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NAVIGATING THE PHD WATERS: THE ROLE OF ADVISORS

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(This is a slightly expanded version of the talk.)

When I thought of today's talk over a year ago, it was crystal clear to me what the topic should be – PhD education. It is one part of our profession that gives me tremendous joy, and so it seemed like a perfect topic to focus on with a captive audience. However, having decided on the topic, the nuances of creating an impact by speaking about the less obvious was a challenge. After all there are several doctoral consortia, and many focus on the path to success for PhD students. So what could I speak about that was different, but still relevant? A topic discussed far less in these public forums is the nature of the Advisor-Student relationship itself: doctoral student training, our relationships with our students, and our presence in their lives for their continued success. So I will focus today on the role of Advisors in PhD education.

I joined the PhD program in Business Administration at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign in 1986, or the time long before Google Scholar. Yes, o young ones, there was that time where the first name of an author could only be found after a visit to the stacks or on microfiche. I had applied to a PhD program, was admitted, and was now venturing forth, bravely and coldly, to the Midwest. And I got hooked on soap operas and used them to educate myself on American culture. I had no idea what I wanted to do or what I wanted to accomplish, but somehow I stumbled along, each year to something better. Now I realize that I wasn't really stumbling, but that my education was a process – a process shaped by my relationship with my Advisor, Seymour Sudman, and the other members of my committee (Carolyn Simmons, Thom Srull and Bob Wyer). As well as by my relationship with my peers in the PhD program – we supported each other, looked out for each other, and saw each through fairly hard times. It's a time when deep bonds are formed and one's worldview is affected for life.

From a Student's perspective, PhD education is about learning new things, apprenticing with experts in the field, and eventually striving for independence and excellence in the profession. From an Advisor's perspective the education process is about creating a new generation of scholars who push the boundaries of knowledge, getting satisfaction from the process, and if some glory is reflected back on them, great! Additionally, there could also be a research synergy that is created for an Advisor across Students.

For students graduating with a behavioral focus in Marketing from a Business school, which tends to be true for most ACR attendees, the Marketing PhD is somewhat different in structure from a PhD in Psychology. For example, the Psychology PhD program typically consists of the "lab-model" where a group of students work with a faculty advisor who is the primary researcher. While the Advisor is a key player in this model, there also is an in-built mentorship or support system (or competition) from other students in the lab. This "lab" of students lives within a bigger doctoral student pool. On the other hand, when a student is working towards a PhD in Marketing in a Business School, s/he is typically working with a faculty advisor one-on-one. And the PhD student pools in a marketing PhD program are typically smaller than those in Psychology departments. Therefore, the Advisor-Student relationship is very central to the education process. Understanding what each group looks for in the other is important.

So my goals today are to help us:

- Understand the PhD landscape,
- Understand the critical Advisor-Student relationship better in terms of what we are doing right, what we are doing less well, and how we can improve.

So like any curious researcher, I collected data.

WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT THE PHD LANDSCAPE?

The first question that I asked myself was what is the size of the total Marketing PhD Student pool compared to the Marketing Faculty Advisor pool. Was there a dearth of one group versus the other?

I included a question in the most recent Marketing Academia Labor Market Survey regarding how many faculty members work with doctoral students in each of the schools surveyed.

- This survey was conducted using Qualtrics from mid-April to mid-May 2010 among 141 schools, out of which 117 responded. [1]
- 16 schools responded that they do not have a PhD program, and of the remaining 101 schools, the average size of a department is 12.5 faculty members, and the average size of the PhD program in marketing is 6.6.
- Additionally, respondents reported that on average, 50% of their faculty work with doctoral students in some capacity, either supervising them on their thesis or working with them on projects with the intention of publishing papers.
- Simple math indicates that the student-faculty ratio is about 1:1, enough for a student to get plenty of attention from a faculty member! It's like pre-school or even better!

