

The Graduate Advisor-Advisee Relationship: What Both Parties Should Expect

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Between 2000 and 2016, postsecondary enrollment at United States universities increased at a rate of 28% (McFarland, et al., 2018). The report comes from the National Center for Educational Statistics stating that enrollment increased from 13.2 million to 16.9 million peaking at 18.1 million in 2010 (McFarland, et al., 2018). Over the last decade, graduate student enrollment across the United States has been increasing significantly (Okahana & Zhou, 2017). According to the 2017 report from the Council of Graduate Schools (CGS), graduate applications increased on average at a rate of 5.7% from the years spanning 2006 to 2016 (Okahana & Zhou, 2017). The report also enumerated the increase in graduate degrees awarded and conferred between 2006 and 2016. In the span of that decade, doctoral degrees conferred within the United States increased at an average rate of 4.7% per year and master's degrees awarded increased at an average rate of 2.4% (Okahana & Zhou, 2017). The number of master's degrees awarded is of course far in excess of the number of doctoral degrees conferred but the percentages show a larger increase in the rate of growth of doctoral degrees.

In approximately the same period, overall average faculty numbers have increased by 51%, but this increase is conflated by the fact that the number of adjunct/part time faculty increased at a higher rate (McFarland, et al., 2018). As a result, the ratio of full time to part time faculty fell considerably. The United States average ratio of students to faculty members is 16:1 (Kena, et al., 2016). The increase in part time faculty has also helped offset the cost of a large increase in the number of higher education administrators that neither do research nor teach.

The Problem

The industry has seen decreases in the number of graduate faculty that advise (Hollis, 2015). Herein lies one of the main problems of discussion; graduate faculty are being asked to advise more students than in previous years. The increases in part-time faculty also has an indirect effect on the potential relationships between advisees and advisors. While, part-time adjunct faculty may be able to ease the load of teaching a larger student body, it does little to abate the issue of graduate student advising needs in relation to thesis and dissertation chairs.

Additionally, doctoral degree advising typically involves a greater deal of mentorship and guidance with respect to research activities and therefore is a larger investment of time and effort on the part of the advisor. If there is an increase in the number of advisees/mentees, this will significantly influence any advisor's capability and capacity for effective and detailed advising and even mentorship. The expectations of students therefore need to be adjusted to match what the faculty member is capable of giving.

In this paper, I would like to discuss my personal experiences as a graduate student who understood this problem, even though I was not deprived mentorship, and how I navigated the industry to the position I am in now as a young graduate faculty member able to mentor students.

Undergraduate vs Graduate Advising

While we have discussed the student faculty ratios and how that may influence the level of advising, a key difference that needs to be stated is the difference between an undergraduate academic advisor and a graduate advisor that is a thesis or dissertation chair. The roles are starkly contrasted and require very different approaches and different levels of expertise. At their core yes, they both are tasked with aiding the student reach graduation. However, this is where the similarities start to fade away. An undergraduate advisor is responsible for assisting the student with class registrations, paperwork and potentially even some career advice, among other things.

Of course, this is an important role and my intention is not to belittle it. I myself have been an undergraduate advisor and have seen the benefit of my help manifest in the success of a student and that is a very rewarding feeling. My point rather is that graduate advising is a much more intricate relationship; a facet that I acknowledge I have limited experience with from a faculty perspective, but have extensive experience from the reverse view point. Working with a student to help them complete a master's thesis or a doctoral dissertation can be years long commitment on the part of the faculty member. The length of time is not the major differentiator, but rather the frequency of interactions and the level of knowledge it takes to guide a student through the research process.

The role of the advisor is to help guide the student, who is learning the field, away from potential obstacles. Another approach to this duty could be not only to point out potential obstacles, but start to train the student to identify these obstacles for themselves. This is true advising wherein there is an imbibing of not just information but the understanding of this information to be used in future settings.

Advisor vs Mentor

In order to move forward we must first clarify the difference between the terms advisor and mentor. At some points in this paper, the lines of differentiation between these terms and their definitions may blur. However, these two roles can be fairly different. Advising graduate students may not involve a great deal of mentorship. Mentorship, for me, involves an investment from the advisor in the overall development and growth of a student. Faculty may choose to advise many students and be able to do so without significant demand on their time, but may only choose to mentor a select few that they see potential in. For the purpose of this paper, I will be focusing more on the mentorship aspect. I will start by looking at basic advising and then how that translates into mentoring, as mentoring typically includes the involvement of the student in the faculty member's research lab.

