

Selecting a Dissertation Advisor: Practical Strategies for Making the Most Important Decision of Your Doctoral Education

By Curtis W. Balmer, Ph.D.

Ask any senior doctoral student or freshly minted Ph.D. and they will likely tell you that selecting a dissertation advisor is the single-most important decision made during graduate school. Indeed, several studies indicate that the quality of the student-advisor relationship—good or bad—directly influences the quality of doctoral education. Yet, as commonplace as this knowledge is by the final years of doctoral training, it is virtually nowhere in evidence among incoming students. Furthermore, doctoral programs do not as a matter of course provide students with information and strategies for assessing candidate advisors. Instead, students—armed with only a vague idea of what to look for in an advisor, what questions to ask, and where to go for additional information—are left to their own devices. Unfortunately, this approach, as studies indicate, all too frequently yields unsatisfactory results which negatively impact students' doctoral education and subsequent professional careers.

While no approach to choosing an advisor can guarantee a perfect match, by employing the following strategies doctoral students can maximize their chances of selecting a mentor with whom they can develop a rewarding and mutually beneficial relationship.

Appreciating the Importance of the Student-Advisor Relationship

Countless anecdotal reports as well as formal research studies indicate that incoming doctoral students are largely unaware of the complexity and importance of the student-advisor relationship. As a result, students often do not adequately perceive the need to investigate potential advisors thoroughly and make choices that all too frequently have negative consequences for their training and subsequent careers. Thus, the process of selecting an advisor really begins with recognizing the inestimable importance of the student-advisor relationship.

This relationship is often likened to a marriage and rightfully so as few other professional interactions—for better or for worse—form such an influential and inextricable union between two people. During graduate school the nature and quality of the student-advisor relationship directly impacts the student's day-to-day professional and personal experience, as

well as the quality of their work, their productivity, and professional development.

As in a marriage, this relationship is ideally founded in mutual interest, respect, and trust, and provides security, understanding, support, and patience, while allowing room for individual growth and expression. All too often, however, this relationship settles into benign indifference and may even become manipulative, abusive, and intellectually and professionally stifling.

Whatever its quality this relationship also influences the student's post-graduate career especially during the formative years immediately following completion of doctoral study. Whether it is grant funding agencies, or potential employers in academia, industry, or business, it is commonly assumed that no one knows a freshly minted Ph.D. as a professional better than their dissertation advisor. Consequently, an advisor's evaluation of a former student's performance and future potential, in the form of written and verbal recommendations, carries tremendous weight and is often a significant factor in the decision to hire or award funding.

For doctoral students with their sights on careers in academia, it is important to know that academics are notoriously conscious of professional pedigree. Therefore, a Ph.D.'s professional identity will always be defined to some extent by where and with whom they studied. Thus, an advisor's reputation and standing can indirectly influence what career options are available to their former students.

Know Yourself

Perhaps the only hard and fast truth about doctoral advisors is that one size does not fit all: qualities in an advisor that herald a satisfying relationship for one student may portend disaster for another. The very subjective nature of this relationship highlights the fact that the better you know yourself, the better you will be able to assess who is the best advisor for you. Therefore, students who are contemplating or have committed to pursuing doctoral study are well-served by thinking deeply about themselves, their career objectives, and their reasons for attending graduate school. To that end, it is helpful to consider the following questions:

- What are my strengths and weaknesses?
- What is my preferred working style?
- What are my reasons for pursuing a doctoral degree?

- What are my expectations for doctoral study?
- Do I really understand what doctoral study entails?
- What are my personal and professional goals?
- What do I expect of my doctoral advisor?
- How would I prefer to interact with my doctoral advisor?

Answering these questions thoughtfully requires time, honesty, some soul-searching, and the willingness to seek out additional information as needed. However, the time and energy expended will be well spent as the more specific and insightful your responses, the better able you will be to define what qualities you are seeking in an advisor and who will best meet your specific wants and needs.

What You Need to Know About Advisors

What do you need to know about candidate advisors? As much as possible. Research indicates that doctoral students who are satisfied with their advisor used many more criteria in their selection process than did students who reported being dissatisfied. The lesson here is clear: the more complete picture students have of potential advisors, the more likely they are to select someone with whom they can form an engaging and satisfying relationship. While “more is better” is the general rule in this case, some advisor qualities and behaviors are of greater concern to students than are others. In particular, when evaluating advisors it is critical to learn as much as possible about the following:

- Personality/Temperament:
 - Is the advisor outgoing and sociable, or are they more introverted and prefer limited social interaction?
 - Is the advisor generally calm and even-tempered, or are they high-strung, moody or unpredictable?
 - Does the advisor handle stress well? If not, how do they respond to acute and chronic stress?
- Work habits:

