On Advising

Mike Yough

Introduction

I believe the advisor-advisee relationship is one of the most important relationships in the graduate student experience—and also the potential for one of the more meaningful relationships in the professional life of faculty. Like any relationship, trust, effort, and open, clear communication on the part of both parties is key. However, the advisor-advisee relationship differs from others in that it also shares characteristics of an apprenticeship.

The purpose of this document is to be transparent about my views of learning and how these views could impact our relationship, to detail what I believe should be outcomes of this relationship, what you can expect from me, and what I expect from you in making the most of your time in the Educational Psychology Program here at Oklahoma State.

On Learning

Fundamentally, learning is a constructive process that is best facilitated by active, self-directed learners who have goals that pertain toward personal and professional growth and development. Effective learners are those that are open to new ideas and experiences with a critical lens and an analytic mind. They do not expect, nor seek to be spoon-fed, but recognize that meaningful learning is the result of time and effort. They see themselves as passionate explorers on this path to discovery. These learners view unfamiliar tasks as opportunities to develop new knowledge or skills. While setbacks in the process are inevitable, effective learners recognize the control they have over their own learning outcomes and make the appropriate adjustments in their learning strategies.

This view of learning is compatible with the support that I can provide as an advisor.

The view of learning as a passive process in which “experts” (i.e., faculty) are expected to “pour knowledge” into relatively empty “receptacles” (i.e., students) are not positions that result in deep, meaningful learning. Ineffective learners resist entertaining new ideas or ways of thinking. They view unfamiliar tasks as threats to be avoided, and are quick to blame setbacks on others or circumstances beyond their control. They seek “boxes to check” rather than opportunities to grow.

This view of learning greatly diminishes my capability as an advisor.

The type of learning characteristic of graduate programs should be a transformative process. My role is to assist in this process. Given that, I make the following assumptions: That you

- are here to learn, grow, and develop—not just in terms of the content, but as an agentic individual striving toward integration and integrity
- are driven primarily by curiosity than a need to be “right”
recognize that you are the individual who has the primary responsibility for your progress.

Outcomes of Effective Learners

By the time effective learners complete their program, they will

- be at a different place than where they started—changes that are both quantitative and qualitative in nature
- be independent thinkers
- have obtained a level of competency in their chosen field, recognizing that expertise is never achieved, but rather, a state in which one only moves closer
- possess an intellectual disposition worthy of being called a “scholar.”

What You Can Expect from Me

You can expect me to

- do my best to always see you as who you are today with an eye toward who you will be tomorrow; not who you were yesterday
- provide opportunities for participating in research, teaching, and service to the extent that I can
- hold high, but realistic expectations for the quality of your work
- be reliable
- be responsive—I will make every effort to respond to emails within 24 hours during the week
- provide honest feedback—I will strive to be your biggest critic; and your biggest supporter.

What I Expect from You

Meeting the following expectations will instill a sense of trust and maximize my effectiveness as an advisor.

- I expect that you have a desire to learn and develop.
- I expect you to take ownership of your own learning—be proactive; not passive.
- Be mindful of the learning and development of your peers and error on the side of believing that we have the best interest of all in mind when making programmatic decisions. When your peers receive opportunities you may have hoped for, be open to the possibility that there may be much about their circumstances that you do not know.
- You deserve a great education. However, you do yourself a service when this is viewed as a privilege and opportunity (which 99.9 earthlings don’t have), rather than out of a sense of entitlement. What this means, in part, is making the most of opportunities during your time in the program. Treat each opportunity as an audition for the next. I expect you to
approach your work with a sense of humility, recognizing that not all have been afforded the opportunities you enjoy.

- Life is not predictable. You will have classes where you believe the teaching is bad. As teachers are generally human beings, they will make mistakes—as will you. Blaming yourself or others is not productive. Learn what you can of the situation and move forward.
- Be reliable.
- Be responsive. I do not expect you to immediately respond to all attempts to reach you (indeed, this would weird me out a bit), but I do expect a response in a couple of (business) days.
- Be open to council and view feedback as an opportunity to learn.
- The primary responsibility for making progress lies with you. If you are not sure what you need or how to proceed, seek out these answers—first consulting the University Catalog and then the EPSY Handbook. If you can’t find what you need there, I am very happy to help. If you are expecting me to nag you, you will be disappointed!

Ultimately, I view my role as one to support you in aspiring to make a difference with your work.

1Keeping in mind that I have to balance the finite nature of those opportunities and the needs of your peers.
2Sometimes being supportive means providing feedback that may be difficult to hear.