Thus, there is an ample supply of faculty members who could serve as potential Advisors to the market of PhD students who are ready to go forth and conquer. Of course, in reality we know

[1] The list of schools across Asia, Europe, North America, and Oceania was compiled using combinations of the UT-Dallas lists of the 100 most productive schools in the U.S. and the 100 most productive schools in the world, together with Chris Janiszewski's and my personal knowledge of schools that regularly interview at the AMA Summer Educators' Conference. Respondents were department chairs and area heads in Marketing.

that some faculty Advisors have clusters of students and therefore this simple math can only go so far, but at least it gives us an indication of the basic numbers.

The next step was to zoom in on the Advisor-Student relationship.

UNDERSTANDING THE ADVISOR-STUDENT RELATIONSHIP

In order to understand the Advisor-Student relationship, I surveyed both advisors and students. Additionally, I wanted to know whether the perspective of students changes once they become faculty members, so I also included a group that graduated a few years ago. Here's what I did:

After the AMA doctoral consortium in Texas Christian University this past June, I sent a survey to three groups of respondents:

- Faculty who were invited to the 2010 AMA Doctoral, and a handful of other faculty members; Of the 135 contacted, 82 responded, a response rate of 61%.
- PhD students who were Fellows at the 2010 Doctoral Consortium; Of the 97 contacted, 58 responded, a response rate of 60%; and,
- PhD students who were Fellows at the 2005 Doctoral Consortium at the University of Connecticut; Of the 81 contacted, 45 responded, a response rate of 56%.

The responses rates were much higher for behavioral (versus non-behavioral) faculty and students, and so I'm going to treat this sample as fairly indicative of the ACR audience.

I asked all three groups of respondents to evaluate the importance of 32 traits in Advisors and Students. Since all traits were positively framed, respondents were given specific instructions:

> "Of course, you may be tempted to choose "7" on most of these options, but let's try to aim for a (normal or bi-modal, etc.) non-skewed distribution of your responses across these traits. In other words, skim through the traits first, and then use the scale discerningly."

Well, while the two Student groups used the scales more discerningly, faculty respondents just chose to disregard these instructions, and all 32 traits loaded onto one factor!

Despite such hiccups, the analyses revealed some interesting information that I have categorized into the following sections:

A. "Seven Deadly Sins of an Advisor,"
B. "Seven Deadly Sins of a Student,"
C. "Are We All on the Same Page Regarding the Advisor's Role?" and
D. "Guiding Light from Advisors Over the Years."

A general point of clarification – there wasn't much difference in the themes of the qualitative data obtained from Advisors and Students in the Seven Deadly Sins. However, when I present the Seven Deadly Sins of an Advisor, the verbatim I report are from Students, and vice versa.

A. SEVEN DEADLY SINS OF AN ADVISOR

I asked the 2010 Consortium faculty and student attendees what, in their opinion, were the top three traits an Advisor should and should not possess in an open-ended format. I did a content-analysis of these top-threes.

Positives

On the positive side, the most-mentioned traits were the Advisor's:

- Passion for research
- Productivity
- Ability to be a research role-model

All of these oft-mentioned positives have to do with the Advisor's research acumen. [At least that's what I called it till a colleague asked me why Indians speak in 18th century English, and so I changed this to "research talent and expertise."]

Negatives

On the negative side, the most mentioned traits are listed below. The main point is a numbered, paraphrased title, and the bullets within are reproduced verbatim from the responses as examples.

#1 Rigidity: My way or the highway

- "Controlling"
- "Dogmatic/strong ideas"
- "Stifling student creativity"

#2 Attitude$_{\text{Student}}$: I need therapy, but instead I choose to be…

- "Mean-spirited"
- "Verbally abusive"
- "Disrespectful"
- "Bossy"
- "Gossiping"

#3 Selfishness: How is this going to help me?

- "Focus on own productivity"
- "Believes in hierarchy and that students are minions"
- "Indifferent to student performance"

#4 Egotism: I reign supreme

- "God complex"
- "Infallible"
- "Dictates research agenda"

#5 Inaccessiblity: "I am out of the office" auto-reply

- "MIA"/"Out of contact"
- "Non-responsive to phone calls and e-mails"
- "Overcommitted"/"tired"
- "Takes too long to give feedback"

And you can't have Accessibility without Diagnosticity!

