

## **Your Faculty Advisor:**

# Getting the Relationship Right

One aspect of graduate school that can be frustrating for students, says Richard Kiely, Department of Lifelong Education, Administration, and Policy, is working with faculty advisors and committee members. Students and faculty alike have intensive workloads and limited time. How should a busy student communicate with a busy advisor? School and departmental protocols can be complicated. What are the student's responsibilities and what are the advisor's responsibilities? By doing the right research, acting professionally and avoiding a few common missteps, graduate students can negotiate healthy and successful relationships with faculty.

### **Do Your Homework: The Department**

The first step to a healthy relationship with your advisor is choosing the right faculty member for the job. Before you make that decision, you'll need to get a feel for the culture of your department. How formal is the expected relationship between graduate students and faculty members? Do faculty members prefer e-mail or in-person communications, scheduled appointments or office-hour drop-ins?

Get to know your professors, peers and the administrative staff. Check your department's Web page to learn a little about faculty members' research and publications. Be polite to office managers: they often know the most about department protocol and requirements and may be the ones who actually make things happen. Ask other graduate students about the personalities and working styles of professors. (Don't rule anyone out, though, based solely on another student's opinion.) Join clubs, committees and organizations to get to know students and faculty – and let them get to know you – outside the classroom.

### **Do Your Homework: The Field**

Next, you'll need to know something about your field in order to know where your research and career interests fit in and which faculty members can best help you pursue them. Be familiar with the major journals and conferences in your field. When you can't attend a conference, read the papers being presented (they're usually available online). Identify the major issues and debates in your field. This will give you ideas for research topics as well as an informed way to talk with faculty members. Once you figure out

where you fall in terms of the field-wide issues and where the faculty members in your department fit in, you will be better prepared to choose an advisor who specializes in the research and career path you want to pursue.

### **Choose an Advisor and Committee Members**

First, know the sequence and time frame of your degree and the protocol for putting together committees. That way, you'll know how many committee members you need, when to choose an advisor and how to go about it. Start with the department's Web site.

Next, make a list of your personal criteria for an advisor based on your knowledge of the field, your working style and your educational and professional goals. Are you looking for someone who is very accessible and willing to be a mentor? Do you want someone who is prominent in the field, even though he or she may be less accessible? (Your advisor should be accessible. Ask the prominent but less available faculty to be on your committee.) Do you need a lot of structure and oversight, or more freedom and less guidance? What are your research interests that an advisor should share? Following department protocol, approach the faculty member who best fits your personal criteria about serving as your advisor.

### **Starting Off on the Right Foot: Be Professional**

Soon after assembling your committee, convene an informal meeting with your committee members. Bring a resume, curriculum vitae and/or list of courses you've taken to show that you are a professional and that they will not have to hold your hand. Let them know what your goals are and how you'd like them to help you. Ask about their expectations of you and the roles everyone should play. Present committee members with a preliminary timeline for completing your program. Ask them whether your timeline is feasible and, if not, how you should adjust it.

Stay on top of paperwork and deadlines. Most professors will expect you to simply bring them forms to be signed at the appropriate times. Ultimately, everything you do in graduate school, from coursework to research to paperwork, is your responsibility. Keep records about major deadlines, assignments and paperwork.

Take responsibility for nurturing the relationship with your advisor. Remember, professors' workloads are time-consuming. Don't take it as a personal slight if they are slow to return e-mails. When you request a meeting, let the faculty member know what you want to talk about and come prepared with a list of questions. Always send e-mail reminders one week, and again one day, before meetings. If you become inaccessible, send a quick e-mail to let faculty advisors know what's going on and that you haven't disappeared.

### **Maintaining the Relationship: What Not to Do**

Don't establish an overly dependent relationship with your advisor or committee members. If you can find the information or complete the task yourself, do so.

Don't get defensive about feedback on assignments, paper presentations or in your thesis or dissertation defense. When feedback is constructive, use it; when it's not constructive, smile and let it go.

Don't get into crisis mode. Don't take out your deadline stress on staff members or make a habit of missing deadlines, asking for extensions or making excuses. If you are calm and organized on a regular basis, faculty, staff and peers will be more willing to help you when the true crises occur.

Don't take your committee members' time for granted and don't let them own your life, either. It may be hard to negotiate parameters with your major professor or lab manager, but try to set some limits and stick to them. If you can't work out limits with your advisor, talk to your peers or someone in the Graduate School for advice. ■

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*Based on the Graduate School seminar "Developing and Maintaining Relationships with Your Faculty Advisor and Committee Members: A Recipe for Success" by Richard Kiely, Department of Lifelong Education, Administration, and Policy. To view this seminar in full, visit <http://www.grad.uga.edu>.*

### **Reasons Advisors Want to End the Relationship**

- Student does not communicate consistently.
- Student does not respond well to feedback.
- Student does not meet deadlines and stay on top of requirements.
- Student comes to meetings unprepared.
- Student is not independent, demands too much of the professor's time.
- Student shows no desire to finish the program.

### **Reasons Students Want to End the Relationship**

- Advisor doesn't listen to the student's needs, concerns, issues.
- Advisor doesn't provide consistent, useful and/or positive feedback.
- Advisor has unreasonable expectations or is too demanding of the student's time.
- Advisor doesn't communicate well and/or is inaccessible.
- Advisor doesn't mentor or offer guidance.
- Advisor doesn't work well with other committee members.
- Advisor isn't interested in student's research topic or doesn't believe in the validity of his/her approach.
- Advisor acts inappropriately. (Contact the Graduate School immediately for guidance if you feel a faculty member has acted inappropriately.)