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To Encourage Ethical Behavior by Graduate Advisers, 3 Scholars Call for Detailed Codes of Conduct

By Brenda Medina

Bad behavior among faculty who teach and advise graduate students can take many forms. It may amount to neglect: an adviser failing to respond to multiple requests for feedback at a crucial stage of a student's dissertation work. It may be much worse: a professor copying an advisee's ideas without attribution and trying to pass them off as his own.

What constitutes a violation of good conduct in graduate education, though, is both ill-defined and inconsistently rectified. Many grievances go unreported, say students and scholars, because graduate students fear harming their relationships with their professors, who are also their mentors, thesis advisers, and supervisors of their research and assistantship work.

Compared with faculty members who teach undergraduates, professors who work in graduate programs have more interdependent and complex relationships with their students. Stronger safeguards and clearer articulation of the dos and don'ts in these relationships are needed, some scholars say, particularly since interactions with professors are so critical to young scholars' careers.

But existing guidelines make few specific references to faculty and students at the graduate level. Handbooks and documents prepared by many colleges, scholarly associations, and national groups, like the American Association of University Professors, offer general guidance that applies to undergraduate and graduate education, but pay little attention to what is expected in situations that are specific to postbaccalaureate study.

The authors of a new book have set out to argue for stricter disciplinary codes of conduct and to recommend specific areas of graduate teaching and mentoring in which behavioral standards should be established. In *Professors Behaving Badly: Faculty Misconduct in Graduate Education*, scheduled to be published in December by the Johns Hopkins University Press, John M. Braxton, a professor of higher education at Vanderbilt University; Eve Proper, an assistant professor of marketing and management at LIM College; and Alan E. Bayer, a professor emeritus of sociology at Virginia Tech, surveyed almost 800 professors who work at research universities about behavioral norms for graduate teaching and mentoring.

On the basis of their results, the authors list five behaviors that should never occur and should be punished: disrespect toward students' efforts, misappropriation of students' work, harassment of students, suppression of whistle-blowing, and faculty-directed research malfeasance.

The authors then identify eight behaviors that should be avoided but shouldn't be as severely punished: neglectful teaching, inadequate advising and mentoring, belittling of faculty colleagues, negligent advising on theses and dissertations, insufficient course structure, pedagogical narrowness, abuse and misuse of students' time and efforts, and lack of concern for the welfare of the graduate program.

Agreement on the five worst misbehaviors was general among survey respondents, Mr. Braxton says, while the level of agreement on the eight others wasn't as high.

"For example, some faculty didn't see inadequate advising or mentoring as highly inappropriate behavior," he says. "To me that was surprising."

Bad Examples

The lack of detailed disciplinary codes for professional behavior in academe presents a problem not only because graduate students may not know how to bring up concerns about their professors, Mr. Braxton says, but also because poor examples of conduct could shape the behavior of future faculty members.

“It sets a precedent for graduate students who are moving to academe to act a certain way toward their students,” he says.

The authors did not try to measure the frequency of bad behavior in graduate programs, but they offered anecdotes. Numerous examples of problematic situations also can be found in *The Chronicle’s* archives, under such headlines as “When a Mentor Becomes a Thief” and “Students or Serfs?”

In one case, a professor of psychology at Columbia University was fired after a university investigation found that she had plagiarized the work of two former graduate students and her colleagues. One of the graduate students said the professor had copied several portions of the student’s dissertation.

In a *Chronicle* advice column, a desperate graduate student asked for help because the student was finishing a dissertation but couldn’t get the adviser to read the final chapters and offer feedback. The adviser had been abroad for several months and was barely responding to the student’s messages. The student feared that a scheduled graduation date would be missed.

Another graduate student working on her dissertation wrote for advice about her situation. She said she had become the companion and helper of her adviser, a recent widow. Afraid to disappoint the professor, she said she even helped with chores like painting the garage and killing mice. Although that took time away from her dissertation, the student had no choice but to continue working with the professor, who was the only one in her field at the university.

In their book, the three authors say that reported incidents like those “are likely only the tip of the iceberg.” But even such anecdotes, they write, “readily convey the extensive variety in the sort of inappropriate behaviors that most any graduate student might be at risk of encountering.”

In interviews with graduate students, it is clear that problems continue. A doctoral student at a City University of New York campus, who asked to not be named for fear of harming her career, faced a problem in her department that she felt wasn’t properly handled.

She said that her adviser and professor routinely belittled her, telling her such things as, “You might think that you’re a big deal, but let me tell you, you’re nobody.”

When she asked for guidance on how to deal with the issue, she was told to talk to the head of the department. She first avoided doing so, not wanting to be stigmatized as a complainer in a program where she would be working and studying for many years.

“I felt misguided. I don’t remember any procedure available to help me deal with the problem,” she said. “I thought that no one was going to believe me because the professor had been in the department for 35 years.”

But it turned out that she wasn’t the only one who felt bullied by the professor. Eventually, the head of the department allowed the student to switch to a new adviser, in part because there had been so many complaints about the faculty member, the student said. She was happy she could make that change but believes the department should have done more to confront the professor’s behavior itself. “The problem is still there,” she said.

Existing Guidance

Not everyone sees the need to set specific behavioral guidelines for faculty members who teach graduate students.

B. Robert Kreiser an associate secretary of the department of academic freedom, tenure, and governance at the American Association of University Professors, says the organization’s guidebook for academic practice offers ethical responses to an array of issues that educators may encounter, whether at the undergraduate or the graduate level.

“I don’t think there is a need to address graduate faculty specifically,” says Mr. Kreiser, an adjunct professor of history at George Mason University who teaches graduate students. “The same basic standards

of professional ethics should apply to graduate and undergraduate faculty.”

Of the guidebook’s 300 pages, three are devoted to a specific “Statement on Graduate Students.”

While the AAUP’s guidebook offers abstract definitions of ethical problems that academics face, it does not give examples of how those problems might present themselves in day-to-day situations, nor does it offer specific solutions.

On intellectual-property rights, for example, the book’s recommended standards say that graduate students are entitled to the protection of those rights, “including recognition of their participation in supervised research and their research with faculty, consistent with generally accepted standards of attribution and acknowledgment in collaborative settings.”

It adds, “Written standards should be publicly available.”

Mr. Kreiser, who has worked with the AAUP for 30 years, says colleges could strengthen the group’s guidelines and provide more specifics. “There are standards and codes of conduct,” he says of the guidebook. “If a student thinks that his or her professor has done something that doesn’t abide by those standards of professional behavior, they should talk to someone in their institution to investigate the issue.”

But Mr. Braxton argues that more-detailed disciplinary codes are needed to help colleges, departments, and students solve problems.

Ms. Proper says she was surprised at how little faculty misconduct in graduate programs has been studied, and worries that most incidents of bad behavior aren’t reported.

She hopes the book will spur more conversation. “I’m hoping people will examine these problems more closely,” she says, “and I’m also hoping for more research.”

Notes

¹<http://chronicle.com/article/Graduate-Advisers-Need-a-Set/129239/>