

Shared Expectations: How to Make the Most of the Relationship with Your Advisor

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Panelists

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What are the most important aspects of the relationship between the advisor and graduate student?

JT: The relationship should be characterized by growth. You start figuring each other out, and at the end of the period of getting to know each other, there's trust, support, etc. I know when students are ready to graduate when I stop thinking about them as students and see them much more as colleagues. I get this feeling of excitement that we can collaborate. When you know they are collaborators, then you can send them on their way.

PG: Once graduate students defend proposals and are dissertating, I will hand them a moleskin notebook with their name on it. This is their "process book." Finishing their dissertation is all about a process or journey: every day it requires you to travel Olympian heights. It's their guide to go up and down every day. The notebook gets students to write the first page of their dissertation before their idea is fully formed because 50% of the people who drop out never even write a page of their dissertation. The process is an important element.

JL: The relationship is a partnership. To get to trust and productivity, both partners are responsible for managing and growing that partnership. You need to see yourself as that part of the relationship. We are all responsible for what we are trying to achieve. The more attached we are to the growth process, the better.

What do you consider to be the difference between advising and mentoring?

JT: Mentoring is about supporting and nurturing students in their development. Advising is about me delivering the knowledge.

PG: The two are entangled. The role of an advisor is a quasi-sacred trust; it's a lifelong relationship. From that point forward you're going to be in that person's corner, and it will be

great to see how the relationship grows and changes with time. The student is taking on an apprenticeship and the advisor is like a master. Advisors know how to train someone to get to where they can be the master themselves. But for that to happen, it has to be a very particular relationship. It is going to be mostly professional, but you also have to be personal and have to get to know that person as a human being. A good advisor is going to be honest and upfront even about the negative. You need someone who is invested in you as an individual.

JL: You'll have one advisor, but you could have multiple mentors. Don't just limit your mentor to who your advisor is. Always be looking for a mentor. One of the most important things to remember, even beyond graduate school, is it takes both mentoring and putting yourself out there.

What do you wish you would have known in graduate school?

JT: Trust in your resilience. Imposter syndrome is a huge issue for everyone. If you trust the love you have for the subject, you will get through it and bounce back when you feel down. Collaboration is so much more enriching than competition. We all win if we all succeed. This is a much healthier attitude to have. There is room for all of our intellectual ideas.

PG: Don't underestimate the importance of getting support. You're not done yet when you get to the top of the mountain, you have to also come down (a.k.a., the revision process). A lot of this is trial and error, so being aware in advance is helpful. If you want to make it, you have to be driven and self-directed. You need passion and fire in you. An advisor can't always give you passion.

JL: You are not supposed to know everything in the first or even second years. Communicate your expectations to your advisor and be able to advocate for yourself. You're allowed to have expectations for your advisor as well. The advisor-student relationship is a relationship.

What responsibilities should fall on the student?

JT: It's important to know the work that the lab has done before so you can build and move forward. Your responsibility to familiarize yourself with the lab's history and your academic family tree. You are responsible to learn where you sit in this scholarship space. This will help you find your jumping off point.

PG: A good advisor cannot do your work or your thinking. We've all seen people who have gotten a faculty position and they have trouble generating the next idea because their advisor got them there and they did no thinking for themselves. So you need to do the thinking now to set yourself up for success. Grad school allows you to see and determine what ability you have. Advisors have to be accountable and be there for students at certain points. They help the students to flourish. The advisor's job is to provide structure, but the student has to put in the work and meet the deadlines.

JL: Think about what is under your control: motivation, persistence, the sleep you're getting, etc. By doing this you can set yourself up to handle the stresses. Be a good communicator and collaborator. Think of the ethical implications of your work and how that is going to mesh with the community or society in general.

What are tips to getting your advisor to stick with the plan you've mutually created (e.g., giving feedback on drafts) beyond self-advocating?

JT: If you're committed to the relationship, try it in as many different ways as you can to get it to work. An advisor often has multiple students, staff, classes to teach, and projects going on. Time management can slip. Advisors are humans. It's important to appreciate all of the responsibilities that they're juggling. Even if it's not true, believe that they're doing the best they can.

