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**Why Aren't You Talking?**

*By KAREN HEAD*

Graduate students often have no idea how to communicate with their advisers.

In my job at a teaching and learning center, I have a unique opportunity to work with graduate students across the disciplines. The thing I most enjoy is that I can be an intricate part of a graduate student's research — specifically the presentation and publication of that work — without ever having to actually assess it in the traditional sense.

My job focuses on the students and their needs, which means they feel comfortable telling me almost anything. Their professional identities are not threatened by my perceptions of their research or career goals.

Many faculty members imagine that I spend most of my time helping students write and revise their theses and dissertations or improve their presentation skills. That does take up a great deal of my time, but the issue I discuss most with graduate students is much more fundamental to their success: Graduate students have no idea how to actually work with — or even talk to — their advisers.

Generally the scene in my office goes something like this: A student arrives and collapses into a chair with a great exhalation, followed by silence. When I ask if there is a problem, the fidgeting begins. Then the student lurches forward (almost falling out of the chair) and, in some cases, begins to cry. Invariably, the conversation begins with some form of the following statement:

"My adviser hates me."

When I ask why the student thinks so, I hear any number of explanations. Among the most common:

* My adviser offers me no direction or advice.
* He is a micromanager.
* She doesn't support me.
* He doesn't think my work is up to standard.
* She never talks to me.
* He forces me to do extra work.
* She is never around.
* He doesn't like women/men.
* She gives me all the lousy jobs.
* He likes the other lab members better.

Often those reasons cannot be substantiated in any way other than by vague feelings. If that is the case, I insist that the students take time to consider whether their complaints are rational or a reflection of the stress-filled environment that is graduate school.

Since all graduate students are accustomed to doing research, I require them to produce some evidence. Once we have actual evidence, we can determine cause and, perhaps, change the effect.

Generally my next question is whether the students have ever discussed the problem directly with their advisers.

I am no statistician, but I would say the odds are near 100 percent that they have not. I have a better chance of winning the lottery than finding the situation otherwise.

It seems that while most graduate students expect to be the center of their mentor's universe, those same students do absolutely nothing to develop a professional relationship with that adviser.

One of the most important aspects of going to graduate (or professional) school is, in fact, learning how to be a professional. I sympathize with graduate students because it is easy to get lost in the roles they must balance. Graduate students are just that: students.

But they also may be engaged in solitary research (in which they are the foremost expert on a technique or issue). They may be autonomous lecturers responsible for teaching a large number of undergraduates. In those cases, the graduate students are already acting as professionals in their fields — and usually expect to be accorded a level of respect appropriate to such professionalism.

Oddly, though, that confident, professional persona seems to crumble when the graduate student is in the presence of a dissertation adviser. The fear of the adviser's disapproval is so strong that the student will not ask questions — about anything.

At times I feel as if my job is to demonstrate a profound grasp of the obvious. For example, I might tell a student, "You really must schedule a meeting with your adviser to discuss why all of this extra work is an impediment to the progress you are expected to make on your dissertation."

My suggestion is generally received with disbelief: "I can do that?"

Not only can you do that, you must. Your adviser is probably not even aware there is a problem. You and your adviser must develop a relationship that encourages communication. As a graduate student, you need to understand that you are responsible for setting your own professional goals. Your mentor has many other responsibilities in addition to advising you (and not just you; most advisers have several graduate students for whom they are responsible).

Your adviser may not be ignoring you so much as being busy with his or her own research, committee work, teaching, or tenure case. Conscientious graduate students set goals and design a work plan complete with specific to-dos and a timeline. They schedule appointments to evaluate (or re-evaluate) their progress, even if the adviser doesn't suggest it.

Ultimately, you may have to accept changes in your plans based on your adviser's needs and expectations. However, part of earning professional status means learning to negotiate — especially about your own work goals.

Advisers, especially the ones most inclined to micromanage, need to allow (and even force) their graduate students to take more responsibility for creating a plan to get through the degree program in a timely manner.

Those of you who are advisers need to remind yourselves what it was like to be a graduate student and anticipate problems. You have a responsibility to meet with your graduate students frequently enough to develop a good sense of their strengths and weaknesses.

In some cases, you must be dictatorial, but allowing your students to make decisions (even bad ones) will help them make better professional choices in the future. And you will have more time for your own work if you are not attempting to make every decision for them.

Essentially, problems between advisers and graduate students almost always occur because of a lack of communication. Advisers and their graduate-student protégés have a common goal: create the best new professionals in a field. Having frequent and mutually respectful conversations will help everyone arrive at a successful outcome.

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