

Take it Personally

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Since my days of beginning graduate study, I have heard a wealth of advice regarding how to find the right mentor. What I haven't heard is how to balance the two most crucial qualifiers in the mentor-protégé relationship: matching personality and research interests.

Typically, students are advised to find a match between their interests and the professor's research, to obtain information about potential mentors, and to get information from other graduate students who have worked with that particular professor (Dittmann, 2005). Assuming the student has found one or more professors whose research is of interest, further suggestions are made with regard to initiating the relationship and assessing the mentor's purpose in facilitating the student's transition into the professional environment. These steps are, of course, necessary. However they must not outweigh the consideration of personal compatibility in conjunction with research interest (Cesa & Fraser, 1989; Dittmann, 2005).

This priority in mind, I pursued a different approach to my mentor search and found my solution already close at hand. I have worked with Avidan Milevsky since I was an undergraduate research assistant. When I became a graduate student, I remained on his research team, and the transition to the mentor-protégé relationship was a natural one. My mentor and I have the necessary components for a good working relationship: academic and behavioral affinities.

For those currently undertaking such a search, Milevsky offers advice based on his own experience as a new graduate student and, most recently, as a professor considering his protégé. Though he acknowledges the typical approach — in which graduate students contact multiple professors who share research interests — Milevsky explains that professors often seek out students based on the strength of

their undergraduate records. He also noted that if the student is fortunate enough to be sought as a protégé by more than one professor, he or she must navigate choosing a mentor without alienating the other professors in order to maintain good working relationships with everyone (A. Milevsky, personal communication, December 8, 2005).

When he himself was a graduate student seeking guidance, Milevsky was aware that the relationship with his mentor would last for several years. Accordingly, he made his selection based on intellectual and personal compatibility. My professor knew — as does any protégée — that his mentor would also be the person to facilitate his exposure to the professional world. Later in his career, he found that that special “fit” was not only important for a student; a mentor also stands to benefit when the relationship evolves into a more collegial one (Dittmann, 2005). Indeed, many protégés continue to collaborate with their mentors in future work.

As the fledgling graduate student, it is imperative to take the initiative to learn all you can about the research interests and personal characteristics of potential mentors. Research their work, talk to students who’ve worked with them in the past, and if possible, sit and talk with professors themselves. Taking an active role in establishing the mentorprotégé relationship is not only conducive to the student’s satisfaction with the relationship (Dittmann, 2005), but also beneficial to mentors, as having a highly motivated protégé stands to benefit their research. The right combination of research interest and personal compatibility is the key to a mutually beneficial mentor-protégé relationship, both now and in the future. Finally, initiative on the part of the student is the best facilitator.

References

- Cesa, I. L., & Fraser, S. C. (1989). A method for encouraging the development of good mentor-protégé relationships. *Teaching of Psychology*, 16(3), 125-128.
- Dittmann, M. (2005). Building mentorships for success. *gradPSYCH*. 3(1), 40-45.