



## ***Protect Graduate Student Success During COVID-19*** by Reinforcing Mentorship Programs

By Bill Andrefsky

One response to the COVID-19 pandemic in graduate education across the country has been to embrace distance education. Delivery of courses and even degree programs in an online setting has helped programs and institutions maintain enrollment when campuses have had to close to protect the health and safety of students, faculty and staff. But as graduate courses pivot online, will faculty mentorship — one of the most important factors for graduate student success — become increasingly more difficult to maintain? If so, how will this impact graduate student success?

Students entering graduate programs for the first time are entering an entirely alien environment. Graduate education is a time of transition — from being a student to becoming a professional — and in many cases, it's the first time a student experiences the responsibilities of running a laboratory project or an experiment as well as the first time s/he instructs or advises undergraduate students. These responsibilities are simultaneously weighed against the personal and academic demands put upon every graduate student to excel in their own scholarship and research efforts toward their degree completion.

Recently, we have witnessed much debate related to which factors are the best predictors of graduate student success. Should we focus on undergraduate GPA? Are letters of recommendation the most important? Is bias increased or decreased with standardized testing? How can we apply and implement holistic admissions practices? While different components of the admissions packet — GRE® test scores, undergraduate GPA and letters of recommendation — are critical indicators of graduate readiness, programs need to look no further than the ability of their faculty to develop meaningful mentorship relationships to anticipate the success of their graduate students.

---

Faculty advising and faculty mentoring of graduate students are two different practices. Faculty “advisors” help the graduate student to understand degree requirements, scholarship requirements and attainment of satisfactory progress toward acquiring the graduate degree. Faculty “mentorship” focuses on the relationships, interactions and resources that help graduate students meet their academic and professional goals. Students need guidance to become socialized and assimilated into their program and discipline. The faculty mentor provides emotional and professional support to the graduate student, which includes listening, building confidence and understanding, as well as career guidance such as professional networking, joint research and publishing.

One of the most important contributions a faculty mentor can make is to value the mentee as a person. This includes listening to the student, maintaining confidentiality, providing prompt feedback and generally respecting the graduate student’s individuality. Often, this relationship is built through regular formal meetings, but also through informal discussions where mentor and mentee are able to share ideas, goals and concerns in casual settings. These kinds of interactions are difficult to propagate as graduate education pivots to distance learning. However, graduate faculty advisors can schedule weekly virtual meetings where both parties contribute topics to the meeting agenda and leave time for informal conversation. Mentors can also consider utilizing virtual chat channels such as Slack® for mentor/mentee conversations and small group conversations. Online channels tend to invite more informal and spontaneous interactions, which can help build a collaborative rapport among students.

Faculty mentors should reach out and help clarify both programmatic and faculty expectations for research and coursework. Effective faculty mentors are always diligent about demystifying the graduate education enterprise. Reminding students through conversation if they have thought about requirements for their program of study, future funding, annual reviews and publication requirements all help the student better navigate the graduate experience. In a virtual context, each of these important issues can be topics that are reviewed by the mentor and mentee at the beginning and end of each semester or quarter.

Effective faculty mentors also facilitate professional networking for the graduate student. Personal introductions at professional meetings are effective for expanding the graduate student’s network, which can benefit the student’s research or future job opportunities. This aspect of personal mentorship could decline as distance education becomes more prevalent unless faculty make an effort to do so virtually. Such networking can continue by having mentors introduce their students via text or email to colleagues doing similar research and then having the student follow up by sending a synopsis of their research. This sometimes results in external thesis committee members for the graduate student and should not be eliminated because it can’t be done face-to-face.

It is important for faculty and degree programs to embrace the challenges of distance learning, while preparing for and adopting remote mentorship capabilities. Otherwise, we may find that the best predictor of graduate student success was lost to COVID-19.

*Bill Andrefsky is the Edward R. Meyer distinguished professor emeritus and former graduate dean at Washington State University. He is also a graduate education advisor for ETS.*