How Advising Doctoral Students Can Be the Greatest Research Gift of All

When I was considering academic positions over 3 years ago (which, by the way, how has it already been 3 years?!), there were so many factors to consider. What was the reputation and atmosphere of the school and department? Was the location going to be nice? Was Mike going to be able to find work? Would I be teaching the types of classes that I wanted to be teaching? Were the tenure requirements reasonable or insane? There were so many things to account for, and so many ways to justify the answers to the aforementioned questions if things didn’t quite fit with the expectations I had at the time. However, one aspect of my job search was a big non-negotiable: I wanted to work somewhere that had a PhD program.

I am fortunate to continue to have a very positive working relationship not just with my doctoral advisor (Hi Jim Diefendorff!) but with my undergraduate honor’s thesis advisor as well (Hi Alicia Grandey!), and it is safe to say that both relationships shaped my graduate school experience in an incredibly positive way. At the time of my job search, I couldn’t imagine not trying to foster that type of experience for someone else. In essence, working somewhere with a doctoral program was my way of trying to “pay it forward” and give back to someone else the hours (and hours) of guidance and social support that I had received from my mentors. Having now had the opportunity to work with two doctoral students at very different phases of their careers—one as a fourth year student and one as a first year student—I’m not sure I’m the best person to speak on “all the lessons learned” because I still have many, many lessons to go. But, I have seen the incredible value of working with doctoral students, and I hope that they can see the value as well.¹

Importantly, over the last 3 years I have received a great deal of (sometimes conflicting) advice on how to best manage working with doctoral students. Because I am still figuring this “stuff” out, I figured that other people out in TIP land might be trying to figure it out as well. When it came to working with doctoral students, I was generally given two streams of advice: (1) fit my
The doctoral student into a project (or projects) I was already working on, or (2) let your doctoral student read within your research area and come up with an idea on his or her own. Initially, it seemed as though these approaches were an “either/or” type of situation, and when I thought of them that way, things seemed to stagnate. In fact, I felt as if I was reading in circles (and they might have felt the same way) or that I was forcing students to be reading or working on something that they weren’t intrinsically motivated to pursue. Although there are certainly things that graduate students work on that are less than glamorous and need to be done, I am a firm believer that students need to see how their work—whether it is reading, coding, or creating surveys—fits into the larger research picture, and this tends to serve as my reality check as well. After all, if I just have a student doing busy work, who is that benefiting? What kind of lesson is that teaching? More often than not, the answer was that it was benefiting no one, and it created an experience that was less than fruitful and a divergence from how I was mentored. So, similar to other areas of my academic life, I decided to take a “best of collection” of my own personal experiences, the advice I was given, and the mentor-mentee relationships I admired to determine how I wanted to actually work with my doctoral students. Here is what has worked:

1. Set a Formal Weekly Meeting Time and Encourage Drop-Ins

Although a weekly meeting may not always be necessary, having a 1–2 hour window blocked out in my Outlook calendar did a couple of important things for me. First, it helped keep me accountable to my doctoral students. If I was having them read 3–4 articles over a given week, I sure had to be reading them as well, and a weekly meeting time kept me on a similar timeframe to make sure we could actually have a productive discussion. Moreover, if I owed my doctoral students something for a project (e.g., a template of a similar survey I had created in the past, contacting someone else in the field for study materials/advice), knowing that we would have a weekly update was incredibly helpful to keep me chugging along on my end. Importantly, once I began meeting weekly with my students, the projects began to flow more fluidly and stay on track. Also, it became a time to chat about ideas that were a hybrid of my own interests and theirs, and several of the projects I am currently working on with my past and current students are a function of this type of idea sharing in meetings.

Nevertheless, what I have found to be just as important as weekly meetings are the times when my students have popped in to chat quickly about an idea or an issue they are running into. When I started in academia, I was given sage advice to protect my time, and my time is certainly something I continue to be mindful of. However, when it comes to pop-in meetings with my doctoral students, it has become less of an issue of protecting my time over the last 3 years and more a realization that quick little meetings can mean the difference between a project taking a huge step forward or slowing down its progression. When thinking back on my own graduate school experience, I
remember many times when I would knock on Jim’s door to pop in for a few minutes to make sure I was clear on something or to ask if a certain idea made sense. I’ll admit that, when I left graduate school, I forgot how frequently I did this, how open Jim was to this practice, and how beneficial it was for my work as a doctoral student. In some ways, I tried to rigidly manage my time so much at the start that these types of quick meetings were viewed as an interruption and not an opportunity. Now, I have loosened up quite a bit, with my door more than open to students who want to pop in, even if sometimes the conversations sidetracks to nonresearch related things. After all, things don’t need to be that serious all of the time, and more often than not, even when things discussed are a little silly (or just involve hanging out eating some of the candy I have stashed in my office), I find that this type of positive work norm enhances the creativity and comfortableness of our actual research meetings when they happen.