#6 Non-diagnosticity: Feedback with little guidance

- "Shooting down ideas"
- "Too critical"
- "On the flip side, too much sugar-coating of comments"

#7 Unfortunately Unaware: La la la…

- "Not pushing student enough"
- "Not being wind beneath sails"

While the positives had to do with the Advisor's research talent, the negative traits had to do with the Advisor:

(a) Doing "bad" stuff (#1 and 2),
(b) Having personality issues (#3 and 4), or
(c) Doing nothing (#5, 6 and 7).

Bottom line

The good news is that as Advisors we at least know what we want to accomplish intellectually! But we can be in a better place by improving social dynamics with Students. Two recommendations emerge:

(a) To Advisors: Don't do bad stuff, self-regulate in interactions with Students when necessary, and try to do good stuff and advise;

(b) To Students: Either

(i) Lower your expectations and accept that Advisors may sometimes be nasty/mean or lazy/aloof/absent (I know, this stinks),

or

(ii) Pick Advisors not just based on research talent but also based on personality and availability. Talk to other senior students. I think that it often comes down to a forecasting/selection problem from the point of view of the Student: they think that all that will matter is research talent so they pick the research star of the department (who happens to be nasty and absent… Just speculating – I do after all have Presidential license! ☺)

B. Seven Deadly Sins of a Student

I also asked each respondent to list the top three traits that a Student should and should not possess in an open-ended question.

Positives

The three most-mentioned positives were:

- Intellectual curiosity
- Creativity
- Perseverance (hard-working, diligence, motivated)

Negatives

These same positive traits were also mentioned in the opposite valence as negatives, along with several others:

#1 Lack of intellectual curiosity

- o “Not inquisitive“
- o “Not passionate“
- o “Not committed“

#2 Close-minded

- o “Stubborn refusal to give up an idea“
- o “Too narrow“
- o “Inability to listen“

#3 Lazy or Passive

- o “Procrastination“
- o “Looking for the easy way“
- o “Need for rapid closure“

#4 Perfectionist

- o “Too detail-oriented“

#5 Thin-skinned

- o “Emotionally fragile“
- o “Can’t take criticism“

#6 Over-confidence

- “Sense of entitlement“
- “Arrogance“
- “Cocky“

#7 *I* not *We*

- “Not a good team player“
- “Overly competitive with other students in the program“
- “Doesn’t work well with others“

Bottom line

These overall results are not surprising: We want intellectually curious, open-minded, hard-working, thorough but not OCD, sensitive, humble, cooperative students!

But maybe not…

Interestingly, while there seemed to be an “ideal” Advisor (i.e., a good researcher, available, helpful, and nice), the data are more ambiguous regarding the “ideal” Student. For example, there is a conflict between #3 and #4 (do you want someone who works fast or is a perfectionist?) and between #5 and #6 (do you want someone humble or confident?). The data indicate greater heterogeneity of preferences when it comes to an ideal Student compared to an ideal Advisor. And one size does not fit all.

C. Are We All on the Same Page Regarding the Advisor’s Role?

So far I have been focusing on the synergies of responses <u>across</u> groups of Advisors and Students. I would like to now focus on some interesting points of differences in perceptions <u>between</u> the groups in terms of the evolving role of Advisors during a Student’s professional journey:

(a) As a student
(b) While on the job market, and
(c) Post-PhD

As an aside, I will be presenting some charts – All scales are 7-point scales, unless otherwise specified, and a higher number indicates more of whatever is being measured.

(a) While the Student is a Student

The time as a PhD student is a critical one in terms of both intellectual training, as well as in terms of developing and refining good “research habits.” But what Students think they want and what Advisors think they need to deliver maybe disjointed, and so I asked a few questions pertaining to Advising goals and the level of involvement.

(i) What could Advisors use more of? Advisors say they wish they had more Time, Students say they wish Advisors had more Personality.

Faculty reported that the biggest problem they perceive in the advising environment is lack of time to advice. However, while Students did mention that Advisors are over-committed, they reported the bigger issues are personality-related: rigid, selfish and egotistical. Students do believe that Advisors have the intellectual component (thank goodness!), but they would also like to receive <u>respectful</u> guidance.

