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GRADUATE STUDENTS

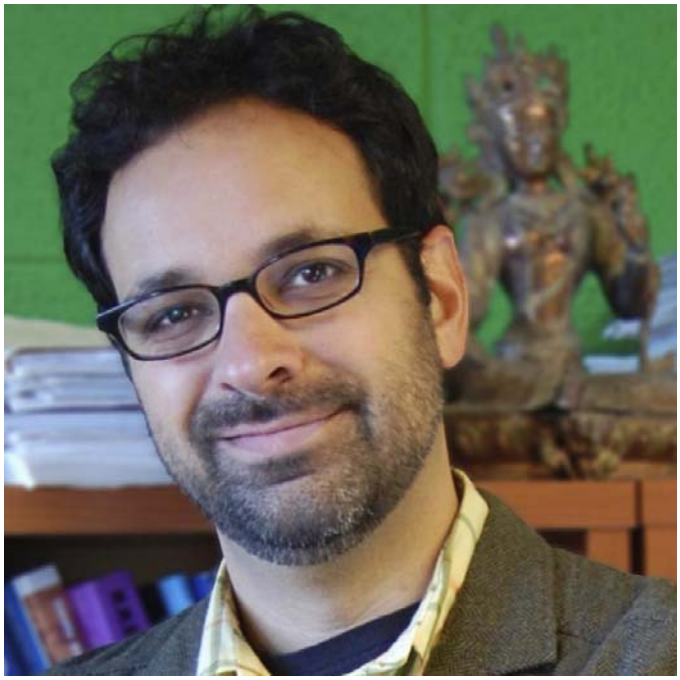
One Way to Be a Better Mentor to Grad Students? Try an Advising Statement

By Vimal Patel | OCTOBER 10, 2018

✔ PREMIUM

Few relationships in academe matter more than the one between doctoral candidate and faculty adviser. It's the incubator of the future professoriate, the heartbeat of the research university.

The recent case of Avital Ronell, the star professor at New York University accused of harassing and overbearing behavior toward a graduate student, is a vivid example of the powerlessness that Ph.D. students often feel in the advising relationship.



Amelia Hyams, U. of Minnesota

"Even graduate students who come from a well-socialized culture of academia are still very nervous and can have many questions," says Moin Syed, an associate professor of psychology at the U. of Minnesota-Twin Cities.

Stories like that, however, are unusual. More common are relationships hobbled by unclear expectations and poor communication. Despite the make-or-break nature of the pairing, professors typically receive no training in how to be mentors. They wing it.

"We tend to treat our graduate students the way we were treated," says Scott Lanyon, graduate dean at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities, "which isn't always a good thing."

When Lanyon, a professor and former department chair, started overseeing the graduate programs, two years ago, he wanted to improve that relationship, or at least reduce the chances of things going awry. So he created a graduate-student advising statement, which clarifies advisers' expectations of their mentees and encourages professors to create one for themselves.

The idea isn't revolutionary. Some programs have created checklists of expectations between adviser and advisee, giving them to both parties. The few universities where graduate students are unionized often articulate boundaries and expectations in their collective-bargaining contracts.

But at Minnesota, and everywhere, a lack of clarity in how advising relationships are expected to function continues to be a big problem.

"I actually spoke to our student-conflict-resolution center, and it seems the vast majority of difficult issues that arise between students and their advisers tend to trace back to poor communication," Lanyon says. "A faculty member hasn't shared truly what they expect of their students, and vice versa."

'An Informed Decision'

An advising statement can, for example, help alleviate a key worry of many graduate students: that disclosing their interest in a nonacademic job might disappoint their adviser or cause advising resources to be diverted to peers planning for professorial career tracks.

If a professor wants his graduate advisee to become a faculty member, Lanyon says, it is helpful for his graduate students and prospective students to know that right from the start.

"Now a student can make an informed decision: Do I want to work with this faculty member so badly that I'm not going to share my career aspirations, or do I go elsewhere?" he says. "In many cases, it would allow a student to relax because the faculty member would be clear they don't care which career a student pursues."

Other topics he addresses in the statement include publication expectations, philosophy on work/life balance, graduate-assistant stipends, conflict resolution, and grant writing.

His views on a student's personal life are there, too: "I expect my advisees to have one," he writes. "People who spend all their time on work activities generally tend to be less productive over the long term, less creative in their work, and frankly less fun as colleagues."

So is his approach to authorship: "Resolving authorship arrangements early is essential if we are to maintain positive relationships with our colleagues. I prefer to decide roles and authorship at the first sign that an activity will result in a publication."

It's unclear how many faculty members are using their own advising statements, Lanyon says.

Change in Ph.D. programs is slow, uneven. Doctoral programs belong to the faculty and at times seem immune from administrative decree. The advising statement is voluntary. Lanyon asked each department's director of graduate study to create one tailored to its discipline, and encouraged them to share it with the department's faculty members.

Power Imbalance

One faculty member who embraced the idea is Moin Syed, an associate professor of psychology. Syed says his advising statement emphasizes conversations he's already had with students early in the mentoring relationship. But putting his thoughts in print allows both new and prospective students to refer back for a precise sense of his expectations.

"This document is not meant to replace conversations by any means. But they can get a concrete sense about whether or not my approach is what they're looking for," he says. "Even graduate students who come from a well-socialized culture of academia are still very nervous and can have many questions."

Syed put a section in his statement about working in other labs after one of his advisees told him she was nervous about asking whether such an arrangement was OK.

"I encourage it," he writes, "as working in other labs helps you diversify your research experience, exposes you to different mentoring styles and lab operations, and allows you to build relationships with other faculty who might serve on your committees and write you letters of recommendation."

Alleviating students' worries is one goal of the advising statement. Another is encouraging professors to reflect on their own philosophies about mentoring and advising. Faculty members don't always appreciate the power differential between themselves and their graduate advisees, Lanyon says. Just because a student doesn't complain doesn't mean there's not a problem.

"That has been one of the hardest lessons to learn as a faculty member," he says. "A lot of faculty struggle to realize that if something isn't going well, the student isn't going to tell you unless it's really bad. Most faculty assume, 'Oh, things are going great because nobody said anything.' That's just not true."

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