

Teaching, Advising, and Mentoring the Non-Traditional Graduate Student

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Although university classrooms are traditionally populated by recent high school graduates and their peers, the number of non-traditional students entering college has increased in recent years. As changing technology and economic fluctuations affect the job market, many people are returning to school, both undergraduate and graduate, in pursuit of advanced degrees. According to the Council of Graduate Schools (2009), there has been a substantial increase in the number of non-traditional graduate students, and the trend is predicted to continue. By 2018, approximately 3.4 million graduate students will be age 35 and older. These students are likely to encounter different obstacles in completing advanced degrees than traditional students who move from undergraduate programs directly into graduate school.

In this article, we focus on the various roles that professors play when working with non-traditional graduate students and provide tips for succeeding in each of these roles. Although a variety of factors have been used to classify students as “traditional” or “non-traditional,” our primary interest is students who have a gap of at least five years between completing the undergraduate degree and beginning an advanced degree. Most non-traditional graduate students return to school either to advance their current employment or to train for a new career. Therefore, professors’ roles will vary depending on the students’ goals and current status. Consequently, professors will find themselves at different times acting as a teacher, an advisor, and a mentor.

Our motivation in writing this article stems partly from our own personal experiences as non-traditional graduate students. The first author returned to graduate school after 18 years in industry, whereas the second author returned after six years. These experiences have made us keenly aware of the challenges that graduate school poses for those who return after an extended period and also remind us of the important roles that our advisors/mentors have played in our academic careers.

The Professor as a Teacher

In the classroom, non-traditional graduate students tend to experience many of the same difficulties as their undergraduate counterparts. In an earlier Teaching Tips article, Allen (2000) provided a thorough guide for addressing these needs, so we will only touch briefly on them here. Allen outlined a variety of concepts (e.g., respect for students, fairness, and diversity) that extend to all levels of education and all mixes of student experiences. The pointers Allen provided, such as role modeling respect, avoiding assumptions, clearly communicating expectations and requirements, and providing optional assignments, are equally useful for non-traditional graduate students. We recommend a complete reading of Allen’s article for further tips for working with non-traditional students in the classroom.

One critical issue that Allen (2000) described for non-traditional undergraduates also holds true for graduate students. That is, the professor must be aware that a mixture of traditional and non-traditional students in the classroom means that the knowledge and skills of the class may be more varied than

usual. Students who return to school after a hiatus may need a refresher in some of the basic constructs and ideas required for a particular course. One way to address deficiencies is to prepare some introductory activities that cover the relevant material and place students into study groups to complete the assignments. Group work may allow the non-traditional students to fill in knowledge gaps without boring traditional students who already know the information. Groups also provide an opportunity for traditional students to review material and for all students to begin forming friendships and support networks that can contribute to a successful and enjoyable learning experience.

Non-traditional graduate students who return to school may also underestimate the amount of time and preparation needed for each course (Malfroy, 2005). They often expect professors to provide clear directions regarding how best to structure their time to combine both work and academic requirements. In addition to covering the syllabus details during the first class, professors should also discuss the amount of time for reading, outside assignments, and writing that should be allocated for each week. It is better for students to err on the side of allowing too much study time (is there is such a thing?) rather than too little. For a more comprehensive review on providing realistic course overviews, we recommend reading Yorges (2008).

Additionally, non-traditional students are likely to be unaware of the educational resources available to them. Assignments that require them to familiarize themselves with library support services, technology support services, and campus offerings such as tutors and writing or math labs, will help correct this inadequacy. Finally, non-traditional students often face obligations, such as family and work, that compete with fulfilling educational responsibilities. Although there is little the professor can do to intervene, it is important to be aware of these conflicts and remain open to strategies designed to assist struggling students. Some pointers professors can offer include setting a sensible schedule for completing assignments and reading. To the extent possible, build in time in case of emergencies. Students who wait until the day before an assignment is due and then cannot complete the assignment because of an outside crisis are unlikely to receive much sympathy from the instructor.

Conversely, professors need to be aware that events occur that are unanticipated, and they should be willing to work with students in designing an appropriate schedule. A brief review of how to set concrete study goals, how to schedule time, and how to monitor their own progress can help students get back into an academic mindset. Finally, have students consider the strategies that allowed them to be successful students, however far in the past that time was. We recommend the Nontraditional Student Website, www.nontradstudents.com, as a resource for both students and faculty.

The Professor as an Advisor

As many graduate programs require some form of a research-oriented thesis, professors are called on to assume the role of advisor. At this level of graduate education, an advisor must guide students and manage their research progress (Malfroy, 2005). An advisor needs to be a reliable source of information, an advocate, and a role model for students seeking post-secondary degrees (Winston & Polkosnik, 1984). For the non-traditional graduate student, these roles take on particular significance.

Our department offers masters degrees in applied psychology, school psychology and special education, as well as a PhD in educational psychology. The educational and experiential requirements for the

related professions are as diverse as the programs themselves. Therefore, an inappropriate fit between student and advisor will make for an unsatisfactory experience on both parts. Frequently, students returning to school after an extended period of time may not be aware of the differences in programs or the intended career path each degree prepares them to enter. Before agreeing to take on the role of advisor, it is imperative that both professor and student understand the desired goals and outcomes so that an appropriate match can be made.

Matching student interests with advisor interests is equally important for a satisfactory experience in designing and completing research. Completing a thesis and dissertation is a difficult process under the best of circumstances. If the student is not interested in the research topic or the topic is not suited to the student's intended career, then completing the project becomes an endurance test. The advisor can address this issue by scheduling an advising meeting as early in the student's first semester as possible to discuss interests and potential research topics.

