

Mentoring the Thesis

Stephanie Hamm

Abstract: Mentoring student research is an important aspect of graduate learning. The literature discusses the importance of intentional mentoring programs for graduate students and undergraduate research students (for example see Dodson, Montgomery, & Brown, 2009; Ghosh, 2014; Murdocka, Stipanovich, & Lucas, 2013; Noy & Ray, 2012; Vliet, Klinge & Hiseler, 2013). This narrative discusses my journey thus far in mentoring thesis students. After seven years of mentoring student research, I have observations and new insights concerning student success and my own effectiveness in mentoring. In this narrative, I will briefly discuss my background and its relevance to my current stance on mentoring, my observations of the thesis process, and new knowledge that has helped me and the students I mentor. I close with a realization that shapes my task moving forward.

Keywords: graduate students, thesis, mentoring

Introduction

I was an ordinary African American female student in high school. I was expected to earn good grades and to be well-behaved and friendly. I was quiet and afraid of rejection from my peers. Having educated parents, I grew up with the expectation that I would attend college. In my family, the message I received was not *if* but *when* I would go.

In high school I had teachers who were very encouraging to me, afforded me opportunities to learn, and who trusted me to do things like make copies of upcoming exams. But my senior English teacher in particular looked at me, saw my potential, and was determined to help me succeed. She was one of the few teachers who looked directly at me when we spoke. She laughed at my adolescent one-liners and sent me out of class to complete college and scholarship applications. She wrote letters of recommendation. She challenged me in ways I thought unfair at the time. I adored Ms. J.

Observations

Now as a professor (and I am sure Ms. J. had something to do with my career choice), one of my favorite roles is mentoring thesis students. Each of the students in our graduate program must complete a thesis, so all students, regardless of their research and writing ability, must struggle through this process. Each year I walk alongside four to six students on the way to completing their thesis. The following are a few things I have observed.

Even the most successful students have trouble managing their stress. In addition to the thesis, advanced year students must complete coursework and a yearlong internship. It is not an easy year, as they must manage their stress and time. They respond to stress in various ways. Some students are reluctant to move forward and are frozen by what feels overwhelming. Some

students jump in with excitement and then shut down halfway through the year. Some students excel in the thing that scares them the most, at the expense of their coursework.

Secondly, the success of the students whose thesis I chair, often feels like a reflection of my mentorship. The student's work is her work, but admittedly, I sometimes fear that a badly produced thesis is my fault, even though I rarely take credit for a thesis well done. I also occasionally compare my less-than-successful students to my colleagues' very successful students and hope my colleagues are not making the same comparison! It is an act of vulnerability indeed.

I have observed that students need more than just a research supervisor when they are completing a thesis. They need a listener, as noted by Noy & Ray (2012). They need an empower-er who is a non-anxious presence, as well as meetings that lack judgment. They need information. Lots of it. They need me to listen and appreciate their one-liners and trust them. They need, for that year, a person who believes they can do it and that they can do it well. According to Linden, Ohlin & Brodin (2013), and Horowitz & Christopher (2013), this type of relationship more closely characterizes mentorship, in contrast to supervision.

Lastly, I have noticed that in the end, they may or may not still like me. I may continue to get occasional emails from them or I may not hear from them ever again. This dearth of ongoing communication could be because they were only pretending to enjoy our thesis meetings in the first place, or because they do not want to bother me. I suspect the reason is because they wish me, and my thesis mentoring, good riddance. Done is done—all 25% cotton fiber pages of it. They name me in their acknowledgements page, thank me numerous times, possibly give me little thank you gifts, take graduation pictures with me... and then leave me to my thoughts. Forever. I find this student response interesting.

New Insights

These points really address the fact that completing a thesis can be a daunting task for mentee and mentor. In my short seven years of mentoring I have also noticed some things that help the process. This is in no way an exhaustive list as surely I have much more to learn. This is not an empirically based list as I have not collected or analyzed any quantitative or qualitative data. This is merely my observation. My musing and what I have found to be helpful.

First and foremost, I listen to the student. I want to know, not just what they are thinking, but how they are thinking. What about this undertaking do they most fear? What do they expect from this process? What do they think of their own abilities? I want to know what they already know. And I want them to expect me to listen to them. Granted, listening often means our meetings last a few minutes longer than they should, given the immediate task. But listening also means that the student will likely listen to me as well. It means the student and I can hash out the challenges of the thesis-writing process together. It also means, to my delight, that I learn some pretty great things about the topic at hand. Without asking the students, I might guess that this is

the primary reason they thank me.

