

Expectations of students (graduate and undergraduate) and research team (associates and postdoctoral fellows) in the Resilient Cropping Systems Lab

Dr. Andrea Basche
Updated August 2019

Graduate school, and the research field more broadly, can be very exciting and rewarding, but it can sometimes be challenging to navigate as well. Challenges often arise when expectations for work and progress are not clear. This document is to help guide students and staff to better understand my expectations of the team working in our research group.

You should expect that the majority of your work will be done independently. This is part of the training process of becoming an independent researcher. I will be here to support you and help as much as I can! However, most “obstacles” that you might encounter, such as researching new methods or approaches, will mostly be your responsibility to solve. Keep in mind that in spite of years of training in a field, no one mentor will have all of the answers to the questions that might arise during your work.

To help troubleshoot issues and discuss progress, I meet with team members regularly on an individual basis. Generally you should plan that we would meet once per week during the semester (late August to early May) and during the summers (early May to late August) we meet regularly (1x per week as schedules allow) as a larger group. You should plan to come prepared for individual meetings or cancel/reschedule at least one day in advance. Being prepared means bringing an agenda of items to discuss and an update of the progress of work. I ask members of our team to complete a brief progress report weekly to facilitating consistent communication about projects, questions and obstacles.

My expectation is that team members will use some method to track their time and project progress. I use an excel spreadsheet to track my time but there are time tracking apps and platforms such as Trello to help with project management. These are extremely helpful tools to manage your time which is a critical skill that you should be developing early in your career.

My expectation is that team members (staff and students) will work 40 hours per week exclusively on their projects related to our research group. Side projects or prior work should be completed outside of these working hours. Graduate research assistants (GRAs, graduate students in the lab group) are paid a monthly stipend and are expected to work 19.6 hours per week during school year and 40 hours per week during the summer and breaks. Vacation time is very important. I will take vacation throughout the year as needed. Vacation time should be approved with me at least two weeks in advance. Vacation time accrues for years 1-5 of employment at the university at a rate of one vacation day per month.

I expect that members of our team will work to find the right balance of “where” to work. While some work (such as writing) may best be done alone or off campus, for other work it is critical to be on campus with your colleagues and other faculty to discuss projects and progress. I expect that we will have most meetings in person and that you will not be off campus working for any extended period of time (i.e. a few days) without previously discussion and clearance with me.

I do not expect you to work when you are sick. I will take time off if I am not feeling well and you should do the same. I expect that you will let me know if you will be out due to illness. If you need to be out of work for an extended period of time due to illness or other family/personal issues, please speak with me so that we can come up with a plan together.

Challenges and conflict arise in our work as they do in life! My expectation is that team members will ask for the help they need when they need it. I also expect that team members will actively seek to resolve conflict with myself or others proactively. As one potential resource, there is an initiative on campus called “Big Red Resilience & Well Being” that can support your professional development in navigating conflict in work and life.

Perhaps one of my most important expectations of team members is that you will show curiosity about your work and strong initiative to tackle challenging questions. To support you, I ask and encourage you to share documents that you would like feedback on, early and often. But given my teaching commitments and other position responsibilities, you will need to allow me at least one week turnaround time for review of documents, whenever possible.

I believe that students and staff should be able to travel to regional and national conferences annually to develop professional network and present research. I will work with students to secure funding for at least one conference per year, when you have new data to present to a wider audience. Usually (but not always) there are funds available through research grants to support travel but I expect that students will proactively seek opportunities to fund travel. We should begin discussing this early on in your program.

Expectations specific to undergraduate students working in the lab (typically in the summer)

I expect that students will show curiosity, initiative, will be deeply self-motivated and will communicate honestly and professionally with members of the team. Students should be reliable and show up as requested to meetings and field work on time. If you cannot fulfill the prior expectations, you may want to explore other opportunities outside of a research experience. I also expect that within the first 1-2 weeks of work together that students will complete our lab safety training and learn more about the work of our group. We will work with you to develop a project plan. You should plan to prepare an update of your project progress at least once per week, which will include presenting at weekly team meetings. Depending on what your program requires as a final “product”, you should begin preparing your final product (for example, a research poster) from the first day of work. We will work with you to prepare a schedule and plan of work to meet your needed goals. You should always plan to send documents that need my review at least one week in advance.

Expectations for MS students working in the research group

University and Departmental coursework expectations for MS can be found on the [Graduate Studies website](#) and the [Agronomy and Horticulture website](#). It is generally expected (and helpful) for students will complete their plan of courses and develop a committee within the first 8-12 months of the program. UNL requires a written exam for MS students to be completed at least one month before a final oral defense. In my experience, most students complete MS degrees in agronomy in approximately 2.5 years. If your research project requires field data collection that is generally done so for two years.

My general expectation for an MS program in Agronomy is to produce two research chapters for the thesis project. I believe it is very important for research to be published in peer-reviewed journals regardless of what future career goals may be. Trust that we will work together toward this goal from day 1! This is the major way that we communicate as a scientific community and you will always benefit from having published work associated with your graduate research experience. Also, other products

outreach products such as extension articles, blog posts, news articles, educational or policy briefs can result from peer reviewed articles.

My expectation is that the primary focus for MS students will be on projects related to thesis research. I will not ask students to spend significant time on side projects or other lab-related projects without first discussing such opportunities together to assess pros/cons, time management, etc. I also expect that students will not embark on other research projects not closely related to their thesis work without first having a discussion with me again about the impacts of such side work on their primary focus (completing a thesis project in a timely fashion).

Expectations for PhD students working in the research group

University and Departmental coursework expectations for PhD students can be found on the [Graduate Studies website](#) and the [Agronomy and Horticulture website](#). It is generally expected (and helpful) for students will complete their plan of courses and develop a committee within the first 8-12 months of the program. In my experience, most students complete PhD degrees in Agronomy in approximately 4-5 years. If your research project requires field data collection that is generally done so for two to three years.

My general expectation for a PhD program in Agronomy is to produce three to four research chapters for the dissertation. I believe it is very important for research to be published in peer-reviewed journals and even more so for PhD level scientists. I expect that students will work toward publishing papers ahead of or as close to their final defense as possible. Trust that we will work together toward this goal from day 1! This is the major way that we communicate as a scientific community and you will always benefit from having published work associated with your graduate research experience. Also, other products outreach products such as extension articles, blog posts, news articles, educational or policy briefs can result from peer reviewed articles.

My expectation is that the primary focus for PhD students will be on projects related to dissertation research. I will not ask students to spend significant time on side projects or other lab-related projects without first discussing such opportunities together to assess pros/cons, time management, etc. I also expect that students will not embark on other research projects not closely related to their dissertation work without first having a discussion with me again about the impacts of such side work on their primary focus (completing dissertation research in a timely fashion).

Expectations for research associates and postdoctoral research fellows working in the research group

Research associates and postdoctoral fellows are in positions with a 100% emphasis on projects related to the work of the research group. It is expected that staff in these positions will spend their time on specific projects as discussed, or a variety of projects, as needed and agreed upon together. Personnel in these positions will likely assume roles that are more managerial in nature (i.e. joining regular conference calls, completing reporting, supervising undergraduate or graduate students) and I will work with you to define such tasks. Managerial skills are critical for future work in various sectors including the private industry, government or academia. It is my expectation is that staff working in our group may have some managerial experience and/or will be willing to learn such skills. Staff in such roles are also expected to meet weekly with me and to submit weekly progress reports about their work.