4-1-2000

The Mentoring of Graduate Students

Margaret King
North Carolina State University at Raleigh

The Mentoring of Graduate Students presents basic issues that face both mentors and their protégés. Margaret King, the Graduate School, is our faculty guide for this module. We focus on some of the ethical values most central to the mentoring process such as justice and the idea of contracts. One of the challenges of the mentoring experience is that it involves rules and practices both tangible and intangible. Dr. King explores some of these intangibles- Right Attention, Right Balance, Right Empowerment and Right Boundaries- in the central essay and we focus on them additionally in our Central Theme section. We present a Case Study from the Association for Practical and Professional Ethics. In the Study Question section we look more closely at the idea of Right Empowerment. In the Resources section you will find a sampling of articles, books and websites.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1) Introduction

This module concerns a process at the heart of life in academia, a student's evolution from apprentice to colleague. The winding path is familiar to mentors; they traveled it themselves and now they are the professor, passing on knowledge, both tangible and intangible, to their own students. The mentoring relationship is complex, with a subtle texture of psychosocial strands interwoven together. If we think of ethics as prescriptive for right behavior, it is clear that good mentoring is grounded in good ethics.

Dr. Margaret King, the Graduate School, will be our guide through this module. She asks how do we decide what we owe to whom, or putting it another way, "how shall we spend the currency of our time?"

Synonyms for Mentor:

teacher, advisor, wise man, sage, mahatma, authority, shining light, counselor, consultant, coach, guide, instructor, advocate, and kibitzer

In Module 1, *Research Ethics: an Introduction*, we focused on the balancing acts we go through in fulfilling our obligations to others. Mentorship is an exercise in juggling a wide range of obligations. Tom Regan divides the obligations we may feel into three categories: non-discretionary (what we owe to everyone) discretionary (what we owe to those we take an interest in, e.g., a charity) and special (what we owe to friends, family, and colleagues.) In the category of special duties, it is not uncommon to feel conflicted. The quandary an academic feels when facing ten separate tasks in one day is a familiar one. We feel a sense of responsibility to our colleagues, our students and our families as well as to the research questions that engage us.

The Graduate School at North Carolina State University sponsors Preparing the Professoriate, a program of seminars and focused mentoring experiences that are open to those students planning for careers in academia. These modules emphasize the research aspect of our lives, but academia also asks for dedication to teaching and this program provides an environment for experiencing the variety of tasks and obligations that confront a researcher working in the academic environment. Research is a multidisciplinary endeavor: teaching is yet another area that can be researched for increased understanding.

"Directing the research of graduate students is the primary point at which the research and teaching missions of the university intersect. Nowhere is instruction more individualized, nowhere is the potential for both satisfaction and frustration greater, and nowhere are the stakes higher. Through their research training, much more than through their coursework, graduate students internalize the norms of their discipline—intellectual, methodological, and ethical. Thus the future health of the discipline, as well as the professional future of the student, depends on the success or failure of this enterprise."

Margaret King, *"Directing the Research of Graduate Students; the Ethical Dimensions," (*pg. 1).

As Jim Wilson noted in Module 2, *Authorship and Peer Review, r*eal world collaboration can challenge our high principles. Often, the most important ethical lessons are given intangibly and by example. One of the challenging aspects of the mentoring relationship is that both parties have rights *and* responsibilities; both parties have boundaries they must respect. These rights, responsibilities and boundaries are both stated and unstated.

Rules and regulations set out by academic institutions are detailed and yet there are many grey areas, situations that are unclear, flexible and sometimes dependent on either personality or discipline. This can be confusing to the apprentice. This is where the idea of the climate of a discipline, its culture, comes into play. The process of enculturation gives apprentice scholars the unwritten codes to follow. This is what Dr. King alludes to when she comments on the "internalization of norms." Guidelines are eminently useful, but what about what they leave out?

In good mentoring relationships, both parties:

- Keep promises
- Keep appointments
- Maintain confidentiality
- Are non-judgmental
- Are honest but respectful
- Have realistic expectations
- Affirm, validate, encourage, appreciate

Margaret King

This enculturation experience is critical for the success of student researchers, particularly in the area of ethics training. As students struggle with their research questions, trying to juggle demands of their studies, their families and their teachers, what they pick up by osmosis is sometimes more to the point than any guideline. It is in the relationship between the mentor and the protégé that the ethical values and subtleties held by the disciplinary culture are communicated.

In this module we shall outline some of the major issues that arise, focus on insights that Margaret King offers us, and sample the literature available to us as we travel this winding path.