Humor is our best friend. This is a season in students' lives when they take their lives very seriously. To a great extent, they must. They have much to accomplish in a short amount of time. They are also tentative about their ability to complete such a task, particularly at the beginning. Self-efficacy and anxiety appear to have a high negative association. So, light-hearted mirthful humor about graduate distractibility, all-nighters, professor absent-mindedness, and technology deficits certainly help.

For every student, I lead with a strict timeline. I clearly and often express the importance of following my timeline. It not only provides structure, it gives the student a glimpse of the finish line. Truthfully, in the beginning when I wanted students to self-actualize during the thesis process and set their own timelines, there was much gnashing of teeth in March as we drew closer to thesis defense. And students anecdotally report to me that a lack of time management is a source of stress. This might be largely due to the fact that students do not have a clear concept of the time needed to complete the task. Therefore I highly encourage them to follow the timeline provided.

Finally, I have learned that students' accomplishments hold little implication for my mentoring ability. Yes, there are lessons I learn every year about ways I can improve my mentoring. Yes, sometimes I remember a key ingredient after the student needs it. And yes, sometimes I just do not see problems in the paper because I have read it so many times that I tend to lose some objectivity. In examining the social/psychological aspects of mentoring, Balogun & Okurame (2011) discuss the mutual responsibility that mentor and mentee experience. So my concern is well founded. Additionally, researchers described increased well-being on student success (Hall & Maltby, 2013). But my job is done when that student submits the paper to the graduate school on 25% cotton fiber paper. I have completed another successful mission. Students might occasionally fail, but will usually succeed (albeit possibly later than expected.) Some will finish by the skin of their teeth, while others will graduate with additional national presentations and a publication under their belts. Although I offer structure, support, academic advice, and accountability, I do not bear the total responsibility for their success or their failure. What a relief that is!

I guess what I am saying is that I am grateful for my profession. The transformation of a student from August to May is amazing to witness. The roller-coaster ride of academia is exciting, with the fluctuating emotions, shifting perceptions of intellectual ability, and the constant readjusting of confidence. It is a divine thing to work in a role that brings equal amounts of challenge and joy. We want to make a difference in the lives of students. We want to be a part of their growth and experience opportunities to see them shine and move on.

References

Dodson, J. E. & Montgomery, B. L., & Brown, L. J. (2009). "Take the fifth": Mentoring

students whose cultural communities were not historically structured into U.S. higher education. *Innov High Educ*, 34, 185-199. doi:10.1007/s10755-009-9099y

Balogun, S. K. & Okurame, D. E. (2011). Social psychological perspective of mentoring. *Mentoring: A Key Issue in Human Resource Management*. In A. A. Olowu (Ed.), Nigeria: Ife Centre for Psychological Studies

Ghosh, R. (2014). Antecedents of mentoring support: A meta-analysis of individual, relational, and structural or organizational factors. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 84(3), 367-384

Hall, M. E. L. & Maltby, L. E. (2013). Mentoring: The view from both sides. *Journal of Psychology and Christianity*, 32(1), 70-74

Horowitz, J. & Christopher, K. B. (2013). The research mentoring program: Serving the needs of graduate and undergraduate researchers. *Innov High Educ*, 38, 105-116. doi:10.1007/s10755-012-9230-3

Linden, J., Ohlin M., & Brodin, E. M. (2013). Mentorship, supervision and learning experience in Ph.D. education. *Studies in Higher Education*, 38(5), 639-662. doi:10.1080/03075079.2011.596526

Murdock, J. L., Stipanovic, N., & Lucas, K. (2013). Fostering connections between graduate students and strengthening professional identity through co-mentoring. *British Journal of Guidance & Counseling*, 41(5), 487-503. doi: 10.1080/03069885.2012.756972

Noy, S., Ray, R. (2012). Graduate students' perceptions of their advisors: Is there systematic disadvantage in mentorship? *The Journal of Higher Education*, 83(6), 876-914

Vliet, K. J. V., Klingle, K. E., & Hiseler, L. E. (2013). The mentorship of undergraduate students in counselling psychology research. *Counseling Psychology Quarterly*, 26(3-4), 406-426. doi: 10.1080/09515070.2013.844095

About the Author: Stephanie Hamm, M.S.W., Ph.D., is Associate Professor of Social Work at Abilene Christian University (stephanie.hamm@acu.edu).