Choosing (and Surviving) Your Advisor:  
Advice and Resources from the Women Mentoring Women Program

Your relationship with your advisor will develop and change over time as you progress through different stages of life, both personal and professional. What you need from your advisor as a first-year may differ greatly from what you need as an older graduate student. It's also important to remember that what you need from your advisor may differ from what a friend or classmate needs, as we all have different social and work personalities.

There is no such thing as the "perfect" advisor. Every advisor has multiple dimensions: leadership/people skills (approachable/supportive); scientific prowess (smart, good to engage / discuss ideas with); business skills (adequate funding). Advisors are people too, and it may just be that you feel more comfortable around certain advisors as compared to others. Your choice should depend on which aspects of an advisor are most critical to your happiness and productivity at Caltech (and which aspects you may be willing to compromise).

While there are many issues to consider, here are some questions and ideas to think about when choosing an advisor:

- How big is the research group? How often does the group socialize outside of lab?
- How hands-on is this advisor?
- How defined vs. broad are graduate research projects in this advisor’s lab? On a related note, is this advisor open to projects that are proposed/designed by graduate students?
- How available is this advisor to meet with students? Is it difficult to meet with him/her?
- Does this advisor have required hours, a vacation policy, or other time-related expectations?
- How well does this advisor prepare students for preliminary and qualifying exams?
- What is it like to publish with him/her?
- Is there support, both financially and in terms of preparation, for students to attend conferences?
- How much job-search support does he/she offer?
- Do alumni from the lab keep in touch / have positive relationships with the advisor? (Ask senior grad students who know people who have graduated.)
- How supportive is this advisor of different career goals (academia, industry, law, etc.)?
- How many women are in the group? How many women have joined in the past? Did they graduate on good terms? Is the group culture welcoming towards women?
- Is the advisor good at communicating with his/her students? Does he/she communicate differently with women vs. men?

You may want to be mindful of this list when “interviewing” current graduate students or faculty when choosing an advisor. Remember also to talk to people from different years/stages in the lab, not just the junior graduate students. Also, talk to students from other labs about the group you are interested in joining, since they may provide a broader perspective.

Choosing an advisor can be difficult, but there are many resources available. Also, remember that relationships can change, and if you find that you need help later in your graduate career, you can still turn to the same resources.

Resources
--Caltech Graduate Student Council:
  Additional questions to ask: http://www.its.caltech.edu/~gscacad/html/advisor.pdf
  Alumni experience (by PI): http://www.its.caltech.edu/~gscacad/html/lab_review_survey.html
--Get in touch with Felicia Hunt and others at the Caltech Graduate Office as needed.
--For post-docs: Consider visiting the Caltech Staff and Faculty Consultation Center (SFCC) if you find yourself in a difficult situation with your advisor (http://sfcc.caltech.edu/contact).
--For all WMW participants: Talk to fellow women in the WMW program, and remember that Portia Harris in the CCD is a supportive and confidential resource.