- Is the advisor organized, methodical, and disciplined, or do they prefer a less organized approach?
- Is the advisor good at developing and adhering to long-term plans of research?
- Does the advisor work regular hours?
- Is the advisor good at multi-tasking or do they prefer to complete one task before beginning another?
- Does the advisor need to “talk through” their ideas with others or do they need to isolate themselves to formulate and clarify their thoughts?
- Management Style:
 - Does the advisor hold regularly scheduled meetings with students or do they prefer random, unscheduled, informal meetings?
 - Is the advisor proactive or do they manage by crisis?
 - Does the advisor micromanage or do they take a more hands-off approach?
 - Are students kept well-informed about the advisor’s schedule and whereabouts?
 - How much additional work not directly pertaining to students’ research does the advisor delegate to students?
- Experience Mentoring Doctoral Students:
 - How many students has the advisor mentored?
 - Does the advisor have well-defined expectations of students and are these expectations communicated clearly and adhered to?
 - Does the advisor treat students as junior colleagues or as something less?
 - Does the advisor take an active role in students’ professional development beyond the immediate concerns of their research?

- What is the average time to graduation for students studying with this advisor? How does this time compare with the overall average of the program?
- How successful have the advisor's former students been in meeting their post-graduate career objectives?
- Advisor Funding:
 - Is the advisor well-funded and able to provide full financial support for students throughout the duration of their doctoral training?
 - How many grants does the advisor currently have and where are the grants in the funding cycle?

While the specific concerns of doctoral students vary somewhat according to academic discipline, these questions highlight essential information that all students should gather in as much detail as possible and consider at length before selecting an advisor.

Sources of Information

Without question, the best source of information about advisors is their students. Therefore, anyone interested in working with a particular professor should make every effort to speak at length with their students, preferably in person. While contacting students by phone or email may yield helpful information, scheduling face-to-face meetings with them, as part of a visit to a university, offers distinct advantages. Students will likely feel more comfortable discussing faculty members in person and may, therefore, provide a more detailed picture of their advisor than they would over the phone or by email. Furthermore, on-site visits provide an opportunity to get a feel for the environment in a department and to observe interactions between students, advisors, and administrators, while also allowing for spontaneous interactions with other students, post-doctoral fellows, and faculty that may provide valuable information and insight.

Because the student-advisor relationship does not end at graduation, it is also helpful to talk with an advisor's former doctoral students. Thus, when meeting with advisors and students, request contact information for those who studied with the advisor in the past.

In some academic disciplines, notably the sciences, evaluation for admission into doctoral programs often includes multiple face-to-face interviews which are typically conducted during "recruiting weekends." While

applicants meet with many faculty and students during their visit to the university, recruiting activities are typically well-orchestrated and rarely leave time or opportunity for interviewees to speak in-depth with advisors and students who are not participating in the scheduled events but may be of most interest to them. Thus, formal recruiting visits typically do not provide the best forum for gathering the type of detailed information needed to evaluate potential advisors.

Assessing Information

Assessing the information gathered about candidate advisors is a very subjective process as only the incoming student knows what attributes and behaviors are most critical to them. In all cases, however, it is important that the information collected be weighed in balance. A very critical review may reflect an isolated interaction that is not typical of an advisor's overall pattern of behavior as a mentor. Conversely, students, perhaps fearful of antagonizing their advisor or compromising their standing within a program, may not be entirely forthcoming and may concentrate exclusively on an advisor's positive attributes. Whichever the case, when making this most critical of decisions, incoming doctoral students should focus on the overall picture of an advisor and make their selection accordingly.

The student-advisor relationship impacts both the quality of a student's doctoral training as well as their post-graduate career. Unfortunately, many incoming doctoral students are only vaguely aware of the inestimable importance of this relationship and have little understanding of how to best go about evaluating candidate advisors. As a result, students all too frequently find themselves mired in a frustrating and unsatisfying relationship with a poorly matched advisor. While no approach to choosing an advisor can guarantee a perfect pairing, by developing a keener appreciation of the importance of this relationship, thinking deeply about themselves, talking extensively with current and former doctoral students, and making a balanced assessment of the information they gather, incoming doctoral students can greatly improve their chances of selecting an advisor with whom they can develop a mutually rewarding relationship.

About the author: Curtis Balmer earned his B.S. degree with High Distinction from George Mason University in 1999. While attending GMU he worked in the lab of Dr. Ann Butler at the Krasnow Institute for Advanced Study where he obtained his first experience in neuroscience research. He went on to earn his Ph.D. at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill where he studied developmental neurobiology. He now works as a science writer living in northern Virginia.