


Effective Mentoring of Graduate Students: Why it Matters for Them and for You

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Our productivity in science, innovation, creative scholarship, and teaching is compromised when relationships fail.

Complaints about Unproductive Relationships with Major Professors

Input provided by Kevin Coonrod (Auburn University Ombudsperson) and George Flowers (Graduate School Dean)

Poor communication

- Poor or nonexistent communication with the professor
- Untimely feedback on papers and thesis or dissertation drafts
- Not receiving constructive feedback on their work
- Polarized relationships

Lack of respect/bullying

- Claims of bullying behavior by major advisor
- Professor making demeaning comments in front of other graduate students
- Claims of sexual harassment by major advisor
- Professors threatening students with dismissal if they complain

Feeling overworked/invisible

- Being overworked, ignoring the student's life outside of the lab
- Excessive/unreasonable demands
- Lack of appreciation for work performed
- Feeling invisible in the eyes of the major advisor
- Feelings of isolation and unfairness when other students receive attention and plaudits from the major advisor, but not the student relaying the complaint

Insensitivity to family and financial concerns

- Lack of understanding regarding family and childcare issues
- Lack of financial support (no advocacy/understanding of this need by the major professor)

Some Reasons for Faculty-Student Problems

Faulty Models

- Faculty mentoring the way they were mentored
- Student expecting the mentor to be a friend

Poor Fit

- Clashing personality, communication, and/or work styles

Misaligned Expectations (Poor Communication)

- Student thinks .5 assistantship = not a serious job
- Faculty thinks .5 assistantship = 40+ hours/week

Isolation

- Lack of integration with other faculty and students

Cultural Differences

- Different expectations for authority, autonomy, and behaviors
- Diversity insensitivity or ignorance

Lack of Training/Skills

- Faculty member has not received training on mentoring
- Student lacks skills needed for the research



Session Outline

Why Good Relationships Matter

Professional Development and Mentoring

Mentoring Graduate Students: Practices and Outcomes

Challenges and Strategies for Leaders

Building a Culture that Supports Mentoring

Relationships Matter

Relationships Affect Emotional Wellbeing

- Interactions and experiences in the work environment
- Management of stress/distress when relationships challenges occur
- Expectations and assumptions that influence subsequent behaviors and workplace culture

Relationships Affect Performance

- Amount, timeliness, and quality of work, and ultimately capacity to meet goals
- Absenteeism and retention
- Resources available to the workplace for building infrastructure, meeting goals, and acquiring new resources

Professional Development and Mentoring

Improving Relationships, Wellbeing, and Performance

Supports gaining knowledge, skills, and capacity to function effectively

Helps with managing challenging environments

Increases understanding of procedures and expected outcomes, as well as ways to work effectively on collaborative projects

Builds confidence and competence

Increases engagement and strengthens retention

Enhances overall mental health and wellbeing in the work environment

Relationship quality in the workplace (Cauce, 2007; Gerlach, 2019; Kane-Urrabazo, 2006; Parmer & Dillard, 2019).

Mentoring

Unique relationship that involves 2 (or more) people that often includes a goal of increasing knowledge and skills. Mentoring varies in the types of support (emotional, social, instrumental) provided. Mentoring relationships are reciprocal yet often asymmetrical and are dynamic and change over time (Allen and Eby, 2007). Specific to graduate students and major professors: “A mentoring relationship is a close, individualized relationship that develops over time between a graduate student and a faculty member and that includes both caring and guidance” (Vanderbilt University Center for Teaching).

Structure

- 1:1
- Group
- Formal
- Informal
- Long-term
- Short-term
- Comprehensive
- Targeted

Approaches

- Discussions
- Observations
- Experiences
- Readings
- Review-Feedback-Processing
- Coaching/Advising
- Advocacy

Supporting Attributes

- Mutual respect
- Trust
- Care and Support
- Engagement and Motivation
- Challenge
- Growth Promotion

A Good Mentor of Graduate Students

- Engages students in conversation
- Demystifies graduate school
- Provides constructive and supportive feedback
- Provides encouragement
- Fosters networks and multiple mentors
- Looks out for students' interests
- Thinks about students' mentoring needs
- Treats students with respect
- Provides a personal touch

Basic Strategies that Promote Good Mentoring

1. Assess and clarify expectations
2. Define roles and responsibilities
3. Tailor activities that capitalize on students' strengths and build new competencies (responsive and flexible approach)
4. Include checks to ensure communication is clear
5. Address personal/interpersonal issues when they arise
6. Engage with others to help support mentoring efforts

Outcomes Associated with Good Mentoring

- Students build skills and perform well on theses/dissertations and other writing tasks.
- Work environment feels energizing and conducive to productivity.
- Work completed on projects is performed well and on time.
- Students obtain competitive internships and fellowships, as well as better employment opportunities.
- Collaboration with and among the next generation of scholars is strengthened.
- Faculty-led programs of research and other forms of scholarship progress and are enhanced.

