

# The Mentoring-Empowered Model: Professional Role Functions in Graduate Student Advisement

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*The Mentoring-Empowered Model provides a developmental framework for graduate student advisement that addresses the psychosocial and developmental needs of graduate students. The model is based upon (a) existing concepts of graduate student advisement, (b) the recently formalized knowledge base pertaining to educational mentoring, and (c) Erikson's stages of human development. The Mentoring-Empowered Model provides graduate advisors with six characteristics essential to creating a developmental context for graduate student advisement and five behavior-specific role functions to facilitate implementation.*

Advising graduate students is a balancing act that frequently involves trial and error on the part of professors and students. Many graduate students are successful, experienced adults who are more accustomed to giving advice than to receiving it. Most adult students know what they want and may view graduate study as one step in the process of achieving their goals. Faculty advisors and their graduate students may have understandably ambiguous expectations of the advisor's role.

Reluctant to push advisement with self-directed adults, graduate advisors may define the advisement role solely in terms of processing paperwork and signing off on forms. This statement may be appalling and foreign to advisors directing the research pursuits of a carefully limited number of doctoral or master's students. It may be sadly familiar to advisors whose graduate advising loads are incongruent with crucial factors to consider when determining an appropriate number of advisees: (a) the field of study, (b) the faculty member's other responsibilities, and (c) the quality of students assigned (Council of Graduate Schools, 1990a). What kind of advising does an independent adult student really need, anyway?

Advisement needs of graduate students differ for many reasons. For example, doctoral students' needs for research direction differ in scope and intensity from those of master's students. Also, students progressing directly into graduate schools from undergraduate programs present different needs from those of graduate

students returning to campus after a period of time. Just as the structure and content of graduate programs are more varied than those of undergraduate programs (Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992), the needs and priorities of students entering graduate programs reflect the diversity of paths taken as adults.

Professors charged with advising this increasingly diverse group of adult students often receive little or no guidance from their universities in regard to their advisor role, despite its central importance in graduate study (Council of Graduate Schools, 1991). The prevailing belief is that faculty members learn all they need to know about advising through their own experiences as doctoral students and teachers, an approach described by the Council of Graduate Schools as haphazard at best.

The purpose of this article is to provide a model for graduate student advisement that clarifies the role of the advisor within a developmental context that meets the needs of adult students. Although applications of the model will vary according to degree program levels and types, the model is based upon the psychosocial needs of adult learners and offers a comprehensive approach.

## Graduate Student Identity

Students who choose to pursue graduate study may do so immediately or may postpone it for a while. In either case, by the time such students begin graduate programs their career goals have become more focused. Increased autonomy and responsibility for learning is possible. Developmental advisement needs reflect their adult status.

By the time students enter master's or doctoral programs, they have progressed beyond the concerns and needs of late adolescence into the sixth and seventh of the eight psychosocial stages of human development posited by Erikson (1959). In the sixth stage, characterized by an intimacy crisis, a person must conquer the fear of identity loss to experience mutual sharing. Not to do so leads to isolation. Therefore, it

is important for advisors to establish a climate of acceptance and openness when advising graduate students.

Graduate students are forced to put their educational fate in their advisors' hands: no one person has greater potential to affect a student's graduate school experience. Because advising relationships are pivotal in student progress (Council of Graduate Schools, 1991), potential intimidation must be alleviated to allow for straightforward communication. The advisor must demonstrate acceptance and openness so that a trust-based relationship can develop.

In the seventh stage of development, the stage of generativity (Erikson, 1959), a person seeks to make a meaningful contribution to society. When this is not accomplished, a sense of restlessness and stagnation results. If advisors are aware of this need for growth, courses and assignments can be discussed from the perspective of their usefulness in accomplishing personal goals rather than viewing course-work milestones as hurdles to be cleared. Graduate study assists in an individual's expansion of knowledge, facilitating the meaningful contributions desired.

Graduate students possess more options for control over their lives than they did as undergraduates. Adult learners exercise choice in who or what will socialize them (Brim & Wheeler, 1966) and in how this will be done. They are free to make choices, and maintaining the autonomy to do so is a potentially powerful motivating force.

However, the policies and procedures characteristic of graduate study compromise this sense of being in charge of one's destiny. Undertaking graduate study means dealing with the authority of the institution, covering tuition costs, and making time for course work in an already crowded life-style. This results in the uncomfortable sensation of not being completely in charge, which may be compounded by memories of prior encounters with higher education, particularly if the experiences date back to a recent baccalaureate degree.

