Core community values: A manual for professional conduct

Department of Biology, UNC-Chapel Hill
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Our community values apply equally to all departmental graduate students, post-docs, faculty, and staff – no one should gain privileges to abuse their power, regardless of their academic rank.

Goal of this manual: To provide baseline expectations of professional behavior for the UNC Biology community.

We hope this document will establish expectations for an atmosphere in UNC Biology where ***all community members feel respected, supported, and included, regardless of academic rank***. All department members should think of these Community Values as a baseline for expected, professional behavior, and should feel empowered to reach out for support if another department member is not abiding by these values. We include examples of breaches of professional conduct for each core community value; we hope this helps clarify the gray areas of behavior that can lead to harmful impacts on department members.

Development of this manual: Department members of all ranks have been offered the opportunity to contribute to this statement of values during and after a series of workshops on power dynamics conducted in the fall semester of 2017.

In these workshops, participating UNC Biology department members discussed two hypothetical scenarios involving abuses of power in research labs. From these discussions, a sub-group of faculty and graduate students developed three products that outline expectations for professional behavior based on responses of department members. This manual is the most comprehensive of the three products, defining common abuses of power in academic research labs so that department members understand when abuses of power take place. We hope this manual will help our community gauge the severity of complicated, gray-area situations that arise in research labs due to abuse of power.

How to use this manual: When reading through these departmental values, think about situations when someone in the UNC Biology department did not follow expectations for professional behavior.

If the aforementioned behavior becomes consistent or has a ***negative impact on your mental health, physical health, career prospects, or development as a scientist, it is appropriate and encouraged for you to discuss the issue with someone in the department*** who can provide you with guidance on how to handle the situation. We suggest first speaking with someone who is not a mandatory reporter and who has received mentorship training. You can find a list of these faculty on the website for the Biology Graduate Student Association (*website link goes here*). If

you prefer to speak to someone outside UNC Biology, you can visit the university ombuds office for confidential advice (*web link*). Lastly, members of the Safe Spaces Committee can provide informal guidance given their experience working with department students and faculty (*link to SSC member page – this doesn't exist yet)*.

Respect

We have agreed that our department is intolerant of any act of disrespect towards an individual. We expect all individuals in our community to follow these values:

- No berating or belittling.
    - Don't critique without guidance on how to improve. Be constructive with your comments on manuscript drafts, ideas, skills development, or other research products.
- Practice active listening.
    - Suspend your judgement when someone is explaining an idea you don't agree with. Rather than advocating for your perspective, first ask them questions to better understand their perspective.
    - Find common ground with someone whose ideas you disagree with.
- Practice patience and understanding.
    - We are human and therefore make mistakes sometimes. If a colleague or trainee fails to meet standards, this is not an excuse to abandon respect.
    - If a colleague or trainee makes mistakes, there could be a reason for their difficulties that you aren't aware of.
- Understand that your actions may be perceived differently than intended.
    - If confronted about your behavior, respond with tact and make it an opportunity to reflect on and change your behavior in the future.
    - Be quick to apologize for unintended harm.
    - Don't attempt to change the emotional reactions of colleagues offended by your behavior. Rather than expecting them to not be offended, think about how you can change your behavior to prevent future conflict.

Acts of disrespect produced by members of our department are the responsibility of all department members. We must all take responsibility for and understand the gravity of all acts of disrespect, regardless of academic rank.

Examples of disrespect

1. A postdoc yells at an undergraduate lab tech for making a mistake. When confronted about their behavior, the postdoc says, "Well if they want to go to grad school, they need to be prepared for what it will be like. That's how it was for me as a grad student."

2. When providing feedback on a manuscript draft, a grad student's labmate often provides insulting or vague comments that are not helpful.

3. When discussing microaggressions with colleagues, a faculty member says that we should not take certain people seriously when they are offended because "they are probably just prone to negative emotions, and we should not have to change our behavior for them."

4. A postdoc's advisor disagrees with the way the postdoc is conducting an experiment. While the postdoc is trying to explain why they're taking this particular approach, the advisor keeps interrupting to explain why they're wrong.

