

BioE Graduate Student Town Hall Spring 2022

[Recording with transcripts available on Google Drive](#)

Attendance:

Faculty: Samuel Chung, Lee Makowski, Shiaoming Shi, Qianqian Fang, Heather Clark, Sara Rouhanifard, Jessica Oakes, Mark Niedre, Jiahe Li, Abbas Yaseen, Elizabeth Libby

Staff: Caroline Pridmore, Esther Cohen, Kathryn Lasseter

Students: Caroline McCormick, Timothy Boyer, Jane Lee, Jacqueline Matz, Timothy Boyer, Samar Tarraf, Ashley Herrick, Kristine Ma, Kevin Bardon, Fernando Ivich, Noam Grunfeld, Quentin Meslier, Yasmeen Farra, Rahul Rangunathan, McKay Cavanaugh, Nathaniel Silva, Joshua Pace, Mireia Perera Gonzalez, Amber Williams, Nick Micovic, Edward Xu, Narges Yazdani, Shoreh Vanaei, Vineel Bodoyina, Prithvi Raj Macha

Agenda:

1. Summary of last town hall

- a. A list of roles for the department faculty and staff would be helpful to guide students
- b. How are TA positions assigned? Is there room for improvement via student feedback?
- c. The department vacation policy should be more explicit about holidays, etc

2. Department Roles

- a. Esther Cohen – Business Manager – TA/RA assignments, department budget, HR issue
- b. Caroline Pridmore - Academic Coordinator – scheduling, PhD oversight, faculty committees, advising students
- c. Liz Chesley – Program Coordinator – Marketing, Social Media, Events
- d. Prachi Shah – Financial Operations Coordinator – all research purchasing
- e. Qianqian Fang – PhD Advising
- f. Shiaoming Shi – MS Advising
- g. COE Advising – visa paperwork, mostly MS advising
- h. Kathryn – Lab Safety, lab resources
 - i. Safety glasses required to enter lab spaces
 - ii. Happy to coordinate with grad students and provide assistance whenever needed
 - iii. Open door/mailbox when needed. MS student on Fridays when Kathryn works from home, could contact the MS student too
 - iv. BioE Shared Dry Ice Box on the 2nd floor (blue), for department use
 - v. They are working with Lab Safety Officers (LSOs) to have a shared pool of common forms, resources, etc for facilities
- i. *Find University resources for mental health and other things on the BioE Grad Student/Post Doc Slack (#neu_resources)*
- j. *For issues with PIs or TA professors, talk to Caroline, Qianqian/Shiaoming*
 - i. *Please contact Caroline, Qianqian, or Shiaoming if you with any concerns regarding your PI or the department*

1. Please contact them before deciding to leave a lab, etc. The department can intervene and be a better help to students before things escalate
2. The timeline to resolve issues will vary case-by-case
- ii. *Caroline is available to chat about your experiences or concerns*
 1. She can serve as mediator and to get advice. She will be transparent about who she would talk to about your situations.
 - a. For mental health services, please refer to the above resources
 2. Caroline's goal is to improve the environment for BioE graduate students

3. TA assignments

- a. Students can be funded by and RA, TA, fellowship or be on co-op
- b. Esther is aware of which faculty have funding for students and whether they need students on a TA to fill gaps in grant funding
 - i. Pool of TAs come from existing students, 1st year students on TA
- c. In mid-April, registration for summer courses begins. The undergrad classes are assigned as many TA positions as needed
- d. TAs and courses are matched based on enrollment for the course and the concentration/research experience of the TA
- e. Esther does her best balance TA workload
 - i. Tries to rotate TAs through classes that require more work
 1. And tries to take into account who is taking the qual that semester
 - ii. E.g. Changed the capstone TA position to a Master's student position
 - iii. E.g. Bioelectricity was a lot of work for 1 TA, so it is now given to 2 TAs + grader
 - iv. E.g. The 2nd year lab now has graders to help the TAs
- f. The TA budget is allocated for the fiscal year (begins June) and based on enrollment for the next year
- g. TAs may be assigned to non BioE courses if other departments need TAs
- h. Similarly, if we have need for TAs but have no BioE students available, the position can be filled by other COE students
- i. Special circumstances for TAs
 - i. 50/50 TA/RA positions when a course does not need a full TA or so two students can split a TA position to reduce workload on each one
 - ii. A student, Caroline McCormick, is currently teaching the BMES lab as an instructor. She has an undergrad that helps with grading and computational PhD student that helps with software development, etc
- j. Esther and Caroline sent out a survey on TA positions to help inform them about what each course requires of the TAs
- k. We have discussed adding a checkbox to the AIDP asking if the student is interested in TA/teaching positions in the future
 - i. This starts the conversation with the PI about the student's goals to teach
 - ii. Also tells the department/Esther who may be willing to TA
- l. We may discuss how to advise incoming students on which classes to take while also on a TA to avoid students being overwhelmed in the first two semesters
- m. *If you have issues with a TA position, please tell Esther who may be able to help you*