2. Identify Blended Interests

Although I’ve become entrenched in a few specific research areas, I haven’t found myself feeling a strong desire to “push” these areas onto any student that I’m working with. Rather, I have found it best to assign readings in an area I’m comfortable in and ask the graduate student I am working with to find articles that he/she is interested in that tend to offer a blend of things we both like. For instance, my first doctoral student (Andrew) had a strong interest in recovery experiences work, which was an area I had never personally pursued but fit within my interest of studying employee well-being. After doing some reading and joint brainstorming, we were able to identify a project merging our interests together, and as we continue to work through the revision process, it remains one of my favorite projects given the organic nature with which it emerged. Importantly, I should note that, when Andrew and I began working together, his research interests were more developed because he was a third year student in the program when we began chatting about this particular idea. However, the same blended approach can be applied, in my opinion, to anyone at any level of their graduate education.

For instance, my current doctoral student (Nitya) started with me during her first semester of graduate school. It may have taken a little longer to identify where our ideas could be blended together, but following the same protocol I outlined above, through readings that we both began picking together, we eventually unearthed a question that (a) fit a project I was currently musing up with a couple of coauthors and (b) could be molded into her own to ensure that she had ownership of the work she was doing. In both scenarios with each doctoral student, in my view at least, the work never seemed forced; rather, we both felt a mutual level of investment, and I’m not sure this would have emerged had I forced a particular project on either of them. (Of course, they could totally disagree with this, but I’ll live in my little world where everything is awesome.)

3. Be Comfortable Making Mistakes

As many TIP readers can attest, the research process—on a good day—can be
incredibly messy. When I first started advising, I placed a ton of pressure on myself to always try and know it all and have everything perfectly together. Yet, trying to maintain this resulted in two major issues. First, it was exhausting. I was too concerned about always knowing the right thing to say and truly believed that it was necessary for me to always have the answers in order to be a good advisor. Second, it was unrealistic not just for me as a person to hold that act up, but also it was an inaccurate preview of what the research process was really like. The reality is that most days when I’m working on research there is a lot of slowly thinking through research questions, reading up about analytic approaches, and, if I’m completely honest, some choice words being said under my breath (that last part may be an understatement; sometimes, it’s kind of loud). Also, part of getting the most out of working with doctoral students is being realistic with the entire experience and not just the final paper that makes its way to a conference or a journal. In following research from my friend and colleague Jennifer Wessel, I find it important to be my entire authentic self during the research process, and this means showing all of the ups and all of the downs with students I am advising. Sometimes the downs can generate some laughs, even at 11:42pm on a Monday night as you are texting with your doctoral student about making changes to a Qualtrics survey to make sure participants don’t click the wrong link and destroy the data collection you have planned to launch in just 3 short days. (Yep – that really happened while writing this article; stay tuned to see if our fix worked.)

4. Remember—These Are Soon-To-Be Colleagues

Perhaps the most rewarding piece about mentoring doctoral students in the research process is knowing that, one day, they are no longer going to be students but colleagues that you continue to collaborate with and see at conferences. The reality is, although graduate school feels like forever when you are a student, the time is truly fleeting, and, in some ways, when advising doctoral students, I feel as though time somehow goes even faster. But you get to be a part of so many phenomenal moments as a research advisor: watching your student’s first conference presentation, reading the acceptance letter of your student’s first publication, hooding your first PhD student (even if you are too short and can’t quite reach high enough to get the darn thing over your student’s head—sorry, Andrew!)—and these moments are the best part of all.

So, to those out there who are currently mentoring doctoral students, or are hoping to someday, do not be scared about stepping into or fulfilling the role of “research advisor.” It could end up being the most rewarding one of all.

Note

1 Andrew Bennett and Nitya Chawla – thank you for not running for the hills when you were assigned to me.