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A NEWSLETTER FOR GRADUATE STUDENTS
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CHOOSING YOUR MAJOR ADVISER

The choice of a person to guide your thesis or dissertation research and writing is among the most important decisions you will make as a graduate student. Choosing the right or wrong adviser, while not necessarily a make-or-break proposition, can mean the difference between a smooth or troublesome journey to your degree.

How do you choose a major adviser? What do you want from that person? What is a mentor, and do you need one to succeed in graduate school?

To answer these questions, we talked to several Berkeley doctoral students who say they have a generally good relationship with their major advisers. Not surprisingly, most requested anonymity, reflecting the importance and sensitivity of this relationship.

We found that the fit between the adviser and advisee is as unique as the individuals involved. Some students considered their major advisers friends as well as teachers, others had strictly professional relationships; some considered their advisers to be mentors, others did not; some were lucky enough to be assigned their eventual major advisers as graduate advisers when they first arrived on campus, others had to seek out appropriate major advisers. No one's relationship with his or her adviser was absolutely perfect, as few relationships are, but each had forged one that satisfied his or her particular needs.

YOUR GRADUATE ADVISER VS. MAJOR ADVISER

When most students arrive on campus, they are assigned a *graduate adviser* by their departments. Graduate advisers are nominated by department chairs and appointed by the Dean of the Graduate Division, who acts on behalf

of the Graduate Council. The graduate adviser helps students select a program of study and maintains the records of the advisees. A *major adviser*, or dissertation adviser, is usually chosen by the student, rather than assigned, and usually later in his or her graduate career.

Although some of the students we spoke with ended up choosing their graduate advisers as their major advisers, most of the time that was not the case. In fact, several students said it was "the luck of the draw" whether or not they received good advice during the course work phase of graduate school.

"I was extremely fortunate," says a student in the social sciences. "My department assigns people by their area of interest, and the adviser I was assigned was great, and I never wanted anybody else. But I know some students who got little or no attention from their assigned adviser and, depending on the student, they had a much harder time."

A student in the humanities, who says she never had the same graduate adviser for two consecutive years during the course work phase of graduate school, says she found her department's system confusing.

"Different faculty had different ideas about what satisfied various course requirements," she says. "So you would negotiate with your adviser on what would fill a course requirement for the next semester, and then that next semester you would have a different adviser and would have to renegotiate the whole thing again. That part was rough."

In the sciences, it is generally a different story. All members of the incoming class usually are assigned an

adviser who works out a course schedule with each student. But a major difference in advising between the sciences and other disciplines is that students in the sciences often do lab rotations and get to know the faculty and their labs; ultimately, they are in a position to make a more educated choice about who they want to work with. They are expected to make that choice quickly, usually within the first year. The professor and student commonly see each other daily, and the professor is more involved with the student's day-to-day progress. This kind of contact often (but not always) makes it easier for the mentor-protégé relationship to develop.

MATCHING YOUR NEEDS WITH THE RIGHT ADVISER

During the course work phase of graduate school, you should start to look at your professors and evaluate them as potential major advisers. Find out where they're headed in their own research and decide whether it's compatible with your interests. Will a potential adviser be around when you need help? Is he or she doing extensive field research, facing a tenure decision, or planning to retire?

If you find a professor you think you might be able to work with, try to enroll in a small seminar or advanced course the person teaches. If there's a job opening as a Graduate Student Instructor (GSI) or Graduate Student Researcher (GSR) with the professor, apply for the position. Make yourself and your work familiar to the professor and be familiar with his or her work as it is related to your topic.

Take a good hard look at yourself when you seriously begin to look for someone to guide your thesis or dissertation research and writing. The advice we heard most from students on finding the right adviser is simple: Know what you need.

"If you are not a self-starter and need to be encouraged, prodded, or

whatever to get through, find someone who is going to give you that," says a student in the professional schools. "If you're a self-starter, find someone who knows a lot about what you're interested in studying, who is accessible, and who can give you feedback in a reasonable amount of time."

Richard Moore, author of *Winning the Ph.D. Game*, believes that the main requirements for a dissertation adviser are that he or she is really interested in your project, able to help you deal with the other members of your committee, and capable of helping you get the resources you need to complete your dissertation. One way to evaluate a potential adviser on these requirements is do what a student in the biological sciences advises: Check into the professor's track record with students.

