

The Chronicle of Higher Education
From the issue dated August 9, 2002

<http://chronicle.com/weekly/v48/i48/48b01601.htm>

POINT OF VIEW

Treating Graduate Students With Dignity

By BRIAN P. COPPOLA

A group of graduate students meets with a group of faculty members in a cabin just off the dunes north of Muskegon, Mich., midway up the eastern shore of Lake Michigan. The students have developed a set of questions that they have always wanted to ask the faculty members; the faculty members have brought in questions for the students.

One graduate student asks, "How do you manage to work out the problems of time-and-task management?" Most of the students are committed to holding faculty positions one day, and their questions revolve around that theme.

The first faculty member is flip: "I still haven't worked it out after 10 years."

The second is hostile: "You are wasting time asking questions you already know the answers to. The point here is that we are really just the same as you."

Most of the graduate students shrink visibly. One replies in kind, "We're not the same. You are the gatekeepers. You hold the keys and the power."

The faculty member flushes -- with annoyance, not embarrassment. "We all have people we have to answer to -- it never goes away. I told you we are the same. Ask a better question."

That exchange took place at an annual retreat sponsored by the Wakonse Foundation and attended by faculty members and grad students from various institutions. The retreat consists of a series of plenary and smaller group sessions on professional development. For the past few years, I have helped organize an exchange of views between the professors and the students.

Beforehand, each group has considered and prioritized questions for the other. I have gained insights into graduate education while helping the students develop their questions; moderating the sessions with faculty members has revealed even more. Although meant to be productive conversations, the exchanges have exemplified the problems between the two groups and the inadequacies of faculty-development programs today.

The discussions have led me to conclude that the ethical framework used for the professional development of Ph.D. students has degenerated over time. At its best,

graduate education should follow Kant's categorical imperative: Act so that you treat human beings always as ends and never only as means. Graduate students deserve dignity and respect.

But far too many graduate students see themselves simply as means for their advisers rather than as dignified ends. Recent reports on the dissatisfaction that graduate students have with their programs, and on the reasons for their increased attrition, all point to the same problem: Students see themselves as being used as workers for hire by thinly stretched research directors who are under increased pressure to compete for diminishing resources. Indeed, accurately or not, the students who participate in the retreats would describe their advisers as unremitting followers of ethical egoism: We have no duty except what is best for ourselves. The students see faculty members subordinating their own disciplinary work to personal advancement and self-aggrandizement.

Whatever else is true, the metaphor of "joining a family" no longer describes the experience of going to graduate school. A research director, long considered to be an intellectual parent, is now more often called "the boss." More than ever, graduate work is treated as a job in which one moves in an opposite direction from developing an integrated identity as a scholar. And if graduate school at all resembles a family, the clinical characteristics of a dysfunctional one would most likely apply.

A major part of the problem is that we have a limited concept of what it means to develop as a faculty member. Even when we deal with life outside of research, we focus almost exclusively on classroom teaching, misrepresent it as no more than techniques and methods, and then neglect or give only superficial attention to a faculty member as a whole individual.

As a society, we have made great progress in understanding who we are as social beings. Cultural identity, racial identity, and sexual identity are all familiar and valued concepts. What about our intellectual and academic identities and how they integrate with our social identities? One of my colleagues uses the phrase "full human presence" to describe the combined professional and personal obligations of a faculty member to guide students in integrating the multiple facets of their lives.

But open discourse about the nature of academic life, its requirements and expectations, and where and how to improve it are all missing in the experience of a majority of graduate students. In fact, although they generate pages of questions on other topics, their biggest concern is one they still cannot express directly to faculty members: "Do I have to give up being me in order to become you? I need to know, because I don't like what I see: disdain for students, overwork, imbalance between professional and personal life, and people who seem unhappy. I don't see guidance or information about why one would elect to pursue a career in academe. I want to know, in particular, is who you appear to be just what you want to show me? Or is it really you? Or is it what you became in order to be a faculty member?"

Most of the students are convinced that faculty members were coerced by the system of traditional faculty roles and rewards to take on, over time, unattractive personae to be successful as professors. They fear that following the path to the professoriate will present them with an inevitable dilemma: to advance, they would have to become a person they dislike. It appears to them that the choices for responsibly serving as mentors to graduate students like themselves (say, letting a student take an extra course) would conflict with the choices for personal survival as professors (the student would not help produce as many research papers).

Yet the graduate students avoid revealing themselves, their doubts, and their criticisms about the way research is conducted to their "bosses" for an obvious reason: fear of retaliation. The retaliation could take the form of withheld trust and respect, or more-concrete punishments, like unsupportive letters of reference or fewer opportunities to have one's work showcased or even acknowledged.

You may be a faculty member who disagrees with me, and you have already thought to prove me wrong by copying this article and handing it to your graduate students while declaring (not asking), "This cannot be about me" (or even "us"). Consider that you should be neither relieved nor reassured if they agree -- particularly if they agree quickly.

Where does this all leave graduate students? Is there even one faculty office, like mine, in your department where they can openly discuss their doubts about their identities without risk? If not, where should your students turn? Do not assume that their peer group provides such support. Pressure is strong among a group of graduate students to keep up appearances and suppress problems and concerns.

Returning to the metaphor of a dysfunctional family, research collaborations between faculty members and graduate students could use some "research-group therapy." Besides more open communication, I suggest the following steps:

First, faculty members must have the moral courage to identify and resolve conflicts that run to the core of faculty identity. Time and again, students are the objects of decision making; a simple strategy would be to bring them into the conversation and seek their input on those decisions.

Second, internal and external sources of support must respond substantively to the needs of a more-balanced professoriate. Outside of research productivity, the documentation and evaluation of scholarly practices in teaching and service are haphazard at best. We need to develop effective methods to bring legitimacy to the full scope of academic work.

Finally, we must mend the broken system of faculty development for the next generation. Beginning with undergraduate-course design, we already identify students with the potential to carry out research; we then move them into independent study as collaborators and on to graduate and postdoctoral education, where their potential is realized. That infrastructure for scholarly development must be broadened to give students the skills for teaching and service as well. Professors of the future should arrive

on campus as capable of carrying out the full obligation of being faculty members as they are of performing disciplinary research today.

Like it or not, faculty members are responsible for the stewardship of higher education. The ability to say "Enough is enough" to the imbalances perceived by the students who consider and then reject a faculty career rests with those who currently occupy college offices. The professional and personal responsibilities for educating with and for a "full human presence" are being neglected. Its attributes must be examined, defined, and integrated into the development of one's character in the same way we are beginning to attend to other moral dimensions of personal development, like research ethics. Membership in a system of real progress, rather than repair, should be the norm for a new breed of scholar.

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