

■ VARUN GROVER, FEATURE EDITOR, Clemson University

How to Be a Good Dissertation Advisor

by Varun Grover, Clemson University, and Ramesh Sharda, Oklahoma State University



Varun Grover

is the William S. Lee (Duke Energy) Distinguished Professor of Information Systems at Clemson University. He has published extensively in the information systems field, with over 200 publications in major refereed journals. Ten

recent articles have ranked him among the top four researchers based on number of publications in the top Information Systems journals, as well as citation impact (h-index). Dr. Grover is senior editor (emeritus) for MIS Quarterly, Journal of the AIS and Database. He is the recipient of numerous awards from USC, Clemson, AIS, DSI, Anbar, PriceWaterhouse, among others, for his research and teaching, and is a Fellow of the Association for Information Systems. For over 20 years, Dr. Grover has been fortunate to be integrally involved with doctoral students in various capacities.

vgrover@clemson.edu



Ramesh Sharda

is director of the PhD in Business for Executives Program, the Institute for Research in Information Systems (IRIS), ConocoPhillips Chair and a Regents Professor of Management Science and Information Systems in

the Spears School of Business at Oklahoma State University. He has coauthored two textbooks (Business Intelligence and Analytics: Systems for Decision Support and Business Intelligence: A Managerial Perspective on Analytics). His research has been published in major journals in management science and information systems including Management Science, Operations Research, Information Systems Research, Decision Support Systems, Interfaces, INFORMS Journal on Computing, and many others. He is a member of the editorial boards of journals such as the Decision Support Systems, ACM Transactions of MIS, and Information Systems Frontiers.

ramesh.sharda@okstate.edu

In a prior article in *Decision Line* (Vol. 34(1), 2003), Grover and Malhotra discuss how students should manage advisors of different temperaments and styles. While this is important counsel for the student, what about the other side of the coin—the responsibility of the advisor? While we know that advisors vary in their “advising” capability, what distinguishes a good advisor from a bad one?

Through our experience in advising dozens of doctoral students over the years, we have developed some normative guidelines for serving as a good advisor. There is of course a danger in doing this, since PhD experiences are very personal and the dyadic interplay between students and advisors is quite idiosyncratic. If we ask students to evaluate their advisors, the responses might vary greatly based on characteristics of the student and the perceived fit with their advisors. For instance, students who expect detailed advice that can be readily implemented will not be happy with an advisor who challenges them to find their own solutions. Similarly, advisors who see students as implementers of their research agenda will create frustration in students who are mature in research skills and prefer independence. Both types of students might evaluate their advisors poorly. If these students swap advisors, the styles are more compatible and their evaluations might be much higher.

Therefore, the normative guidelines simply reflect the lessons learned from our experiences. While we have encountered many experiences, there could be situations where doctoral programs

have different assumptions or students are different, and the guidelines don't work as well. With that caveat, we offer the following 10 basic guidelines for advisors in managing their doctoral students.

A good advisor works with students who match his/her style and skills.

As pointed out above, a mismatch between an advisor's style of work and a doctoral student's skills can spell disaster for both sides. So it is crucial for an advisor to assess a student's working style and seek or accept them only if there is congruence. This can usually be done before the dissertation process starts by the advisor clearly laying out expectations for how the process will unfold and the student indicating agreement or negotiating certain aspects of the process. This concept also extends to a lesser extent to the advisor's research interests and method skills. It could be a suboptimal experience for both sides if the advisor accepted a student who was going to use method 'X' but the advisor did not feel competent or interested in that method and advice is not readily available (e.g., from another member of the committee). We do believe, however, that advisors with experience in advising doctoral students can provide excellent guidance on how to build a good research project on a variety of research topics—as long as the mismatch is not fundamental (e.g., positivist vs. interpretive research or behavioral research vs. design science). Sometimes students want to work with an advisor for pedigree or political reasons, but it

is prudent to make this choice carefully. One of us rejected a student's request to work with him because he did not feel comfortable with the research philosophy and approach being pushed by this student. Although the student was upset initially at the rejection, the end result was much better for everyone.

A good advisor does not implement "his" research agenda.

We suspect that there may be some disagreement on this point in the academic community. However, in our assessment, good advisors do not chart out their own research program and then use doctoral students to implement it by plugging them into different dissertation topics. This model might work for a large-scale funded research program, where the various projects have been charted out. However, for most business school research, finding and developing a topic is a very critical research skill that needs to be nurtured by the advisor. Further, students must be passionate about their topics so they can navigate through the "low points" and frustrations of the research process.

So, good advisors do not use doctoral students to conduct their (the advisor's) research, but adapt to topics that the student wants to do. Of course, there should be a mutual interest in the area or the research question for the student and advisor to work together. In some cases, the advisor may not have the method competence of the student or even the theoretical competence. Good advisors, however, can evaluate a research project and provide direction for its improvement, while being open to learning about a new area.

A good advisor understands scope and quality of a dissertation.

There is something to be said for experience and success. Advisors with considerable research experience and success understand what it takes to create and package research that meets

the standards of premier journals. However, research success does not necessarily translate into the ability to provide good advice. Advisors that have successfully guided students who are well placed and doing well have acquired skills that facilitate translation of their research expertise into good guidance for the student. Of course, this requires dedication, an intense interest in the student's development and a willingness to invest time in pedagogical aspects of the relationship. Such advisors are better calibrated regarding the scope and quality of a dissertation, as well as how to work through the committee process. Experienced advisors have also established a process that generally works and helps them accomplish this.

