

Creating Clear Expectations for Graduate Mentees

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Discussion of the Graduate Student Contract

Scenario One (from the Advisor's Perspective)

You are an assistant professor who has served on several dissertation committees; you have one grant with limited funds. One doctoral student, Adam, has been working in your lab for the last year and half, and your grant is supporting his assistantship. At first Adam eagerly worked more than 20 hours a week in your lab even while taking 9 hours of regular courses. Now he is taking 6 hours of regular coursework and 3 hours of doctoral research under your supervision. But in the last two semesters you've noticed that you see Adam less and less although you assigned him a new project last semester. At his annual review a month ago you mentioned his lack of performance but you gave him a satisfactory evaluation. You also told him to prepare a rough draft of a paper documenting work he completed his first semester but you haven't seen it yet. You are concerned about his lack of performance and uncertain of what to do about it.

What Should the Advisor Do?

- a. Give Adam an “Unsatisfactory” in doctoral research and cut his assistantship funding at end of the semester.
- b. Discuss your concerns with a more experienced faculty member.
- c. Send an email to Adam expressing your frustration about his performance.
- d. Make an appointment with Adam to discuss his performance.
- e. None of the above/other

Scenario One (from the Student's Perspective)

You are a second year doctoral student working with Dr. Jones, an assistant professor. The first semester you worked very hard on a project he gave you although you were taking 9 hours of formal courses. Unfortunately you made a 2.75 GPA (C, B+, B) and are now on Academic Probation. After the first project, Dr. Jones assigned you a second, but you are unclear about what exactly he wants and where to start. There are no other students or technicians in the lab and Dr. Jones is spending less time with you since he is teaching two courses, working very hard on a grant and writing several papers. You hesitate to bother him since he has been a little “snappy” lately. Still your annual review went well and Dr. Jones gave you an “S” in doctoral research last semester so all must be reasonably well. Still you wonder if Dr. Jones is really the person with whom you want to work. What should you do?

Your response to the Student's Perspective

- a. Start talking to other students about the faculty they are working with and how to switch advisors.
- b. Talk with the graduate program director about your concerns.
- c. Just stay focused on your courses to improve your GPA and worry about the project later.
- d. Make an appointment with Dr. Smith to discuss your concerns.
- e. None of the above/other

Scenario Two : Lack of Student Progress

One of your students has been working well towards his research proposal defense. He informs you that his new wife has accepted a position at a Fortune 500 company and the two of them are moving across the country. The student assures you that he will complete his research *in absentia*. During the following year you only hear from the student once in a while and when you do meet via teleconference you find that he is not making progress, in part because he has taken on a teaching position at a local high school. What do you do?

Your response to Lack of Student Progress

- a. Allow the situation to continue and hope the student will change his habits.
- b. Tell him he must quit the position at the high school to free up time to complete his research.
- c. Tell him you cannot advise him anymore and he must find another research supervisor because he is not devoting enough time to completing his research.
- d. Work with him to develop a detailed plan for making progress including specific deadlines and consequences for missing them.
- e. None of the above/other

Scenario Three: Writing Quality

You are the research advisor/dissertation director for Sasha, a third year doctoral student. You are preparing a co-authored publication describing an important experimental result for an upcoming special journal issue. This will be Sasha's first publication. She writes and submits a draft to you in preparation for your next meeting. You are dismayed by the poor quality of the writing and think the paper needs to be rewritten. Without improvement, you believe that the student's writing will limit her career progress. The submission deadline is approaching rapidly. What should you do?

Your Response to Poor Writing

- a. Rewrite the article yourself and hope that Sasha can learn from reviewing your changes.
- b. Tell Sasha that she needs to improve her writing and that if she can't get this draft in adequate shape you won't be able to submit it.
- c. Encourage Sasha to visit the University Writing Center or to hire a tutor for help with this project and her writing skills more generally.
- d. Provide Sasha with some introductory pointers on how she might improve her writing and then make most of the revisions yourself.
- e. None of the above/other