Expectations and Misconceptions

In order for an effective relationship to thrive certain expectation need to be met, from both parties, and certain misconceptions need to be assuaged. A large part of the issues discussed in this piece stem from the fact that the two parties are often times not on the same page. It is therefore the aim of this piece, through narrative, to help both sides gain perspective of the other. It is my understanding, from discussion with other faculty from different universities and my own personal experience, that the main reason for breakdowns in these relationships is due to a disproportionate level of expectations on the part of the student.

Oftentimes new graduate students expect their advisors to guide them on every little detail and do not take responsibility of trying to problem solve on their own first. Most diligent advisors will help a student who is putting in effort, but struggling. However, that is often not the case with students asking their advisors to provide them the answers to every aspect without taking any initiative of their own. I do not say this as a decades experienced faculty, but as a recent graduate student who oftentimes was guilty of this same crime. The advisor is there to guide and make minor steering adjustments to help a student learn themselves rather than be the one to make all the decisions and thereby depriving the student the opportunity to learn to problem solve on their own.

Going back to the statistics of the increase in graduate students, advisors are at times asked to take on more students than before. This increased load of students can greatly influence the quality of advising. While advisors may want to help students learn to problem solve on their own, it is oftentimes faster to tell them what to do. From my experience, this is seemingly becoming an increasing trend in academia. What students need to bear in mind is that this is not a parent-child relationship, it is one of mutual respect and professionalism.

Having discussed the presence of this issue in general graduate student advising, the issue is not absent in the mentorships either. As stated earlier, advising and mentoring can be significantly different and increased advising loads may not appear to be a large concern. However, increased advising loads will have an effect on available time and therefore influence the faculty member's ability to mentor as well. Many graduate students may work in research labs of their advisors, and a few of those students may even be mentees of the faculty.

The research aspect of most graduate student and advisor relationships brings about a connected point on the value of time and the misconception of many students. Students working in research professors' labs oftentimes help with the performance of experiments and their subsequent write ups for publications. This system is a valuable tool for students to learn and get exposed to their potential futures. Faculty will often delegate work among graduate students with the intention for them to learn the process. The misconception I speak of is where slightly experienced graduate students feel they have learnt the process and are being exploited as a means of cheap labor. That the student does more work than the advisor. Going back to my point on the value of time, what many students fail to see is that it often takes more time and effort to oversee, guide, proofread and correct the work of graduate students than if they were to do the task by themselves.

Factors that Influence the Relationship

There are several other factors at play that influence the success or failure of these kinds of relationships. Some of these issues may stem from generational differences. The millennial generation learns in a different way to the previous generations. The advising/mentoring faculty are likely to be members of said previous generations and this could be one explanation for such issues. Sandeen (2008) states that the millennial generation expects to have near constant access to a faculty member, and this is a vital and important part of the learning experience for these students. Conversely, having not had or needed the same requirements as the current generation of higher education students, previous generations tend to view these students as less committed and dedicated (Wilton, 2008). This once again highlights the need for both parties to be on the same page with their expectations of one another to avoid potential strife.

A large focus in the previous section was on the area of research laboratories, but what was not discussed was that of the nature of research. Different forms of research lend themselves to different relationships. Students in a human factors and psychology research laboratory operate with a different level of autonomy and supervision as perhaps those in a particle physics research laboratory. It is important to keep in mind that different fields may or may not experience these issues discussed or may experience them to varying degrees.

Another factor at play is the personalities of both individuals. Some individuals are more suited to mentoring and fostering potential in others, while some are not. On the other hand, some students' personalities are more suited to being advised and mentored than others. The manner in which these personality types interact with each other is likely to be a very important influencing factor on the relationship. As we discuss communication later, both these points warrant significant attention.

Personal Experience

I have been on both sides of the equation. I have been involved in a research team as a student where other students have felt exploited, and recently have been an advisor that has seen this misconception arise. I have also read of cases where the accusations of such exploitations have been brought to higher administrations of academia by students. In almost all cases, the advisor is not in the wrong, but fear of, and frustrations with such accusations could push

advisors to not want to help students as much in the future. On the other hand, there are cases where this exploitation is true. Much like most other situations in life these occurrences are rare, but become the focus when discussing the topic. As the saying goes, the few ruin it for the many. It would be a huge loss to any field to have advisors no longer want to include graduate students in research.

