

Some Thoughts on Graduate Student Mentoring

by

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**University
Outstanding Graduate Mentor Award
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I am truly honored to have been selected as the recipient of Utah State University's Outstanding Graduate Mentor Award for 2005. I am also deeply touched by the thoughtfulness of both my departmental colleagues and the current and former graduate students who wrote in support of my nomination for the award.



For the past 25 years I have been privileged to work in a department that prioritizes and rewards faculty participation in graduate education. My life and my career have been enriched by opportunities to teach, supervise, advise, and collaborate with many exceptional graduate students at Utah State, both within my own department and in several other USU programs. It has been incredibly rewarding to be able to help students reach their potential, to watch them grow and develop as scholars and researchers, and to see them move on to successful and productive careers. The professional ties and friendships that I continue to enjoy with many former students represent an additional, highly treasured reward that endures long

after their degrees are completed.

Several months have passed since the Graduate Mentor award was announced and I was invited to write this essay, and during that period I've spent considerable time thinking about what I might say here. My experiences working with graduate students have in nearly all cases been deeply rewarding, from my vantage point at least. In most instances I believe that things have also worked out well from my students' perspectives. At the same time, it seems important to acknowledge that there have been a few disappointments and failures along the way. I've worked with several highly capable students who for various reasons have not moved successfully through degree completion. With a few students I've not found a way to establish the kind of rapport and close working relationship that I consider crucial to fostering their success. While with most students it has been hard and even painful both for them and for me to say goodbye when the time arrived for them to leave Logan, I suspect that one or two were entirely happy to leave and never look back. In short, as is probably true for everyone involved in graduate education, I've not managed to establish a perfect batting average!

I'm certain that there is not a single "best" formula or strategy for successful mentoring. Different personal styles, preferences and needs, and the varied personalities of both faculty and students suggest that "different strokes for different folks" may be a more realistic guideline than rigid adherence to any particular set of principles or suggestions. In light of this, what follows is offered not as a definitive set of "best practices" for effective graduate mentoring, but as an attempt to outline some ideas about approaches that have worked well for me, most of the time, with most of my students. Ten years from now my list of ideas about graduate mentoring will most likely be different – some things will probably need to be added, some things changed, some others possibly dropped. In short, I'm still very midstream in the process of learning how to be as effective as possible when mentoring graduate students – and that learning process is a big part of the reason that this is such an enjoyable and stimulating adventure!

With these caveats in mind, I offer the following thoughts regarding some approaches that I hope have helped to make me a more effective graduate mentor:

- Foster student engagement in all phases of the research process.

It is extraordinarily important to provide students with frequent and extensive opportunities for hands-on engagement in research. I believe strongly that graduate students should have direct experience with every element of the research endeavor. In all disciplines there are various relatively tedious and mundane tasks that are inevitable and important parts of any research project – for sociologists these include things like stuffing envelopes with questionnaires, pasting stamps and mailing labels on survey envelopes, and keypunching data into electronic files. While it is necessary for students to know about these components of the research process and the importance of performing them carefully, it is also important that they share in the more challenging and exciting elements of the process as well.

Collaborative involvement in decisions about study design; in the construction of data collection protocols; in all aspects of data collection, organization, and analysis; in preparation of research reports; in presentation of papers at professional meetings; and in authorship of peer-reviewed manuscripts provides a broad range of opportunities for the kinds of hands-on learning needed to build student competence and self-confidence, and helps to generate excitement about research and discovery. Faculty who work side-by-side with students in conducting these tasks and in resolving problems that may arise during the research process encounter many opportunities to demonstrate the application of disciplinary concepts and methodologies, to clarify the rationale for decisions about alternative research strategies, and to point out the consequences of poor decisions and errors of various types. The learning that derives from such experience often extends far beyond what can be accomplished through normal classroom instruction.

- Don't micro-manage – provide room for exploration and individual discovery.

I am convinced that students experience greater success when they can exercise a substantial degree of individual choice with respect to their thesis or dissertation topics, explore new or alternative research interests, try out different theoretical or methodological approaches to a research problem, and make (and learn from) some false starts and mistakes. Students who are handed a pre-packaged research problem and approach and expected to make that the focus of their theses or dissertations are seldom as engaged with or enthusiastic about their projects as those who have more latitude in defining and pursuing a research topic, and less likely to maintain the commitment and energy needed to bring those projects to completion. The thematic focus and analytic needs of faculty research projects that provide assistantship support may impose some constraints on the range of appropriate thesis or dissertation topics. Nevertheless, even when those circumstances exist the boundaries within which students can explore options and identify a topic that stirs their passions should be as broad as possible.

- Provide extensive, constructively critical, and timely feedback and oversight.

