

# McEwan Lab Best Practices

## Well-being and safety

Updated August 2019



**McEwanlab.org**

One of the central missions of the McEwan lab is to:

*Create opportunities and guide students in the pursuit of their professional vision in the realm of scientific research, application and outreach.*

Toward this end, the lab is committed to providing a healthy framework for student engagement. The pursuit of science can become an overwhelming experience and can create, or interact with, unhealthy patterns in the lives of students in the lab. Destructive tendencies can flourish in the academic setting and it is our goal, as a lab community, to pursue science while also supporting the overall health and well-being of lab members.

### **Mental and physical health concerns.**

If you are not feeling well, either physically or mentally, take the time off you need to seek out help and take care of yourself. There are many resources at the University of Dayton that you can use and you should always feel free to take time off from the lab, miss a meeting, or otherwise disengage if you are ill or otherwise need to take care of yourself. Please communicate with Dr. McEwan and other community members you might be working with if you cannot attend a lab activity where others are counting on your presence, or if you will be out for an extended period of time.

### **Personal emergencies.**

You may be a member of the McEwan lab for an extended period and during this time it is possible that a life-altering situation or emergency will arise. We have seen many different things arise in the lives of community members and it is critical that you take the time you need if such a situation arises in your own life. Please communicate with Dr. McEwan if something happens that will require you to miss a lot of time in the lab.

## **Balance.**

Scientists can be both ambitious and obsessive. The pursuit of scientific knowledge is intoxicating at times and students can easily fall into a routine of working far more than is healthy. If you are the kind of person who tends to push beyond your limits you can become a [Growing Tree Academic](#) and wind up personally destroyed in the pursuit of giving yourself to your project and to Science. Many of our projects are bottomless, meaning that we can keep working forever and still have more to do. This can lead to working far more hours that are healthy. Thus, learning to set limits is an important goal. For some, managing this comes naturally, while for others it can be extremely complicated.

I want to also note that what is an unhealthy level of work and commitment for some may be perfectly healthy for others. Rarely are painters or musicians criticized for working obsessively, nor do we criticize the star athlete for working tirelessly on her craft – similarly, it is important that we are also accepting of the fact that for some people, Ecology is truly a labor of love and working “constantly” can be part of a healthy and happy life. If someone says “I don’t want to go to the *Avengers* movie because I am working on these figures” that does not mean they have a work-life balance issue, they might actually enjoy figure making more than the *Avengers*. We encourage each person to find the balance that keeps them inspired, avoids burn-out, and keeps their project on track.

## **Work hours.**

Science is a “product” driven enterprise. The goal is the accumulation of knowledge and communication of that knowledge to the scientific community and the public. Scientists approach the notion of work hours from a variety of different perspectives. Some find success in setting up a “normal” 8-5 Monday through Friday work week, and come to campus during those hours and work, then do not work on the weekends. Others work better from off campus at times and do not have as consistent hours. I have known successful scientists who wake up at 5:00 am every night and are super productive, and I have known successful scientists who did their best work between 10:00 pm and 2:00 am.

Dr. McEwan is normally on campus a lot during the semesters, but isn’t always in his office. He also works from home a lot as he has found that focus is sometimes easier there away from distractions. Dr. McEwan works at least some most days, including weekends and holidays, also works at night often, but also will simply not come to campus some days and takes a lot of time for family when needed. That Dr. McEwan works on weekends does not indicate that you need to do so! Your goal ultimately is to fine the working pattern that helps you be maximally productive and happy - nothing else really matters.

## **Email hours.**

Email is the primary mode of communication in academia, science and in the McEwan Lab. As a lab member you will be added to a list and there will be periodic communication over that list. *You must read your email to stay informed.* Further, you may also be involved in projects where Dr. McEwan is involved and those projects will likely prompt email communication. Dr.

McEwan may send emails at odd hours. Late at night, early in the morning, during holidays, on weekends. You should not take emails sent at odd times or days as an indication that you need to reply immediately. You can manage emails in a professional fashion and should not answer emails during times where you normally would be on holiday or sleeping, etc. Students are responsible for being responsible about when to read and reply to emails in a way that is healthy and productive for them as individuals.

### **Lab and field safety.**

The Department of Biology has lab safety training that you should participate in if you are going to be working in the lab. Let Dr. McEwan know so that can be scheduled.

Field trip safety is also an important concern for McEwan Lab members. Here are some safety rules:

- Transportation into the field is normally via the Department of Biology field vehicle (truck). Communicate with Dr. McEwan for safety rules and access. Driver training is required.
- Do not go into the field alone. You should always have at least one person with you.
- Generally speaking if you are going into the field for terrestrial sampling you should wear tough closed toe shoes (boots), preferably water proof (think Gortex) and long pants. In the summer, pants preferably would be light, loose, and tough - ripstop nylon or something similar (think Army surplus!!). Additionally, I personally like to wear light long-sleeved shirts. Something that does not stick to you and that you can roll up or down sleeves. The main idea is to delete from your brain the thought of walking on lawns and trails, and insert the idea that your job as an environmental professional will often mean going perpendicular to the trail directly through briars, nettles, poison ivy, with swarms of biting flies, mosquitoes, etc. If you have on shorts and sandals you will be sad and distracted and in pain, and therefore not able to do your job.
- Sunscreen, sun hats, insect repellent are often needed in a field situation. Protect yourself.