However, Advisors don't seem to realize this. They rated the importance of being Socially Aware (a measure that I am using as a surrogate for treating people with respect) as much less important a trait in an Advisor (3.8) compared to both groups of Students (4.8 and 5.6). Similarly, having a "Charming personality" was rated much lower by faculty (2.6) than the two groups of Students (4.0 and 4.2). While these traits are not the most important (given the overall middle-of-the range ratings on 7-point scales), we, as Advisors, should pay more attention to personality-related traits since there is a disparity in ratings between groups. Sensitivity to the way we interact with doctoral students is an important issue that we should keep in mind.

(ii) What specific activities should Advisors participate in to facilitate the PhD education process?

When asked this question, many faculty members mentioned:

1. Provide the big picture
2. Help with methodology and analyses
3. Keep abreast of the literature so that Students don't go astray.

These can be classified as the "intellectual" components of advising.

However, it turns out that Students don't mention anything so sophisticated or high-brow in their responses. In fact, when asked to rate the traits of "Well read in the field" and "Has intellectual breadth" on importance in an Advisors, faculty rated these traits at 6.2 and 6.3. Students, both the 2005 and the 2010 samples, rated these traits between 5.1 and 5.3.

So what do Students want Advisors to do more of? They universally identified three sets of activities that they would like their Advisors to do more of:

1. Have regular meetings/provide constant feedback;
2. Make a schedule/check up on Student's progress; and
3. Interact personally/have lunch together occasionally/and drinks!

All three have to do with "logistical details." AKA, some form of hand-holding.

Thankfully, given the specific nature of the feedback from Students, these action items are simple to implement, if not already in place. However, Advisors, if you're not planning to check up on your students, you should make sure that students realize it is their task to chase you and harass you.

(iii) How directive should an Advisor be?

One of the scaled questions asked, “How directive do you think an Advisor should be as far as a Student’s research is concerned?” Faculty expressed that they should be less directive (4.2) than recent graduates (5.6) and current students (5.1) desire.

What is the issue here? I have been involved in reviews of PhD programs and have given quite a lot of thought to different forms of advising that I have seen over the years. In general, at the two ends of a spectrum of advising, there is the “Apprenticeship” approach and the “Sink or Swim” approach. In general, I have been a fan of the Apprenticeship approach. A discussion with a colleague recently, though, made me rethink my stand. He pointed out that too much of an Apprenticeship approach may hinder the independence of the PhD student, making them less likely to succeed in a world where they need to struggle as Assistant Professors and get tenure. [Besides, we have scientific evidence that the Apprenticeship model may convert an Anakin Skywalker into a Darth Vader!]

I still do believe that Apprenticeship is important, and maybe there is a happy medium between this and the “Sink or Swim” approach in the role an Advisor plays in the Student’s life.

(b) While the Student is on the Job Market

When on the job market, the set of demands on an Advisor is very different. The job market generally lasts for only a few months, but it has a lasting impact. So I wanted to gauge the levels of satisfaction with the role of the Advisor during this phase.

I asked respondents a hard-to-answer, ambiguous and complex question: “In your opinion, what percentage of PhD students in marketing are satisfied with the role that their advisor plays in their (a) overall PhD education; and (b) job placement?” In answering this question, respondents were asked to think about Students and Advisors around them to make the question slightly more tangible.

Regardless of the craziness of the question (and my Advisor’s voice in my head saying, “I wrote Asking Questions! Did you not read it?”), the responses were indeed interesting. Faculty perceptions of themselves as Advisors are worse than student perceptions. Faculty reported on average that about 40% of students were satisfied with the role of their advisors in their overall PhD education. But the Student samples reported 60%. A similar pattern holds for job placement (40%, 54%, and 59% respectively).

Bottom line – Advisors, forgive yourselves! We are doing a lot better in the eyes of our Students than we give ourselves credit for. Yes, there is room for improvement (after all the satisfaction percentages are only a little over the half-way mark), but let's not try too hard to fix something that is only a little broken!

