Advising, Co-advising and Collaboration in the UNL IGERT

A key component of the UNL IGERT program “Resilience in stressed watersheds” is the requirement that students have both an Advisor and a Co-advisor. The intent of this arrangement is to ensure that students develop a close collaborative relationship with faculty in at least two disciplines. Here we clearly define the roles of the advisor and co-advisor so there is no confusion. This is consistent with the core recommendation of Graybill et al. (2006) to “attend to the process.”

As in all graduate programs, the Advisor is the chair of the graduate student’s committee, has primary administrative responsibility for the student, and is affiliated with the academic unit that is responsible for the PhD program the student actually enrolls in. For example, a student whose IGERT program will be completed as a PhD in Psychology needs an advisor who can serve as graduate committee chair in the Department of Psychology. Such a student will need to complete all the requirements of a PhD in Psychology in addition to the IGERT program requirements. The advisor is responsible for funding beyond the duration of the IGERT fellowship. This funding could be provided from alternate sources (e.g. grants), but the ultimate commitment rests with the home department and the advisor.

The co-advisor will be a member of the student’s supervisory committee, and be affiliated with a different discipline than the student’s Advisor. The final say in whether a putative co-advisor has a different discipline than an Advisor rests with the IGERT steering committee. We deliberately do not use academic unit as the metric of “difference” because some academic units, such as the School of Natural Resources, are inherently interdisciplinary, and using academic unit as the basis for defining the differences between advisors and co-advisors is unnecessarily restrictive. Similarly, there are different academic units that house faculty with very similar disciplines (e.g. Geosciences and SNR), and an advisor / co-advisor pair from those two units may not meet the interdisciplinary intent of the IGERT program. Co-advisors will be expected to participate in the IGERT activities as specified in the grant.

The relationship between the student, co-advisor, and advisor is of a team of collaborators working on a shared project. Thus, they should be prepared to meet and communicate as often as necessary to meet the goals of their shared interdisciplinary project. The project should advance the academic interests of all three, and no faculty member can be compelled to serve as advisor or co-advisor on a project that does not advance their interests. Thus, it is incumbent upon the student and the advisor to ensure that a suitable co-advisor is available and interested in the proposed project. Given the diversity of interests represented by the IGERT faculty, as well as the benefits to faculty of participating, it is not anticipated that this is an onerous requirement. Advisors and co-advisors are not limited to the current pool of participating faculty; any member of the UNL graduate faculty (tenure-track or permanent) willing to commit to the goals of the IGERT in writing may be added to the pool, following the procedures already established by the IGERT steering committee.