

Transfer or Transition?

February 29, 2012

Selecting the best research advisor and securing the opportunity to work with that person are two of the biggest hurdles of graduate study. Once students find an advisor and secure funding, they tend to focus all their energy on research, imagining that there's nothing else but a few years of hard work between them and their degree. But many students, including the three authors (who all began the same graduate program simultaneously), have had to face another unexpected challenge — a moving advisor. In this situation, students are faced with a difficult choice: transfer or transition.

Transfer: Moving With Your Mentor

The biggest question that comes up when an advisor is moving is whether one should — or even can — transfer to the advisor's new institution. When considering a transfer, there are a number of things students should be aware of. First, students who move with an advisor will probably need to formally transfer to the new program, which typically involves reapplying to graduate school. Although acceptance to the new program may be guaranteed as part of an advisor's contract negotiations, students should communicate with their advisor about this possibility as early as possible to maximize the chance that their needs are being built into the arrangement.

Another consideration is whether or not the new program will allow previously completed coursework to fulfill its requirements. Curricula vary widely across programs and, unfortunately, the onus may be on the student to prove how past coursework meets the requirements of the new program. One solution to this problem is to compare syllabi from previous coursework with the new program's coursework requirements to demonstrate that there is a significant overlap. Another approach is to obtain American Psychological Association (APA) accreditation documentation for both programs, which can help students demonstrate exactly how each program's courses satisfy specific APA directives. Even if the new program accepts previous coursework, transfer students should be prepared to take additional courses or fulfill additional requirements for their new program's unique requirements.

A final concern for students considering a transfer is that the culture of the new department may be different from their previous program. For example, programs have various explicit and implicit expectations related to completing theses and dissertations. One program may allow students to collect data before defending a thesis proposal, while another may not. Some departments have financial assistance for conference travel, while others expect students to find their own funding. Clarifying these details ahead of time, and asking the departing advisor to help facilitate the transition, allows students to learn the nuances of their new department and to navigate its politics effectively.

Logistics aside, moving with an advisor has additional consequences, from losing the camaraderie and support of fellow students to the possibility of losing collaborative relationships with faculty in their department. But even with these concerns in mind, a transfer provides an exceptional opportunity for students to leave graduate school with a broader understanding of how their field operates.

Transition: Finding a New Advisor

Students who have the opportunity to transfer are pretty lucky. Depending on the circumstances of an advisor's move, it's not always possible for students to follow, and students who stay at their original institution after the loss of an advisor has their own set of unique challenges to face. Issues that must be navigated include whether or not it will be feasible (or desirable) to continue working with the departed advisor remotely. Even when students and advisors work well together, long-distance advising can be problematic. Students who stay behind run the risk of becoming a secondary concern to both their original advisor and their graduate program. Departed advisors will likely have more immediate priorities at their new institutions, so it falls to the student to ensure that he or she remains a priority and to prepare a backup plan in the event that the original advisor's support is lost. Similarly, students who stay can quickly become "no one's" student within the department, and they may not get the support they need to complete program requirements, apply for funding, and so on. Departmental logistics can also become a problem. For instance, the program will likely still require an "official" local advisor to sign off on paperwork, and the original advisor may need to travel to attend the student's dissertation defense.

To avoid these potential pitfalls, many students who stay at an institution choose new advisors. This solution, however, has its own difficulties. Depending on the similarity of research interests, these students may be required to refocus their work on another substantive area. As a result, students often lose the resources and support they need to complete unfinished projects. Students may also have to delay graduation while they get up to speed with their new laboratory and advisor. For students who are farther along in their programs, having limited time to develop a good working relationship could ultimately affect their careers when they ask their new advisors for letters of recommendation or to be a reference.

A Contingency Plan

For individuals who have yet to enroll in graduate school, the possibility of an advisor's move is somewhat easier to handle. Applicants can speak frankly with prospective advisors about any intentions to leave in the coming years. They can also look closely at other faculty in the program to determine whether alternative advisors would be available if their advisor left. For students who are already in graduate programs, one of the best ways to minimize the impact of an advisor moving is to develop collaborations within their department. These relationships will buffer against the likelihood that students might be left behind without a logical advising contingency plan.

Even with a contingency plan, working with a moving advisor can be challenging. But students should view the move as an opportunity to reassess their graduate school trajectory and broader career goals. The departure of an advisor is a rare occasion to start over and/or completely change directions. Ultimately, the decision students make to transfer or transition should boil down to one thing: determining what is best for them and their careers