



# Strategic Intervention For Doctoral Completion

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## Student and Faculty Perceptions of the Advisor-Advisee Relationship

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### BACKGROUND

Undeniably, supervised doctoral studies can be conceived of as a mentor-protégé relationship in which one person exerts considerable control over the other person's life, learning, and future career. Consequently, how the student and the advisor relate to each other is an important factor for the students' completion of doctoral studies.

In fact, some people assert that the biggest, single factor in doctoral completion is the advisor-advisee relationship. Many noncompleters give accounts of how their advisors' shortcomings led to their noncompletion; whereas, many students who have completed, and are satisfied, point to the relationships with their advisors as a major motivating force leading to their completion.

This study is based on a conceptual model consisting of four conditions that our project team believes to be necessary for optimal doctoral completion (see Table 1). The four conditions for optimal completion were compiled from the literature on the topic (CGS, 2003; Golde and Dore, 2001; Lovitts, 2001). In this particular study, we focused on Condition 3: Students and faculty form productive working relationships.

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Table 1. Necessary Conditions for Optimal Doctoral Completion

Condition # 1: The right people apply for doctoral study
Condition # 2: The right applicants are admitted as doctoral students
Condition # 3: Students and faculty form productive working relationships
Condition # 4: Students experience social support from fellow students

### PURPOSE

The purpose of this particular study was to explore student and faculty perceptions of the advisor-advisee relationship. The two research questions were: What constitutes a good relationship between an advisor and an advisee? What constitutes a poor relationship between an advisor and an advisee?

### METHODS

#### Sample

Sixty participants, 30 faculty members and 30 doctoral students from 15 programs in seven areas participated in this study. Each program nominated two faculty members and two students to serve as respondents in this study. In nominating respondents, program administrators were asked to base their choice on the participants' familiarity with, and knowledge of the individual programs. Participating programs consisted mainly of the STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) fields. However, other programs representing the humanities and social sciences were also included. The 15 programs are identified in the matrix represented in Table 2.

Table 2. Participating Programs

Programs	The University of Georgia	The University of Florida	North Carolina State University
Economics	X	X	X
History	X	X	
Sociology	X	X	X
Chemistry	X	X	X
Civil Engineering		X	X
Genetics	X		X

The Graduate School, The University of Georgia

Two researchers from the University of Georgia conducted the interviews. We made several attempts by telephone and email to contact the participants. Of the 30 students nominated for the study, 27 students (90%) participated. Participation rate for the 30 faculty members was 28 or 93%.

#### *Instrumentation*

We collected the data using a semi-structured interview guide as the primary data collection tool. The questions focused on the four conditions in our conceptual model. The questionnaires were parallel; though some questions were slightly altered to fit each group. The faculty questionnaire consisted of six questions while the students' version had seven questions. The questions were designed to obtain the participants' perspectives on six distinct areas:

- Why some students complete doctoral studies and others do not;
- The type of program information given to students and its usefulness in helping students select the most appropriate program;
- Graduate admissions protocol and whether they (the participants) believe the process is an effective selection process;
- The relationship between doctoral students and their advisors;
- The different ways students support each other or do not support each other;
- Departmental practices that support doctoral completion, or practices which, if implemented, may improve conditions for doctoral completion.

We asked the interview questions in the same sequence except in those situations that warranted deviations. Each participant was interviewed by telephone. Individual interviews took an average of 30 to 35 minutes to complete. We audiotaped and later transcribed all interviews.

#### *Data Analysis*

We collected the data over a period of two months (May 2005 through June 2005) and used qualitative content analysis to analyze the data. Comments from both faculty members and students relating to Condition 3 (see again Table 1) were

extracted and compiled into a single data set. We studied the data and coded the primary themes that emerged. Emergent themes in each data set were then compared for similarities, relationships and patterns.

#### **FINDINGS**

The two research questions established the framework for analysis of the data related to Condition 3. The bulk of the data on which these findings were based was gathered from three interview questions:

1. *Some students finish doctoral studies and others do not. Can you tell me why?*
2. *Can you describe a good relationship between a doctoral student and a dissertation advisor? Can you describe a poor relationship between a doctoral student and a dissertation advisor?*
3. *Can you tell me some things your department does well to support doctoral completion? Can you tell me some things your department can do better to support doctoral completion?*

Faculty members' responses revealed that faculty perspectives were rooted in wider frames of references than the students'. They made more inclusive statements than students and addressed a much wider array of issues relating to doctoral completion. Students, in comparison, focused on fewer issues specific to their individual experiences and directly related to the completion of their dissertation.