In modern times, the concept of mentoring has found application in virtually every forum of learning. In academics, *mentor* is often used synonymously with *faculty adviser.* A fundamental difference between mentoring and advising is more than advising; mentoring is a personal, as well as, professional relationship. An adviser might or might not be a mentor, depending on the quality of the relationship. A mentoring relationship develops over an extended period, during which a student's needs and the nature of the relationship tend to change. A mentor will try to be aware of these changes and vary the degree and type of attention, help, advice, information, and encouragement that he or she provides.

Adviser, Teacher, Role Model, Friend, an online publication from the National Academies Press

3) Applied Ethics: Mentoring, Contracts and Justice

Professional relationships follow codes of behavior; the mentoring relationship is an example of this sort of relationship and given the inherent complexity of mentoring, many schools have Bills of Rights for graduate students. Two examples of these are:
1) Washington State University:
Rights and Responsibilities of Graduate Students

2) University of California, Davis:
Graduate Bill of Rights

If we look at these we can see that they are a kind of social contract, spelling out the details between the institution, the faculty and the students. It is assumed that this will set out procedures for everyone's mutual benefit. The goal is good consequences for all. Recalling Module 1 and the summary of the four ethical approaches, Consequentalism (e.g. Utilitarianism), Non-Consequentalism (e.g. Kantian or Deontic), and Care Ethics and Virtue Ethics, we can see that these two Bill of Rights are a blend of several approaches.

E.g. the University of Washington contract states: "Graduate students have the right to an accurate description of financial support and an indication of the likelihood that they will receive it." Clearly, we can see the Consequentalist focus here, but there is also the statement "students have the right" so the contract is also emphasizing the idea of rights and obligations.

This emphasizes a central principle in the mentoring relationship, that of balancing rights and obligations. Faculty members strive to fulfill their duties conscientiously, attempting to be fair to everyone. Referring back to Dr. Tom Regan's description of Special Duties—those responsibilities we feel towards family, colleagues, friends and students—a good enough mentor tries to distribute time and attention in a just and equitable way to those in this category.

John Rawls, a philosopher well known for his work with social contract theory and discussions of justice, thinks that a critical point is that contracts must assume participants are valuable in and of themselves, not as means to an end. It is the principle behind the action, not the consequences that matter. In this sense, the idea of justice pursued through contracts is closer to the Kantian or Deontic Non-Consequentalist approach. (Deontic is from the Greek word "deontos" meaning obligation.)

Thought Questions:

Why do we have such contracts as Bills of Rights for students? Wouldn't the university automatically do what is in the students' interests? Do we need such a formalized contract? What about the university's Rights vis a vis students?

How does this idea of people (or mentored students) mattering in and of themselves, rather than means to an end relate to the mentoring endeavor? We can see two examples of this.

1) Justice means fair apportionment of time.

If we look at the challenges of deciding where to "spend the currency of our time," to quote Margaret King, "the principle of justice is a useful compass." A professor of music may see herself as having three sorts of obligations that need to be balanced: 1) to her family; 2) to her students; and, 3) to her discipline. Thus she may choose to spend extra time with her family instead of with a student if she has spent most of her week with students, saving some weekend time for work on her own compositions. Justice dictates that somehow, all the obligations must be balanced.

2) Justice means treating students as having inherent value, never as means to an end.

This would mean not using students to further one's own research interests, but rather to help them become professionals themselves. We saw examples of this in Module 2 when thinking about publication issues; justice would dictate that a mentor give appropriate credit to the protégés working in the lab.

…as with Hume, the criterion of the rightness of an action has to do with the inner state or motive that lies behind it. But by the same token individuals who demonstrate the virtue of caring act in ways that show how much they care or are concerned about others, in ways that demonstrate their emotional connectedness with others, and this means in particular that such people don't have to remind themselves of moral ideals and obligations in order to get themselves to help those they care about. They help because they care, not because conscience or some sort of (abstract) love of the Good tells them (how virtuous or dutiful it would be) to do so.

Justice as a Virtue, the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (this article also includes a discussion of Rawls.)

The idea of justice brings up a central theme in ethics, that of balance. This reminds us of one of the central tenants of Virtue Ethics: that of the Golden Mean, the idea that we should strive to always stay in the middle, not too much, not too little. One of the focuses of Justice Theory, and thus of philosophers who work in this area is to clarify power differentials, e.g. what is fair to whom and why? In the hypothetical example of the professor of music, it is part of the balancing equation that she also spends time on herself, on her own work. In the mentoring relationship there is much to ponder in terms of fairness to both mentor and protégé: students have reciprocal responsibilities to their mentors as well.

