

How to Work Well With Graduate Students

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By Jessica Early and Trisalyn Nelson

Scenario: A doctoral student comes by your office to ask if you will serve as a reader on her dissertation committee. While a senior professor is chairing her committee, she wants you to help with the "heaving lifting." You start shifting in your seat, wishing there was a pause button you could hit as you figure out the best thing to say. You want to support this student — but as an assistant professor, a few years from tenure, you need to protect your time *and* avoid stepping on her adviser's toes. Do you say no and clarify the roles of dissertation chair versus reader? Do you say yes and support the student in the way she is asking? Or do you ask her to first clarify your role with her adviser?

That is the kind of moment, and decision, that can make or break a healthy working relationship between a professor and a Ph.D. student.

A good relationship benefits your student, your field, and you — boosting your own output and intellectual growth. It can have you bouncing out of bed in the morning, excited to go to work. But when it goes off kilter? A fraught relationship can lead to anxiety and reduced productivity for both of you, and leave you wanting to stay in bed with the covers over your head. Naturally, you want to spend your advising time on the good stuff — helping students plug away on their coursework, write proposals, prepare their dissertations, and practice

job talks. In good adviser-advisee relationships, there is an ebb and flow of shared work over a number of years that is rewarding and generative and counts as one of the true gifts of this profession.

Yet there is little-to-no shared conversation about how to mentor graduate students and few workshops or panels on the topic. As senior faculty members, we still have moments in our advising when we are stopped in our tracks and think, "Why is this so hard?"

These work relationships can go off the rails for all sorts of reasons, with plenty of factors you can't control. Here we'd like to focus on the things you can control. Leaning on our cumulative experience supervising more than 50 graduate students, we have four suggestions for how to establish productive, rewarding relationships with graduate students.

Tip No. 1: Set Clear Expectations in a 'Contract'

All relationships work better with clear expectations. Relationships with graduate students are no different. It's a mistake to assume they want the same experiences that you had (or desired) in graduate school, or share the same goals. Yes, setting clear expectations with each student takes upfront time and mental energy. But whenever we've neglected to do that — either because we were too busy or didn't know the unwritten rules — it has always come back to haunt us.

To avoid that outcome, we now use what we call an "expectation contract." It's not a legal document, of course; it's a mutually generated, informal agreement. But creating it prompts a discussion about what supervisor and student each expect and commit to do. Our "contracts" include the following categories:

- The student's goals. Taking the time, early on, to ask students what they hope to do with their graduate degree, gives them purpose and agency. We start by asking questions like, "Visualize yourself in four years: What do you see yourself doing with this degree?" Or, more directly: "Do you want an academic job? Do you want to work in industry or consulting? Are you hoping for a terminal master's?" In addition to their preferred career, ask students to list their associated goals — such as skills development (e.g., programming and statistics), networking and engagement, publishing and grant writing, conference presentations, and additional work experience. In Year 1, not all graduate students will know their goals, or how to articulate them. That's where you can help. Make sure to communicate that their goals may change. People fall in love, have babies, need to care for ailing parents, decide teaching or research is not for them, and the like. Make clear that life happens and that the two of you can make whatever adjustments are needed.

- The student's expectations. Here is where students get a chance to clearly state not only what they expect of you and of the graduate program but also to talk about their preferred ways of working. Again, some students might not know what those are yet. So remind them that the expectation contract is the start of an ongoing conversation. The types of expectations we frequently see students list: frequency of adviser/advisee meetings and how they will take place (in person or via technology); funding (for teaching or research assistantships or travel money to attend conferences); types of feedback they find useful (and not); work they hope to take on outside of their doctoral program; travel schedules; and life circumstances (family, health, and other personal issues that may affect their work).
- Your expectations and commitments. Chances are, you expect a lot of graduate students (even those of you who think you are "easygoing"). They are a long-term commitment, eating up your time, funding, and other resources. Make your expectations explicit in this section of the contract. Be equally clear on what you are bringing to the table. How frequently are you willing to meet? What funding can they expect? How much conference-travel or fieldwork support? What training, resources, data, or software will you provide? Who owns/stores the resulting research data? And what happens if they fall short of your expectations?
- Authorship. In some fields, it is common for students to have solo-authored papers; in others, supervisors are typically co-authors. Even within the same field, academics can view questions of authorship and "credit" very differently. Graduate students won't always see your contributions — as their adviser and/or principal investigator — as you work behind the scenes writing grants, drafting the institutional-review board (IRB) application, designing methods for collecting and creating data, or negotiating with various stakeholders. Regardless of field, make clear in the contract your position on authorship and your expectations on who will do what.

