

11-1-2004

# Mentoring Doctoral Students: A Personal Perspective

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## Recommended Citation

Hall, Bruce W. (2004) "Mentoring Doctoral Students: A Personal Perspective," *Journal of Modern Applied Statistical Methods*: Vol. 3 :  
Iss. 2 , Article 24.

DOI: 10.22237/jmasm/1099268640

## Mentoring Doctoral Students: A Personal Perspective

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In this brief essay, I reflect on the mentoring process based on advising over thirty doctoral students in measurement, evaluation, and research. There is considerable cause for optimism, and it is among the professors' highest honor to mentor the doctoral student.

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### Introduction

During my 32 years as a professor of educational research involved in graduate education at the University of South Florida, I have been privileged to assist over 200 doctoral candidates in the pursuit of their advanced degree. For 34 of those students, I served as Major Advisor. My services to the remaining doctoral students were typically as a committee member providing advise and guidance with instrumentation, sampling, statistical analysis, and other method-related issues.

Over the years, my experiences as advisor and mentor to doctoral candidates have given me cause for great optimism, and also deep concern, about the future of educational research, its production and application. My enthusiasm for the mentor-mentee relationship has at times soared on the wings of a sublime interaction, and at other times crashed under the weight of an intractable position.

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I can honestly say that I have never had to deal with stupidity in my mentoring duties. But I have suffered the presence of some students who were naïve about the responsibilities of candidacy, others who were obstinate in the face of needed changes in their research, and still others who were manipulative of the mentor-mentee relationship in the sense of trying to turn it into a series of negotiations to win the "best deal". I have had students who wanted their hand held through every inch of the dissertation process, others who threatened to walk out on their supervisory committee if any substantive changes to their work were expected. I have even had students who, without my knowledge or consent, attempted to replace doctoral committee members in hopes of creating a "best fit", much like one who repeatedly tries on and discards shoes in search of the shoe that doesn't pinch.

And then there are the students who bring completely unexpected idiosyncrasies to the mentoring experience. I once worked with a candidate who quickly and repeatedly responded "OK" to every suggestion I offered; After discovering that none of my suggestions was ever acted on, I slowly came to realize that his "OK" responses were nothing more than an

affectation manifested whenever he felt stressed. Such behaviors can burden the development of nurturing, constructive interactions within the mentoring context, and can quickly affect the quality of the dissertation work.

Each type of candidate reaction described above can be terribly burdensome to any professor who aspires to the role of doctoral mentor. To me, however, the behavior most troubling within the mentor-mentee arena is one that I call “unconditional discouragement”. I am speaking of candidates who appear so lacking in confidence in their dissertation-related capabilities that every question raised by the doctoral advisor, every suggestion offered becomes the impetus, maybe the excuse, for expressions of despair and defeat. A low threshold for defeat may seem a strange coping mechanism for someone who has successfully navigated the complexities of doctoral work. Yet, I have seen it used, and more than once. Its effect is one of misdirection — instead of focusing on task relevant matters, the advisor becomes focused on bolstering the candidate’s spirits, and little else gets accomplished.

Before I leave the reader convinced that my mentoring career has been a series of unrelieved disasters, let me say that for every mentoring session that was forgettable or regrettable, there have been dozens that filled me with a sense of quiet accomplishment. An effective mentoring relationship requires a certain facility with role-playing. You have to be tutor, counselor, guide, critic, coach and confidante, and you often have to assume these roles in quick succession. It also requires a profound belief in the potential of every student placed in your care.

By its nature the relationship is dynamic, continuously changing. At times it may even be intense, especially if either your student or you hold to strong positions on procedures, topics or issues. At its best, mentoring requires an openness to dialogue, the willingness to permit a free flow of ideas between the candidate and you. That necessitates a field of play on which each of you perceives the other as equal. When everything works, nothing is more stimulating. And it has worked for me many times.

Of course, the candidate must do her or his part. The interactions between doctoral advisor and candidate constitute a genuine professional linkage, the connections between the two being cemented by the candidate’s growing expertise within the field of study. With this understood, the candidate bears a significant responsibility for the success, i.e., the productivity, of the mentoring relationship. The paramount rules of mutual trust and respect must hold sway. The esteem and regard directed toward the candidate must also be directed back toward the advisor. Above all, the working relationship must rest on a foundation of honesty; if the candidate is unable to be forthright about difficulties encountered or confusions arising in her dissertation work, the advisor’s usefulness and effectiveness will be seriously compromised.

Within Greek mythology, the goddess Athena used Odysseus’s friend, Mentor, as a guise through which she became the guardian and teacher of Odysseus’s son, Telemachus. In much the same sense today, we as doctoral mentors serve as a guise through which our institutions of higher learning become entrusted with the academic care and nurturing of much of our nation’s intellectual offspring. There is no greater honor to be accorded a professor than the honor of mentor.