But one of the inherent challenges in the mentoring relationship is that there is, in reality, an imbalance of power. At least in the present. With the principle of justice in mind foreseeing the day when a protégé becomes a colleague, the imbalance is only a temporary affliction.

4) Central Theme: the "Four Rights"

Dr. King articulates four specific "rights" that are embedded in ethical mentoring behavior. These are "right attention," "right empathy," "right boundaries," and "right empowerment." How do these rights relate to the concept of justice? First, they imply "right balance." Second, they imply fair treatment. And fair treatment is a condition of justice.

- Right Attention
- Right Balance
- Right Empowerment
- Right Boundaries

Dr. King notes that mentoring embodies "right attention." By this she means a proper mix of the correct amount of time given to a student, sufficient feedback, keeping tabs on details such as committees and deadlines, interaction with other colleagues on the student's committee, as well as the correct amount of guidance on the project. Good mentors will find that right balance between compassion and nerve, between too much attention and too little, to arrive at an optimal quality called "right attention" to bring out the best in their students.

The mentor needs to give enough guidance to start a protégée on the right track, but not too much, in order to foster independent thinking. A good teacher has high expectations; but if too high, the student feels overwhelmed. A good coach is parental but not paternalistic. There are similarities to "good enough" parenting and yet differences, since the students are adults, with their own lives and goals. And again, we see the complicated issue of power differentials here. Is the attention coercive, seeing protégés as means to an end? Or is the attention one of giving room for the protégés to thrive? The latter is "right attention."

In the situation described here by Robert Sowell, when in the process was there a breakdown in "right attention?"

> "We had a case a while ago where a student was here for over eight years; gradually members of the original committee had departed for a variety of reasons. The student was left on his own; the department head lacked the necessary courage to inform the student he lacked the ability to do original research and the situation drifted. This is a clear example of a failure of attention early on that becomes an immoral action. The department had an ethical responsibility to that student and by not taking action, by letting the situation go—due to a lack of attention and courage, not "bad intention", just a lack, had committed an unethical act."
>
> Dr. Robert Sowell, NC State, The Graduate School.

Given the complexity of the "Four Rights", a mentor does indeed take on a highly demanding task. Vivian Weil comments that, "The word mentor should really be considered a kind of honorary title, since the activities take in so many dimensions and are so critical to the growth of the student." She emphasizes that at the center of the mentoring experience for both parties is the experience of the relationship. We noted in the Introduction that mentoring involves complex psychosocial interactions: this is why the idea of rights and balance is so critical. The job of the mentor is to impart not only a massive amount of specific disciplinary knowledge, but also to guide the student into the professional arena.

"All the activities of mentoring, but especially the nurturing activities, require interacting with those mentored, and so to be a mentor is to be involved in a relationship. The relationships are informal, fully voluntary for both members, but at least initially and for sometime thereafter, characterized by great disparity of experience and wisdom. Some writers also view the mentor as friend. However, friendship is generally a reciprocal, symmetrical relationship. The idea of the mentor as friend does not convey the 'taking under one's wing' that is characteristic of the mentor's activities. In situations where neophytes or apprentices are learning to 'play the game', mentors act on behalf of the interests of these less experienced, more vulnerable parties. Although some activities of mentoring might be performed by friends, to identify mentoring with friendship is misleading. The mentoring relationship does not feature the symmetry of relationships between friends."

Weil, Vivian. "Mentoring: Some Ethical Considerations." Science and Engineering Ethics, 7, 2001. 471-482.

In a provocative article, Eric Margolis and Mary Romero bring to our attention some dilemmas of academic enculturation. In the box at the right is a quotation from a student they interviewed in the course of their own research into the climate in particular departments in academia. We can see here what happens when mentoring falls short of the goals of "the four rights."

What are the responsibilities of mentors in this area? Does pursuing "right balance" imply equal attention to the theoretical problems and the practical ones? Does "right empowerment" imply supporting protégés in their choice of topics? In the situation described in the article, where are the "Four Rights" not respected?

"Very often women of color are interested in doing the kind of research that has some real policy implications and that's really oriented toward problem-solving issues. And at the program in this university, it's the kind of research that's almost disdained and it's almost looked down upon. They (students of color) thought they were jeopardized and placed in a whole different category because their work wasn't understood. Whether it had to do with race or ethnicity, then it wasn't seen as valuable or as important…I mean, they place a much higher value and premium on things that are purely theoretical."
"The Department is Very Male, Very White, Very Old, and Very Conservative: The Functioning of the Hidden Curriculum in Graduate Sociology Departments," Harvard Educational Review, 1998: 15.

5) Case Study

This case study is from the collection published by the Association for Practical and Professional Ethics (APPE), posted by the Online Ethics Center hosted by the National Academy of Engineering. The case, Today's Specials, explores the problem of work after graduate school.