(c) **After the Student gets a PhD**

Once Students are gainfully employed, the question arises regarding the continuing role of Advisors. Anecdotally, I know several colleagues of mine who say that they wash their hands off their Students once that time comes, and yet others who continue to hover like helicopter parents. So I investigated this issue empirically.

(i) Mentoring after graduation

Respondents were asked: "How much (a) SHOULD, and (b) WILL an advisor continue to mentor their student after s/he graduates?"

- All three groups are equivalent in their beliefs regarding how much faculty members SHOULD mentor after graduation (Faculty = 5.7, Recent graduates = 5.5 and Current students = 5.8).
- However, Advisors believe they mentor Students after they graduate as much as they think they should (5.6); I call this group Idealists.
- Recent graduates (i.e., 2005 Doctoral Consortium students) do not believe that Advisors have continued involvement in mentoring after graduation (3.8); I call this group the Disappointed.
- Those that haven't yet graduated (i.e., 2010 Doctoral Consortium students) believe that their Advisors should continue to be involved, though they are not sure that they actually will be (4.6); I call this group the Pessimists, albeit not sufficiently so.

All three groups believe that Advisors should continue to be involved in their career, and yet according to the 2005 Students (who are probably the most recent beneficiaries of their Advisors' goodwill), Advisors are not as involved.

From an Advisor's viewpoint, however, consider issues of Promotion and Tenure down the road for our students. As good Advisors, we hopefully have internal compasses that tell us to what extent we should be involved (that is, till the student is flying on their own), and when to let go (that is, when students should establish an area of research of their own, and gain an independent reputation). Therefore, it is likely that Advisors are involved to the extent they believe that they should be involved, and that is just not the same amount as what Students expect. So again, it is up to us to either step it up or at least manage expectations.

(ii) How important is the Advisor-Student relationship to future success of the Student?

Both groups of "Students," the 2005 and the 2010 doctoral consortia attendees, rated this relationship as extremely important to their future success (6.5 and 6.6 out of 7). Faculty members, however, rated this relationship as less critical to success, albeit on the positive side of the 7-point scale (5.0). Since the Students that graduated a few years ago still think that the Advisor is critical to their success, Advisors need to acknowledge this more and need to: (a) either manage these expectations, or (b) work harder towards getting students to be more self-sufficient.

Bottom line

- Advisors need to be more attentive to personality issues when it comes to dealing with Students (maybe); and

- We need to revisit and manage the expectations of Students better in terms of:
    - Our role in their current PhD life (e.g., Schedule-keeper? Or idea-bouncer?)
    - Our role in their future academic life as young professors. Are we really that central to a Student's future success? I hope the answer is No.

An intriguing question is that given that all Advisors were Students at some point, why do these differences exist? I see four possibilities:

(1) Advisors have moved on, forgotten, and now have a different perspective;

(2) Times are different. Personality may have been considered irrelevant before (heck, it may even have been cool to be the crazy professor), but now Students want you to be nice;

(3) There is a survival bias and the most successful academics are those that did not care whether their Advisor was charming; or

(4) Students are now a coddled bunch and expect to have a lot of hand-holding.

You pick the poison(s)!

D. GUIDING LIGHT FROM ADVISORS OVER THE YEARS

Finally, I asked all respondents who have been in academia for as many as 40 years to as few as 2 years what was the best piece of advice they received from their Advisor. Here are the ones that resonated most with me and they are a reminder, in my opinion, of what we need to reinforce in our roles as Advisors:

(a) "It's a marathon, not a sprint."

It is important to think of the PhD education process as the antecedent to a life-long research adventure full of discoveries, akin to a life-long marathon. If these discoveries are packaged into synergistic research areas, a body of knowledge is generated. However, if we think of research as a bunch of publications, then the journey becomes more like a number of sprints strung together, rather than a marathon.

The kind of student that enters the PhD program is somewhat different today than 20 years ago, and some even join the PhD program with publications. Yet, doctoral programs now last 5 or 6 years instead of 3 or 4 because we hire junior faculty members for their record+potential, as opposed to the old days when we hired based on potential. All that is well and good, but I also fear that this change in our education system will slowly decompose the contributions of the next generation into a series of sprints if our focus shifts to publishing, rather than create an impact with a marathon.

