



# Careers

THE CHRONICLE  
OF HIGHER EDUCATION

## Are You A Good Protégé?

*Failing to seek, find, and keep a good relationship with a mentor in the tenure-track years is a serious mistake*

By DAVID D. PERLMUTTER

**E**VER SINCE I was in graduate school, I have quizzed doctoral students, mostly in the social sciences and humanities, about their ideal academic adviser. High on their wish list:

- Someone who is respected within the field and has contacts who can help you with publications and jobs.

- Someone who is knowledgeable about the university and its politics and policies.

- Someone who takes the time to help with your studies and your career.

- Someone who does not exploit you.

- Someone who is not a disinterested observer of your career but cares about you as a person and is supportive—like a coach cheering you on.

I once shared that list with a senior colleague who has a reputation as a great mentor, and he chuckled at its comprehensiveness. We both agreed that the doctoral students were describing someone who probably doesn't exist. But that doesn't mean Ph.D.'s should stop hoping; in fact, the profile is similar to how junior faculty members would describe their ideal career mentor, too.

The art and protocols of being a good mentor will be the subject of next month's column. What is not widely understood is that the other side of the relationship—how to be a good protégé—has

its own strategies, techniques, and responsibilities. Perhaps getting advice seems a clearer-cut task than giving it. But at a time when budding academics seem busier and more distracted than ever, it is all the more important to understand how to learn from a mentor.

The mentor relationship is alive and well in the sciences, where there is a strong tradition of senior researchers bringing postdocs and new assistant professors into their laboratories and grant projects.

But in the social sciences and humanities, probably because of the difficult job market, relations

between established scholars and newcomers to the profession seem strained. Perhaps that is because senior scholars were tenured at a time when the expectations for the profession were different. Some veteran professors also note a strong cultural gap in temperament and outlook between themselves and the new faculty members.

Whatever the reason, failing to seek, find, and keep a good relationship with a mentor during the tenure-track years—and beyond—is a serious mistake.

In my own case, I have benefited from knowing several scholars for most of my academic life who continue to give me good advice on research, teaching, and service as well as myriad

*Continued on Page C4*

**P&T  
Confidential**

### INSIDE

#### Putting My Best Face Forward

Tired of being typecast as an aging adjunct, a job candidate turns to Botox. **C2**

#### Not Your Father's Ph.D.

A devoted blogger confronts his fear that his virtual life is damaging his career prospects in academe. **C3**

### JOBS

#### FACULTY POSITIONS

Humanities

**C9-C10**

Social & behavioral sciences

**C11-C13**

Science, technology, & mathematics

**C14-15**

Professional fields

**C16-C19**

#### ADMINISTRATIVE POSITIONS

Academic affairs

**C20-C25**

Student affairs

**C26-C28**

Business affairs

**C29-C34**

Deans

**C35-C37**

#### EXECUTIVE POSITIONS

Presidents

Chancellors

Provosts

**C37-C39**

#### INDEXES

Positions in display ads

Geographical

Employer Profiles

**C5**

#### HOW TO PLACE

A JOB ANNOUNCEMENT

**C5**

#### On the Web

3,249 positions available

Sign up for e-mail alerts

Special searches

[chroniclecareers.com](http://chroniclecareers.com)

## Are You a Good Protégé?

*Continued From Page C1*

other aspects of the profession. We can always use help—good help—and we need to know how to get it and keep it coming.

So how do you keep up your end of the deal?

A bedrock quality of a good protégé is being able to accept imperfection in our mentors as much as we hope they will forgive our peccadilloes. You can get good advice from people who may not possess all, or even most, of the qualities of the perfect mentor.

A doctoral student I know once lamented that a senior professor in her department, while offering astute advice about research methods, was a cold fish when it came to personal encouragement. I suggested that she listen carefully to what he had to say about content analysis but find somebody else to be her confidant.

Alternately, there was the case of the “grand old man” who was a true father confessor to his doctoral students, the perfect person with whom they could share their worries and leave feeling valued and respected. The problem was that he was *too* positive in his critiques: Somehow, all of the papers he read were “terrific.”

The lesson here is that the ideal adviser may be a composite of various imperfect humans.

Knowing that allows you to better estimate what a mentor can and can't do for you. I recall telling a master's student, many years ago, that I would be happy to write him a letter of recommendation to doctoral programs in which I had friends on the faculty, but I could not guarantee his admission. The look of doubt on his face prompted me to repeat the caveat. When I asked him why he was looking at me with skepticism, he stated that his parents or close acquaintances had always gotten him the jobs he sought and assumed academe worked the same way.

The opposite problem arises when the protégé is too passive about asking for help. One of my doctoral students was turned down for a job at an institution where I knew the dean well; the student had never asked me to write a letter or make a phone call on her behalf. Her rationale: “I didn't want to bother you.”

Her reticence, I realized, was my fault: I had made the mistake of mentioning in class that, since I was a faculty member in my middle years of academic life, writing letters of recommendation for present and former students had become a “part-time job.” I had not meant to imply that I didn't want to write such letters. My student, however, came from a country where professors hold a sacerdotal status and so took my jest as a brush-off.