"Look at the time it takes for the professor's students to get through the program," he says. "Find other students who are working with that professor and talk to them about their experiences. Be sure to find out what has happened to the professor's former students. It's important to know if they got funded as postdocs (if applicable) and how they have done in the job market."

And, of course, personality is important. If you don't feel you can be open and honest with your adviser, the relationship may be doomed from the start.

"Find someone you feel comfortable talking to," advises a humanities student. "Everyone runs into places in the dissertation where she or he feels stuck, and sometimes being able to talk about the problem solves it. But you have to be able to do that."

If you're a student in the sciences, you have an additional consideration when choosing your adviser. You will probably be working in the adviser's lab, and you need to make sure you can work there.

"Spend time in the lab," says a student in the biological sciences. "You will probably be spending at least 40 hours a week in that environment, and you'd better be comfortable there."

A student in the physical sciences adds that, while not necessary for success, it helps if your adviser's lab is

well-funded.

"My adviser has solid funding, and he's been able to give me GSR positions and send me to conferences," she says. "Because of that funding, I've been able to finish faster and to make more contacts than students whose professors are not as well-funded."

A MENTOR?

In the ideal world, your dissertation adviser might also be your mentor. Some students find this kind of relationship, and others go through graduate school without ever finding a mentor. What is a mentor, and do you really need one?

We found that a mentor is different things to different people. Two of the five students we talked to feel that their dissertation advisers are mentors. Two students do not consider their advisers mentors, but feel the relationship they have with their advisers lacks nothing and fills their needs. The fifth student has carved out a good working relationship with his adviser, yet feels something is lacking, and, as a result, thinks he has become much more self-directed and self-motivated. Surprisingly, some of the people who feel they don't have or need a mentor do have an adviser who gives them many of the same things a mentor would.

In *Mentor/Mentoring: What It Is and What It Means to Me*, UC Postdoctoral Fellow Refugio I. Rochin defines a mentor as an adviser who helps students set goals and standards, develops students' skills, protects students from failures, and advises them on appropriate and feasible dissertation topics. The mentor also facilitates the student's entry into academic and professional circles. He adds that the relationship between student and adviser is based on mutual acceptance and respect.

A student in the physical sciences who feels she has found a mentor in her adviser thinks that the "chemistry" between the two parties is a key.

"I think it all has to do with personalities clicking," she says. "I liked my adviser the minute I met him and found him very upfront and easy to talk to. I knew that he would always tell me what he thought, and that was impor-

tant to me."

But she adds that she doesn't think she could have worked with the same professor ten years ago.

"I think he's reached the mentor stage in his career," she says. "I suspect that ten years ago he was much too driven to be a good mentor."

A social sciences student who considers her adviser to be a mentor says she also sees her adviser as a role model.

"I admire her deeply, and in many ways I am aspiring to be like her," she says. "She gives me the things I need, especially honest criticism, yet she doesn't flatten me. Her style works for me, but I can see where it wouldn't work for everyone."

Other students who don't consider their advisers to be mentors nevertheless are perfectly happy with the relationship they have with their major advisers.

"I have trouble with the word 'mentor' because it sounds almost paternalistic to me," says a humanities student. "I consider my adviser to be my teacher in the best sense of the word. I've learned a lot from her both academically and personally, but we're not the same person."

A student in the biological sciences says his adviser's style doesn't invite the mentor-protégé relationship.

"He's very much into encouraging you to be independent," he says. "I tend to be a fairly independent person, so I found it quite easy to get along in his lab."

He adds that students in his professor's lab do tend to take longer to finish than other students in the department.

"He doesn't offer advice unless you ask for it," he says. "And you have to know what to ask in order to get the best advice. If you aren't aggressive and somewhat independent, it will probably take more time to get your project done."

Some students do not find the traditional mentor in their dissertation advisers, but work out a successful relationship with the best person they can find.

"I see it as people envisioning their roles in different ways," says a student in the professional schools. "I expected

my dissertation adviser to be a warm, open, mentoring person, and my adviser's personality is such that we have never really become friends."