Graduate students cannot seek refuge in the passive recipient-of-knowledge stance that may have provided safe harbor on the undergraduate level. Becoming actively involved in their own education is not only appropriate but necessary. The adult need for generativity and reciprocity in relationships must be kept in mind by both advisor and advisee to establish a climate wherein the latter can satisfy developmental

needs. Shared initiative is important in plotting and pursuing a course of study.

Graduate advising is a reciprocal process. Students must actively seek the input of advisors; advisors must provide counsel and guidance (Council of Graduate Schools, 1990a). It is also a developmental process that encourages reflection upon and analysis of academic, career, and personal goals (Ender, Winston, & Miller, 1982).

### Importance of the Advisor

Advisors assume central importance in the encouragement and guidance of graduate students. The importance of this relationship has been supported in many studies. In a study by Polkosnik and Winston (1983), 78% of the graduate students surveyed indicated that a close, personal relationship with an advisor was important. Goplerud (1980) found that high stress levels frequently observed among graduate students were mediated or lessened in direct proportion to the frequency of contact with faculty members. The greater the social distance between professors and students, the less satisfaction students report with their education (Bowen & Kilmann, 1976). The quality of relationships between professors and students is so important that it has even been found to be a better predictor of success in a doctoral program than a student's Graduate Record Examination score and undergraduate grade point average (Sorenson & Kagan, 1967).

It is essential that advisors establish communication grounded on openness, mutual willingness to grow, and trust (Barger & Mayo-Chamberlin, 1983). Graduate advisors are in a special position of influence and trust (Council of Graduate Schools, 1990a). The nature of the resulting relationship is as different from most undergraduate advisement relationships as graduate study is from undergraduate. Although still appropriately developmental, the relationship must respect the adult status of the advisee and be choice-directed, reflecting the professional and personal needs common to adult development.

Five functions have been found to be essential to the graduate advisor role: (a) being a reliable information source, (b) acting as a departmental socializer, (c) acting as an occupational socializer, (d) serving as a role model, and (e) being an advocate for the advisee (Winston, Miller, Ender, & Grites, 1984). Three additional characteristics are essential for advisors to make

a significant, positive impact. An advisor must (a) be accessible and approachable, (b) be consistent in maintaining contact with advisees, and (c) establish pleasant relationships with advisees in and out of the classroom (Winston et al.).

The role functions of the advisor and the preferred contexts for their enactment are expressed in the Mentoring-Empowered Model of graduate student advisement (see Figure 1). The large outer circle represents the context for mentoring-empowered graduate student advisement. Within the large circle are the key characteristics associated with establishing a context for mentoring. Trust, openness, acceptance, growth, and communication comprise the developmental context into which the role functions of mentoring-empowered advisement are placed.

The role functions associated with mentoring appear in the smaller circles: counselor, role model, encourager, teacher, and sponsor/socializer. These interconnect and exist within the preestablished developmental context for mentoring-empowered graduate student advisement represented by the large circle.

In the middle is the mentor characteristic of nurturer. Nurturing is the foundation, the component that connects all other components. Nurturing, in the proposed model, is defined through providing the context and enacting the

role functions of mentoring-empowered graduate student advisement. Nurturing captures the fundamental nature of the growth-oriented mentoring process expressed in the model.

### A Context of Mentoring-Empowered Graduate Student Advisement

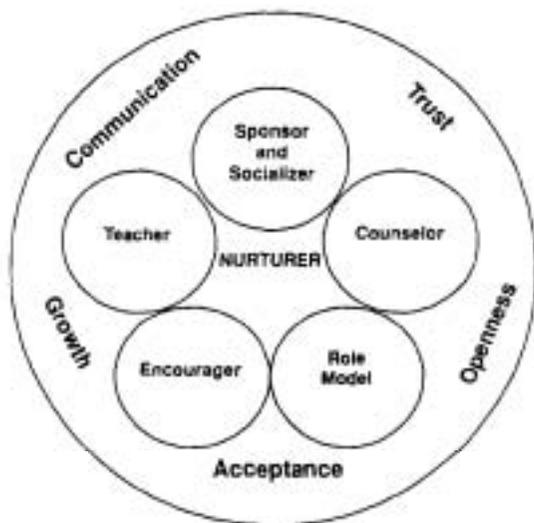
Anderson and Shannon (1988) approach the concept of mentoring from a perspective that clarifies advisor role functions. Mentoring is an intentional, insightful, supportive, process, they explain, "in which a more skilled or more experienced person, serving as a role model, nurtures, befriends, teaches, sponsors, encourages, and counsels a less skilled or less experienced person for the purpose of promoting the latter's professional and/or personal development" (p. 39).