Despite the differences in breadth of opinions, both faculty and students generally agreed on what made a productive or non-productive advisor – advisee relationship. The four salient findings from each category are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3. Productive and Non-productive Working Relationship between Advisor and Advisee

Productive relationships are characterized by:

- Clarification of individual roles
- Open, respectful, regular, timely, positive communication of information

- Clearly outlined goals and expectations
- Collaborative action toward the attainment of mutual goals

Non-productive relationships are characterized by:

- Unclear expectations and goals
- Inadequate, untimely, negative, irregular feedback
- Lack of, or too much, independence
- Inaccessibility to each other

The most frequently mentioned finding contributing to the sort of working relationship, both faculty and students felt was necessary, “to grow the student into a successful Ph.D.” was *clarification of advisor and advisee roles*. Even so, both groups had different perspectives on what each other’s roles were. For example, faculty perceived their roles as wide-ranging, including that of advisor, coach, mentor, colleague, supporter, friend, and facilitator. Students, on the other hand, generally perceived faculty roles as that of an advisor--a leader and a guide --one who outlines goals and expectations and provides guidance on how to achieve them.

The *level and quality of interaction between advisor and advisee* was a second important finding. Both faculty and students felt that hallmarks of good, advisor-advisee relationships were open, regular, timely, respectful, professional communication; however, students mostly described this type of communication as what students expected from faculty members. The data did not reveal whether students felt faculty should have similar expectations about the way students communicate with them. Faculty, in comparison, spoke of this open interaction as reciprocal.

The need for *clearly articulated goals and expectations* as a basis for productive working relationships between advisors and advisees, was also a consistent theme throughout the data. Most faculty members envisioned the formation of goals and expectations as a collaborative effort (each group having a voice) between the student and the advisor. Even though, some students shared perspectives similar to that of the faculty, the majority of students expressed different viewpoints. The majority

group felt it was the advisor’s responsibility to outline the goals and expectations while it was the student’s responsibility to meet them.

Despite some students’ viewpoints that the formation of goals and expectations was primarily the advisor’s responsibility, they nevertheless agreed, as did faculty, that *collaboration between advisee and advisor* was a strong indicator of a productive working relationship between student and advisor. Most faculty members and students interviewed, reported positive experiences in this area and used the positive aspects of their experiences to support the importance of collaboration in working relationship.

### Non-Productive Working Relationships

The findings show there were some similarities in the themes, which emerged from questions about good advisor-advisee relationships and those that emerged from questions about poor advisor-advisee relationships. *Unclear goals and expectations followed by inadequate, untimely, negative, irregular feedback* were the two themes that surfaced most often.

Both groups saw these as negative characteristics; however, students were especially emphatic that the absence of clear goals and expectations and appropriate levels of feedback were strong deterring factors in their relationship with their advisors and in their completion of the dissertation.

Other findings relating to a poor relationship were *students’ inappropriate levels of independence*. Mostly advisors expressed this concern; mostly students expressed its converse, too much independence. Faculty felt lack of independence was detrimental to the working relationship because it “sometimes tends to stunt intellectual growth.” While students were not averse to some independence in the relationship, their concern was primarily the degree of independence. The findings suggest most students were averse to relationships that were “coddling supportive” or “micromanaging.” Rather, they wanted a balance between independence, structure, direction, and support from their advisors.

The final of the four most salient findings on what makes a non-productive advisor-advisee relationship is *lack of access to each other*. Participants were unanimous in expressing the perspective that one of the ingredients of an unsuccessful relationship is inaccessibility--on both sides. Students interpreted an advisor's inaccessibility as either not caring or forgetfulness. They rarely commented on their own inaccessibility. Faculty members attributed faculty's inaccessibility to their involvement in too many projects and not enough time. They attributed students' inaccessibility to the "student's refusal to respond to efforts to encourage the kind of research or progress that is needed" or the student's comfort level in approaching the faculty member.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PROGRAM IMPROVEMENT

Faculty members have a responsibility to their field and to the university, to ensure excellence and to train students in their field's knowledge. This involves explicit teaching, upholding standards and advising students in a manner that meets their needs. Students are the future faculty; they bear the responsibility to "carry the torches." It is in this spirit that we make the following suggestions to improve doctoral completion.