In addition to selecting an appropriate faculty member with which to work, non-traditional graduate students often struggle with initiating the thesis or dissertation process. Although this process is challenging for all graduate students, traditional students have more recent experiences from which they can draw (e.g., an experimental psychology course). One way to facilitate this process is by offering a seminar that covers the fundamentals of the thesis/dissertation process and provides instructions on designing research. Such a seminar should include information about how to conduct a thorough literature review, how to narrow down an area of interest to a specific topic, and then how to identify a research question that can be put to an empirical test. In our experience, many non-traditional graduate students, especially those who have had careers in different fields, come into the program with little or no idea how to ask empirical questions. Often, these students begin the research process by asking overly ambitious questions. An advisor's role in this situation is to guide the student in scaling back these ambitious goals and focus on a project that is not only interesting to the student but, more importantly, doable in a reasonable time frame.

A delay in entering graduate school can adversely affect the skills and knowledge non-traditional students bring into the program. Traditional graduate students enter the program having recently completed courses in statistical analysis, as well as having designed and implemented research projects. In contrast, non-traditional students may have a considerable gap between completing their last undergraduate course and beginning graduate school. Consequently, the expertise they developed from undergraduate research courses is likely to be diminished. Furthermore, these students find that resources and technology have changed since they completed their undergraduate education. Therefore, advisors would do well to maintain a list of resources, such as books and websites, designed for the needs of the non-traditional student.

Additionally, advisors are frequently called upon to provide reliable information about the requirements and expectations inherent in the educational process. Non-traditional graduate students are likely to be unfamiliar with the step-by-step requirements they must follow to successfully complete their degree. Providing a flow chart indicating the order and timing of crucial milestones will help ensure students meet degree requirements in the proper order and time frame.

Advisors may also be called on to assist with the informal, and often unwritten, requirements of an advanced program. For non-traditional students, selecting and acquiring a thesis or dissertation

committee can be as confusing and intimidating as completing the first IRB submission form. These students are frequently unaware of other faculty members' research interests, which faculty members will contribute constructive guidance for a particular project, and how to approach those faculty members and request their presence on the research committee.

Although providing the extra advising that non-traditional students require may be time consuming, it is necessary for an enjoyable and rewarding experience. Additional time invested at the beginning of a student's program will pay dividends in time saved later, as well as in the satisfaction of a mutually rewarding academic experience.

The Professor as a Mentor

Although an advisor may also be a mentor, there can be substantial differences between the two roles. A mentor must act as both a sponsor and a counselor, provide exposure and visibility in the field the student seeks to enter, and supply confirmation and coaching (Rose, 2005). In addition, many graduate students prefer mentors who are not required to formally evaluate them. For non-traditional graduate students who are preparing for a new career, a mentor is needed as a guide, teacher, and advocate. Students who have been out of academia for some time may be unaware of the formal and informal requirements required to enter a new career. Although the examples we present here relate to academia, the role of a mentor may be similar across various disciplines and professions.

Rarely does completing a degree provide all the training needed to enter and succeed in a new field. In our doctoral program, many students prepare to become professors and researchers, whereas others prepare for careers in more applied areas (e.g., school psychologist, psychological associate). Although their formal education may provide students many of the tools needed to obtain these goals, the mentor can provide an invaluable service in helping the student improve his or her marketability. For example, students often need guidance in preparing a curriculum vita, initiating a focused research program, and establishing contacts with others in the field. Consequently, the mentor can provide a connection between the student world and the professional world. By sharing personal experiences, the mentor previews what will be expected once the student enters his or her new career. Involving students in research projects, encouraging them to attend professional conferences, and allowing them to participate in related endeavors provides students with opportunities to practice professional duties without bearing the full brunt of professional responsibility. The mentor can thus initiate the student into the cultures of his or her chosen profession.

A student's relationship with a mentor is often more nurturing than one with an adviser and may strongly impact the perceived quality of the student's graduate education (Rose, 2005). According to Rose, two of the most important benefits a mentor can give a student are clear, effective communication and honest feedback. The mentor monitors the student's progress and talks with him or her in detail about a project. Because a student might meet with his or her advisor only once or twice a semester, the relationship with a mentor can be vital to the student's success. A close relationship between a student and mentor is often beneficial because a mentor can give the student honest feedback that might be rejected if provided by an adviser. However, this closeness can also be a source of tension. Older non-traditional graduate students might take the greater familiarity with a mentor as an invitation to extend the boundaries from professional into personal. These extensions can range from calling the mentor by his or her given name to expecting the mentor to be a social friend. Thus, the boundaries need to be

established early and reinforced as the relationship progresses.

Although there is considerable overlap in the roles of adviser and mentor, the differences are also considerable. When working with non-traditional graduate students, professors must be prepared to be more involved in their students' research and professional development than with traditional students. As discussed, non-traditional graduate students may be lacking in skills and knowledge when they enter graduate school. They may also be uncertain about the details of what they hope to achieve and how to fulfill their goals. The student/mentor relationship is of particular value to the student as the mentor can help establish realistic expectations and provide a preview of the student's future career. Without this extra assistance, non-traditional students can be at a considerable disadvantage entering the job market.

Conclusion

Our goal in this article has been to describe the different functions professors play in the education of non-traditional graduate students and to provide some guidance on what these functions mean to these students. Graduate education can be a struggle for any student, but it may be especially difficult for non-traditional students who enter the fray with a number of disadvantages. In addition to the various academic challenges that non-traditional graduate students face, they often have other pressures such as family and financial concerns that may make graduate school particularly difficult. Faculty need to be aware of these difficulties when playing the various roles of teacher, advisor, and mentor. However, if professors understand these roles and embrace them, their relationships with these non-traditional graduate students will be enhanced, increasing the likelihood that the students will thrive in a graduate environment.