It is also important to the nurturing nature of this relationship that the mentor be willing to "lead incrementally over time" (Anderson & Shannon, 1988). Challenges, opportunities, and responsibilities need to be expanded as student capabilities expand. Nurturing advisors must be sensitive to the transitory, developmental nature of graduate study to respond to student needs.

It is possible that a mutually acceptable implementation of the nurturing component of mentoring may be easier in some cases than in others. Some graduate students or advisors may not want to establish a personal relationship that moves beyond a formal association, preferring to limit interaction to the realm of professional development. This choice must be respected. However, Anderson and Shannon's concept of mentoring does give the option of promoting the mentee's professional and personal development. Even if there is insufficient time or interest on the part of professor or student for maintaining the close mentor-protégé bond of traditional mentoring, the advisor can still engage in mentoring behaviors by focusing attention upon issues related to professional rather than personal development.

The specific components that comprise the context for mentoring, as expressed in the Mentoring-Empowered Model of graduate student advisement, are (a) accepting and relating to each other; (b) establishing good communication; and (c) founding a relationship on trust, openness, acceptance, and mutual willingness to grow (Anderson & Shannon, 1988; Barger & Mayo-Chamberlin, 1983). As indicated earlier, a context comprised of these characteristics is cru-

Figure 1



### Mentoring-Empowered Model

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cial for nurturing the graduate student identity. It is also essential for facilitating the psychosocial development of the adult student. The Mentoring-Empowered Model focuses on graduate advisor roles important to the mentoring process: counselor, role model, encourager, teacher, and sponsor/socializer.

### **Role Functions of Mentoring-Empowered Graduate Student Advisement**

Cusanovich and Gilliland (1991) emphasize the importance of the mentoring context, stating that the mentor is essential to graduate education. It has also been stated that an unusual relationship exists between the graduate advisor and advisee: they start as master and pupil and ideally end up as colleagues. Personal, as well as intellectual, characteristics need to be considered if the partnership is to be productive (Council of Graduate Schools, 1990b).

Counseling is one role function of the proposed model. Similar to the contextual characteristic of nurturing in its potential for highly personal interpretation, counseling is the role function that may cause some advisors to hesitate. Counseling behaviors in this model are carefully delineated and include listening, probing for or clarifying information, and traditional academic advising. All of the counseling behaviors are familiar ones, traditionally ascribed to advisors at all levels. Counseling, as defined here, may be comfortably applied in a professional relationship.

Mentors must also be role models; they must be competent enough and secure enough to open their professional activities to scrutiny. Graduate advisors become the ideal by which students evaluate their own progress and accomplishments. Barger and Mayo-Chamberlin (1983) state that this process of comparison provides graduate students with a sense of how they measure up to an experienced professional.

Encouraging also comes naturally to those accustomed to teaching or advising. Encouraging, in this instance, means affirming, inspiring, and challenging. Sound teaching practice, these activities describe high quality interaction at any level, including graduate school.

The teaching role is perhaps most familiar to advisors in the professoriate. Specific teaching behaviors of those in advisor roles are informing, confirming, prescribing, and questioning. Although these behaviors are commonplace in

the classroom setting, they must carry over into advising. Through enacting the teaching role one-on-one, the advisor can be the reliable source of information (Winston et al., 1984) that the role traditionally requires.

The final component of the mentoring definition is that of *sponsor/socializer*. This coincides the advisor role of departmental and occupational sponsor (Winston et al., 1984). In this use, *sponsoring* refers to supporting the student, protecting the student when necessary, and promoting the student's interests in the daily operations of the academic unit. Advisors in the sponsor role represent students' interests when students may not be able to do so personally. They may, for instance, nominate advisees for scholarships and assistantships or for membership in professional organizations.

The main difference between the sponsor and socializer functions is that advisors enact the socializer role alongside students rather than in their absence. *Socializing* in this use refers to assisting with integration into the culture of the school and the college or university. This may take many forms. For example, advisors may arrange meetings for students who share the same major or similar research interests, encourage participation in student groups, introduce students to colleagues, collaborate on professional projects, or involve students in conferences.

