

Temporary Funding to Accommodate Doctoral Student Research Advisor Transitions in Chemical Engineering

As emphasized in our Roadmap statement, the Department is committed to maintaining a community that cares about the mental and physical health of our students, faculty, and staff first and foremost. It is recognized that, for our PhD students, the most critical relationship in their training is that between student and research advisor. Great effort and intent is put forth to ensure a reasonable match of research interests for graduate students and advisors, and positive mentor-mentee relationships; however, it is important to recognize that there may arise difficulties with these interactions that may not be readily resolved, or significant shifts in funding or research scope that make it difficult for a student to continue in a given research lab. There may also be unhealthy situations (e.g. student is experiencing bias, discrimination, harassment, other violations of MIT policies, or other aggressive behavior from their advisor or colleagues). Such cases often lead to a need to change research advisors; however, because most students are funded by research assistantships associated with their advisor, such changes can be difficult.

The Department has always been committed to ensuring our graduate students are supported during such periods. Along with ensuring the educational well-being of our students, the provision of transitional funds can help counter power imbalances that are inherent in academic settings, and is one of the recommendations of the MIT Academic Organizational Relationships Working Group in response to the NASEM Report on Sexual and Gender Harassment. As a Department, we feel it is important to ensure student awareness of this provisional support and present a clear pathway and mechanism for engaging it.

Every PhD candidate in the Department is eligible for up to one semester of provisional funding from the department during the course of their enrollment in the program, if they believe it necessary to change research advisors. The form of this support may be in the form of a TAship or fellowship depending on the circumstances. This support can be provided for a number of reasons which may include difficulties in funding, irreconcilable issues in the mentor-mentee relationship, unhealthy situations or, within reason, significant shifts in research scope. The student should find a new research advisor (and financial support, if needed) during the semester that they are receiving the provisional funding. The Graduate Officer will advise the student in identifying a potential new advisor, and also provide a 10.THG evaluation for that provisional semester, if needed.

The Graduate Officer is the Departmental Transition Support Coordinator (TSC) and acts as an advocate of the student during the transition process. The student should first schedule a meeting with the Graduate Officer to describe the situation and discuss paths forward. A possible outcome of this meeting will be a separate meeting with the advisor and Graduate Officer, and then a joint meeting with the student, advisor and Graduate Officer. If it is determined that a change of advisor is the best path forward, this meeting will then be followed by a written request to the Graduate Officer detailing the request for transition funding. **In particular for PhD and SM/PhD students in unhealthy advisor or lab situations (e.g., the student is experiencing bias, discrimination, harassment, other violations of MIT policies, or other aggressive behavior from their advisor or colleagues in the research lab they are wishing to transfer from), the transitional funding will be guaranteed.** Approval for funding will be determined within 2 weeks by the Graduate Officer, with input as needed from the Graduate Committee and Department Head. Approved funding will be contingent on the student and Graduate Officer agreeing to contents in a written document outlining the timeline for transitioning out of the current research group and obligations regarding any work to be completed with the student's current advisor.

Appendix

1. The Office of Graduate Education (OGE) will appoint a Transition Support Coordinator (TSC) and is someone whom students can reach out to if they feel they may have a conflict within or distrust of the department in handling this particular situation. The OGE TSC will be able to act as a mediator if needed to help the student discuss their situation with the department Graduate Officer and departmental leadership.
2. Once a student finds a new research advisor, it is expected that the new research advisor takes over funding of the student if possible. If a student finds a new research advisor prior to the end of the semester, and support is not immediately available from the new advisor, the student can continue to be funded by the transitional funding through the remainder of the semester.
3. If the transitional funding begins in the middle of the semester, the unutilized remainder of the semester's funding can be carried over into the following term.
4. Additional funding beyond the semester may be needed and will be determined on a case-by-case basis by mutual agreement between the Chemical Engineering Department Head and both the Graduate Officer and OGE TSC.
5. The student's original research advisor may ask the student to wrap-up/hand-off their duties (i.e., train new students, finalize/compile data and other materials, etc.). This should take no more than 15 hours per week of the student's time, for up to 4 weeks. In cases where the student does not agree to the terms of the requested wrap-up/hand-off duties, the departmental Graduate Officer and the OGE TSC will work with the student and advisor (separately, if the student wishes) to facilitate an equitable agreement.
6. The Graduate Officer and OGE TSC will work with Department Head to provide avenues for the student to find alternative letter writers and references, if desired by the student.
7. [MIT prohibits any member of the community from retaliating against any person](#) who, in good faith: raises concerns about a possible violation of MIT policy or other wrongdoing; or participates in any Institute complaint resolution process. The student should inform the Graduate Officer or OGE TSC if retaliation is occurring.