to where we need to focus efforts**

## “Shifting Academic Expectations and Faculty Relational Dynamics

Theme: Students encounter unclear or inconsistently applied academic expectations, along with faculty and committee dynamics that raise concerns about fairness, professionalism, and student progress.

### Examples of concerns noted:

- Students expressed a sense of dismissiveness when reaching out for guidance and told to "Master out" by both faculty advisors and departmental leadership.
- Working with committees where spouses are involved has detrimentally impacted the student experience.
- Research and dissertation credits seen to have ambiguous and changing expectations for receiving credit.”

(Ombuds 2024-25 Report)



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# Shared Goals, Different Approaches



## VCU

- University-wide compact embedded in graduate program policy.



## Virginia Tech

- Expectation-setting tools integrated within mentoring culture.



## Both

- Promote clarity, accountability, and student advocacy.

# Implementation Lessons



- Secure faculty and student input early in development.



- Frame as proactive resources, not punitive measures.



- Provide flexibility for program-level customization.



- Integrate into annual review and professional development processes.

# Engagement Activity

## **Customizable Mentoring Compact Toolkit**

This toolkit provides a customizable framework that institutions can adapt to foster positive and effective graduate mentoring relationships. It includes a sample compact template, discussion guide, implementation steps, and supporting resources to help programs and institutions strengthen advisor–advisee relationships.



# Engagement Activity

## 1. Advisor-Advisee Compact Template

### Section A: Shared Purpose Statement

*This agreement outlines guiding principles to promote a successful advisor–advisee relationship based on mutual respect, effective communication, and shared responsibility for graduate student success.*

### Section B: Expectations of Advisors

- *Provide timely and constructive feedback*
- *Be accessible for regular meetings*
- *Support academic and professional development*
- *Guide student through milestones and requirements*
- *Maintain respect and professionalism*

### Section C: Expectations of Advisees

- *Take responsibility for degree progress*
- *Prepare for meetings and share updates*
- *Communicate challenges proactively*
- *Engage in professional development opportunities*
- *Maintain respect and professionalism*

### Section D: Shared Responsibilities

- *Commit to regular and open communication*
- *Discuss authorship and intellectual property early*
- *Address conflicts respectfully and seek resolution promptly*
- *Maintain professional conduct and integrity*

### Section E: Review and Renewal

- *Compact should be reviewed at the start of the advising relationship*
- *Revisited annually and updated as needed*
- *Signed copy retained by graduate program*



# Engagement Activity

## 2. Discussion Guide

Suggested questions for the advisor–advisee meeting:

- *How often should we meet?*
- *What is the preferred mode of communication?*
- *What are expectations for authorship on papers?*
- *How do we handle vacation, leave, or emergencies?*
- *Who can we go to if disagreements cannot be resolved?*

*Checklist for annual review meeting: academic progress, milestones, evolving goals, changes in expectations.*



## 3. Implementation Guide for Institutions

Steps to launch Locally:

1. *Form a working group of faculty, students, and administrators*
2. *Adapt the compact language to fit institutional culture and policies*
3. *Pilot in 1–2 programs before scaling broadly*
4. *Provide faculty training and student orientation*
5. *Collect signed agreements at the program level*

*Scalability Tips: Encourage flexibility with program-level customization, integrate with annual review processes, and frame as proactive rather than punitive.*

# Engagement Activity

## 4. Sample Tools to Include

- *Editable Word version of the Compact*
- *Fillable PDF version for electronic signatures*
- *Comparison matrix (examples from multiple institutions)*
- *FAQ sheet for faculty and students*
- *Workshop agenda template for faculty and student training*

## 5. Optional Add-ons

- *Conflict resolution resources (sample escalation steps)*
- *Professional development planning addendum*
- *Metrics for evaluation (student satisfaction, conflict reduction, time to degree)*



# Tools for Participants



- Editable compact template for adaptation.



- Implementation checklist for institutions.



- Discussion guide for advisor–advisee meetings.



- Comparison of VCU and Virginia Tech approaches.

# Discussion and Q&A

- How do you structure mentoring expectations at your institution?
- What challenges arise in advisor–advisee relationships?
- What tools could help foster stronger mentoring culture in your setting?

