

MCB Departmental Norms

The Department of Molecular and Cell Biology (MCB) at the University of Connecticut (UConn) is committed to creating an equitable, transparent, productive, and collegial environment for faculty, staff, and students. We believe that realizing these ideals is an ongoing process that requires deliberate and purposeful action by all MCB members and that is built on open communication and personal reflection. Our work is guided by integrity, equity, and accountability. We will use these principles to govern interactions both within and between the different constituent groups that comprise MCB and respect the distinct roles and responsibilities of each group. All MCB members have unique knowledge, experiences, and personal identities that enrich our work and community.

Purpose of this document

UConn has clear policy expectations for the professional and respectful behavior of faculty, staff, and students (<https://policy.uconn.edu/2011/05/17/employee-code-of-conduct/>; <https://community.uconn.edu/>). This document does not supersede these and represents MCB's interpretation of them in our specific departmental context. Thus, it comprises a guideline for the behavior of all MCB members and will be upheld as such by the MCB departmental leadership.

Principles of professionalism and respect

Professionalism describes collegial behaviors that work in the best interests of our community and institution (<https://career.uconn.edu/resources/professionalism/>). It includes acting with equity and accountability in a manner that aligns with the core values of MCB, as defined throughout this document.

Respectful interactions appreciate and accommodate how different individuals express their personal identities. We all have unique histories and personalities that inform our work, study, and communication practices. These differences contribute to the vibrancy and productivity of MCB and should be respected and upheld at all times (employees see <https://policy.uconn.edu/2011/05/17/employee-code-of-conduct/>; students see <https://community.uconn.edu/>). Conversely, bullying, harassment, and discrimination, in all forms, are disrespectful behaviors that have no place in MCB or UConn and should be reported via appropriate channels to ensure that a safe and respectful environment is maintained for all MCB members (see "Conflict Resolution" below and <https://policy.uconn.edu/2015/12/29/policy-against-discrimination-harassment-and-related-interpersonal-violence/>).

Differences in expertise and experience are frequently codified by the different roles and ranks held by different MCB members. Extra responsibility is placed on those in managerial and supervisory roles to recognize and accommodate power differentials while promoting respect, ethics, and rigor in our work. Regardless of rank, all MCB members should treat each other in a civil, collegial, and respectful manner, take responsibility for their own actions, and make reasonable compromises to meet our shared goals. We strive for all our interactions to be constructive, even when critical, and to openly discuss our differences of opinion in a manner that respects individual experiences and expertise.

Communication

MCB expects that all professional communication should be respectful and cordial, regardless of its setting. Conversations should be factual and transparent about sources of information (e.g., prioritizing first-hand information over rumors). Communication practices (e.g., the use of titles or pronouns) should be established early in each relationship and deferred to, being mindful that these standards will vary between individuals with different cultural backgrounds, gender identities, or other forms of diversity. Mentors and supervisors should especially solicit such preferences from their trainees and staff, recognizing the power differentials involved.

All MCB members will adhere to UConn's communications policies (email: <https://policy.uconn.edu/2011/05/19/electronic-communication-policy/>; social media: https://policy.uconn.edu/2015/02/12/https-policy-uconn-edu-wp-content-uploads-sites-243-2019-01-uconn-social-media-policy_rev-11-28-18-1-pdf/; media: <https://policy.uconn.edu/category/university-communications/>). Following these, email is the designated and UConn-owned medium for professional communications that is expected to be checked and responded to in a timely manner. The use of other professional communication media and the designation of appropriate timelines for communication should follow UConn's policies and be clearly communicated by mentors and supervisors to their trainees and staff. Mentors and supervisors should regularly communicate with their trainees and staff, with expectations and preferences for the frequency and modality of communication agreed to early in the relationship and then modified as needed. Communication using personal devices and accounts, and/or outside of designated work hours, should only be used with the voluntary consent of both parties. Contact information volunteered for emergency use only is appreciated but must be restricted to such use.