4. Changes the department made for student benefit in Fall 2021

- a. Changes were made to the medical physiology course (quizzes, etc) to help students succeed

- b. 2nd year lab (BIOE 2366) TAs were supplemented with graders and not required to attend early class meetings, which reduced the amount of work required for this TA position
- c. The GSC and department faculty/staff are working to improve communication between students and department, including the involvement/collaboration between the GSC and Graduate Development Committee (GDC)
- d. The department has initiated offered funding for grad student events
 - i. (This wasn't discussed in the town hall, but we wanted to mention it)
 - ii. E.g. Esther offered us funding to go apple picking without us asking

5. Vacation Policy

- a. The department passed a vacation policy. It has not yet been published in the graduate handbook. The BioE GSC will get a chance to look at the policy and handbook before publishing.
 - i. Vacation policy: 10 business days (in alignment with faculty/post doc policy: have 15 business days)
- b. *Qianqian/Caroline happy to step up and help moderate/assist in these conversations to try and get a "fair" allowance for vacation*
- c. Vacation time is in addition to university holidays
 - i. Need to clarify if the week between Christmas and New Year's vacation counts
 - ii. Nate Silva – Northeastern website states that 12/24-1/1 is a recognized holiday
 - 1. Qianqian & Caroline will clarify with HR to figure out if this is the case
- d. The PhD Network is working on a policy for all PhDs at Northeastern. Not sure where they are in the formation of this policy.
 - i. The COE approved a policy ~end of 2021. BioE is trying to have a more specific policy

6. Funding rules in BioE

- a. 5 years guaranteed funding (COE), so long as student is in good academic standing
- b. What happens when students are on probation with their PIs?
 - i. A PI begins 4 months "research" probation process
 - 1. Funding from PI continues over those 4 months
 - ii. Unsatisfactory AIDP review → academic probation
 - iii. Poor grades (< 3.0) → academic probation
 - iv. Two semesters of academic probation → dismissal from the program (appeals process)
- c. When students leave labs - 6 months bridge period for students to find the next lab
 - i. Funding for these 6 months is not guaranteed, but the department will do it's best to cover funding by TA
 - 1. Worst case scenario- if it was too late to get on a TA fellowship, they could enroll in "student/research" course and be under Qianqian as a "pseudommentor" to get through a semester, then get funding as a TA for the next semester
 - ii. Students do informal rotations to find new lab
- d. Student initiated transition:
 - i. 6 months funding
 - ii. If after 6 months the student has not found a department, would need to drop to the course-based MS program
 - iii. If a PI is found in the 6-month period has no funding, TA could be assigned, however, the PI needs to have a plan to provide funding in the future

1. This prevents students being on TA for entire program and letting professors use BioE students as free labor
- iv. Any additional changes are case by case dependent
- e. PI initiated transition
 - i. An unsatisfactory AIDP review or PI email to Qianqian will trigger the probation
 1. PI needs to immediately email student (and CC Qianqian) with a plan to improve performance over 4 months
 - ii. During this period the student can trigger the student-initiated transition, or the student could go through the period and then see if their performance is satisfactory at the end of the 4 months
- f. This all highlights the importance of the AIDP

7. Qual survey feedback

- a. Students feel unprepared for the oral presentation
- b. *Reach out to the chair for other paper options if you are not comfortable with your options*
- c. *Talk to Caroline and/or Qianqian if you have qual exam concerns*
- d. The expectation is that students can show not just basic techniques/course/knowledge, but rather show whether they understand the research and how to formulate an experiment.
 - i. You do not need to pick apart a paper to find something fundamentally “wrong” with the science. Instead, bring up areas of improvement and places where future research can build upon the paper’s work
 1. “Critique” meaning “potential for further research” rather than “wrongness”
 - ii. If you do see something wrong and you propose something about it, actually solve the problem... don’t point out an issue and then don’t follow up
 - iii. Some student were taught to find the inconsistencies in Principles of Bioengineering rather than focusing on room for improvement
 - iv. Student feedback - it would be useful to have more quals as reference/examples to distribute.
 1. Qianqian recommended against students widely sharing previous students’ exams as some papers are recycled
 2. The department facilitates the offering of some examples through a Canvas course for students currently taking the qual

8. Faculty-student social interaction

- a. Student seminars - would really love to see faculty attend
 - i. Good for feedback and community building
- b. General desire for increased faculty participation in student events
 - i. GSC will work with Caroline to better target faculty through emails to encourage event attendance
 - ii. Students should invite their PIs personally when applicable (e.g. town hall)
 - iii. Maybe host a “meet the faculty” event for each concentration (maybe as a seminar)
- c. Request to increase student involvement when faculty candidates visit