Support

We have agreed to support the whole individual by being aware of and sensitive to the mental health, physical health, and academic needs of all department members by following these values:

- The emotional needs of the individual should not be overshadowed or discarded by the demands of research.
    - If the behavior or disposition of a colleague or trainee changes, they may be experiencing an unusual amount of stress (either from within or outside of lab life).
    - Actively let trainees know that you are open to discussing how emotional conflict is affecting their productivity.
- Be invested in the success of colleagues and trainees (even if they are not your trainees).
    - Ask them what their goals are and help see their goals to fruition.
    - Celebrate the successes of your colleagues and trainees.
- If a colleague or trainee confides in you that they've experienced harassment, abusive power dynamics, or other conflict, support them in any way possible.
    - Validate their experience (don't hesitate to believe them).
    - Make an effort to connect them with available resources, and check in on them to make sure actions are being taken.

We acknowledge that although each research lab in our department will inevitably have its own unique culture and environment, department members should actively seek to support each other's emotional and physical health and scientific needs, regardless of lab affiliation.

Examples of discouragement

1. A grad student is being harassed by another grad student, who is trying to pressure her to go on a date with him. The victim approaches her advisor for advice, and the advisor says: "You just need to be more direct with him. But anyway, you should be flattered that he's so interested in you!"

2. A lab technician has been working long hours for months at a time, and others in the lab have noticed a change in their behavior – the technician is often tired, cranky, and making silly mistakes. A few grad students approach their PI about the situation, and the PI laughs: "Ahh

yes, I remember those days working long hours at the bench. They'll be fine, that's just how life goes when you work in a productive lab."

3. A PI notices that their grad student has been declining in productivity; the student spends less time in the lab than before and hasn't been showing up to lab meetings. The PI tells the other lab members that the student is being lazy and probably won't make it through the program.

4. After his manuscript has been accepted in a high-profile journal, a grad student's friends take him out for lunch to celebrate. When he returns to lab after lunch later than usual, his labmates glare or roll their eyes at his tardiness and complain to each other that he's showing off.

Inclusion and diversity

We have agreed to welcome and celebrate the diverse backgrounds, ideas, and viewpoints of all department members, regardless of gender (identity), race, ethnicity, sexual preference, religion, or culture. We will use our actions, as individuals and as a department, to enhance diversity and inclusion in the following ways:

- Maintain active awareness of how diversity is affected by administrative tasks and events.
    - Through the hiring and recruitment process.
    - Through nominating and inviting seminar speakers.
    - Host discussions or workshops related to inclusivity and diversity.
- Commit to fostering a diverse and inclusive working environment, where individuals can express all forms of their personality, either academic or non-academic.
    - Provide a platform for all members to share ideas, opinions, and work during faculty meetings, lab meetings, one-on-one meetings, seminars, and social events.
- Actively seek out opinions and ideas from colleagues and trainees by creating multiple avenues of communication that are accessible to all.
    - Via small-group meetings, one-on-one meetings, and regular anonymous feedback.

Every member of our department is valued. We are all critical to our collective success, which can only be maintained and enhanced if we value the contributions of all our members.

Examples of exclusion

1. A staff member notices that almost all the invited seminar speakers for the semester are white and male. The staff member confronts a faculty member about it, and the faculty member says, "It's just a coincidence that the speakers we wanted to invite this year happened to be white men. We don't invite speakers just because they're women or minorities. That would make our seminar series less impactful and interesting."

2. A PI claims that religious scientists can't possibly be doing good science, and that religious tolerance in research labs should not be expected in their department.

3. An international grad student is not accustomed to speaking up during lab meetings, so does not share their opinions or ideas with peers. The PI doesn't bother asking the grad student for input, assuming that if they wanted to share their ideas, they would speak up.

4. Some labmates try to organize a lab dinner to foster more workplace comradery. When invited, the lab's PI says, "Apparently I'm not giving you enough things to do since you have time to go out and party. We don't need to get to know each other better here, we need to focus on being more productive."