Confidential communications should be clearly labeled and absolutely respected. Such communications should consider the ramifications of using media (such as UConn email accounts) that are potentially subject to Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests. Faculty and staff who are designated as mandatory reporters should disclose this status as early as possible in conversations where this might reasonably be invoked.

Teaching and Learning

Teaching in MCB must always emphasize respect and professionalism, as expected at UConn (<https://policy.uconn.edu/2011/05/17/employee-code-of-conduct/#education>). This includes recognizing and accommodating differences in student backgrounds that lead them to learn in different ways and with different constraints, to the greatest extent possible and following all relevant UConn policies. Instructors should recognize their responsibilities as leaders in their classrooms and the power differentials inherent to student-teacher relationships. They should establish clear and professional expectations for behavior in their classes, communicate clearly, courteously, and promptly within those bounds, thoughtfully consider reasonable requests, and be respectful of feedback. Teaching Assistants (TAs) should also implement these values in their classrooms, following the lead of their supervisors. Supervisors should ensure that TAs have appropriate training and resources to implement the curricula, recognizing the dual role of TAs as both teachers and trainees.

As defined by the Student Code of Conduct (<https://community.uconn.edu/the-student-code-preamble/>), a “spirit of inquiry” is inherent to being a UConn student. Students should therefore approach their studies with commitment, humility, and integrity. As with instructors, students should be courteous and engaged in the classroom, communicate openly and respectfully, and adhere to UConn’s high academic standards (<https://community.uconn.edu/academic-misconduct/>). As appropriate (and especially when asked), students should provide honest and constructive feedback to their instructors, recognizing the potential for bias to influence this process.

In MCB, the departmental Areas of Concentration (AOC) design and implement teaching curricula in collaboration with departmental leadership. Curricular concerns should be primarily addressed to the appropriate AOC head for resolution.

Mentoring

Mentoring describes relationships where an experienced individual provides guidance and support to another. Such relationships are common throughout MCB and comprise a core function of our department. Mentor-mentee relationships include many positions and career stages (e.g., faculty-student, graduate student-undergraduate student, senior staff-junior staff), and objectives and expectations vary between each relationship. Regardless, mentors should always advocate for the best interests of their mentees and be cognizant of the power differentials that inevitably exist due to mentees seeking to obtain unique expertise that they want to develop. Professionalism, respect, and open communication are therefore especially important for the success of such relationships. Where breakdowns occur, the mentee and mentor should work through issues respectfully and equitably, involving external resources when necessary (e.g., departmental leadership during changes of graduate student advisors, following <https://gradcatalog.uconn.edu/grad-school-info/advisory-system/>; see also “Conflict resolution” below).

Mentors and mentees should together establish and work towards goals. In MCB, this often takes the form of completing a research project or academic program, or furthering professional development. Both mentors and mentees are responsible for progressing toward these goals, which involves regular meetings, project planning, setting and meeting milestones, and feedback on the products resulting from the mentored project (e.g., written documents). Standards for timelines and outcomes (e.g., using individual development plans) should be established early and clearly. These standards should be adhered to by both parties to the greatest extent possible, and respectfully and collaboratively accommodate unforeseen issues as they arise.

When entering into a formal mentoring relationship, a mentor commits to advance the interest of their mentee, e.g., by supporting training and professional development activities, assisting with project planning, and making reasonable efforts to provide the resources needed to achieve project goals. When planning the activities of their mentees, supervisors must follow all relevant UConn policies, e.g., those that define the contractual responsibilities of graduate assistants via their union contract. Although a mentee may choose to exceed the stipulations of such policies (e.g., by working additional hours), such activities must be strictly voluntary and not required by a supervisor, even informally. Expectations for the mentor-mentee relationship should be established as early as possible in the relationship, revisited regularly, and revised as needed. Supervisors should work to understand (and where reasonable, accommodate) the unique constraints faced by their mentees due to academic, social, or workplace conditions, as well as their mentee's personal and professional goals.