### **Application**

Because the model is a framework, it is not rigidly prescriptive. Although that is a strength, it is also a potential limitation. Interpretations of the model that fit individual institutions, advisors, and students need to be carefully and continuously developed. The Mentoring-Empowered Model is not a panacea for graduate student advisement but rather a tool to empower the relationship between advisors and graduate students. Like any tool it depends upon the willingness of those who employ it to become skilled in its implementation.

If you are an advisor, application of the Mentoring-Empowered Model begins when a graduate student is assigned to you. Immediately take the initiative in establishing a relationship. Invite the advisee to your office for an informal visit and a welcome. Ask about the student's interests, goals, and reasons for pursuing graduate study. Point out ways that shared input is accepted, indeed expected, on the graduate level.

Introduce the student to the stages and milestones that characterize graduate study (Council of Graduate Schools, 1990b), and encourage the student to share reactions.

Make the first meeting student-centered and relaxed. Be an attentive, receptive, undistracted listener. A positive beginning sets a basis for trust. If the student does encounter a problem at some point, he or she will be more likely to seek your advice. To facilitate subsequent communication, find out when and where the student prefers to be contacted.

In addition to maintaining contact, make it easy for students to get in touch with you. Keep office hours that coincide with times that students are available. Be sure your advisees are able to reach you easily by phone. Be sure, too, that information you provide is up to date. Taking an unnecessary course or missing a deadline based on incorrect information quickly erodes the trust you are seeking to build.

After the initial meeting be consistent in maintaining contact. Regular meetings keep a student up to date on expectations and emphasize your commitment to the student's progress (Council of Graduate Schools, 1990b). Get in touch at least once or twice a semester during the course-work and early research stages, long before the start of the more intensive thesis or dissertation phase. After midterms, when you both can find your desktops again, may be a good time. Remember to help the student approach courses, assignments, and reading lists from the perspective of their usefulness in accomplishing personal goals. Conversations may be short at first. The important thing is to establish a nurturing groundwork of concern and support.

When students contact you for advice, be accepting of what they have to say. Demonstrate flexibility and critical thinking, a willingness to be challenged and to challenge constructively, and a desire to help students become better at research (Council of Graduate Schools, 1990a). Challenge without intimidating. Affirm successes. Point out possibilities and opportunities they may not be aware of. Hold up a symbolic mirror to help them clarify their own ideas by seeing them more clearly.

In your role as teacher outside the classroom, remember to provide informal guidance in areas not usually covered in classes but important to students nonetheless (e.g., how to construct a vita, tips for directing course-work efforts toward an eventual thesis or dissertation.

time-saving research techniques, preparation of materials for a professional presentation, and the unwritten rules of job hunting).

## Conclusions

Mentoring, by definition, adds the element of shared insight to an already intentional, supportive process. This is grounded in an atmosphere of trust, openness, and mutual willingness to grow by including the elements of nurturing, befriending, and encouraging. Applicability to most graduate advising situations is assured by the option of approaching mentoring from a personal or professional perspective.

Several components of the mentoring definition coincide with the guidelines for graduate student advisement of Winston et al. (1984). For example, being a reliable source of information fits into the counseling component of the Mentoring-Empowered Model. Acting as an advocate who socializes advisees into the department and the profession belongs to the sponsoring role function. The importance of role modeling is emphasized in the guidelines for graduate student advisement and in the chosen definition of mentoring. Of course the teaching component of mentoring has always been a part of professor-delivered graduate student advisement. Integrating the components of nurturing, befriending, and encouraging facilitates reciprocity in choice-based relationships. This encourages the personal empowerment so crucial to students who are working through adult life stages.

The resulting context for relationships provides fertile ground for the role functions attributed to the advisor in mentoring-empowered graduate student advisement. Reciprocal growth opportunities are fostered in the advisor-advisee relationship. Frustration and guesswork are replaced with guidelines for establishing a relationship that is mutually rewarding and developmentally sound.

The Mentoring-Empowered Model sets a comprehensive standard for advisement by providing a framework for needs-based advisement of the adult student that offers enough flexibility to meet the needs of a varied student population. Application of the Mentoring-Empowered Model will provide an opportunity for advisors to fulfill role functions in a context that preserves the autonomy, choice, and significant personal involvement in learning that is crucial to the development of graduate students.

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