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Advice on Being Advised

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Image: *Higher Learning (1995)*

It's difficult to offer general advice on the adviser-advisee relationship because it varies so much — by discipline, professor, student, or institution. How friendly, how hierarchical, or how useful the relationship is differs from one pair to the next.

Still, there are some near-universal implicit rules that govern this relationship. More often than not, a student learns them the hard way.

As a director of graduate studies, I can offer some general words of advice for students on how to navigate this critical relationship. Because, despite all the differences, there are some implicit rules that *are* near universal about these relationships and that graduate students, more often than not,end up learning the hard way. This post will uncover some of those implicit rules and help students start off on the right foot.

Ask us to explain our expectations. Many a relationship runs afoul of unstated assumptions. I ran into that trouble myself with an implicit rule that I didn't even realize I had — until a student didn't follow it. Turns out, I expect new(ish) graduate students to spend a majority of their working time on campus — usually from around 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., four days a week. If students want to work from home one day a week, that's fine, but I want to see their faces around the office. Once trust has been established, I am more flexible.

Unfortunately, I did not explain my expectation clearly to one of my students, and that left both of us frustrated. To avoid such conflicts, you might want to ask your adviser for clarifications on the following:

What about over the summer?

- *Emails*. How quickly does your adviser expect you to respond to messages?
- *Tasks*. How quickly does your professor want you to complete work?
- *Interruptions*. Is it OK to stop by your adviser's office uninvited with questions? When is it not OK?

I am not saying that advisers should call all the shots here. I am saying that you need to have explicit conversations about our expectations. That allows you to either: (a) meet them, or (b) negotiate to come up with an agreement that works for both of you. My student and I should have talked and set up a work schedulewe could both live with.

Respect the demands on your adviser's schedule. Professors are busy. Graduate students are too, but you tend to have more flexibility in your day.As a general rule, when you are trying to schedule a meeting with your adviser, defer to his or her schedule. That's even more important if your adviser is an administrator, because someone in an administrative position is likely to have a highly scheduled workday.

Don't try to our friend. The boundaries between adviser and friend are complicated. In one sense, you want to be friendly with your adviser. But you shouldn't be friends — either on social media or otherwise — until you graduate. It is hard to be critical of a friend, and your adviser may hesitate to give you crucial feedback if you are too chummy. In fact, The Professor Is In's Karen Kelsky cites this as one of the top five traits of the worst advisers. You want someone who can help you become a better scholar and researcher, not go to a movie with you. I look forward to friending my students on Facebook once they graduate, but I am not going to do it before.

Respond to emails promptly and politely. If your adviser emails you, please at least acknowledge — ideally within less than 12 hours — that you got the email. Even better, say thanks if the email was helpful. I emailed a graduate student with some information related to that person's next career goals, and never received an acknowledgment let alone a thank you. You can bet I was irritated. In or out of the academy, that's just common courtesy. So make sure you take the time to say thanks after a faculty member has helped you, especially your adviser.

When you meet with your adviser, have an agenda. Make a list of questions you want to ask, updates you need to give on particular projects, and any other information you want to share. During my last few years of grad school, my adviser was an administrator and, thus, very busy. Each time we met, I would bring with me a bulleted list of what we needed to discuss, and work my way through it. That cut down on the number of emails I had to send and times I had to pop into his office.

Actually take our advice. When we tell you to do something — make certain editing changes, fix the references in a paper, shorten a section — it is super irritating when you come back to the next meeting having not done it. Given our experience, we as advisers usually have good reasons for telling you to make certain changes. If you don't make them, come to our next meeting prepared to explain why. Perhaps something came up? Or maybe you didn't agree with the change? But don't send us the same unchanged manuscript without some kind of comment.

Google it first. If you have a question about something that someone else may have the answer to — i.e., a coding problem, an analysis issue, or an APA style question —trying using a search engine before you approach us for help. In countless meetings, I've had students ask me questions they could have found answers to on their own. And check Google Scholar, too. Sometimes students will come to me and say, "I want to do my thesis on X. There hasn't been anything done on it." Then I search for X on Google Scholar and find an entire literature. Do your homework.

Go to the right source for the right question. Your adviser does not have the answer to every question. If you have an HR question, you are better off going to the HR office. If you have a question about deadlines, the grad-school website is the place to go. Alternately, your department may have one of those all-knowing staff members who keeps the place running. When I was in grad school, we had Mary Jo, who knew everything and had the answer for just about every question that wasn't related to our research topics. I don't think anyone would have graduated from our program without Mary Jo.