But after much thought, this student decided to stay with his adviser even though their personalities and expectations of their roles were quite different.

"He was the key person to work with on my topic," he says. "Even though I will probably always feel our relationship could have been more, he has given me the time and guidance I've needed to finish."

FINDING HELP ELSEWHERE

What do you do if you can't find the perfect mentor as a major adviser? The solution may be a network of mentors who can help you with various aspects of your career development. For anyone who is having a hard time finding a traditional mentor, the choice of the other committee members becomes all the more important.

When you think about who the other members of your committee will be, consider the professional strengths and weaknesses of your major adviser. Is your adviser the ideal person to work with on your topic but not tied into professional organizations or the job market in a way that will help you find a position eventually? Will he or she be able to get you through any administrative problems you might have and over any tough spots that come up while you're writing your thesis or dissertation?

If you don't think all your needs can be filled by your major adviser (and it's common that they can't), look around for committee members who can help you in ways your major adviser may not be able to. An example of this is the committee of a former graduate student who earned a Ph.D. here, who chose a committee with an eye to people who could help him with both the immediate task of writing his dissertation and with his future concerns about finding a position.

"I knew my committee chair could help me through any administrative problem I might have, and I really liked him," the former student says, "even though he was not really an expert in my field."

As a second reader, the student chose a faculty member who was an expert in the specific area, who would give advice only on the dissertation, and with whom the student did not have as personal a relationship. The third reader was the "outside" person on the committee, who read looking to the issues in her specialty. The fourth member was also an expert on a specific element of the dissertation, and, more importantly, was tied into professional networks that the student wanted access to. (According to Graduate Division regulations, under special circumstances doctoral students in Plan B can have up to four members on their committees, although three is the usual number.)

"My major adviser was wonderful in a lot of ways, but he really didn't know much about professional organizations and publishing," the former student explains. "I needed someone who knew a lot of people."

And ultimately, it was the fourth reader who helped him find a post-doctoral position.

ASK! ASK! ASK!

Our discussions with students con-

vinced us that it's up to *you* to ask for the help you need. Think about what you want from your major adviser and the rest of your committee and devise strategies to make it easy for them to give it to you. (If you need a boost of confidence to take on this intimidating task, read the list of what students can expect from faculty, which appears at the bottom of this page.)

For example, if you are having trouble getting one of your committee members to read parts of your dissertation in a timely manner, make an appointment to talk about what you have written at the time you submit a chapter to a committee member for review. Professors need deadlines, too. One student found that becoming friends with a professor's assistant was a good strategy. The assistant would remind the often absent-minded professor of specific deadlines.

Take the initiative in your dealings with your adviser. If it's important in your field to attend conferences and give papers, approach your adviser when you think you have a paper to give and ask for advice on where to give the paper or how to form a panel at a conference. Sometimes it helps to

WHAT CAN STUDENTS EXPECT FROM MAJOR ADVISERS?

Graduate students have the right to:

- Initiate meetings with their advisers;
- Receive guidance in preparing for the qualifying exam;
- Get help with selecting a thesis or dissertation topic and developing a proposal;
- Meet regularly with their major advisers to discuss progress on their theses or dissertations and to get specific comments on problems and what needs to be done to correct them;
- Establish a schedule for reading chapters of theses or dissertations, and to remind faculty of these deadlines;
- Change topics, major advisers, and membership of their committees;
- Have letters of recommendation for fellowships, grants, and employment sent by the announced deadlines;
- Receive guidance on becoming professionals in the field, including introductions to other scholars in the discipline and help with preparing talks for scholarly meetings, joining professional organizations, publishing articles, getting grants, and applying and interviewing for positions;
- Seek help from the department chair of graduate advisers or department chair if problems with major advisers cannot be resolved; and
- Request assistance from an Associate Dean of the Graduate Division if problems with major advisers cannot be solved at the departmental level.

set up a regular meeting schedule with your adviser when you are researching and writing your thesis or dissertation. Regular meetings can often solve problems before they get out of hand.

A student in the biological sciences gives some advice that applies to students in all disciplines: Work toward independence.

“You need to learn when to be independent and when to ask for advice,” he says. “You really don’t want someone to make every decision for you throughout your graduate career, because once you’re out, you’re on your own.”

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