We will present a summary of the Case Study here in the box to the right, but reading the original Case Study, Discussion Questions and Commentaries will enable you to go more deeply into the issues. You will find that with this case, as well as others, there are two levels of questions and/or concerns; firstly, there will be specific authorship issues and then secondly, the deeper, more complex societal implications to ponder.

Professor Hill and his wife Karen are eating out at a restaurant: their waiter turns out to be one of Prof. Hill's past students. Jake's situation, that of a saturated job market, is why a successful PhD student in marine ecology is without a job and is waiting tables. Back on campus Prof. Hill shares his concerns at a faculty meeting. Should the department limit acceptance of new students if the job market is soft? Is this a reasonable response? Is the question of future jobs an appropriate issue for a university department? What are the "right boundaries" of responsibility here?

This case brings up several key points we need to consider when thinking about mentoring:

There are also the deeper issues to consider, that of the underlying responsibility mentors have to students; what students owe to mentors and
Suggested Methodology:

Access the original Case Study, Left in the Dark, read it thoroughly, including the Discussion Questions. As we did in Module 1, *Research Ethics: an Introduction*, we will review the case study in terms of guidelines from our faculty expert, in this case, Margaret King (See page 6 of this Module and of the Central Essay, *Mentoring of Graduate Students).*

Review *Tom Regan's Check List* from page 4 of Module 1. Doing this will enable you to see the inter-relationship of research ethics in general to the context specific concerns of mentoring.

For example, the "*responsibility for and leadership of the performance of the study*" – how does that link to Regan's point 8: "*Are any duties of justice involved? If so, who has what rights? Against whom?"*

Clearly, Conway has an obligation to be fair to Elizabeth and she has the right to fair treatment. But, does Conway have a right to Elizabeth's ideas on some level, since he is sponsoring her work in his lab? Does he have a right to expect some sort of loyalty from his students for supporting them? And on a deeper level, can and should publication focus primarily on these sorts of ethical issues, or should it focus more narrowly on the real life needs of researchers in the real world? Cast a wide net in your thinking about publishing issues in terms of Regan's *Morally Relevant Questions.*

Again, as in the case study for Module 1,
What seems to you to be *resolved* in your own mind?
What seems to you to be *unresolved* in your own mind?
What do you find challenging to *articulate*?

Now review the Commentary by Karen Muscovitch, which accompanies this case. Reading her ideas when you have already struggled with this case will add to your ability to become articulate with the ethical issues and help you work on areas you are still unresolved and will help you articulate the deeper issues of this case. One of the realities of both case studies and real life situations that involve moral dilemmas is that you might have decided on how to go forward, and yet still feel the pull of the dilemma or find that there are still areas that feel unresolved to you.

6) Study Question: Right Empowerment

Right empowerment is one of the most crucial Right Balances in the student/mentor relationship. It directly relates to the themes of Right Attention and Right Empathy.

Margaret King notes that "Achieving the right balance between challenging or stretching a student and nurturing and encouraging a student, supporting their career aspirations, whether in academia or beyond are what is needed to guide someone into being a colleague."

Here is a case study, *courtesy of Margaret King*, based on real experience (changes have been made in several ways as privacy protection.)

John Doe's graduate program is terminated because his department says he has failed to make satisfactory progress toward the degree. Doe files a grievance, charging that the fault lies with his department. He alleges that he enrolled in his department with plans to pursue a very specialized line of research, which he outlined in the statement of purpose he submitted with his application. After enrolling, however, he discovered that there was no one in the department with the expertise to direct his research. He then persuaded a prominent faculty member in another department, Dr. Superstar, to allow him to join her lab, where the research was closest to his interests. With the begrudging acquiescence of Doe's home department, Dr. Superstar became Doe's nominal adviser and provided him with a research assistantship. But because she was already advising ten Ph.D. students, Dr. Superstar assigned an assistant professor in her group, Dr. Untenured, to provide the primary supervision of Doe's research. After all, Dr. Untenured's research was closely related to John Doe's interests. However, before Doe could complete his research, Dr. Untenured was denied tenure and left the university. Doe alleges that then, for all practical purposes, he had to find his own way because Dr. Superstar had neither the time nor the expertise to help him. Dr. Superstar claims that the real problem was that Doe ignored the direction she offered and was psychologically incapable of reaching closure on his research. Exasperated, Dr. Superstar resigned as chair of Doe's committee and terminated his assistantship. No one else on Doe's committee would agree to serve as chair, nor would anyone else in his home department. Thereupon the department terminated John Doe's program.