Go to events we mention. If your adviser tells you about an event or a talk, or forwards you an email with a "this looks interesting" message, that usually means you should go — especially if you rarely get messages like that from your adviser. If you are confused about whether to go, move to the next point.

Ask for clarification. This is may be the most important piece of advice. When you aren't sure whether you have to go to an event, just send a reply that says, "Just to clarify: Is this something you would like me to attend?" Likewise, if you are confused about some issue that is impeding your progress on a project— and you've Googled it and talked with fellow students and are still confused — then ask your adviser for clarification. Otherwise, at your next meeting, the task that you were supposed to have completed may be delayed because you didn't speak up. Following this advice also can help you learn and meet your adviser's expectations.

Send materials 48 hours in advance. Don't send a document that you want us to comment on at 9:45 a.m., if our meeting is at 10 a.m. If you are behind and don't have a draft done 48

hours beforehand, admit it and ask to reschedule the meeting. For example, you can say, "I know we are meeting on Wednesday but I still have a few hours' work to do on it. Any chance that I can send it to you tomorrow before 5 p.m., and you would have time to read it before our meeting? If not, could we move our meeting to later this week?"

Keep track of your deadlines. Your adviser most likely does not know the deadline for when you must defend your thesis to graduate in a given semester. We also probably don't know conference deadlines. Take it upon yourself to keep up with those deadlines, and remind us as they approach. If you need a recommendation letter by a certain date, or a document signed by a certain time, make sure you give us plenty of advanced warning and email us as the deadline gets close: "Just a friendly reminder, the recommendation letter for this award is due in one week." That will keep it on our radar. One of the worst situations I have been in was when a student needed a letter for the National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellowship and my colleague did not turn it in on time. All the effort she and I had put into crafting the application was for nothing. So remind us, especially when it comes to letters for grant applications, which often have hard deadlines.

Give us what we need to help you. If you need a recommendation letter, give us a copy of the announcement for the award, fellowship, or job so that we can tailor the letter to that purpose. Also give us the latest copy of your CV, and perhaps even a few points that might be important to emphasize in the letter.

Confirm what you need to do next. As you are leaving a meeting with your adviser, make sure you understand what is expected of you by the next meeting. You can even email us afterward to confirm our expectations. That is a great way to stay accountable. You do not want to get to the next meeting missing something you were supposed to have done because you did not know you had to do it.

Take notes. I will be at meetings with my students and I will be telling them some kind of important instruction when I notice they are just sitting there kind of looking at me. So I will say, "Don't you want to write this down?" Memories can be lousy. So take notes. They can also help you with the previous point in clarifying what you need to do next.

Don't limit yourself to a single adviser. Kerry Ann Rockquemore has long advocated that graduate students should have multiple mentors. Besides your primary adviser, you might cultivate a mentor on teaching, and one on writing. You might have a mentor who is not at your university but is doing work in a related field. If it turns out that your adviser is out of touch with reality, your informal mentors might be your saving grace.

Keep us posted. Recently I met with a student to discuss the status of our various projects. I was confused about why she seemed so worried about getting one of them done. Then I realized: It was due a few weeks after her wedding and honeymoon. Oops! I had totally forgotten about her impending nuptials. So please — when we're trying to set realistic goals and expectations — talk to us about all of the things you have on your plate. We may have forgotten the large

amount of grading you have to do for that online course, or that you have a family obligation coming up.

That advice is not limited to things that are taking up your time. I have had students come and talk to me who were not making progress, and when we really started talking, it turned out they were feeling depressed, anxious, and/or overwhelmed. This next point is so important it deserves special emphasis: *Your well-being is FAR more important than any activity or expectation related to graduate school.* When my students bring up problems like this, we can usually brainstorm ways to take some things off plate, and prioritize projects.

Graduate school can wait if you are having mental-health problems. Tell us — if you feel comfortable doing so — when you are struggling with physical- or mental-health problems. If you do not feel comfortable telling us, then talk to your graduate-studies chair. And if you do not feel comfortable at all discussing these issues with people in your department, go to your university's counseling center.

Following these strategies early on may help you avoid problems later. But keep in mind: General advice may not be enough. You might also seek out advice specific to your own adviser, graduate program, or field. Identify a recent Ph.D. or a current student who had some success in your doctoral program. Even better, talk with people who actually have worked with your adviser. What do they suggest?

A version of this post originally appeared on Adventures in Human Development and Family Science.

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This article relates to...

- advising
- mentoring
- students
- graduate school