Tip No. 2: Manage Your Time and Their Timelines

If we had to point to one thing that can make or break your relationship with a graduate student, it's time management.

Professors juggle a lot of varied work obligations: teaching, research, grant writing, campus service, disciplinary service, mentoring, reviewing, reference writing. If you didn't learn time-management skills prior to becoming a faculty member, it's not too late to learn the value of timelines.

A timeline gives you a sense of whether a student is on track, and helps the two of you say yes or no to new opportunities. By using timelines — rather than trying to track hours of work — both professor and student learn what a realistic goal looks like and get to feel that rush of excitement/relief when it's actually accomplished. We've successfully used three types of timelines with graduate students:

- Program timelines. Remember what it was like to start a doctoral program with four (or more) years stretching out ahead of you? It's hard to make effective use of all that time without a clear overview and plan. Some doctoral programs provide a timeline to the Ph.D. If not, it's easy to create one based on key deadlines and steps that a student needs to take each semester to graduate within the desired time frame. Post the timeline somewhere visible to both of you. Make it brief and easy to see at a glance if things are on track. Break up a big project (like the dissertation) into steps that can be marked off as they are achieved (e.g., dissertation proposal, IRB, first chapter). If things veer wildly off course (as they do, sometimes for good reasons), update the timeline and keep working toward the next goal.
- Semester timelines. Every August, ask your graduate students to plan the fall and spring semesters ahead in detail, guided by their program timeline. A semester timeline could include weekly or twice a month milestones for their research and writing, as well as their teaching, personal, and family commitments. We advise our own students to plan backward: Start at the end of the semester with what goals they want to have accomplished, and then set a pace for the term accordingly.
- The final countdown. Despite the best-laid plans, those final months of graduate school are always a time crunch. The last round of reviews, the final push on packaging the dissertation, the scheduling of oral defenses — it all happens with urgency. We have come to accept that as part of the process. Rather than being annoyed that a student didn't "plan better," think of this period as the final lap of a marathon. The pressure is almost inevitable as they finish their final chapters, defend their scholarship, ready for a huge life change, and prepare for the job market. They need more help than ever to navigate unfamiliar terrain. This is when the "every two-week check-in" may become a daily email flurry on the dissertation fine-tuning, paperwork that needs signing, questions about formatting, advice on next steps. All either of you can do is hunker down and get it all done. Charting a final timeline for these hectic months can help both of you.

Less is more for some of us, but not for others. Some professors work best with a small group of graduate students, but others find efficiency in scale. The two of us are a case in point. One of us (Jessica) has found that, to give her best to her students, she must avoid spreading herself too thin. However, the other (Trisalyn) prefers to have a larger group of graduate students with a range of skills. She finds that having a critical mass of students means they support each other in their work — and that takes some of the burden off of her.

Whatever your approach, pay attention to your own workload and stress levels. When you feel like you have the right number of graduate students, try to stick to it.

Tip No. 3: You're a Professor, Not a Therapist

Students know going in that graduate school will stretch them intellectually, but they are less prepared for how it might unsettle them emotionally. They are constantly learning and doing new things yet very likely getting more criticism than they ever thought possible. Students often feel like their lives before graduate school have been erased; they may perceive themselves to be jumping through hoops or struggling under some professor's thumb. Recent studies suggest that nearly 40 percent of graduate students report moderate to severe anxiety.

