

Improving Research Advising through Subject Evaluations (X.ThG)

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The relationship between a graduate student and their research/thesis advisor is one of the core components of their experience at MIT, and plays a defining role in the students' learning, development as independent researchers, and career trajectories. Due to the crucial nature of this relationship, all educational stakeholders at the Institute should take an interest in constantly improving the state of research advising and—more broadly—mentorship of MIT students.

Process

During the 2015-2016 Academic Year, graduate students Boris Braverman (Physics), Erhardt Graeff (Media Lab), Michael McClellan (EAPS), as members of CJAC (Corporation Joint Advisory Committee on Institute-Wide Affairs), endeavored to create tools with which individual academic departments could survey the current state of research advising and develop strategies to improve research advising/mentoring that would have long-term assessment opportunities built in. We read through every letter of recommendation for the Frank E. Perkins Award for Excellence in Graduate Advising (awarded by the Graduate Student Council), and this rich archive provided many indicators of exceptional graduate research advising.

This analysis was used to create a new class of questions for use in end-of-term Subject Evaluations of research “placeholder” courses. Mechanical Engineering and EECS ran a pilot of these evaluations for Spring 2016 (in 6.ThG, 6.960, and 2.ThG). The survey is anonymous—just as with any other Subject Evaluation—and features a free-text response section at the end and the opportunity to add department-specific questions to probe specific departmental challenges or to target assessment of newly formed programs and initiatives.

Next Steps

In addition to positive feedback from Courses 2 and 6, there is a palpable buzz in the departmental student governments of other departments in which students would like to see the assessment expanded beyond the 1-year CJAC pilot. Each department will need to make decisions based on the needs of its students and faculty members; however, I am committed to answer questions and provide insights in order to help expand this tool to as many departments as possible.

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