

# A match made in academia: you and your graduate advisor



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Joe shivered as he looked out of his window at the falling snow. Even the cockroaches that usually haunted his office had moved on to cozier places. He was working late on his dissertation proposal, as he had been doing for months. He had hoped to defend it in a week's time, but yesterday his advisor had postponed the committee meeting and requested substantial revisions. Joe was furious, and had spent the day searching for ways to prove his advisor wrong. Now he was exhausted and alone in his cold office at 3:00 am on a Saturday, he lacked adequate proof, and he finally had to accept that his advisor was right.

Like Joe, we graduate students look to our advisors for guidance, but it can sometimes be hard to accept their criticism. With good communication, you can develop a strong working relationship with your advisor, that will have positive and long-lasting impacts on your career. If you hope to shine brilliantly as a job candidate when you finish your graduate degree, the key person who can help you shine (or dull you completely) is your advisor.

Most of us have good relationships with our advisors. We meet regularly, have fun exchanging ideas, collaborate on research projects, co-author papers, and generally like each other. If a student–advisor relationship does not work out, it is usually for one of two main reasons:

- (1) the research interests of the student no longer match those of the advisor, or
- (2) the personality or communication styles of the student and advisor are not compatible.

To help you succeed in graduate school, here are some guidelines for working with your advisor and switching to a new one if necessary.

## ■ Working with your advisor

The most important thing you can do to maintain a good working relationship with an advisor is to keep the lines of communication open. Make sure that you both give and receive information constructively. This may sound ridiculously simple, but many of us in academia have slightly weird personalities that sometimes make communication difficult. We also have egos that occasionally get bruised. After Joe received revisions

from his advisor, his first inclination was to become defensive and dismiss the criticism. In these situations, taking a walk or having a beer with a friend can help you come back to the comments and see them more clearly, when you feel less emotional. You wouldn't be getting much help if your advisor didn't give you any comments at all, so it is important to accept them graciously or to respectfully disagree. Besides, receiving criticism is great practice for your professional life.

You also have a responsibility to be open and honest with your advisor. This will help your advisor know what kind of work to expect from you at a given time, and will prevent disappointment when life (eg a heavy teaching load, a bulldozed field site, a marriage or divorce) temporarily slows down your research.

Good communication can also help your advisor provide you with timely advice. A friend of mine decided toward the end of her PhD that she did not want a traditional academic job and would rather work with a non-profit organization. She was so afraid of disappointing her advisor that she didn't tell him how she felt. She finished her PhD but found no desirable job opportunities, despite her advisor's willingness to help her find a postdoc. When she finally told her advisor about her goals, he said, "If you had told me sooner, I could have helped connect you with people in those fields". Being honest is your responsibility to your advisor, but can also help you to achieve your own goals.

If you are not making progress in your program and you can't figure out why, evaluate your relationship with your advisor. Are you an active, engaged member of your lab? Are there communication issues you can both work on? Do you treat each other with respect? Finally, don't expect your advisor to be everything to you. Most of us find several mentors (eg other professors, senior grad students, or postdocs) who can help us with research, teaching, and professional development.

## ■ Switching advisors

Changing advisors can have long-term consequences for your career and should be avoided if possible, but you should consider it if you are unable to progress with your current advisor or if you are thinking about dropping out of grad school. Switching can help you when your research interests have diverged from those of your advisor or when your personalities (or personal situations) are not compatible.

For example, a friend's advisor had experienced a lot of personal tension with other professors in the department. My friend wanted to move his dissertation for-

ward, so he scheduled weekly meetings with his advisor. He would prepare research topics to discuss at the meeting, but found that they spent the entire time talking about the advisor's personal problems. He told me that he didn't want to leave his advisor because he liked her and felt sorry for her, but he asked himself, "What is my number one goal in graduate school? To finish my PhD!" After more than a year of trying to make things work, he asked a committee member to be his new advisor.

His advisor's problems were beyond his control. In retrospect, he wished he had talked with more students in the department when interviewing, and not just with students in the same lab. Conversations in a comfortable setting, in which everyone can talk freely, are very revealing. Unfortunately for my friend, he was already working in the lab when those conversations took place.

If you decide to switch advisors, you will need lots of support, so find friends, other students, or a trusted professor to confide in. The first step in switching is finding a new advisor. Creating relationships with other professors early on can help you identify someone with whom you are more compatible (UM 2006). Second, talk with your current advisor about leaving the rela-

tionship. Be honest and considerate and make it clear that you are switching because you are not a good match for each other. It is best to talk privately, but if you need support, you may want members of your committee present. Finally, finish any work with your previous advisor and file the paperwork necessary to make the switch official (UM 2006). Most students who switch keep their original advisor as a committee member, which is a great way to maintain a cordial, professional relationship.

Working with your advisor should be a rewarding experience for both of you. It takes some effort to develop an outstanding relationship, but, as in most graduate school endeavors, persistence usually helps you prevail. When you become a respected scientist and find your dream job, remember to show your appreciation to your advisor for helping you to achieve your goals.

#### ■ Reference

UM (University of Michigan). 2006. How to get the mentoring you want: a guide for graduate students at a diverse university. Ann Arbor, MI: The Regents of the University of Michigan. [www.rackham.umich.edu/StudentInfo/Publications/StudentMentoring/contents.html](http://www.rackham.umich.edu/StudentInfo/Publications/StudentMentoring/contents.html). Viewed 15 Jun 2007.

## Faculty response



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Erin Questad's advice on maintaining a good working relationship between graduate student and advisor contains much wisdom. Frequent, open, and honest communication between student and advisor is essential for success, as is a student's ability to accept constructive criticism and their understanding that an advisor "can't be everything" to his or her student. It is this latter point of Erin's that I would like to expand upon here.

Although graduate students may complain, justifiably in some cases, of unreasonably high expectations from their advisor or committee, Erin's advice to students to not expect their advisor to solve all their problems deserves elaboration. Most advisors I know want nothing but the best for their graduate students – indeed, the successes of their students are the advisor's successes as well (deserved or not). Most of us care for our students personally, we worry about them (like parents, in some cases), and we spend many hours discussing them with our colleagues, usually with regard to how we can facilitate their success. But it's important for students to recognize that a typical graduate advisor is juggling research collaborations with colleagues, proposal writing,

teaching, participation in committees, workshops, and symposia, and of course, involvement in the research and educational programs of several additional graduate students – not to mention talented undergrads in the lab. Thus, although a graduate student's research may be all-consuming to them, this endeavor may occupy only a fraction of the landscape that their advisor must navigate daily. Most students roll their eyes (I know I did) when they hear faculty say "if you think you are busy as a grad student, just wait till you get out there and get a job", but it's true nonetheless.

Graduate advisors do have a responsibility to guide their advisees toward success. Yet achieving their goals requires graduate students to expect the best from themselves and to recognize that their success depends primarily on their own efforts. I have observed that success in academia, whether as a graduate student or faculty member, requires three basic things: (1) adequate resources, (2) sufficient time, and (3) a high degree of creativity and drive. Providing graduate students with the necessary resources (lab space, equipment, or even funds to buy supplies or construct research infrastructure) is the responsibility of the advisor. Most faculty freely admit that time is their most limited resource and graduate students are not immune to the challenge of time constraints. However, being creative (a skill that can be learned) and maintaining a strong desire to succeed, even if the road is less than smooth, is the responsibility of the graduate student.

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