Empathy and kindness are critical to working well with people. But you need to be able to spot when your student needs the kind of help that you are not trained to provide. And when the issue is not mental health but basic personality clashes, you need to act rather than let those tensions fester and worsen. Here are some steps to consider in such situations:

- Encourage the student to seek counseling. Obvious? Sure. But hearing you say — and mean — that you support a student who seeks professional help and that you don't see it as a stigma, a sign of weakness, or a career killer can make a real difference. Supervisors have an important role to play in helping students manage their mental health, in that you can be an important conduit to the campus services they need. Keep information about those services handy in your office. And if you have sought professional support at some point in your career, you might find it useful, as we have, to share that with a student.
- Turn to the experts yourself. Supervising students is not always going to be a joy-filled, productive experience. We have seen plenty of adviser-advisee relationships — our own and others — flounder because of personality clashes, research complications, mental-health issues, and simple misunderstandings. When a problem arises — if talking frankly and setting boundaries do not yield a more productive work relationship — don't try to manage the impasse yourself. Reach out as early as possible to graduate-program coordinators, other committee members, departmental colleagues, the department chair, and the graduate school for help with complex student (and supervisor) issues.
- It's OK to part ways. Once in a rare while, you will come to the uneasy realization that a relationship is just not going to work out and that going your separate ways is the best path forward for everyone. Sometimes students completely change their minds about their research interests, and it makes more sense for them to work with someone else. Let them. This is a generous and necessary letting go. Sometimes a particular student starts to see you as a parental figure, which can play out in awkward and unprofessional ways in your work together. That can be a good reason to change course and have the student work with a different mentor.

Tip No. 4: Clarify Everyone's Roles on the Dissertation Committee

When doctoral students invite you to serve on their dissertation committee, it's usually in a particular role: as their chair/adviser, as a reader/member, or, if you are at another university, as an external reader. Whatever your role, you are more likely to do it well if you clarify what the student actually expects you to do. Because what that student expects might not be in sync with your perception of the job.

For example, some graduate students see their committee as a team of coaches when what they really have is one main coach — i.e., the dissertation chair (or maybe two co-chairs) — and a few other people in secondary roles on the sidelines offering very specific kinds of support. Things go awry when a student unknowingly asks a committee member to do the work of the adviser, or when the adviser is not doing the heavy lifting and the committee members have to pick up the slack.

Blurred boundaries waste vast amounts of time and generate loads of bad feelings. Instead, as dissertation advisers, we find it useful to explain the different roles, and thus help students and other faculty members stay in their respective lanes. Here are two ways we do that:

- Who does what? When you direct a student's committee, you can pave the way for smooth communication and clear understanding of roles by spelling out, from the get-go, how you like to operate. It's OK to own your role and clarify how you work. That can be with an email that outlines how you will route work through the committee. For example, we like to approve a student's work before he or she shares it with the other committee members. That saves everyone time in editing. It also sets a clear practice and expectation for who does the heavy lifting.
- Feedback and timing expectations. One of the trickiest things for graduate students to negotiate is getting timely feedback from committee members. We have seen students held up for months at a time waiting for a single committee member to respond to a draft. Students often end up very frustrated trying to navigate different faculty personalities. One way to avoid such holdups: Write to everyone on the committee — in the beginning of its formation — to share how you'd like things to work and to ask the other faculty members for their preferences and schedules (e.g., is anyone going on sabbatical?). Ask your advisees to give committee members at least two weeks to respond to things like proposals or comprehensive exams and, if possible, even more time to read whole dissertations. Tell the committee members that the student will give them a heads up when a draft of something will be coming their way, when they are scheduling the defense, or when they need a particular kind of help that you as the adviser cannot provide. Such seemingly small exchanges can pave the way to happy, productive students.

Back when we were assistant professors, we had yet to figure out a lot of what we have written here. We didn't fully understand yet that the work of advising and mentoring graduate students would bring as many headaches as it did joys. These tips and suggestions represent what we've learned through trial and error. Use some of these strategies to set clear parameters and expectations, and we promise: You will experience far fewer misunderstandings and road bumps and many more moments of joy.

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