At the same time, it is possible to provide too much of a good thing – students do need ample room to explore and grow on their own, but they also require frequent attention, a reasonable degree of direction, and an occasional course correction. Graduate students frequently express frustration (and with good reason) about faculty members who do not provide in-depth feedback on papers, proposals, thesis drafts, or other research products, or who fail to provide such feedback within a reasonable time frame. Papers or thesis and dissertation drafts returned to students without a detailed commentary and exchange on what is good, what is problematic, and how things might be done differently fail to provide the kind of guidance and opportunity for learning that students need and deserve. Progress toward degree completion and in development of conference papers and other similar professional products can be impeded when faculty let weeks, and in some cases months, pass by without providing students with such feedback. I believe that effective graduate education

emerges out of high levels of personal attention, extensive interaction, and a constructive, ongoing dialogue between a faculty member and individual students.

- Strike a balance between “good cop” and “bad cop” roles.

Graduate degree programs are inherently demanding and often highly stressful even for the best-prepared, most capable, and hardest-working students. Successful mentoring requires a sensitivity to those demands and stressors, and an ability to recognize when students might need an extra dose of encouragement, a bit of nurturing, or a gentle pep talk to help keep them motivated, focused, and moving forward.

At the same time, for nearly all students there are occasions – more frequent for some than for others – when a less-than-gentle push (or even a sharp kick) in the right direction is needed. While faculty must at times be supportive and nurturing, they also need to hold students to high standards regarding allocation of effort and the quality of their work. Being supportive and understanding does not imply acceptance of sub-par performance – students need to know clearly that they cannot “cut corners,” and that “good” work is not the same as “good enough to get by.”

- Provide professional socialization experiences and opportunities.

Socialization experiences leading to a clear understanding of the roles, expectations, and responsibilities that accompany professional engagement in a scientific discipline represent a critical component of the graduate education experience, and one that occurs almost entirely outside of the classroom context. Effective professional socialization can be facilitated in a number of key ways.

First, through their own activities and interactions faculty should provide students with a positive role model for professional behavior. Students benefit greatly from the opportunity to work with faculty who are meticulous and careful in conducting research, who maintain high levels of productivity, who are actively engaged in professional associations, who work effectively and comfortably with colleagues, and who display enthusiasm for and commitment to their discipline,

their program or department, and the broader institution in which they work.

Second, faculty can foster the socialization process by creating opportunities for students to learn professional roles and develop the kinds of professional affiliations that are needed to initiate and sustain successful careers. Students who are encouraged to attend and participate actively in professional meetings, present research papers at conferences, submit manuscripts to peer-reviewed journals, serve as reviewers, develop proposals for research funding, and so forth not only have stronger resumes, but they also learn a great deal about the roles and expectations associated with professional engagement in their disciplines.

Finally, faculty who are themselves professionally active and engaged can be highly effective in helping students to develop professional roles and linkages. Faculty should be conscientious about introducing their students to colleagues and peers at meetings, involving them in multi-investigator research activities, and otherwise helping them to develop the professional networks that are often crucial to future success when searching for employment, identifying potential collaborators, and pursuing other forms of professional engagement.

- Develop lasting friendships and collaborations.

The relationships that develop between faculty members and graduate students are, like those between a parent and a teenage son or daughter, complex and multifaceted. Faculty are expected to function as evaluators of student performance, often as employers and supervisors, and even on occasion as authoritarian task masters – all roles that can at times create tensions between faculty and their students. However, the close working relationships that hopefully build over time between a faculty mentor and his or her graduate students can also lend themselves to the emergence of rewarding professional collaborations and enduring personal friendships.

Faculty need to accomplish something of a balancing act as they engage in these very different types of roles and relationships with their students. It can be difficult to play the role of evaluator and

supervisor with a student who has become a very close friend; it can also be difficult to work closely and collaborate effectively with a student who has not also become something of a friend. Fortunately, faculty-student relationships generally evolve and change over the period of time when students are pursuing their degrees, with an initial foundation involving evaluation and supervision that gradually transforms into a relationship based more and more on collaboration and friendship. A somewhat bittersweet characteristic of graduate student mentoring is the fact that as faculty we often develop friendships with students whose degree completion and professional success will soon require that they move on to other, often distant, roles and activities. While those departures are often painful for both the faculty member and the now-former student, they also represent a point when the faculty-student relationship can transition into the kind of long-term professional collaborations that generally require a foundation in friendship as well as in shared research interests.

In my experience this final observation represents a key reason why involvement in graduate education is such a rewarding and enriching experience. I take joy and pride in the things that my current and former students accomplish, not because those accomplishments reflect well on me or my program but because I care about each of them as individuals who have touched and improved my life. I relish the opportunities to see former students at meetings, to talk with them on the telephone, to provide continued support and encouragement, to share stories and laughs, and to work together as peers. In the overall scheme of things I have learned as much from my students as they have learned from me – and I am indebted to each and every one of them.