It's All Part of the Process: Advising, Coaching, and Mentoring Graduate Students

Simone C. O. Conceição
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee
Raji Swaminathan
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

ABSTRACT

This essay examines doctoral student advising as an essential component of the faculty role in doctoral student retention. The essay breaks down advising from a monolithic catch-all term and instead argues that advising is composed of three progressively expansive roles: adviser, coach, and mentor. The distinctions between the roles are clarified and explained and, finally, several strategies for advising within each role are offered.

Keywords: advising; coaching; graduate; mentoring; students

Introduction

Forty percent of doctoral students who begin a program are unsuccessful in completing it. This high rate of attrition is regarded as one of academia's best-kept secrets (Golde, 2005; Lovitts, 1996). Some of the reasons affecting doctoral-degree progress are personal while others are process-based. Personal reasons include family or health challenges. Process-based reasons are related to the program structure, and they center on the lack of preparation and opportunities to practice research and the relationship between faculty adviser and the doctoral student (Maher, Ford, & Thompson, 2004). This relationship complements the type of doctoral experience a student is likely to have, particularly since students tend to look to their advisers for tacit knowledge, such as survival strategies for learning the culture of higher education (Sullivan, 1991; Egan, 1989). This essay examines doctoral student advising as an essential component of the faculty role in doctoral student retention. The essay breaks down advising from a monolithic catch-all term and instead argues that advising comprises three progressively expansive roles; that of adviser, coach, and mentor. The distinctions between the roles are clarified and explained and finally, several strategies for advising within each role are offered.

Role of the Graduate Student

For students to enter a graduate program, they must master certain academic competencies. However, they continue to use the same kind of methods of studying and learning that they have used throughout their academic careers. These strategies are appropriate in their undergraduate education because most undergraduate education is content driven. Students need to master the

content, which is often reproduced in quizzes, exams, and essays. While we acknowledge that undergraduate programs require critical thinking, at the graduate level the challenges are different. The differences lie in changing mindset and behaviors, moving from student to scholar. Changing the mindset means thinking in a different way to produce (not reproduce) new knowledge. New knowledge is constructed on basic knowledge, critical thinking, and creative thinking. Changing behavior means taking initiative and ownership of their knowledge, reflecting on their learning development, and acting as a scholar.

Role of the Faculty Member

While the literature on advising tends to subsume coaching and mentoring under the term advising (Paglis, Greene, & Bauer, 2006), we regard the terms as roles with distinct functions that may sometimes overlap each other. As faculty advisers of graduate students, we will differentiate in this article among advising, coaching, and mentoring; discuss issues and challenges around coaching and mentoring; and explain our advising, coaching, and mentoring strategies to help graduate students develop into scholars.

When graduate students enter a doctoral program, it is a hit or miss situation with regard to advising. Although they are usually assigned an adviser, we contend that advising is a starting point in the scholarly process. As the student progresses from course work to research, the faculty member moves from being an adviser to a coach and, finally, to a mentor. In the beginning, advising is a pale shadow of coaching and mentoring. Students often find themselves overwhelmed with vast amounts of information received from a variety of sources, including their advisers. There tends to be a lack of a systematic approach for working with students. Advisers are equally at sea with regard to assisting students through the dissertation process and moving them from concrete to abstract thinking. Instead, the onus is put on the student to figure out. As the relationship develops, advisers become coaches who guide students through the dissertation process.

From Advising to Coaching to Mentoring

Working with graduate students is a continuous process that begins with advising, moves to coaching, and on to mentoring. While these stages may be distinct in the beginning, they overlap while working with the student throughout the graduate program. Depending on the student needs, one may move back and forth between being an adviser, coach, or mentor.

Advising consists of instrumental tasks usually at the beginning of the doctoral program. These tasks include recommending appropriate course work, developing a timeline, completing requirements, and monitoring paper work (Waldeck, Orrego, Plax, & Kearney, 1997). Faculty members at this stage are focused on directing students according to external factors and program directives. Students at this stage are encouraged to navigate the system, become self-directed, and start working on their own.

Coaching involves facilitated and guided tasks intended to achieve specific goals. At this point, the student has completed all course work and is preparing the dissertation proposal. In preparation for this critical task, the faculty coach assists the student make contacts and gain

exposure to other faculty members, other students, and members of the scholarly community. The coach can provide information on program politics, procedures and unwritten rules, culture, and other faculty (Waldeck et al., 1995). The faculty member engages the student in thinking about the role of committee members, the potential contribution of each faculty to the student research topic; and further provides psycho-social support to alleviate anxiety during the transition phase between being a student and a dissertator. This contributes to a student's proficiency, self-esteem, and efficacy as an emerging scholar (Kram, 1983, 1985). This stage is characterized by intense one-on-one work. The faculty member facilitates critical and creative thinking, reflecting, and developing student ownership of their work and acquiring a voice as a scholar.

Mentoring is composed of integrative and modeling tasks, which bring together all the parts of the research into a holistic outcome. This stage is distinguished by a synergy between the faculty member and the student, forming an alliance in which there is space for dialogue, reflection, and learning. The faculty member guides the student toward research completion through modeling as well as counseling on a future career as a scholar. This involves inviting students to work on collaborative research projects and introducing them to the world of conference presentations and establishing them as scholars in the field. This step inducts students into the field as future colleagues (Kram, 1985). Students as potential research collaborators contribute to increased faculty productivity.

Issues and Challenges around Advising, Coaching, and Mentoring

The process of advising, coaching, and mentoring can be seen from an individual or institutional-based perspective. From an individual perspective, the faculty and student personality, experience, and preparedness are at play. From an institutional-based perspective, the discipline, institutional procedures, and program requirements set the climate. Based on these views, issues and challenges drive the relationship between faculty and student.