### **Commitment to Community.**

One important aspect of safety and well-being in the McEwan lab is a commitment to the lab community. Occasional disagreement is a normal part of a large, interacting, group and we must all acknowledge that potential exists for miscommunication and hurt feelings. Although we seek a “horizontal” structure, there are power imbalances in the lab that must be acknowledged and addressed.

One important thing that you can do to ensure the work environment remains hospitable and safe for everyone is to address any conflict that arises promptly with the individual in question. If there is some reason that you cannot address the issue immediately or if you feel unable to deal

directly with the individual in question, then bring your issue to one of the graduate students or Dr. McEwan. If you feel worried that negative statements might cause problems for you, then you can simply type up a description of the problem you see and leave it as an anonymous note in Dr. McEwan's mailbox, or a mailbox of one of the graduate students. Doing this is extremely helpful and a highly responsible thing to do.

Nobody in the lab should have to worry that others are talking about them "behind their back" or gossiping about them in a negative way. It is unacceptable for you to engage in these behaviors. For example, if you feel slighted by something a grad student says, or you feel one of the other students in the lab is being, e.g., "lazy" you should not form a group chat with other lab members to discuss how "awful" that person is through text messages. This is harmful (and childish) behavior that is unacceptable in any professional environment. You must not engage in such things, if you see it happening you should tell folks doing it to "stop" and tell Dr. McEwan either in person or anonymously right away.

### **Harassment, Discrimination and Assault.**

The McEwan Lab abides by and strongly supports the University of Dayton Nondiscrimination policy: [LINK](#). Further, we strongly affirm the University of Dayton's equity efforts and formally proclaim:

*The McEwan Lab does not discriminate on the basis of age, race, color, creed, religion, ancestry, national or ethnic origin, sex/gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, disability, genetic information, military status, veteran status, familial status or any other protected category under applicable local, state or federal law, ordinance or regulation.*

Any activity in the lab that violates the anti-harassment policies of the University of Dayton will be addressed promptly through the formal equity compliance process: [LINK](#). In particular, we are vigilantly opposed to sexist, misogynistic, racist, homophobic and transphobic behavior and language and will seek to create an open, inclusive, space for the sharing of ideas and professional growth of lab members.

Sexual harassment and assault are prevalent on college campuses and we want members of the McEwan Lab to be safe. We will not tolerate such behavior in the Lab and will work to rid the campus of the University of Dayton of this behavior. Members of the lab are encouraged to participate in [Green Dot](#) training and we will seek to have a formal lab meeting devoted to this training when possible.

### **Dr. McEwan & McEwan lab Grad Students are Mandatory Reporters**

If something happens to you and you wish to talk about it to Dr. McEwan or a graduate student in the lab, it is important that you understand that while your privacy is important, we cannot promise to keep what you share confidential if what you share indicates a violation of your rights or the law. If you are comfortable speaking with us we will take what you say seriously. We will pursue the appropriate processes carefully and thoughtfully. There are many different offices and venues for addressing a wide range of issues and we will help you navigate to the

appropriate person. There are people on campus (Doctors, Counselors, Clergy) who are NOT mandatory reporters who I can direct you to. But, it is important that you know that if what you share with me indicates a violation of your rights I literally cannot meet your request for privacy.

[LINK](#) to more information.

## Summary

(a) Ensuring that lab activities do not adversely impact the well-being of lab members is a critically important task and something we all take seriously and work on as a community.

(b) Undergraduate students often experience stressful times and mental health is a serious concern. Many new studies indicate that stress and mental health are also serious concerns for graduate students. In the McEwan Lab we will work to create an environment of support around mental health challenges. Respect for work-life balance is fundamental to the McEwan Lab philosophy ([LINK](#)).

(c) Working in a research lab can be fun and the quest for scientific knowledge can be truly exhilarating. Although we all experience pressure related to our lives as academics, we in the McEwan Lab seek to pursue answers to important scientific questions in a way that is mutually supportive and ultimately *joyful*.

(d) Students in the lab who experience challenges to their wellness are encouraged to seek out help. Many resources exist at the University of Dayton which can be found by following this [LINK](#).

## Outside Reading

- [College Student Mental Health Crisis \(Psychology Today\)](#)
- [Evidence for a Mental Health Crisis in Graduate Education \(Nature\)](#)
- [Work organization and mental health for PhD students](#)

## McEwan's Mental Health LifeHack Lecture

[Charybdis](#)