

Graduate Student – Faculty Relations: Exploring Gender and Nationality

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BACKGROUND

In this study we explore the graduate student – faculty relationship, effect of gender, nationality and tenure status and the process for resolving difficulties in the relationship.

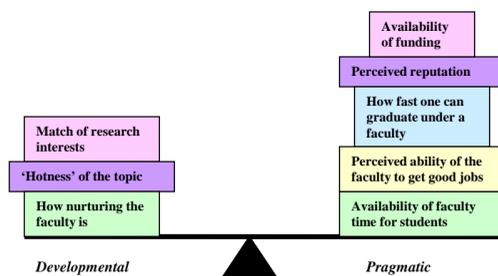
METHOD & SAMPLE

We conducted 6 focus groups of students as well as faculty - one each of the international students (2 males, 3 females), domestic students (4 males, 7 females), tenured women (6 participants), pre-tenure women (9 participants), tenured men (13 participants) and pre-tenure men (6 participants). We conducted additional individual interviews of international students (2 interviews) and tenured women (4 interviews) since the participation in those groups was low.

FINDINGS

How do graduate students choose their advisors?

- The process varied among departments and individuals. It included:
 - association with the faculty prior to joining the university
 - formal rotation process within the department and mutual selection of advisor and advisee
 - initial allocation of an advisor by the department and subsequent changes made by the students
- Students try to balance ‘developmental’ and ‘pragmatic’ interests.



- Students are savvy about collecting information about faculty before making choices. Student grapevine plays an important role in disseminating ‘information’ about the faculty.

Does gender play a role in the graduate student – faculty relationship?

- Gender isn’t an issue in some departments, especially the ones with larger proportion of female faculty and students. (All student and faculty groups)
- Funding, publications, reputation and research interests matter more than gender. (Domestic and international students)
- Sometimes female students tend to gravitate towards female faculty. (All student and faculty groups)
- Female as well as male students discuss work-life balance issues with the faculty. (Tenured female faculty)
- Feeling a responsibility to female students and wanting to guide them to be professionally successful can become a burden when female students want to share or know more of the non-academic side of their lives. (Pre-tenure and tenured female faculty)
- Some students distrust the knowledge of female faculty and verify it with others and disregard their instructions. (Pre-tenure female faculty)
- Male as well as female students hold the prejudices, but communicate them differently. (Pre-tenure female faculty)
- Male as well as female students develop the ‘buddy’ relationships usually with the male faculty. (Pre-tenure female faculty)
- Many female faculty choose not to call it a ‘gender issue’, but a ‘personality thing’ and are determined to not let such behavior bog them down. (Pre-tenure and tenured female faculty)
- Male faculty reported that they have heard stories of female faculty being treated differently, but had never seen it. Some felt that it might have been true in the past and the scene is different now. (Pre-tenure and tenured male faculty)

Does nationality play a role in the graduate student – faculty relationship?

- The funding arrangement and visa regulations make international students almost trapped. They can’t afford to fail and therefore work harder. (International students)
- International students work hard. (Domestic students, pre-tenure female faculty and tenured male faculty)
- Ineligibility of international students for certain grants and scholarships affects getting into the lab they want to join. (International students)
- Communication was one area that caused misunderstanding either due to language skills or due to cultural inappropriateness of expressions or jokes. (Pre-tenure and tenured male faculty and tenured female faculty)
- Some international students are reluctant to work with female faculty, and say that women would be less dedicated as they had families. (Pre-tenure female faculty and tenured male faculty)
- Some international students say “yes” to instructions from female faculty but don’t follow them. This could be because of a communication barrier or because the student is stubborn about his/her notion of how it should be done. (Pre-tenure female faculty)
- Bad experiences with post docs from certain countries make female faculty reluctant to take on future post docs from those countries (Pre-tenure female faculty)
- Stereotypes based on nationality should be treated carefully and there are huge individual differences among students from the same nation. (Pre-tenure and tenured male faculty)
- International students need more handholding to get them familiarized with the new culture and work setting. There are new things to learn with every new student. (Tenured male and female faculty)

Does tenure status play a role in the graduate student – faculty relationship?

- Students often aren’t aware of who has tenure and who doesn’t. (All students and faculty groups)
- Junior faculty are perceived as friendlier, more approachable, and providing better advice since their graduate life experience is more recent and they’re closer in age. They deal with “hot topics” and are likely to publish more and make students work hard. (All student and faculty groups)
- Some students prefer junior faculty (for availability and motivation to publish) while some prefer senior (for status and resources). (All student and faculty groups)
- Some senior faculty think that the junior faculty shouldn’t be pressured by taking in more students and advised students accordingly. (Pre-tenure male faculty, tenured male and female faculty)
- A few students prefer not to work with junior faculty thinking that they might be undesirable burden to the faculty or they may not stay for the duration of the students’ studies. (Domestic and international students)
- Junior faculty expressed frustration at being threatened to take incompetent students and bear the burden of ‘getting them through’. (Pre-tenure male faculty)

How are difficulties in the graduate student – faculty relationship approached?

Students and faculty resorted to informal as well as formal processes to resolve the difficulties that arose in their mutual relationships. The Informal process included approaching other faculty members or the Chair for advice and/or mediation. The formal procedure follows the guidelines by the Graduate School.

Some departments had formal committees that looked into conflicts. Students felt that there is a stigma attached to changing advisors. Senior male faculty members said that it is often seen that the faculty is at fault, however it is difficult to make a faculty understand he/she needs to change his/her ways. Junior faculty members felt that the process is unfair to them at times and their reputation among students get tarnished for years. All the parties involved expressed discomfort in dealing with faculty-student conflicts.

CONCLUSIONS

We observed that the view point of the primary participants in an interaction is different from that of the observers. For example, the feelings of the female faculty about how they are treated are very different from those of the male faculty who are only observers to that interaction. It is also interesting that students who are also primary participants don’t talk much about differential treatment. It appears that the response of the ‘actor’ is different from that of the ‘acted’.

Each group had members who reported very opposite experiences (e.g. female faculty treated differently and otherwise, students preferring junior faculty to work with and the opposite). These divergent experiences indicate that multiple underlying factors affect the graduate student – faculty relationship. Some examples may be nature of the subject, proportion of male and females among faculty and students, notion of ideal graduate education etc. Future research can focus on teasing out these factors.