When faculty members act as advisers (as opposed to coaches and mentors), one of the issues that may hinder the relationship is a student-faculty mismatch (Golde, 2000, 2005) related to research interests (Green & Bauer, 1995). From an individual perspective, the challenge is how to match the student with the right faculty member. From an institutional perspective, the institution must find ways to assign a temporary adviser until the student finds the right match.

When faculty members act in the role of coaches, their experience, skills, and preparedness can predict potential issues. These issues may be a lack of experience with diverse learners, limited conflict-resolution skills, and lack of preparation in overcoming and dealing with stress. From an individual perspective, inexperienced faculty members may find it challenging to work with under-prepared students to scaffold their learning, deal with conflict resolution, and provide support during times of stress. From an institutional perspective, the challenge is to provide peer support for new faculty members through brown-bag discussions and workshops.

Issues related to mentoring involve supporting graduate students as they reach a level of independence in becoming a scholar. At this time the student should embrace the role of a scholar and develop his or her own voice. From an individual viewpoint, setting boundaries to

promote independence can be challenging. Also, the process does not end when the dissertation is completed, because mentoring continues beyond graduation. Working with students on the next steps can be demanding due to time and interest. From an institutional position, the challenge is to provide resources for faculty to take graduate students to conferences and professional meetings.

Advising, Coaching, and Mentoring Strategies for Faculty

Reflecting on our work with graduate students has led us to rethink how the strategies we use are either beneficial to our students or hinder the process. We suggest strategies below that have worked for us when we play the different roles. Keep in mind that these strategies are guideposts, not blueprints. It is important to consider students' personalities, experiences, and openness throughout the process and adapt the strategies to fit their needs. Table 1 shows the roles of adviser, coach, and mentor and strategies that apply to each role. These strategies can help faculty members organize and plan their work with their students to assist them in their growth from student to scholar.

Table 1 - Faculty Role and Strategies for Advising, Coaching, and Mentoring

Faculty Role	Strategies
Adviser	- Be clear about institutional and program requirements - Encourage independence in selecting course work and creating a study plan that focuses on a specific idea - Create a visual map to review timeline when courses are offered - Monitor work progress - Invite student to conduct a mini-research project - Help student determine committee membership
Coach	- Set timeline for accomplishing work - Have conversations to brainstorm ideas - Review students' map of their study topic - Have regular meetings to discuss proposal chapters - Review scholarly sources with student - Walk through the proposal chapters - encourage student to work in all three chapters together - Discuss literature review themes and connections with the study problem - Assess when student is ready to present proposal to other committee members
Mentor	- Give frequent and timely feedback - Raise questions throughout the dissertation phase - Challenge students to think outside the box, look at study data using set methods, and develop the research results that integrate the findings and literature reviewed - Help students plan future career goals, potential publications, and presentations

Solving Academia's Secret Problem with Doctoral Student Attrition

Since doctoral students' success hinges on the quality of the relationship with their advisers, it is important for faculty members to realize and consider their changing roles during the process of the doctoral work. Faculty members need to be aware of the degree of commitment and time required to advise doctoral students and be prepared to adapt their role within the context of their needs. The three roles addressed in this essay do not necessarily appear in a linear order. A mentor role encompasses all three facets of the dissertation process: advising, coaching, and mentoring. If faculty members limit themselves to one of these facets, it is possible that they are not meeting students' needs, which can lead to student attrition. This essay provided practical strategies to solve academia's secret problem with doctoral student attrition.

REFERENCES

Egan, J. M. (1989). Graduate school and the self: A theoretical view of some negative effects of professional socialization. *Teaching Sociology, 17*, 200–208.

Golde, C. M. (2005). The role of the department and discipline in doctoral student attrition: Lessons from four departments. *The Journal of Higher Education, 76*(6), 669–700.

Golde, C. M. (2000). Should I stay or should I go? Student descriptions of the doctoral attrition process. *The Review of Higher Education, 23*(2), 199–227.

Green, S. G., & Bauer, T. N. (1995). Supervisory mentoring by advisers: Relationships with doctoral student potential, productivity, and commitment. *Personnel Psychology, 48*(3), 537–561.

Kram, K. E. (1983). Phases of the mentor relationship. *Academy of Management Journal, 26*, 608–625.

Kram, K. E. (1985). *Mentoring at work: Developmental relationships in organizational life.* Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman.

Lovitts, B. (1996). Leaving the ivory tower: A sociological analysis of the causes of departure from doctoral study. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Ann Arbor, MI: University of Maryland.

Maher, M. A., Ford, M. E., & Thompson, C. M. (2004). Degree progress of women doctoral students: Factors that constrain, facilitate, and differentiate. *The Review of Higher Education, 27*(3), 385–408.

Paglis, L. L., Green, S. G., & Bauer, T. N. (2006). Does adviser mentoring add value? A longitudinal study of mentoring and doctoral student outcomes. *Research in Higher Education, 47*(4), 451–476.

Sullivan, T. A. (1991). Making the graduate curriculum explicit. *Teaching Sociology, 19*, 408–413.

Waldeck, J. H., Orrego, V. O., Plax, T. G., & Kearney, P. (1997). Graduate student/faculty mentoring relationships: Who gets mentored, how it happens, and to what end. *Communication Quarterly, 45*(3) 93–109.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR(S)

Simone C.O. Conceição, Ph.D., is an associate professor in the Department of Administrative Leadership at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee School of Education. She can be reached at simonec@uwm.edu.

Raji Swaminathan, Ph.D., is an associate professor in the Department of Educational Policy and Community Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. She can be reached at swaminar@uwm.edu.