**Spotting a Bad Adviser—and How to Pick a Good One**

By Leonard Cassuto



Image: André da Loba for The Chronicle

Universities have a lot of names for the professor who works with a graduate student on a thesis or dissertation and later signs off on it. The main titles are "adviser," "director," and, more rarely, "sponsor." Some universities, including my own, call a professor in this position a "mentor." I like "adviser" because I think that’s the best description of the job when it’s being done well.

The 19th-century term for such an adviser was "master," with all of the connotations that the word carries. The idea of the guiding master originated in Germany. In the United States, the relationship quickly translated into what the historian William Clark calls an "intensely personal," almost cultish, tie of admiring loyalty. So powerful was that tie that some American academics once floated the idea that an official Ph.D. award should carry the name of your master rather than the name of the university that the student attended.

The relationship between advisee and professor (whatever that person’s title) is the longest and most important one in a graduate student’s formal education, a unique blend of the professional and the personal. The tie binds like family—and genealogical metaphors for the adviser-student relationship abound. Some long-serving professors even become the trunk nodes of their own family-tree diagrams. (A site called PsychTree builds an adviser-student family tree in the field of psychology.) The students of the legendary historian Frederick Jackson Turner used to refer to him—and even address him!—as "my professional father."

When it’s forged and maintained in the right way, this tie turns into a lifelong, productive, ever-evolving relationship of mutually rewarding collegiality. It often levels off into a friendship between peers. When it goes bad, though, the relationship can breed anger, resentment, bitterness, and an unfulfillment that extends far beyond graduate school itself. All of which ought to remind us that, family relations aside, this is still a connection between a worker and a boss.

So how do you spot a bad adviser? Or to put it another way: How do you pick a good one?

To identify what to look for, let’s go back to names. I said that I prefer the title of "adviser." I like it much better than "director" in particular, because "adviser" is less authoritative. Graduate students need to write their own dissertations. Professors have a job to help them. Certainly that help will entail some guidance, and some of that guidance may reasonably be described as direction. But the fact that I offer direction doesn’t make me the director. The director of a movie runs the whole set. Dissertation advisers shouldn’t try to do that; it’s not their project.

"You are the CEO of your own graduate education," I tell my advisees. I like the sound of that phrase because it conveys managerial duty and places responsibility with the student, where it belongs. Graduate school is professional school. It’s a graduate student’s job to complete the requirements for the degree.

But it’s not quite as simple as that. I have to approve my student’s thesis for it to receive credit. To return to the direction metaphor, perhaps it’s more precise to say that the graduate student is the director of the project, but everyone involved does well to remember that directors don’t always have the final cut.

Graduate students do have the final cut on their own lives. They choose their goals, and commit their own resources. Within that context, the adviser should make sure that the goals are rational, and the plans to reach them sensible. And there’s the rub. Based simply on the numbers, chasing a professorship is not exactly practical. Is it a rational career goal? That depends on how sensible the plan to chase it turns out to be.

Graduate students make that plan with the help of their advisers—or at least they should. But they often don’t. The education scholars Chris M. Golde and Timothy M. Dore reported two major findings in their oft-cited research on[doctoral-student experiences](http://www.phd-survey.org/report%20final.pdf). First, "the training doctoral students receive is not what they want, nor does it prepare them for the jobs they take," and second, "many students do not clearly understand what doctoral study entails, how the process works, and how to navigate it effectively." It follows from those conclusions that lots of advisers are doing a bad job—and also that lots of graduate students aren’t savvy enough to figure that out.

How can you avoid a picking a bad adviser if you’re not sure what you’re looking for in the first place?

One way is to study what goes into the decision. Be an informed consumer: Know what you want, and expect what you’re entitled to.

Graduate-student expectations of their advisers need to change, and they are changing—slowly. The history of masters and mentors that I unspooled at the beginning may seem extravagant and excessive to us, but it’s really not very different from the situation that prevails now. The advisers of today still attract students through charisma, and their recommendations still exert major control over the fate of those students, especially the ones who want to follow them into academe. Minus the affectations, not much has changed, and that ought to make us nervous.

It should also serve as a call to arms. Studies of graduate education are thin on the ground, but in one of the few investigations of the [adviser-graduate student tie,](http://psycnet.apa.org/psycinfo/1984-08087-001) Robert R. Bargar and Jane Mayo-Chamberlain talk about the "developmental" nature of the connection—that is, it should evolve over its duration. The students themselves develop as they move through a graduate program, and the adviser needs to adjust to their needs at different stages. Advisers and advisees therefore have to maintain open lines of communication, not only about the work that they are doing together but also about any potential emotional pitfalls that may attend that work. Better to defuse an explosion than have to deal with the fallout afterward.

Advisers, say Bargar and Mayo-Chamberlain, should create a "positive environment" for students by "showing interest" in their "work and welfare." They suggest "open discussions" and "direct programmatic activities." All of which sounds very blurry to me.

The career field for graduate students is likewise blurry. The higher-education-industrial complex is only lately beginning to recognize the fact that graduate school is not solely a training ground for future professors. Good advisers recognize that, and teach their students accordingly. Bad advisers don’t.

So if you’re looking for a good adviser, look for one who’s interested in your career. If you think you’re being collected like a bauble in someone else’s collection, then steer clear. Or if you suspect that you’re being recruited to run on someone else’s hamster wheel, then run the other way. Good advisers collaborate with their graduate students, but that collaboration has only one appropriate goal: It needs to be about you, and furthering your work and career.

I began this column with a preference for the title of "adviser" over "mentor." Mentorship carries extra weight for me. Not just anyone who sponsors a thesis deserves to be called a mentor. In Greek myth, Mentor was a wise man who earned the trust of Odysseus, who selected him to educate his son, Telemachus. The word has a legacy: "Mentor" is a title that should be earned. These are challenging times for students to choose an adviser. Look for the ones who try their hardest to act as true mentors.

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