Who is responsible for Effective Mentoring of Graduate Students?

Major Professor

Department Head

Graduate Program Officer

Associate Dean for Graduate Studies

Other Faculty

Research Team Members

Other Students

Mentors through Professional Organizations

Other Mentors

Here's the
situation....

Scenario 1: Faulty
Communication

Scenario 2: Abuse
of Power?

See <https://onlineethics.org/cases/role-play-scenarios-teaching-responsible-conduct-research/mentoring-rcr-role-plays>

Scenario 1: Faulty Communication

Student A is a third-year doctoral student who switched to his current major professor, Dr. B, at the end of his second year when his prior major professor left the university.

Student A's view

My working relationship with Dr. B started off good, but lately has become a problem. Dr. B seems anxious a lot of the time and is constantly setting unrealistic deadlines for me to complete work for her. My last major professor was more flexible and understanding of the many things I am juggling (demands of courses, my health issues, my aging parents...). It seems all Dr. B cares about is her grant and the results she needs for papers. I am not fully clear on the analyses she wants me to complete nor how she wants the results reported, but she gets irritated whenever I ask questions or request greater clarity. I feel like I am working very hard to please Dr. B, but she is never satisfied with my work. She also is not supportive of my need to care for my aging parents and seems reluctant to let me leave for two weeks to help at home when my father undergoes and recovers from major surgery.

Scenario 1: Faulty Communication

Dr. B is a recently tenured associate professor who is highly productive and stretched across many important commitments.

Faculty Member B's view

I am dealing with a problem graduate student, student A, who is being paid on a grant but is not completing assigned tasks. I need the data analysis results student A was supposed to have completed over two weeks ago. I have tried different approaches to help the student perform, but I also believe student A (who has completed two years in the doctoral program) should be increasing his independence and taking more initiative. Student A has yet to make a deadline for completing tasks, and always has an excuse (illness, competing course demands, family responsibilities...). The current project student A is working on has become very important to my lab, and student A is the only student on my team with the skills to complete the needed analyses. I need the results of the data analysis student A is being paid to complete so I can write the next draft of the manuscript. I am frustrated as yet another deadline has been missed and now student A is telling me he needs two weeks off to address a family concern.

Assessment

- What is your assessment of the situation?
 - If you had only one of these perspectives, how would your assessment of the situation change?
- How might you advise the student and the faculty member so they can make improvements to their communication and working relationship?
- How does this scenario inform your thinking about mentoring needs in your department/college?

Scenario 2: Abuse of Power?

Student C is starting her second semester in the doctoral program. She had a high GPA and received multiple honors in both her undergraduate and Master's programs.

Student C's view

When I was accepted into the doctoral program, I was assigned to work with Dr. D who is fully funding my assistantship. When I checked recently, I found out there are no other assistantships available. I was told there is limited assistantship funding in the department, and all support is committed to current students. I am feeling stressed out all the time because Professor D expects me to work very long hours, including evenings and weekends, well beyond the 20 hours/week of my assistantship. He has been critical of every task I've performed and has embarrassed me with his negative public comments during lab team meetings. He often compares me to several of his other students to point out how poorly I am doing. He has told me several times, in front of others, I am lucky to have an assistantship with him and that he expects more out of me if I want to keep it. I am thinking I made a big mistake and if an alternative assistantship is not available, I might withdraw from the program.

Scenario 2: Abuse of Power?

Dr. D is a tenured, full professor with a strong track record of federal funding. He has prestigious collaborators across the country and has won numerous awards for his research.

Faculty Member D's view

My lab is producing cutting-edge research and I'm a leader in the field. I take it as a point of pride that I require my students to work hard and that includes long hours when needed to get the work done. You are well aware that I have produced many strong researchers in my lab who have gone on to accept prestigious positions. Let's be honest, many of the students and even some of the faculty in our department are rather mediocre, and I find it insulting when colleagues suggest I be more collegial. I vehemently deny mistreating student C and you are welcome to ask my other students whether she is treated any differently than they are. I should point out that student C was not well-trained in her Master's program and is struggling with the demands of working in my lab. I cannot compromise my standards and she can withdraw from working in my lab if she is unhappy. It is not my problem there are no funds for an alternative assistantship in the department, and I will not sacrifice the quality of my research or my reputation.