Discussion

Imagine that you are a member of the grievance committee charged with adjudicating this grievance. Who are the stakeholders? What are the facts in the case? Where are there competing explanations of the facts, and what evidence would you need to choose between them? Do you believe the grievance is justified? What assumptions about faculty and student responsibility underlie your answer? Had you been this student's advisor or a member of the departmental faculty, would you have done anything differently?

How do power differentials and the idea of "right empowerment" play out in this situation? We might think that the student here did not have enough empowerment, but thinking more deeply, do not students have enormous power? What are the protégés obligations to their mentor, their department, their discipline? What subtle issues can you tease out from this case study?

The Mentor:
Personal Empowerment

- Shares personal experience, especially on "life balance" issues (role model)
- Serves as a sounding board
- Assists protégée in goal setting
- Helps protégée develop strategies to achieve goals and measure progress
- Respects, encourages, and believes in protégée

Dr. Margaret King

7) Resources

Articles

Calabrese, Raymond L. Friends Along the Journey, Peabody Journal of Education, 71. 1, 1996. 44-56, a classic article.

Reybold, L. Earle. The Social and Political Structuring of Faculty Ethicality in Education, Innovations in Higher Education, July 26, 2007

Science and Engineering Ethics, devoted the October, 2001 issue to the topic of mentoring in science - a selection of articles by experts in the field on this topic.

Books

Anderson, Melissa S., Ed. The Experience of Being in Graduate School, New Directions for Higher Education, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1998. This collection of essays focuses on the experience of students, through surveys, interviews and reported conversations. Dr. Anderson is known for her research into the culture of graduate school. Chapters on electronic reserve include: "Reflections on the Graduate Student Experience: an Overview" (Melissa S. Anderson, Judith P. Swazey), "Survival Skills for Graduate School and Beyond," Beth A. Fisher, Michael J. Zigmond), "Developing Self Authorship in Graduate School," (Marcia B. Baxter Magnolda), "Best Practices for Enculturation: Collegiality, Mentoring, and Structure." (Peg Boyle, Bob Boice)

Committee on Science, Engineering and Public Policy. "Enhancing the Postdoctoral Experience for Scientists and Engineers: A Guide for Postdoctoral Scholars, Advisors, Institutions, Funding Organizations and Disciplinary Societies. " National Academy Press, 2000.

Council of Graduate Schools, Graduate Education for the Responsible Conduct of Research (2006)

Macrina, Francis L. Ed., Scientific Integrity: An Introductory Text With Cases, Second Edition. Washington, DC: ASM Press, 2000. Chapter 3 "Mentoring" on electronic reserve.

McCabe, Linda L. and Edward R.B. McCabe. How to Succeed in Academics. New York: Academic Press, 2000. This is an extremely readable, user-friendly book covering all aspects of academic life, achieving short and long-term goals, dealing with funding, and manuscript questions. An all around good combination of practical advice and insights about the many challenges newcomers to academia will encounter. Chapter 2 "Selecting a Training Environment: Choosing a Training

Program, Training Institution, and Mentor," Chapter 3, Selecting a Position in Academia," and Chapter 15 "Ethical Behavior" are available electronically.

Steneck, Nick, ORI Introduction to the Responsible Conduct of Research, see Chapter 7, Mentor and Training Responsibilities.

Websites

The Association of American Universities, Graduate Education

The McGraw Center: Working with Graduate Students,

Michigan State University, the Graduate School, Setting Expectations and Resolving Conflicts Program concerns conflict resolution between faculty and students.

Office of Research Integrity, RCR educational resource on Mentoring. Has links to many further online resources. Also see their posting of a Case Study on Mentoring from Columbia University, excellent for further class discussion.

University of Louisville has an excellent website: Mentor and Graduate Student Strategies for Success.

University of Pittsburgh, Survival Skills and Ethics Program, this is a very well known program, well worth looking into

Washington University, Mentoring Resources is an excellent clearinghouse of online resources.

"There is no formula for discharging the academic duties involved in being a good mentor. Knowing when to be demanding and when to be flexible and forgiving is a skill possessed by the best. But there are successful mentors who are either consistently tough or reliably supportive; the important feature is that the same message is sent all the time… Apprentice scholarship is a time of trying out new ideas and testing creative limits. Sometimes the new ideas are bad or even silly. Veterans become sued to the harsh public fate of bad ideas, but neophytes can be scared into a kind of unproductive trance if one of their first real creations is treated roughly. Criticizing with respect and turning a poorly structured question into a good one are among the skills that good mentors are able to utilize regularly."

Kennedy, Donald. Academic Duty. Boston: Harvard University Press, 1997. 108.