Accountability

We have agreed that faculty accountability is crucial to fostering a positive work environment, but we are still working toward having a robust accountability structure. Until we develop such a structure, we are striving to build an accountability culture, where individuals in our department are empowered to respond appropriately to harassment and harmful power dynamics through the following ways:

- Create intentional lines of communication that allow people to talk about conflict.
    - Have lab communication protocols in place and train new lab members on the protocol.
    - Regularly discuss lab culture with colleagues and trainees.
- Hold yourself accountable; everyone makes mistakes.
    - It's likely that you have unintentionally harmed a colleague or trainee with words or actions.
    - When someone confronts you about your behavior, suspend judgement and self-defense, and listen; be quick to apologize for causing unintentional harm.
- If you observe harassment or other abuses of power, find a way to approach the person with the problematic behavior (if you are in a position of power or feel safe to do so).
    - Remember the person probably has no idea they caused harm, so they might be surprised or defensive. Keep in mind that you are doing a good thing by holding them accountable for their actions.
- If you do not feel empowered or safe to address problematic behavior, find a way to approach the person on the receiving end of the abuse.
    - You might accompany them to Counseling and Psychological Services and/or an appropriate Biology faculty member (see a list of mandatory reporters and faculty who have received mentorship training here: *place link here*).

Our department cares deeply about accountability to ensure that all members can conduct research while feeling safe and supported. We are working toward an accountability structure that is independent (unbiased), fair, and transparent. Repeated failure to meet community standards as laid out in this statement of community values should result in fair consequences.

Examples of irresponsibility

1. A faculty member hears grad students discussing a colleague of hers: the colleague has made inappropriate advances on multiple grad students. Not having been trained to respond to this situation, the faculty member doesn't take any action.

2. A senior faculty member makes offensive comments about a female grad student to a group of faculty. No one in the faculty group challenges the senior faculty member about their comments.

3. A PI does not set up a lab communication protocol and does not respond well to lab members who complain about other lab members. When confronted with lab conflict, the PI says, "You are adults. Just do your job and don't get me involved."

4. A faculty member is confronted by a colleague after a meeting. The colleague points out that some of the things the faculty member said in the meeting were offensive, including an insinuation that the women and minority faculty members in their department got their jobs to increase diversity in the department and not for their research accomplishments. The colleague responds defensively: "Wow, I can't believe you took it that way, you should relax. Have you been stressed out lately or something?"

Excellence

We have agreed to aim for excellence, rigor, and fulfilled potential for all. We will foster an environment where everyone is supported and stimulated to grow and reach new insights. In the pursuit of excellence, we hold the following values:

- Offer and accept feedback honestly, respectfully, kindly, clearly, and well.
    - Feedback is integral to excellence in scientific research and in our conduct with each other; we will hear one another genuinely and without defensiveness.
    - Superiors offer feedback to subordinates, and subordinates offer feedback to superiors. Subordinates should be able to offer feedback without fear of retaliation.
- Create conditions of safety.
    - Scientists who are afraid for their basic safety cannot put their full resources towards their science and cannot excel.
    - Prioritize safety through lab protocols and interpersonal conflict protocols.
    - If a colleague or trainee approaches you with a safety concern (including unwanted attention or harassment from colleagues): believe them; ask what they would prefer to see happen; have plans already in place to address the conflict; and try to resolve the issue as soon as possible.
- Revisit these Community Values regularly and proactively (not reactively) and make new members aware of these values.

We aim to put the same energy and determination we put into scientific excellence into our conduct with each other. We will do far more than meet the bare minimum to comply with government-mandated policies around non-discrimination.

Examples of deficiency

1. Grad students don't feel comfortable providing critical feedback of their advisor's mentoring style, and the advisor does not solicit feedback from their trainees. The advisor continues to miss meetings with students, ignore their emails, and will take months to return manuscript drafts with comments.

2. A PI doesn't always remember to go over lab safety protocols with new lab members, which results in unsafe chemical exposure and storage.

3. A postdoc does not specify expectations of an undergrad technician. When the technician fails to meet the postdoc's standards, the postdoc tells the technician, "You aren't picking up on this stuff very quickly, are you? You should be a lot further along than this by now."

4. A grad student's advisor tells her that her experiment will probably fail, but provides no guidance for how to approach her research differently.

5. A PI doesn’t clearly express their expectations of their grad students. One grad student works 80+ hours per week and puts a lot of time and thought into their dissertation research; however, the student doesn’t know what the PI expects from them, such as producing manuscripts. The PI doesn't see any solid results or manuscripts coming from the student, so assumes it is because the grad student is "just being lazy" and doesn't bother checking in with them.