### 1. Universities need to examine the nature of the communication and the perceptions about positionality and power surrounding doctoral advisement.

Students and faculty members need to be aware that there are complexities within the advisor-advisee relationship and, like all long-term human relationships, there will be "ups and downs". Therefore, the ability to communicate wants, negotiate expectations and discuss problems become critical factors in doctoral completion. Relationships cannot develop without the ability and opportunity, for both parties, to initiate communication.

### 2. Faculty must take the lead and help students develop realistic expectations about the advisor-advisee relationship through dialogue and departmental publications.

Although dissertation advisors have worked with many students, students have worked with only one major advisor. They are not as adept at building advisee-advisor relationship and sometimes

may have unrealistic expectations. When these expectations are not clarified both the working relationship between the advisor and the advisee and the students' goal to complete their Ph.D., are ultimately affected. Subsequently, students need explicit guidance to know what to expect from their advisor and to take the guesswork out of the relationship.

### 3. Faculty should work with students to clarify individual roles.

Role clarification is an integral part of any relationship, including that of advisor and advisee. So that both parties create productive working relationships, students and advisors' roles in the completion of the dissertation should be a key topic of discussion in program marketing strategies, student orientations, and program information sharing.

### 4. Programs should recognize faculty who have exceptional results at helping doctoral students complete the program.

The success of advisor-advisee relations should become "part and parcel" of the advisor's annual review. Programs should play special attention to the successes of advisors in assisting students to complete the program. In the case of advisors who are exceptionally successful, good work should be recognized, and it should be a favorable factor in the review. In the case of faculty who are having persistent problems in helping students to complete the program, the department should implement ways to assist them to higher levels of success.

### 5. Programs should institute mentor recognition programs at both the undergraduate and graduate levels.

Commenting on why students complete the doctoral program, one faculty member said, "...another reason why students who do finish, finish, is because of having a mentor, a research professor, a chair of the supervising committee who is committed to [his or her] obligation to educate the next generation of Ph.D. students." Programs should create mentorship programs at the faculty, graduate and undergraduate levels.

This practice will help to create a culture of appreciation for good mentorship.

## 6. A FINAL RECOMMENDATION....

Although this did not emerge from these data, it seems unrealistic to assume that all advisor-advisee relationship can work. Even good faculty with good students, experience interpersonal disconnects. Consequently, departments must have some protocols for assessing the productivity of these relationship and for allowing, whenever possible, dysfunctional non-productive relationships to be replaced with relationships that are conducive to doctoral completion.

## USEFUL RESOURCES

### Books & Articles

- Baird, L. (1974). The practical utility of measures of college environments. *Review of Educational Research*, 44, 307-330.
- Bowen, W., & Rudenstine, N. (1992). *In pursuit of the Ph.D.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Gell, S. (1996). Factors associated with completion or non-completion of doctoral dissertations: Self-direction and advisor/advisee congruity. *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 56, 4292A.
- Gilbert, L.A. (1985). Dimensions of same-gender student-faculty role-model relationships. *Sex Roles*, 12, 111-123.
- Golde, C., & Dore, T. (2001). At Cross Purposes: What the experiences of doctoral students reveal about doctoral education. *Science*, 291, 5503, 408-409.
- Golde, C. (1996). How departmental contextual factors shape doctoral student attrition. *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 57, 3415A.
- Isangedighi, A. (1985). Correlates of graduate students' relationship with faculty member. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 1, 121-127.
- Lovitts, B. (2001). *Leaving the ivory tower: The causes and consequences of departure from doctoral study*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Quinn, E. (1991). Doctoral student retention and selected personal factors. *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 52, 3200A.

**Web sites:**

Council of Graduate Schools (2004). *Ph.D. Completion Project*. Retrieved October 15, 2005, from <http://www.phdcompletion.org>

Nelson, C., & Lovitts, B. (2001). Ten ways to keep graduate students from quitting. Retrieved August 12, 2004, from <http://chronicle.com>.

Weis, J. (1993). Identification of mentoring constructs that are related to the attainment of career goals of recent doctoral degree recipients in education. Retrieved August 16, 2004, from <http://weber.ucsd.edu/~eparent/>.

*Workshop on graduate student attrition*. (1997). Washington: National Science Foundation, Division of Science Resources Studies. Retrieved on August 15, 2004, from <http://www.nsf.gov/sbe/srs/nsf98322/qualit.htm>

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