THE CHRONICLE
of Higher Education

ADVICE

How Much Is Your Adviser's Reputation Worth?

Part 1 in a series on how to pick the professor who will guide your dissertation

Kevin Van Aelst for The Chronicle

By Leonard Cassuto | OCTOBER 02, 2016

Let's begin with a happy hypothetical. You've just been admitted to a couple of Ph.D. programs that you like, and you're choosing between them. Each department has a strong faculty member in your chosen field, but one of the professors is more famous than the other. Which program — and adviser — should you choose?

Choosing a dissertation adviser is probably the most important decision that doctoral students make during graduate school. You might think that the hypothetical I just outlined would be an easy choice: Why not just choose the famous professor?

Perhaps you should, and perhaps you will. But wait a minute. Many variables ought to inform the choice of a dissertation adviser, with reputation being only the most obvious and gossipy one. But how important should it be?

I posed that question to professors in a variety of fields. Most were young enough to remember their own graduate-school experience. Their emailed answers were remarkably consistent, with some field-specific differences. To do justice to those differences, I've focused here on the humanities and social sciences, and will write about the lab sciences in my next column.

For all aspiring Ph.D students, there's the practical matter of whether the famous faculty member is a decent adviser or not. The first and most important piece of predissertation "research" you can do, said a graduate-program director in the humanities, is to learn something about the people you're considering. Ask your peers, he said: "It's usually pretty clear among students which faculty members have a good track record as advisers."

There's also the practical matter of whether the famous professor will actually advise your dissertation. "Look up prospective advisers on ProQuest's Dissertation Database," advises the graduate director. You might expect to see that scholar's name on every dissertation in her field, but instead find that she's shepherded only one dissertation from her department every 10 years — or maybe not even that often. Paul Krugman, the Nobel Prize-winning economist and *New York Times* columnist, rarely directs dissertations, for example. That's his career choice — and anyone considering studying economics at the CUNY Graduate Center, where Krugman now works, ought to be aware of it.

"The reality," said one English professor, "is that at many programs, students have a choice between an adviser who advises many students, and one who advises very few." She has worked at several universities over her career, and at every one, she said, "there are a small handful of faculty who do the lion's share of the advising."

"The factory-style adviser" — one with an unusually large number of dissertation students — is more likely to be well known. Such advisers come with "some definite disadvantages," the English professor said — more students means less time for each one. But factory-style advisers often have "a high level of commitment" to their students, which can create "a sense of community in the group."

When she chose her own dissertation adviser, the English professor recalled, "a crucial element was considering how many dissertators an adviser had, rather than 'name' or 'no name.'" Now as a professor herself, she prefers to advise only a few students at a time. "I've advised six dissertations in my 15 years," she said, and to her, that feels like quite a few. "I'm certainly not a 'name' adviser," she said, "but I have certain practical skills," and they work best when she's advising only one or two students at a time.

Most graduate students want to be professors, so preparation for the academic job market naturally has a place in the equation. "All things being equal, an adviser with a distinguished reputation will be able to do more for a doctoral student" seeking a professorship, said a history professor. Some big-name scholars "work tirelessly with their students," he said. On the other hand, "I know of famous academics who are never available." The best course, he added, was to "choose someone engaged and available, regardless of status."

As an adviser, that historian focuses on the work that his students will wind up doing. That's the right way to look at it. Another history professor put it simply and well: Choose an adviser who will "put you in a position to do your best work."

Make sure you get "a good funding package," he said, as well as an adviser you "can imagine having a positive relationship with" for years to come. Because it is a relationship that lasts years. If it goes well, it will continue beyond graduate school.

When that historian was choosing a graduate school, he visited three campuses. On one campus, he was told by a very famous scholar that he "would only allow me to work on an economic history topic." At the second campus, he met with another famous scholar, who "told me that he could only spare 10 minutes to talk to me because he was on leave that semester."

At the third campus he spent a lot of time with the professor who became his adviser. That scholar was well known, too, though perhaps not as famous as the other two. "We talked about a range of topics beyond history," including baseball, the historian recalled. His choice, he said, "was easy, and I've never had occasion to regret it." His adviser told him that academe still operates as an apprenticeship, so a prospective student should consider not just "prestige, but the quality of mentorship." In essence, the adviser reminded his prospective student that he was choosing a teacher.

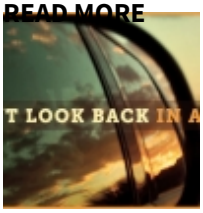
That historian's experience with his adviser ought to resonate even more in this day and age, when Ph.D. students can't necessarily expect to become professors. That matters on at least two levels:

- First, choose an adviser who is realistic about the limitations of the faculty job market. Potential advisers who treat academe as the only option aren't being realistic. Do you really want someone that out of touch managing your biggest graduate-school project for years?
- Second, be prepared to treat graduate school not only as a means to some end (even if you're not sure what that end will be), but also as an end in itself. You want to choose an adviser who will help you enjoy getting a Ph.D., and learn from doing it. Graduate school is obviously not for everyone, especially now. But if you're thinking of going, be prepared to value the experience it can give you, not just the prestige of the credential. And choose your adviser accordingly.

Next month, I'll turn to the sciences.

Leonard Cassuto, a professor of English at Fordham University, writes regularly about graduate education in this space. His latest book, The Graduate School Mess: What Caused It and How We Can Fix It, is published by Harvard University Press. He welcomes comments, suggestions, and stories at lcassuto@erols.com. Twitter handle: @LCassuto.

READ MORE



Dear Adviser: You Were My Favorite Mistake

By Rebecca Schuman

In choosing my committee chair, I made the best worst decision of my academic career.