

Excerpt

From *How to Survive Your PhD*

Choosing Your Academic Advisor

The relationship between doctoral student and academic advisor is a unique one. There's questioning, challenging, commanding, learning, joking, yielding, yelling—and that's just the first week of school. If you take the time to make the right choice, the relationship you forge with your advisor can become very rewarding. If you don't make the right choice, the relationship can become very frustrating, very quickly. In short, who you choose as your doctoral advisor will make or break your PhD experience.

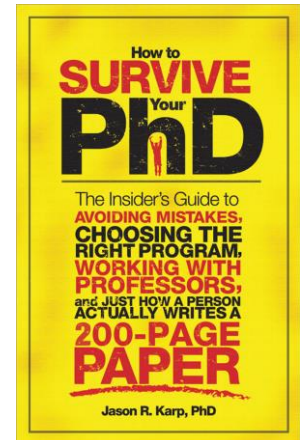
In my discipline, as in many others, there is a wide array of things to study, from limitations of oxygen consumption in elite endurance athletes to the mechanisms of the blood pressure-lowering effect of exercise in sedentary people to the contractile properties of single muscle fibers biopsied from an animal. That's why it's extremely important to choose an academic advisor whose research interests match your own.

Indeed, one of the key things that will help direct your choice of academic advisors is what his or her line of research includes. That's the reason it's so important to know your own research interests first. If you're interested in studying the effects of strength training on bone mineral density in postmenopausal women, why would you ever enroll in a school where the professors are studying insulin-mediated glucose utilization in diabetic rats? In scientific disciplines, finding a research match with an advisor is usually more important than the reputation of the department or the university. In humanities disciplines, this is not always the case, as the department may be more important than working with any one person. In either case, find out how actively your advisor is involved in research. How many publications has he or she had in the last three years? This will give you an idea of your potential advisor's productivity and his or her ability to help you get published yourself.

After you have pared down your choice to a few potential advisors by familiarizing yourself with their work, call or email them to introduce yourself and discuss the potential of working with them. Tell each of them about yourself, your background, your professional goals, and your interest in working with them. To a certain extent, your status as a new PhD graduate will be based on the reputation of your advisor even more so than on the reputation of the department from which you graduated. For the rest of your career, people will refer to you as "one of Dr. Nobel's students," so try to pick someone who has some clout.

Your Advisor's Work Ethic

Aside from having similar research interests, you should know the work ethic of your potential advisors. Are they good at getting things accomplished, or are they procrastinators? Check out their offices—are they messy with cluttered desks, or are they organized? If any of your potential advisors have papers scattered all over the desk and floor, turn around, walk out of the office, and go find another advisor. If you don't, your dissertation proposal will soon be one of the scattered papers mixed in with the rest. Before you dismiss a cluttered desk as



being trivial, trust me, the personality hidden behind it is immensely important when you are trying to publish your research or finish your dissertation. You don't want your advisor misplacing the scholarly work that you've worked so hard to produce. Waiting months for your advisor to read your manuscripts and provide feedback just so you can revise and submit them for publication is another example of how not to get your PhD.

One of the reasons that your chosen advisor may seem incredibly busy is that he or she has a number of students to advise, which I myself have been told more than once. Find out how many doctoral and master's students your advisor currently advises and how many more will enter the program the same time as you. You want your advisor to attend to your needs, and he or she won't be able to do that if he or she is juggling the needs of ten or more other students. Bear in mind that most reputable graduate programs have three to five doctoral students (plus a few master's degree students) per advisor at any one time.

Your Advisor's Philosophy

Since the PhD, after all, stands for Doctor of Philosophy (or Piled Higher and Deeper, as some cynics will tell you), find out what your advisor's philosophy is. This may be the most important thing you find out about your advisor, as it can make or break your working relationship. Here are some questions you should ask:

- How do you see your role as an advisor?
- How much control do you keep, and how much do you give to your students? If you're someone who likes to be in control, you want an advisor who gives a lot of control to his or her students. Conversely, if you don't like to be in control, you don't want an advisor who gives control to his or her students since that may be too overwhelming for you. On the other hand, if you and your advisor both prefer to be in control, then that may pose a serious problem.
- Do you micromanage your students or do you leave them alone to do their own work? Again, the answer to this question is important in relation to how you like to work. If you're independent and like to work on your own, you want an advisor who doesn't micromanage his or her students. On the other hand, if you're not good at setting and meeting deadlines for yourself, you tend to procrastinate, or you're a tad disorganized, you may want someone to micromanage you and make sure you get the work done on time.
- Do you allow your students to initiate and voice their own research ideas, or do you start your students with an idea and let them make it their own?
- If I come up with an idea, who retains the intellectual property? This question may sound like putting the cart before the horse, especially since you haven't even begun your degree yet, but it's important to know where your advisor stands on this issue and what the department's or university's policy is because you don't want problems later. Many advisors wrongly think that they own their students' research, especially in scientific disciplines.
- Where do you stand on authorship for publications? This is important, primarily because being the first author on a published article will help foster your professional development. Many advisors allow their students to be the first author, but others, especially if the idea is theirs, will want to be first author themselves.
- How do you measure your students' success? If your advisor isn't clear about his or her methods for evaluating achievement, you'll have no benchmark by which to judge your

own progress. Most advisors want to see certain things or competencies from their students. Find out what those things are from the very beginning.

- How much time do you devote to giving feedback? You want an advisor who actively offers feedback on a regular basis because that shows he or she is committed to the development and success of the students.
- Do you set deadlines for your students and for yourself? Given the open-ended nature of the PhD program, you will definitely need mutually agreeable deadlines.

If you are planning to visit the school before making a decision (and I strongly suggest you do), ask your advisor to go to lunch and get as many answers to the above questions as you can. This meeting will also give you the opportunity to catch a glimpse of his or her personality. There are a lot of big Egos in academia, and many of the potential problems that can arise between students and advisors can be traced back to the size of the Egos involved (from both the advisor and the student). In my experience, I've found this particularly true among scientists. Many scientists seem to think that they have the answers to everything and that they operate on a higher level than the general public.

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