

Graduate Mentoring: Advancing Students' Professional Development

By Brian R. Murphy

Only rarely do you find a student who is completely happy with the amount and type of feedback and support provided by their advisor. Resentment, disappointment, and frustration are common. Why is this so? (Stock 1985:13)

Only half of the more than 1 million who enroll in graduate programs for the arts and sciences each year finish their work. The reason...is that they feel professors shortchange them on professional and emotional support. (Marcus 1997:72)

Research, being a discovery process, requires that a certain number of mistakes be made. By directing you too closely, an advisor can actually reduce the chance that you will turn up something genuinely new and that you will learn to synthesize information from your own background, information, and experience. (Stock 1985:14)

Graduate students undergo a stringent selection process whereby only the most-qualified, highly recommended, and seemingly motivated students are accepted. Despite this, we all know of students who fail to complete their degrees. This failure can represent a major psychological and career setback to a student as well as possible financial setback and loss of productivity to the research program of that student's major professor. What goes wrong for these seemingly qualified students? What are the critical factors that determine graduate student success? The quotes above indicate that the viewpoints of professors and students may not coincide and that a fine line does indeed exist between smothering creativity through heavy-handed direction and

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allowing self-discovery by the student. I contend that effective mentoring by a faculty advisor is one of the most critical factors contributing to student success. In this essay I offer my views about what I see as the critical components of successful graduate mentoring.

What is a mentor?

Mentor: a wise and trusted counselor or teacher. (American Heritage Dictionary 1992:1,128)

Ideally, a mentor will sharpen your professional and political skills, instill confidence, help clarify goals, and lend a hand up the ladder. (Stock 1985:14)

Too often, graduate advisors have an employer-employee relationship with their students. Rather, the

student in as part of a dynamic team for which the entire research process operates as a partnership. The graduate mentor advises and guides but lets the student have a strong hand in shared decision making. The student begins in the role of an apprentice and learns how to be a professional by working side by side with one. Defining goals for the student's program should be one of their first cooperative tasks. The mentor offers opportunities for professional growth and skills development that will serve the student well when that individual moves to the next career stage. Effective mentors are educators first and researchers second, although they often are some of the most respected "thinkers" and productive researchers in the fisheries field because they have learned to make



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John Manning

In an effective mentorship team, the faculty member and students work together during the entire research process.

meaning of *mentor* implies that the faculty member should be a true "counselor" rather than employer. The effective mentor draws the

their students truly part of their teams. The mentor's reward comes partly in seeing students develop as effective and respected professionals,

ready to lead the next professional generation.

Trust and Communication

Without character and competence, we won't be considered trustworthy, nor will we show much wisdom in our choices and decisions...If two people trust each other... they can enjoy clear communication, empathy, synergy, and productive inter-dependency. (Covey 1990:31)

Trust has to be the cornerstone of a mentoring relationship between advisor and student. This is a relationship characterized by an unequal balance

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Students absorb valuable lessons from interacting with respected professionals.

of power, and to a large extent the student is putting his or her future in someone else's hands. Although major programmatic decisions generally will be made by advisors, students should feel that they have some role in setting specific goals for their own program within the context of the larger agenda. This shared goal-setting will help build trust and prevent misunderstandings. Some advisors exploit their graduate students as "hired hands" to help advance faculty careers. The ethical advisor feels a primary obligation to assist with a student's professional development, and the student is able to trust that any advice is offered with the individual's

welfare in mind. The relationship should be mutualistic, whereby the success and advancement of both mentor and student contribute to the professional development of both.

From the start, advisor and student should understand each other's expectations and needs. The effective mentor clarifies expectations regarding items such as academic performance, professional involvement, work ethic, research accomplishments, scheduling, and publications. The student, in turn, should clarify all expectations of the program and advisor. Perhaps the student's most-critical request should be for time, e.g., regular access to his or her advisor for the opportunity to communicate regarding problems, needs, and concerns as they arise.

Fairness

...structures and opportunities for support such as assistantships, quality advising, and office space are distributed differently to students in a department.

Students who receive these forms of support are more likely to complete than students who do not. (Lovitts 1997:5)

For leaders seeking to win trust, another requirement is fairness... Nothing is more surely stabilizing than confidence that the lead is unshakably fair in private as well as in public. (Gardner 1990:33)

An open relationship of mutual trust cannot develop if either party thinks they are being treated unfairly. The ethical advisor accepts only those students for whom sufficient support is available to provide the resources necessary for their success. In my mind, for the traditional full-time student this means both assistantship and research support for any student accepted into a thesis- or dissertation-based research degree program. Most students forced to secure outside employment will not be able to dedicate the necessary time and energy to their research, and the quality of their graduate experience will be reduced. In such cases I've seen resentment and frustration develop on the part of both student and advisor. These problems are only magnified in a program

where two classes of students exist: the supported and the unsupported. It is better to turn down students if available support is insufficient rather than set them up for a less-than-satisfactory experience. Otherwise, the reputation of both the advisor and the overall program will suffer.

Professionalism

Professionalism is a reflection, through behavior, of vocation with its inherent commitment, and sharply focused will ...In the end, the measure of success for a professional is demonstrated effectiveness in achieving objectives. (Thomas 1986:28)


Reason itself does not work instinctively but requires trial, practice, and instruction in order gradually to progress from one level of insight to another. (Kant 1963:13)

Growth in personality occurs as a consequence of meeting conflicts and impasses head on, and reconciling them. (Jourard 1974:28)

For students to develop as effective professionals, they must have opportunities for growth. Advisors should provide occasions for them to develop skills needed in their professional roles, including critical thinking, problem-solving, public speaking, writing, leading, and working in teams. Don't settle every issue for them; rather, let them be a part of formulating solutions. I ask that my students come to me not with problems but rather with potential solutions to discuss. Only through experience (and failure in some cases) will they develop confidence to tackle problems on their own.

Nothing will help students more in their professional lives than the development of effective communications skills. Provide your students with an opportunity to gain communications experience in a variety of settings: scientific presentations, classroom settings, formal and informal public meetings, etc. Give honest and constructive feedback on their efforts and help them improve their presentation and poise.

Finally, students need the opportunity to regularly interact with professionals. Mentors should provide a

wide variety of such opportunities, including professional meetings, interactions with agency personnel, and informal contacts with colleagues. Students will absorb valuable lessons from observing and interacting with respected professionals. Perhaps foremost, we should strive to be professional role models ourselves, which will engender the respect among students that is a crucial component of the student-mentor relationship. 

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Tenets of Effective Graduate Mentoring

Faculty should think back to their own graduate days. Which professors were respected by students? Who treated her or his graduate students fairly? Whose students have become respected professional leaders themselves? Chances are that effective mentoring was involved in many of the success stories that we remember. Set high standards to challenge students, and people will generally rise beyond your expectations. Developing and employing effective graduate mentoring skills will lead to a rewarding experience for both graduate advisors and their students. Below are 10 tenets for mentors:

1. Set high standards.
2. Build mutual trust.
3. Strive for open communication.
4. Define expectations for both the advisor and student.
5. Define program goals together.
6. Make yourself available.
7. Provide critical resources.
8. Provide opportunities for professional growth.
9. Be fair.
10. Set an example.