So what can we do to encourage a marathon approach among Students? It is important to focus students on some of the basic characteristics that will maintain the excitement of research through the years ahead. Here's what some Advisors had to say:

<u>Study something that excites you, not something that is "in".</u>
Chris Janiszewski spoke about this last year in his Presidential address. Other Advisors have said:

- "Follow your inspiration."
- "Study what you are passionate about and academia ceases to be work."
- "Don't follow the herd."
- "Risky research is not all that risky – this is the work that garners the most attention and changes the way people think."

<u>Try to explore the topic in various ways (width) and as well as you can (depth):</u>

- "Build a program of research."
- "Work on multiple projects at once but don't spread yourself too thin."
- "Publish in top journals."

(b) "When the going gets tough, the tough get going."

An aspect of research life is rejection, criticism and very often having to rework a project that you have already invested a year or two into (the Reject/Resubmit or the "new manuscript" syndrome). The key is perseverance! As many Advisors have noted, the correlation between smartness and perseverance is not perfect. Brilliant ideas are a dime a dozen, but brilliant ideas, done, redone and then disseminated are fewer and far between. One Advisor said:

- “It’s not the smartest people who succeed in our field, but it’s the people who keep working and don’t give up.”

(c) “Take yourself seriously, but not too seriously.”

I believe very strongly that everyone needs work-life balance, whatever that “life” component may be. So for those of us that need something beyond work, let’s take our work seriously, but let’s also try to find ways to incorporate other things that inject joy into our lives; who knows they may trigger a lot of creative thinking and produce impactful research as a side benefit!

I encourage my PhD students to enjoy whatever it is that rocks their boat: their kids, travel, cooking, gardening, drinking, bartending, karaoke, reading, working at the zoo, sky-diving, cross-dressing… you name it.

(d) “Personal issues come and go but you will always have your dissertation.”

I have had several students over the years that joined the PhD program with families, or had a baby or two during the program. They balk at the age-old wisdom that the dissertation is like a baby. And while surfing the web and talking to colleagues, I found these compelling arguments about why a dissertation is harder than having a baby:

1. Unlike advisors, you can switch doctors without having to start over.
2. Conceiving a baby is WAY more fun than conceiving a topic.
3. Friends and relatives don't question the worth of a baby.
4. No one will complain if your baby is too similar to another one.
5. If you produce 8 dissertations, nobody will give you your own TV show.

So let’s stop calling the dissertation a baby, and call it what it is – a big (though sometimes fulfilling) pain, which if doesn’t kill you, makes you stronger.

(e) “Pass the torch.”

As Advisors, we are role models setting an example for our Students, and much like our children, they pick up behaviors and attitudes that are both communicated deliberately as well as non-consciously. Have you ever noticed a child may end up a Phillies fan because one of the parents is a Phillies fan? PhD students tend to do the same thing. No, they may not become Phillies fans, but they mimic behaviors and attitudes. It is important to behave in a way that one is proud of when emulated. And as one Advisor said, “Whatever you get from me, pass it forward.” We are, after all, creating the next generation of researchers.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would now like to say a few words of thanks to ACR.

(a) In order to recognize the "marathon, not a sprint" thinking, ACR has instituted the annual Early Career Award for contributions to consumer research. This award will be presented for the first time at tomorrow's luncheon.

(b) In today's talk, I have focused on Advisor-Student relationships, but of course Advisors can spawn off a whole line of research with Students, and more interestingly (and very true in my case), can be influenced by their Students' research. This is an extremely important aspect of an Advisor's role in PhD education that I did not have the time to talk about.

    As an illustration, there is a special session chaired by Nidhi Agrawal and Ellie Kyung that was invited by the three ACR co-chairs immediately following this luncheon. This session highlights synergy in research on Consumer Well-Being across several students I have been lucky enough to interact with during my twenty years as a faculty member. I have been influenced by their very intellectual minds in my own work.

(c) Finally, ACR is a forum that fosters mentorship both intellectually with cutting-edge research, and socially by bringing together different generations of scholar.

A few other acknowledgements…

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DEDICATIONS

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