

Author's Commentary on "O, What a Tangled Web We Weave!"

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This case study is intended to highlight the differences between "advisers" and "mentors" and to show the positive effects a good mentor can have on a graduate student. Because mentoring can be construed differently across disciplines, clarification is needed. In academic settings, the term "mentor" is often simultaneously associated with the term "faculty adviser." In this case, however, the research adviser and mentor are not only two different people, but also come from different disciplines.

The Committee on Science, Engineering, and Public Policy stated that "A fundamental difference between mentoring and advising is [that mentoring is] more than advising; mentoring is a personal, as well as, professional relationship." (Committee on Science, Engineering, and Public Policy, 1997, 1) Positive mentoring requires effort from both parties involved. A motivated graduate student helps the process of mentoring along, while the professor feels that she is not wasting anyone's time. Unfortunately, there is no optimal formula for positive mentoring. Each situation is complex, with many different factors entering the formula. Mentoring can differ on the basis of discipline, personality type, gender, ethnicity, knowledge of subject matter, and status of graduate student and professor.

The original concept of mentoring is an ancient one. Homer describes the first mentor as the "wise and trusted counselor" who is left in charge of Odysseus' household during his travels. Athena acted as the mentor and became the guardian and teacher of Telemachus, the son of Odysseus. In the context of today's higher education, mentoring has many different facets. A mentor's primary responsibility is to help a graduate student and to take an interest in the student's professional development. This responsibility requires patience, trust, effective communication, good role modeling and understanding from both parties involved. It also requires that both the professor and graduate student fully understand the ethics of research and abide by federal and institutional regulations and guidelines.

Swazey and Anderson suggest that a good mentor be skilled in interpersonal relationships and genuinely interested in the mentee's professional development. In addition, they suggest that the mentor be involved in teaching effective communication skills to the mentee. It is not surprising that research has shown that both faculty and graduate students consider mentoring relationships rare. (Friedman 1987)

An adviser, by contrast, performs more narrow or technical functions such as "informal advising about degree requirements, periodic monitoring of an advisee's research work and progress toward his/her degree" (Swazey and Anderson 1996, 6). In addition, the adviser usually serves as the principal investigator and/or laboratory director for the graduate student's project. In this capacity, the adviser instructs the graduate student on design, methodology, literature review, proposal and other aspects of the dissertation research.

This case study demonstrates the differences between adviser and mentor by suggesting that the two need not be the same person, or even come from the same discipline. Simpson's egregious ethical mistake undermines his position as adviser. Simpson's behavior effectively demonstrates the term "toxic mentoring" coined by Swazey and Anderson (1996). They cite four types of undesirable or "toxic" mentors: "avoiders" - mentors who are neither available nor accessible; "dumpers" - mentors who force novices into new roles and let them "sink or swim"; "blockers" - mentors who continually refuse requests, withhold information, take over projects, or supervise too closely; and "destroyers or criticizers" - mentors who focus on inadequacies. (From Darling 1986, quoted in Mateo et al. 1991, 76)

Although this case study raises several issues, such as whistle blowing and the vulnerable position of being both an advisee and employee, it is important to underscore the differences between the mentor/mentee and adviser/advisee relationship as it may affect the ethical environment for both faculty member and student. Effective communication is paramount in both relationships. Interestingly, a recent survey of graduate students at one university reported that just over half of all graduate students surveyed (52%, with 40% agreeing and 12% strongly agreeing) believe that communication between faculty and graduate students is satisfactory. While that result is gratifying, the survey raises questions about why 48% found communication between graduate students and faculty unsatisfactory.

A positive mentoring relationship can be an important asset to the graduate school process. If properly mentored, graduate students can expect to grow academically, professionally and personally and develop the skills necessary to become mentors themselves in the future. The mentor/mentee relationship cannot be ignored in higher education and should not be confused with the adviser/advisee relationship.

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