

# Finding a Project/Thesis Advisor

Environmental Studies Program, Cal State Fullerton

Finding the perfect advisor can be a complicated and often frustrating task, especially in a program like ENST, where there is only one full-time faculty member and one part-time faculty member to choose from. This means that it may be challenging to find a suitable advisor to agree to work with you. The good news is that if you are aware of this ahead of time, and are willing to put in the time and effort, your search for an advisor should not be that difficult.

First and foremost it is important to recognize that faculty members are under no obligation to be your advisor. This means that it is up to the discretion of all faculty members to choose to work with you. By agreeing to serve as your advisor, a faculty member is obligated to work closely with you for (oftentimes) more than one semester, to read countless drafts, and to generally be available for you when assistance is required. The task of advising graduate students can often be thankless, difficult, and time-consuming for faculty members and so please approach with them with this in mind. This handout is intended to serve as a guideline to help you in your hunt for an advisor.

## Familiarize Yourself with CSUF Faculty

There are over 1500 full-time faculty members on the CSUF campus, but do not let this figure overwhelm you. Once you have decided upon a general area of research that you are interested in pursuing further, your list will automatically be narrowed down to just a select group of departments on campus to focus your attention on. The next step is to familiarize yourself with the departmental websites where much of the initial background information is available that you will need to help you further narrow down your search to specific faculty members within particular departments.

What constitutes an ideal advisor varies from student to student, but in general, it is recommended that your advisor shares the following:

- similar research interests
- a compatible personality
- willingness to advise you

More often than not, professors like to know their students before committing to advisory duties. This may require you to *take one or more of their classes*. If a faculty member is already familiar with your academic abilities he or she will be more or less willing to commit to working with you based upon a number of factors including: your writing skills, ability to communicate well and to form coherent research objectives. *Familiarize yourself with the publications and textbooks* that your potential advisor has written. This will help you to decide whether or not your interests are suitably matched

*Get to know your fellow classmates.* Talk to other graduate students who may have had experience with particular professors. They are likely well equipped to give you useful

information about specific departments/programs and professors on campus. Ask them about the professional and personal styles of individual professors. More specific questions could also be useful, such as: Does this professor have a hands-off or hands-on approach to research? How helpful and accessible is this professor when students need them?

Another way of better acquainting yourself with faculty may include involving yourself with campus organizations or program associations. Participate in the activities they participate in. For example, the Geography Club holds an annual conference called "All Points of the Compass." This event provides the opportunity to meet professionals and allows students and faculty to present their research. The ENST Program also has a student run organization called Environmental Studies Student Association (ESSA) that you may consider joining.

## **Before Your Approach**

Decide on the general topic of your project/thesis early in your program and make a point of taking one class or more from a faculty who focuses on that subject area. This takes a bit of investigation, but it is well worth the effort in the end. In any case, most faculty members will not accept a student who has not taken a class from him/her.

When you approach the faculty member, make sure you've done your homework. Showing up with a very diffuse idea such as "I am interested in doing a project/thesis on environmental conservation" will not make for a great first impression. Have some concrete ideas, be able to cite previous work on the topic, and perhaps even have more than one project/thesis idea. Type out a few of your ideas, email them to the professor prior to the meeting, so they have an idea of the topics you might be interested in pursuing. It also gives them a chance to think about them before you meet. Even better, it requires you, the student, to plan ahead, outline ideas, and determine what you feel would be appropriate for you.

Frequently, the faculty member will be able, unfortunately, to shoot down your idea in an instant, so it's worthwhile having several fallback positions. Also, find out what he/she does research on, and perhaps tailor your project so that in some way it is related to what that person knows well. Remember, in a way, you are selling yourself to the professor.

Show that you have thought through the process to some degree. This is particularly true of methodology and scope. How are you going to do this, and how much ground do you plan to cover? The more you can show that you are on top of your topic, the more likely the professor is to accept you.

Avoid topics that involve data collection that will put you in harms way, or that will be extremely difficult to ascertain. Don't depend on someone else to come through for you. Depend on yourself.

## **Things to Ask a Potential Advisor**

The needs for each student will vary. One student may need to be walked through the process of how to accomplish certain tasks, while others may need less continuous feedback. There are a

lot of factors to take into consideration when pursuing an advisor. Think about what kind of style you prefer to see in an advisor. Listed below are some questions you may want to consider before asking a faculty member to work with you:

- What is the dropout rate for his/her students?
- How long has he/she been on the faculty?
- Is he/she planning on retiring or going on sabbatical soon? *Keep in mind that nearly one third of the full time faculty currently at CSUF are going to be retiring soon or are in the process of retiring.*
- Can he/she serve on the committee or act as an advisor?
- Is he/she full time faculty? *(Your primary advisor (and committee members) must be full-time CSUF faculty members)*
- Is she/he compatible with your personality?

## Once You Have Selected Your Advisor

By now, you've already introduced yourself and your areas of interest. Make sure you continue to participate in his/her presentations, research, and classes. Don't be afraid to show up for office hours or to several regular meetings to meet with your advisor. In fact, it is recommended that you This will help you become more involved and ultimately help you when you sit down to write your project/thesis.

Brainstorm with your advisor as to the topics that you both have in common and then narrow them down a few topics that you would be interested in researching. Advisors are a good source of information, have many professional contacts and may be able to point you in a good direction for further information.

## The Advisor's Role

Once an advisor has agreed to work with you, you should directly agree upon what is expected of you and what you expect from your advisor in terms of guidance. This is a two-way street. Be considerate of your advisor's other responsibilities. You are likely not his/her only student and so realize that it is your responsibility to be pro-active about setting up meeting schedules and keeping your advisor informed through the process.

If your advisor is frequently inaccessible (away on sabbatical, near retirement, etc.) you may want to consider changing advisors. This is where the proposal you have already written comes in handy. Discuss this change first with your new potential advisor; make sure he/she is willing to take you and your project/thesis over. Have this new advisor sign all the paperwork, then discuss with your soon to be former advisor the reasons you have decided to change advisors.

**Special note:** At CSUF, the summer session is not considered a part of the regular school period. This means that full-time faculty members are not obligated to work with you over the summer, and it is likely that most have commitments that extend off campus during this period. In fact, summer graduation completions are actively discouraged by the Graduate Studies Office and the ENST office. Be sure to schedule this factor into your plans.

## **Some General Tips to Consider:**

Keep a running diary of ALL of your efforts that lead to completing your project or thesis. This diary might be approached in any number of ways, as long as it works for you in helping you maintain your focus and organization. Some suggestions are listed below.

- Keep track of the dates and times when you dealt specifically with your thesis/project. This will allow you to go back and follow the progression of ideas that may have led to particular ideas and research directions.
- Write down all brainstorming ideas that you have when working on a topic.
- Make note of all references that you are hunting down and where they are located in case you need to find them later. This includes website addresses, names, phone numbers etc.
- Once you have some idea of topics, make a running list of potential advisors and people who may be able to assist you along with their contact information. Be sure to write a summary of what was said right after each meeting (and all future ones with the person who will eventually be your advisor) so that you can keep track of what was said and what advice was given.
- Establish working deadlines for yourself and keep track of your progress.