An Introduction for Users of the Mentoring Guides for NRC Research Advisers

Congratulations! If you have accessed this guide you’ve joined the ranks of the many accomplished, successful Research Advisers who make the NRC Research Associateship Program (RAP) such a success. There are many reasons professionals choose to become NRC Advisers. Perhaps you are excited about expanding the scope and accelerating the pace of your research program, furthering your organization’s mission by realizing the full potential of your research agenda, or fulfilling your commitment to your professional community by helping to develop the next generation of researchers. Perhaps you are looking forward to the rewarding, enjoyable experience of engaging with early-career researchers and the many benefits that come from being exposed to their fresh ideas, cutting-edge knowledge, and challenging questions. Regardless of your motivation, making this formal commitment to help an early-career scientist get off to a great start will also be a significant professional development step for you.

It might seem strange to frame your NRC Adviser commitment as a benefit to your own development. After all, you have probably been engaged in scientific advising and mentoring for years, as a mentor and mentee, dating back to your undergraduate research days. But the formal experience of advising postdoctoral researchers brings new challenges and responsibilities. For example, the relationship between a postdoctoral researcher and their adviser is typically much more peer-like than the relationship between an undergraduate or graduate student and their adviser. As an NRC Adviser in a federal agency, you are accountable for the work of another - your advisee - perhaps for the first time. You are also responsible for helping to successfully launch a new researcher into your professional community. As an experienced research professional and NRC Adviser you are surely up to these challenges! However, acknowledging that mentoring postdoctoral researchers is a complex role and taking deliberate steps to foster your growth as a mentor can go a long way towards helping you succeed as an Adviser. We aim to help you and your postdoctoral mentee have a great experience, which can also help attract top talent to your research group for many years to come.

The goal of these guides is to help you become an excellent Research Adviser and mentor for NRC Research Associates. The guides address basic expectations of NRC Advisers, getting the relationship off to a good start, maintaining progress, and dealing with common challenges experienced by Advisers. Each guide is self-contained and includes suggestions for additional self-study. Though the series is intended to be read in sequence, this is not strictly necessary. We hope the guides will help you prepare, gain confidence, and find useful ideas when you encounter challenges.

These self-study reference materials are meant to support NRC Advisers from any scientific or technical field, in any NRC-participating agency. As such, they are discipline- and agency-agnostic. Advisers may need to supplement their learning with discipline-specific mentoring practices and agency-specific expectations and policies.
These Guides were written specifically for Advisers of postdoctoral researchers. The intended audience is new NRC Advisers and as such the content focuses on fundamentals and one-on-one interactions between Advisers and Associates. It is our hope that these Guides may also serve as a skill-enhancer or helpful refresher for experienced NRC Advisers. Much of the content and the associated self-study material can help with building general mentoring skills and may prove useful to Advisers of more experienced Research Associates as well.

Throughout the entire series of Guides, the terms “postdoctoral researcher,” “NRC Associate,” “Research Associate,” “Associate,” “advisee,” and “mentee” will be used interchangeably to refer to NRC Postdoctoral Research Associates, and the terms “NRC Adviser,” “Adviser,” and “mentor” will be used interchangeably to refer to NRC Research Advisers.

This Mentoring Guide Series supports the National Academies Fellowships Office’s objective of fostering positive experiences for all NRC Research Associates by helping to develop strong mentors throughout the NRC Research Adviser community.

These guides were developed by Nora Beck Tan of Illumina Executive Coaching, with the support of Dr. Ray Gamble and Ms. Melanie Suydam of the National Academies. They were informed by several years of work with NRC Associates and NRC Advisers at the National Institutes of Standards and Technology as well as professional experience and vetted by three accomplished NRC Advisers: Dr. Michael McPhaden of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, Dr. Sangeet Khemlani of the Naval Research Laboratory, and Dr. Debra Yourick of the Walter Reed Army Institute of Research. We sincerely hope that you find them useful.

Your feedback on these Guides is very welcome, and can be sent to:
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Best of luck to you and your NRC Research Associate mentees!