Assessment

- What is your assessment of the situation?
 - Is this an abuse of power?
- Do you want to keep this student?
 - If so, are there ways to prevent the student from dropping out of the program?
- How does this scenario inform your thinking about student assistantship decisions, as well as about mentoring needs in the department/college?



What can Department Heads/Chairs, Directors, Deans, and Associate Deans do?

- Establish general expectations/guides for mentoring.
- Assess fit and consider alternative assistantship assignments.
- Encourage early discussions about expectations among faculty/students who will be working together.
- Offer seminars for new graduate students and for continuing graduate students.
- Offer mentoring training and resources for faculty.
- Have a strategy/process to address problems.
- Encourage multiple forms of mentoring and help diversify student connections with faculty and other students.
- Discuss as a faculty the mentoring and support needs of graduate students and ways to help faculty provide good mentoring.
- Gather input on mentoring from outside the department/college.



Building a Culture that Supports Mentoring for Faculty and Students

CHS Example: Multifaceted Mentoring and Professional Development for Faculty and Graduate Students

CHS Research Advisory Committee

Graduate Students

Onboarding and Mentoring Departments/Research Teams

Professional Development and Training Sessions (College)

Professional Development Courses (Departments)

CHS Graduate Student Research Symposium

Graduate Writing Assistant

ADR Individualized Supports

Faculty

College Onboarding for New Faculty

Professional Development and Training Sessions (College)

Mentoring in Departments (organic)

Peer Mentoring Groups & Mentoring Network

Mentoring Pairs Program

ADR Individualized Supports



Ideas for Establishing a Mentoring Culture at Department, College and University Levels

Department

- General guide for graduate student-major professor roles and responsibilities
- Onboarding and periodic training/seminars for faculty and students
- Consideration of fit and alternatives for assistantship assignments
- Resources and other supports for faculty and students
- Sharing models of effective mentoring

Intervention plan when problems arise

College

- Onboarding/training
- Mentoring programs, groups, and resources
- Professional development opportunities
- Mentoring advisory committee composed of faculty and graduate students
- Mentoring point person (assists when mentoring/relationship issues arise)

Intervention plan when problems arise

University

- Training, seminars and resources
- Mentoring available in central units (Graduate School, Biggio, PSFS, Inclusion & Diversity...)
- Mentoring advisory committee composed of faculty and graduate students
- Ongoing discussions about mentoring; sharing models of effective mentoring
- Presentations by effective mentors (sharing practices via panels or interactive meetings)
- Mentoring guide (living document) – see examples from other universities

References in Presentation

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- University of Washington Graduate School <https://grad.uw.edu/for-students-and-post-docs/core-programs/mentoring/mentoring-guides-for-students/what-a-good-mentor-does/>
- Vanderbilt University Center for Teaching <https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/mentoring-graduate-students/>

Additional Resources

Auburn University Graduate School

<http://graduate.auburn.edu/faculty-staff/faculty-toolkits/>

See Mentoring link that connects to a wide range of resources

Seminars provided by Kevin Coonrod, Auburn University Ombudsperson:

- Basic Conflict Management Techniques
- Teamwork: building Results Collaboratively and Amicably
- The Art & Productive Capacity of Active Listening
- Identifying Underlying Interests: Tips from Nature, History and the Cinema
- Working with High Conflict People
- Understanding Bullying and Mobbing

University of Michigan

- <https://rackham.umich.edu/downloads/student-mentoring-handbook.pdf>
- <https://rackham.umich.edu/downloads/how-to-mentor-graduate-students.pdf>

Pennsylvania State University

<https://gradschool.psu.edu/graduate-program-resources/mentoring-matters/>

Emory – Laney Graduate School

https://www.gs.emory.edu/includes/documents/sections/professional-development/mentoring-guide_student_final.pdf

https://www.gs.emory.edu/includes/documents/sections/guides/mentoring-guide_faculty_final.pdf

Council of Graduate Schools

- https://art.unc.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/344/2019/11/CGS_OPS_Mentoring2016.pdf

Online Ethics Center for Engineering and Science

- <https://onlineethics.org/cases/role-play-scenarios-teaching-responsible-conduct-research/mentoring-rcr-role-plays>



Helpful Readings

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