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## Steps to help professors better advise graduate students (essay)

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I have some vivid memories of advising graduate students in my early days as a university faculty member. I had just completed my Ph.D. program and had arrived at a new institution. One day I was a graduate student finishing up my dissertation; the next I was advising graduate students. I received no formal guidance about how to make the transition.

I was flying by the seat of my pants: eager to learn, eager to be helpful but woefully short on experience and knowledge about how to be an effective adviser.

My experience was not unique. I suspect it was the norm in those days for new faculty members to receive little or no guidance regarding their advising responsibilities. I like to think higher education has made great progress at helping new faculty members learn how to serve as high-quality advisers for graduate students, but I fear the actual progress has been modest.

This dearth of guidance might suggest that today's graduate students are facing big problems as they seek to make progress in their programs. In reality, many faculty members have learned how to function well as advisers and perform effectively, as suggested by the numerous laudatory e-mails I received from graduate students in response to a recent request I made for information about the advising experience. There is a tendency to "advise as one was advised," and it appears that this emulation model is working well, at least sometimes.

But not always. Over the years, I've also become aware of instances where students have been treated badly at the hands of their advisers. The evidence of this mistreatment tends to be anecdotal and sometimes comes with requests that it not be shared for fear of reprisal. Some of the anecdotes are disturbing and remind me of how vulnerable a student is if he or she gets crosswise with an adviser.

This issue became personal for me recently when a member of my family had difficulties with an adviser in a graduate program at a different university.

Granted, I have only my family member's side of the story, but the concern was along the lines of the adviser being unresponsive to repeated requests for answers to questions and requests for feedback on drafts. Not only was this adviser being unresponsive, but the feedback, when it came, was limited and contradictory.

While it is not appropriate for me to second-guess this faculty member's feedback, there's no

question in my mind that the faculty member was creating unwarranted and frustrating hardships for a member of my family. Having to pay tuition for this kind of bad treatment just added insult to injury.

I watched this member of my family struggle with figuring out what to do. The adviser had what my family member needed, namely the sign-off on the thesis, and there was not much that could be done other than to accept the bad treatment.

This said, advisees also need to understand that good scholarship requires hard work and that they should expect to receive hard-hitting feedback from their adviser about their work. While advisers have a responsibility to provide criticism when it is warranted, the criticism always needs to be respectful, humane and responsive. Advising is a complex task and things work best when the lines of communication are open and effective in both directions.

In light of all this, the graduate students and faculty members in my college are taking a special interest in trying to articulate the hallmarks of high-quality advising for graduate students. Our graduate students conducted a survey last fall and now are working with our Faculty Council and department heads to digest the findings and to identify a set of best practices. We see this as a work in progress and offer below the hallmarks that have surfaced to date with the hope that they will be of interest to others.

### **Accessibility**

The adviser needs to be reasonably accessible. Advisers should not disappear, but students also need to understand that advisers lead demanding lives and have professional as well as family responsibilities. It is not reasonable for students to expect immediate access at all times.

### **Accuracy**

The advice needs to be accurate. Students can reasonably expect their advisers to be knowledgeable and able to communicate clearly.

### **Timeliness**

The advice needs to be timely. While it is hard to put a precise metric on this, it is also hard to defend making a student wait more than three weeks for feedback. The best way to avoid problems in this area is for the adviser and graduate student to have a conversation at the outset of the relationship in which the expectations are communicated and understood.

### **Criticism**

The advice can include criticism, but the criticism needs to be respectful and humane. Students should expect constructive criticism to be part of the advising experience. Advisers should strive to serve as “critical friends.”

### **Standards**

Advisers need to set high, but realistic and attainable, standards. It is not appropriate for advisers to expect students to reach ever higher standards. Students are entitled to know

what counts as an acceptable level of performance for moving to the next milestone in the program.

### **Responsiveness**

Advisers are entitled to expect their advisees to be attentive to the advice that is offered, but not to the point where advisees are expected to slavishly follow all suggestions that are offered. Advisers need to listen carefully to their advisees.

### **Boundaries**

Advisers should keep their relationships with advisees focused on academic and professional development. It is not appropriate for advisers to expect advisees to become involved with assisting them in meeting their personal needs.

### **Remedies**

Advisees need to know where they can obtain assistance if difficulties develop with an adviser. Similarly, advisers need to know where they can obtain assistance if difficulties develop with an advisee.

As with any worthwhile academic endeavor, our effort to improve the advising experience for all parties is an ongoing process. As we move forward, feedback and ideas for further improvement are very welcome.

### **Author Bio:**

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