In contrast, faculty colleagues who might be competent in research but have not worked with doctoral students may have overly high expectations and could get frustrated if they feel their important time is not being efficiently utilized due to student developmental investments needed. We have seen substandard dissertations emerge from haphazard processes followed by inexperienced advisors, causing frustration and tension to the student during the Q&A sessions in the proposal defense. We have also seen advisors who cannot calibrate the capabilities of the student and demand too much, don't make adjustments during the process, and get frustrated when the student cannot deliver. We also see that our role on many occasions has been to limit the scope of projects put together by overly ambitious students where we adjust tradeoffs between breadth and depth of the study.

A good advisor recognizes the point of diminishing returns.

Good advisors recognize that any research is going to be imperfect and the research process could be fraught with dead-ends and long feedback cycles. Therefore, recognition of "return on

investment" of a student is a judgment that needs to be frequently made. Good advisors might push students to explore new domains (literature) but also recognize when the investment is not yielding commensurate returns. Therefore, steadfast insistence on using a theory or a literature base or a certain kind of framing might be good in principle, but it may not be good for the progress of a doctoral dissertation. We can relate the case of a very dedicated advisor who loved to engage in detailed conceptual discussions with the student. These discussions continued over a six-month period as the student was building a new conceptual model. However, the progress over the six months regarding the actual changes in the model was quite minimal. In this case, the advisor would have better served the student if the discussions (which were interesting) were postponed to a post-dissertation project, and energy focused on doing a reasonable job with the conceptualization so the student could advance. Being sensitive to the progress of the student and making adjustments to facilitate student success is the hallmark of a good advisor.

A good advisor is accessible and encourages communication.

A good advisor should be responsive to the student's needs. It should be very apparent to the advisor through prior interactions with the student or during the early stages of the dissertation, the degree of interaction a particular student requires. Some advisors have a tendency to be "hands off," while others insist on frequent meetings. However, good advisors try to adjust their natural tendencies to accommodate the needs of the student. The danger is that students can demand too much time and come to the advisor for every minor issue they face. Advisors should insist on a good faith effort by the student in trying to resolve the problem—and then indicate their availability and accessibility if the

student is unable to resolve the issue. A student should not feel that they cannot contact their advisor (via e-mail or in person) if they are at an impasse. In meetings, advisors should be good listeners—not jump to giving advice in any predetermined manner without fully understanding the problem faced by the student.

A good advisor gives well-bounded advice.

On one extreme we have seen advisors correct typographical errors on a document when giving student feedback. This level of feedback is useful if a document is in the final stages of preparation, but not the level of feedback that is typically appropriate. On the other extreme, we have seen advisors casually put cryptic words like “What” or a symbol like a “?” on entire paragraphs of a submitted document. While these comments indicate a problem, they provide very little in terms of guidance to the student. Good advisors provide advice that is well bounded. It is not too granular to be trivial and not too abstract to be immaterial. It is bounded in scope so that the student is challenged to find a resolution, but a solution is not given to the student. This type of guidance allows the student to build research skills, but does not send the student on an open-ended chase. By bounding the opportunity set, students get constructive advice but have the discretion in many cases to develop their own resolution. Good advice may consist of phrases such as: “Why don’t you look at this literature stream”; or “This paper has used a similar method”; or “Find a paper using a similar method on which you can model your organization—look in this journal.” In sum, good advisors give honest feedback, including pointers and directions to help the student find solutions to the issues they are facing. They advise—and do not dictate, coerce, or mandate.

A good advisor provides reasonable turnaround on feedback.

We have witnessed cases where students request feedback from an advisor and it takes months and many reminders by a frustrated student to obtain a response. Smart students when facing such situations “manage” their advisors by working in parallel as they are soliciting advice. However, despite being busy, it is important that advisors make a commitment on giving feedback to students within a reasonable timeframe. That is a fundamental responsibility of the advisor when taking on a student. The timeframe should be understood by the student so they can plan accordingly. For instance, a two-to-three week turnaround on a document where feedback and advice is solicited is not unreasonable.

A good advisor handles political issues.

On some occasions, political issues such as conflict between committee members can surface. Students can get caught between opposing currents and suffer as a consequence. Good advisors can recognize the potential for these conflicts a-priori, and provide advice on the formation of the committee. They can also actively deal with these conflicts through private conversations and persuasion, so that the student is not adversely affected. Most critically, a good advisor must not become a party in such a political situation.

A good advisor should be positive and patient.

Dissertation processes are difficult for all students, more for some than for others. While navigating this journey, the advisor should be a motivating force—encouraging students to do their best and giving them clear indications when they meet or exceed landmarks. This is what can keep students going through difficult times. While honesty is important, the advisor should try to make the distinction between substandard work and substandard effort. In the former case,

strong direction is key, along with a strong dose of patience, as the hard-working student tries to bring up the quality. In the latter case, honesty is key, as the advisor pushes the student to work harder.

A good advisor promotes student’s career.

The success of an advisor is partially reflected in how well his students and graduates are doing. So it is important for an advisor to seek opportunities for advancement of their students’ careers. This may include nominating them proactively for various local, regional, and national award competitions, for doctoral consortia, and introducing them to one’s own professional network and service opportunities. Of course, it also includes taking a proactive role in getting the students placed at a teaching/research institution based on their interests and the level of research productivity they aspire. It is important to recognize this last issue so that the student does not get severely mismatched between the level of school the advisor wants them to join and the school and context where the student will more likely succeed.

In sum, good advisors understand what it takes to complete a quality dissertation, are sensitive to student’s return on investment, are accessible when needed, provide well-bounded advice in a timely manner that challenges students, do not use students as mere implementers, are positive and patient while helping students avoid and navigate political issues. As students assess potential advisors, it might be useful for them to use these 10 basic guidelines as evaluative criteria a priori. As advisors, these guidelines can be viewed as something to strive for as they manage their doctoral students. Of course, as we indicated earlier, one shoe does not fit all, and the criteria can be adjusted to accommodate the unique context of the advisor and the student. ■