Establishing clear communications,

sometimes across the borders of age and culture, is, thus, a key to clarifying what can be asked of mentor and protégé.

The good protégé also appreciates the boundaries of the relationship with a mentor. You want to be on good terms of course, but there is such a thing as overfraternization.

I speak not of the obvious minefield of romantic liaisons but of the impositions that too much friendliness can bestow on both parties. A minor example is the issue of time: I became such good friends with one adviser that every meeting we had to talk ostensibly about research was

scholar at a different university had asked for his help on a project and was so satisfied with the result that further requests for assistance started to arrive daily. A protégé who makes too many demands on an adviser/friend can end up alienating both.

Being a good protégé also means learning to accept criticism gracefully. We all know a “Fragile Fred” who breaks down at any hint of negativity, discards student evaluations without reading them, and never reads article reviews. A useful mentor is one who is willing to give us bad news, but a

educator does not have to lead off a cliff. I often spend lots of time talking to my graduate students about their thesis topics. But only when I am convinced that they lack an idea of their own do I feel free to suggest some research track that intrigues me. I always encourage them to think about the solo publications that the thesis should engender, and I obey the unwritten code that simply because I have advised someone about a paper does not give me the right to have my name on it.

In any case, there is something wrong with the relationship if either of you feel like the mentor is an overprotective, smothering parent.

Finally, accept that the protégé-mentor bond may simply fade away. Say your mentor loses interest in research, becomes busy with other colleagues, or goes through a period of personal distraction. Politeness and kindness are called for, but there is no written contract that demands that you return to the same well for advice forever.

A fruitful, long-lasting mentor-protégé relationship is one of the great joys of an academic career. But like any meeting of minds, spirits, and interests, it needs to be worked at, tended carefully, and evaluated for its limitations as well as appreciated for its opportunities.

*David D. Perlmutter is a professor and associate dean for graduate studies and research in the William Allen White School of Journalism and Mass Communications at the University of Kansas. For an archive of his previous columns, see [http://chronicle.com/jobs/news/archives/columns/pt\\_confidential](http://chronicle.com/jobs/news/archives/columns/pt_confidential)*

A useful mentor is one who is willing to give us bad news, but a proper protégé is one who is willing to take it.

taken up, in part, by family news and gossip. We were both busy people, so we agreed in the future to cover all personal conversation in a maximum of five minutes.

When protégé and mentor are too close, their differential status can muddle things. A friend might ask you to house-sit or do other favors, but is it appropriate for mentors to make such requests of their advisees? More infamous (and alarming) are the advisers who insist on being listed as co-authors on published studies even when their contributions are minimal.

But the risk of imposition cuts both ways. A professor told me how a young

proper protégé is one who is willing to hear it.

Both parties must be sensitive to the degree of independence the protégé wants (and needs) from the mentor. At one extreme are assistant professors who have trouble surviving the tenure track because they can't seem to navigate their research, teaching, and service obligations without the guiding mind and hand of their doctoral mentor. For example, they seem to produce no original research; all their work is either co-authored with the mentor or apes his or her style.

That is not to say that mentors should violently push protégés out of the nest. The path to becoming an independent

## Forum: Not Happy With Your New Job?

*The Careers section of The Chronicle maintains discussion forums on academic work and life. Here are some comments posted recently in our Grad-School Life forum. To join the discussions, visit <http://chronicle.com/forums>*

**Comment:** I wanted to ask if any of you are unhappy with your new position. I've got geographic constraints but also pretty much bombed on the market, too, so I've accepted a tenure-track position at a school I'm not happy about, especially given that I'm pretty research-oriented (though I am a good teacher)—heavy teaching load, mediocre students, weird faculty vibes. I've been [working as a visiting assistant professor] for the past couple years, and I basically accepted the position because I had no alternatives.

Anyone else in the same boat? Are you planning to go on the job market again next year? I think I am (ugh).

**Response:** Oh, God, I hope we didn't just hire you!

**Response:** My only advice would be to try to go into this with an open mind, and to figure that you really will get some positive things out of it—more teaching experience, if nothing else!

**Response:** I'm in the first year of my second tenure-track po-

sition. I spent only one year in the first tenure-track position, but the second institution initially wouldn't have considered me from the visiting-professor position I had previously.

I wasn't unhappy with the first gig but the second one was my dream job. As good as it seemed as an outsider it's even better from within. Remember that you are now dealing from a position of strength.

**Response:** Does loving the job but hating the geographic area count? I landed a great job, but I'm so unhappy with where I'm living that I'm torn between staying and leaving.

**Response:** I am happy with my job, my significant other is happy with my job, my job is happy with me. ... But: Many other people I know aren't happy with my job, because it's not good enough. At least two members of my dissertation committee, other junior and senior people in my field, and my peer have reassured me, without prompting, that I'll get something better. One committee member has said she hopes I “don't get too comfortable” and will be “more ambitious.” ... Part of this comes from a bias against the location of my university, and part it comes from genuine respect for the small amount of scholarship I've produced. But all of this status-obsessed “helpful” talk is starting to make me feel like a loser.