Try different ways to lower the hurdle. For example, go back to them a second time and ask a different way (e.g., going in person or calling instead of email). Try different ways to get what you need and don't give up. Be the squeaky wheel. It's important to remember that it's not just how efficiently you meet the deadlines, you also need someone who is going to give quality feedback, so try to keep in mind the balance of the timeline with high-quality feedback.

PG: It's difficult because you may feel that you're in a compromised position. Try to be as diplomatic and as gentle as possible. They are probably stressed and stretched. Before you begin to research, try to sit down together and ask your advisor how they work and how you can see eye to eye. Be honest. If you get anxious, explain that and make sure that they are aware of it from a "needs" standpoint. If you need them to respond to emails, tell them that you need them to respond.

JL: You can't hold people accountable if you haven't had this conversation. You need to have this conversation, then if someone deviates, you're able to say, "Hey, things are different now, how can we get back to what we agreed upon?" Priority matters: if you are waiting on comments or a paper to come back, ma

Someone mentioned that you need to trust you have the capacity to do well. What does this mean? When has this happened in your career? How do you get past the tougher times?

JT: Questioning yourself is normal, but try to be confident. Don't be overly confident, but find the right balance of confidence. Be confident that if you put your mind to something you can achieve it. Don't waste time on the "what ifs," but spend time on the "how can I?"

PG: Every single person in this call looks in the mirror and thinks they're inadequate. "When am I going to figure out who I am and stop feeling like an imposter?" It's normal to feel this. There are going to be key points you will be able to map on your graduate career where you questioned your life and your decisions. As a mentor and advisor, it's important to normalize it. It's part of the process. At certain points, if you are feeling so lost, you should talk to someone. Talk to

your advisor. Talk to someone outside of the department. It's normal to feel alienated. You're not alone and you can push through it. This can transform a good dissertation into a great dissertation.

JL: Try to limit the number of long-term outcome goals that you focus on. At year 1 or 2, if your goal is completing your dissertation you are going to be overwhelmed. Break things into small goals that will help you move forward. Set small steps forward every morning and evaluate them each evening. Try to take one step every day and before you know it your dissertation will be done.

What are concrete tactics that you can recommend to identify what's the next step?

JT: The best students are highly organized and identify short-term little steps. They have checklists and schedules. That habit of mapping out the way forward in little increments, even though it seems crazy, will work. It also keeps the stress levels down. The dissertation is the combination of all those little steps. With practice, you get better at this. It is so much harder in the beginning than it is in the end. Whatever seemed a difficult step forward, will become much easier later on.

PG: Accomplish something every day. It's terrifying to know others are going to read your work and feel like others are going to discover who you are. But you must confront it. Confronting it is the only way that you are going to succeed. It's not just adding more information; it's the courage you accumulate after getting past the blank page. By thinking about these challenges every day, you will grow in the way you think and perform.

JL: When we fail, we focus on failure and ignore our successes. Find a way to celebrate your successes. Maybe add a dollar to a jar every time you succeed and then treat yourself when it is full. Or track successes by adding sticky notes to the wall. Watch it expand across the wall as you grow as a professional. Attend events, go to the gym; find ways to work on your stress level.

Are you able to manage hobbies and life beyond research?

JT: You need a rich tapestry of life. If that means going to the gym for you, then do that. But there are a lot of ways to enrich your life. Students do better when they have those other things in their life. This is a marathon. And not just the dissertation, it's for your career as well. You are the next generation, and it's up to you to embrace healthy standards now so the culture of academia changes. The pressure never decreases, so your whole life should be focused on well-being.

PG: As an academic, your work never ends and that is difficult to live with. Take on new things. We are all here because we love learning. Find enjoyment in something outside of school. Schedule time to separate from academics.

JL: The big myth is that grad students only focus on their research. However, students are engaging in so much -- they have so many passions and hobbies. The prevailing myth is that you must only focus on your work. We need to break that stereotype. If you can't find passion in the world, you're not going to be motivated and you're not going to persist.

Additional Resources:

Shared Expectations Information and Advisor-Student Conversation Guide:

<https://graduateschool.nd.edu/graduate-training/intellectual-community/sharedexpectations/>

How to Virtually: Manage, Coordinate, and Communicate with your Research Group:

<https://drive.google.com/drive/u/1/folders/1R62y7-I2tCCRMp62tOam81G7epqgHL6f>

<https://provost.nd.edu/news/provost-office-hosting-virtual-professional-development-series-for-faculty/>