As a graduate student I was fortunate enough to have exceptional advisors that were fully engaged in my success. As a person that needed constant reassurance that I was good enough for this field, and worthy to receive praise when I worked hard it was vital to have mentors that provided that to me. If they were not this way, I may not have ended up where I am. A large portion of graduate students feel this similar imposter syndrome, especially female graduate students, and those in doctoral programs. (Gibson-Beverly & Schwartz, 2008; Long, Jenkins & Bracken, 2000). The statistics relating to graduate student mental health issues are also alarming. Evans, Bira, Gastelum, Weiss, L. T., and Vanderford (2018) suggest, through their findings, that as compared to the general population, graduate students are six times as likely to experience anxiety and depression. Other studies suggest that half of all doctoral graduate students experience psychological distress and a third of all doctoral students are liable to display symptoms of psychiatric disorders (Levecque., Anseel, De Beuckelaer, Van der Heyden, & Gisle, 2017).

That is why I consider myself fortunate to have invested, caring advisors. The university setting I was in provided that for me. Be it chance or not, I was fortunate. In my years of interacting with other graduate students within many different fields, I have found my situation to be somewhat of a rarity. This is disheartening to some extent, but the misconceptions outlined earlier may well be contributing to this situation. It took many of such interactions for me to realize that my situation was less the norm and more the exception.

This leads me to my most disheartening revelation. I have seen many other advisors, that I try to emulate, try to be as devoted, caring, and engaged, but are met with indifference. Seeing now that other graduate students that have been as lucky as me do not see it as good fortune, but rather expect that as the minimum threshold for the future, and are not grateful for what they have received. I write this not to chastise today's graduate students, but to implore them to realize when they are fortunate to have advisors that are vested in their success and not to take it for granted.

Communication

I am often frustrated by situations and people that describe problems and have opinions on such problems, but do not offer any input on the solution. Therefore, in an effort to not be one such person, I would like to put forth my opinion on the solution to this issue. I believe, in large part, many of the issues discussed here can be avoided through communication. Just as in any relationship, communication is key between a student and an advisor. If both communicate up front during the mentorship process to ensure that they are both always on the same page and get what they need, then these issues can be avoided.

Earlier, it was discussed that different fields may or may not experience these issues and that the nature of the research was an influencing factor. While on the topic of communication, it is also important for expectations to be made clear from the beginning. In some research labs, faculty may expect that the students will work on and continue their particular line of research, whereas others allow students to bring up their own ideas and potentially work on those topics. Communicating ahead of time, whether the latter is acceptable is another means for ensuring that all are on the same page and that there is no cause of misconceptions down the road.

Personality types need to be suited for each other in order for an effective relationship to exist. While a conversation on personality types may be difficult, it is important to communicate these differences and expectations from the start. It may be difficult to gauge personalities from initial meetings and that is why relying heavily on clear, and open communication is key to most relationships.

Having discussed the issues relating to mental health and emotional support earlier, it is important to once again raise this issue from a communication perspective. Advisors that feel they cannot be or believe they should not be emotional support systems for their students can inform said students about this from the start. This alleviates any potential disparity in expectations. Conversely, advisors explaining to students what level of work they expect, that they are trying to teach them the research process and that it should not be construed as exploitation can also help prevent these sentiments from building. Lastly, if either party is dissatisfied with the other a fair, frank, and open line of communication will always help. I spoke of a mutually respectful relationship being key, and communication, I believe, is a cornerstone to that sentiment.

Conclusion

Again, I would to reiterate how fortunate I was to have advisors and mentors that considered my inferiority complex/imposter syndrome in this field and did everything to build me up. They did not need to do that, and I am grateful for it. This is not an expectation or a duty of a graduate faculty member, and as I have said earlier, it is unfair to expect that of all graduate faculty. Therefore, if you are lucky enough to have such an advisor or mentor, do not take him or her for granted. They are rare. I only understood this fully as I have become a graduate faculty member myself. It is my goal and aim in life to be one such advisor to my students, but I can understand the frustrations of that effort potentially being expected and demanded rather than being met with gratitude. I am ever thankful to my advisors, and aim to emulate them in my career.

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