



Balancing the Scale: The Advisor-Graduate Student Relationship



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Introduction

Successful graduate advisors face many challenges in helping a student progress through their graduate education. Current literature reveals that the graduate student-graduate advisor relationship is the most important factor for success as a graduate student (Boyle & Boice, 1998; Nettles & Millett, 2006; Schlosser & Gelso, 2001; Thibodeaux, 2003; Zhao, Golde, & McCormick, 2005) and graduate advisors are often seen as “the most influential role models in emerging scholars’ academic lives” (Bloom, Cuevas, Hall, & Evans, 2007, p. 33). The role of a graduate advisor can be very ambiguous. To be an effective advisor requires a deeper understanding of the needs of graduate students.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study is the mentoring-empowered model proposed by Selke and Wong (1993). The mentoring-empowered model defines the roles that advisors play. At the center of this model is the principle that advisors should act as nurturers in the advising process. The five roles that a successful advisor must play are: teacher, encourager, role model, counselor, and sponsor-socializer (Selke & Wong). Coupled with the mentoring-empowered model, Vygotsky’s (2005) scaffolding model is another model used to discern the role of a graduate advisor. In this model, there are three stages of learning. As each stage progresses, the graduate advisor becomes less involved and the graduate student takes on more responsibility. The challenge still remains for graduate advisors as to when they should provide more support for the graduate student and when to give them greater opportunities.

Objectives

1. To describe graduate students’ perceptions of their professional relationship with their advisor
2. To describe graduate students’ perceptions of their accessibility to their advisor for questions regarding their degree plan or course offerings
3. To describe graduate students’ perceptions of their advisor’s ability to help graduate students improve their knowledge and ability in their focus area

Methods

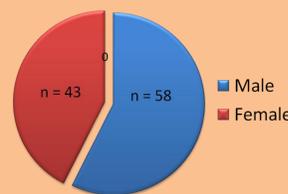
- Sample Population: Texas A & M University College of Agricultural and Life Sciences Graduate Students (n = 273).
- A electronic questionnaire was created after a review of the literature
- Validity of the instrument was determined by a panel of experts (N = 8)
- Reliability $\alpha = .96$ (n = 28)
- 107 usable responses collected (39.19% response rate).
- Results are limited to the respondents, therefore, non-response error was not an issue.

Results

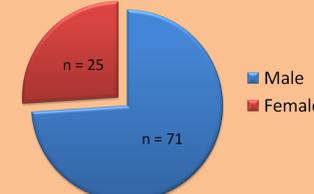
▪Average age of graduate students was 29.65 (SD = 7.92, Mode = 25)

Graduate Students’ Perceived Age of Their Advisor		
Age Range	f	%
30-39	27	28.1
40-49	33	34.4
50-59	27	28.1
Over 60	9	9.4

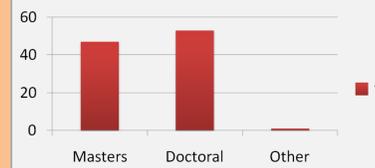
Graduate Student Gender



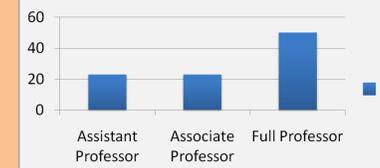
Advisor Gender



Grad Student Program Level



Level of Professor



Graduate Students’ Perceptions of Their Advisors’ in Relation to Their Personal Interests
1 = Strongly Agree, 2 = Agree, 3 = Disagree, 4 = Strongly Disagree

Statement	M	SD
My advisor cares about my progress in the area of research	1.74	.706
My advisor possesses a student centered attitude	2.02	.920
My advisor is easy to talk to about my academic endeavors	1.77	.835
My advisor is willing to discuss my personal problems	1.94	.787
My advisor provides a caring, open atmosphere	1.86	.814
My advisor encourages me to join professional organizations	2.14	.799

Graduate Students’ Perceptions of Their Advisors’ Support
1 = Strongly Agree, 2 = Agree, 3 = Disagree, 4 = Strongly Disagree

My advisor provides me with...	M	SD
an overview of the departmental procedures in relation to research	2.06	.730
an overview of the departmental procedures in relation to travel	2.29	.759
an overview of the departmental procedures in relation to teaching	2.10	.741
an opportunity to improve my research skills in my focus area	1.86	.764
an opportunity to improve my knowledge in my focus area	1.77	.705
advice on securing a job in my field of study	1.96	.873
an understanding of my strengths and weaknesses	1.92	.762
opportunities to make professional contacts within the profession	1.95	.846
opportunities to conduct scholarly research	1.84	.810
assistance with securing funds for research	2.15	.851
opportunities to teach undergraduate courses	2.26	.814
opportunities to establish career goals	2.09	.814

References available upon request

Graduate Students’ Perceptions of Their Advisors’ in Relation to Accessibility in Regards to Degree Planning
1 = Strongly Agree, 2 = Agree, 3 = Disagree, 4 = Strongly Disagree

Statement	M	SD
My advisor clearly defines my degree requirements	2.13	.864
My advisor recommends courses that may help me achieve my professional goals	1.97	.771
My advisor encourages me to assume an active role in planning my academic program	1.73	.761
Overall, I am satisfied with the support my advisor provides	1.97	.799

Graduate Students’ Perceptions of Their Advisors’ Knowledge
1 = Strongly Agree, 2 = Agree, 3 = Disagree, 4 = Strongly Disagree

My advisor is knowledgeable...	M	SD
in his/her field of study	1.36	.554
about research skills	1.57	.608
about sources of funding available for research	1.78	.766
about sources of funding available for participation in professional development and travel	1.98	.698
about courses that are offered within our department	1.75	.729
about courses that are offered outside my department	2.24	.709
about degree planning	1.95	.747
about university policies and procedures	1.90	.775
about professional organizations	1.75	.713

Communication with Advisors

- A majority of the participants communicate with their advisor at least once a week or more (n = 72)
- A majority of the participants communicate primarily with their advisor via face to face communication (n = 59)
- The secondary form of communication most frequently used by the participants’ is email (n = 59)
- A majority of the participants reported that their advisor does not acknowledge them in social settings (= 67)
- A majority of the participants strongly agree or agree that their advisors are willing to meet before (n = 47) or after (n = 71) business hours
- A majority of the participants have scheduled meetings with their advisor once a month or more frequently (n = 72)

Conclusions & Recommendations

- Overall graduate students are satisfied with their advisor’s performance
- Graduate students perceive that their advisors are knowledgeable and provide them adequate support
- Communication between graduate students and advisors is open and frequent, mainly via face to face communication
- The researchers recommend that a qualitative research study be conducted to further explore the relationships between graduate students and their advisors