Like mentors, mentees are also responsible for the success of mentor-mentee relationships. In addition to committing to the activities collaboratively planned with their mentors, mentees should provide them with regular project updates and strategize with them to overcome obstacles. Mentees should also work to understand their roles and responsibilities under their mentor's supervision, e.g., participating in common lab jobs, ensuring financial responsibility, or providing preliminary data for grant proposals. Although such tasks must not supersede the mentee's primary responsibility for their own project, they do often comprise part of a mentee's training and collaboratively advance mentee projects via the success of the larger lab group. Communication between faculty and mentees is particularly important when mentees work on grant-funded projects so that faculty can ensure that funder requirements are satisfied. Both mentees and mentors should transparently communicate the difficulties and limitations of a project (e.g., technical, financial, temporal) as they become apparent and work together to mitigate or compensate for such issues. Via such collaboration, both mentees and mentors can adapt projects to accommodate their respective constraints and ensure the success of the mentee-mentor relationship.

Student committees are another common form of formal student mentoring within MCB. Committees have the core function of guiding and advocating for students while also upholding the high standards of the MCB department. By agreeing to be on a student committee, a mentor commits to actively and honestly engage with the student's project and promote their intellectual

and professional development where appropriate. Committees can also play an important role in conflict resolution (see below).

Research

Research performed by any MCB member will be conducted with the highest standards of integrity, as expected at UConn (<https://ovpr.uconn.edu/services/rics/>). As discussed under the Mentoring section, most MCB research occurs via mentored and/or supervised relationships, e.g., between faculty and graduate students or between graduate and undergraduate students. All research mentors and supervisors are responsible for identifying and following the standards (e.g., regulatory, safety, animal use) that govern the work being conducted and communicating these standards to their trainees and staff. Senior mentors and supervisors are responsible for ensuring that their subordinate mentors and supervisors are equipped to follow such standards. Trainees and staff should be empowered to ask their mentors and supervisors when such procedures are unclear. All researchers must make a complete record of their work while it is being conducted, including all relevant procedures, metadata, and the full results obtained. Lab heads (e.g., faculty) are ultimately responsible for the proper oversight of the research conducted in their labs.

Collaboration, both within and between labs, is a hallmark of research in MCB and critical for advancing knowledge. All collaborations should be entered into transparently, with roles and responsibilities discussed as early as possible to ensure the equitable sharing of work and credit (e.g., authorship, presentations, intellectual property). Such discussions should be continued throughout a project, updating expectations as appropriate. All researchers who work on a project should be included in these discussions and have their contributions acknowledged according to their substance.

Conflict resolution

Situations may arise between MCB members that require resolution. Ideally, grievances should be communicated openly and respectfully between the affected parties, allowing for the perspectives of each to be shared and with the goal of reaching equitable accommodation of the concerns raised to the greatest extent possible. Mentors and supervisors should especially be aware of power differentials that might impact these discussions and advocate for the equitable treatment of their trainees and staff. Where limitations exist that obstruct such accommodation (by either party), these should be clearly and openly communicated (respecting confidentiality if needed) and solutions to overcome them should be sought. Other mentors (e.g., thesis committee members, informal mentors) and departmental leadership (e.g., the AOC heads, associate department heads, or department head) may also contribute to these discussions, especially when difficult issues arise. If issues remain unsettled after discussion within the MCB department, outside resources such as the Workplace Navigators, the Graduate School, or the Ombuds Office can provide additional mediation to ensure the equitable treatment of all parties.

Retaliation in response to such discussions will not be tolerated and should be reported via the preceding channels or directly to the UConn Office of Institutional Equity (<https://inform.uconn.edu/>) to initiate an appropriate institutional response (following <https://policy.uconn.edu/2011/05/24/non-retaliation-policy/>).

This document was written by the MCB DEI committee and last updated on 05/08/2023. Feedback on this document was solicited from MCB graduate students, postdoctoral researchers, staff, and faculty (both tenure and non-tenure track). It was formally approved by faculty vote on 08/03/2023. The MCB DEI committee will review and revise this document biennially thereafter.