Characteristics That Matter Most: Doctoral Students' Perceptions of Positive and Negative Advisor Attributes

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The relationship doctoral students develop with their advisor is reputed to be one of the most important of their graduate education. Research shows that advisors play a critical role in many aspects of the doctoral degree process. However, the literature is sparse regarding doctoral students' perceptions of the positive and negative attributes of their advisors. We address that gap by identifying several recurring themes that emerged from a qualitative content analysis of open-ended survey responses from doctoral students regarding their advising experiences. Students spoke most positively about advisors who were accessible and helpful as well as socializing and caring. Conversely, they identified being inaccessible, unhelpful, and uninterested as negative attributes of advisors. We offer implications for advisors and advisees.

KEY WORDS: advisor role, faculty advisors, graduate students, retention, student perceptions of advising, student satisfaction with advising

While gaining momentum in recent years, interest in academic advising has been mostly devoted to advising at the undergraduate level. Researchers have investigated the relationship between advising and undergraduate student retention (Beal & Noel, 1980), the delivery of advising services (Davis & Cooper, 2001), undergraduate student satisfaction with advising (Lowe & Toney, 2000), and the role of academic advisors in undergraduate education (Petress, 1996). Until recently, research on advising at the doctoral level has been sparse. However, a number of recent national studies included questions regarding students' advising and mentoring relationships during the doctoral process (Golde & Dore, 2001; Lovitts, 2001; Nettles & Millett, 2006; Nyquist & Woodford, 2000).

The faculty advisor is one of the most important people with whom doctoral students will interact during the course of their doctoral program (Baird, 1995; Lovitts, 2001; Nettles & Millet, 2006). Lovitts (2001) pointed out that advisors impact the nature and quality of students' experiences, their socialization processes, and their postgraduate opportunities. Holland (1998) reported that doctoral advisors play a significant role in the academic life and satisfaction of their advisees. Cheatham and Phelps (1995) contended that doctoral advisors are a source of academic support, as well as providers of opportunities for participation in research projects, publishing, and conference presentations. Lyons, Scroggins, and Rule (1990) argued that advisors transmit scientific knowledge, socialize their students into the discipline, and bolster their students' confidence through encouragement and praise. More specifically, previous researchers (Barnes & Austin, 2009; Winston & Polkosnik, 1984) have suggested that effective advisors perform specific functions in an effort to help their advisees achieve success.

Undergraduate advisors practice under prescriptive, developmental, or integrated models (Heisserer & Parette, 2002). Such paradigms aid advisors in effectively working with students and guiding them throughout their undergraduate careers. However, no such models or guides are available at the graduate level, particularly for those who advise doctoral students. Therefore, we provide doctoral advisors with an understanding of characteristics that may be viewed as favorable or unfavorable by advisees. We used the following research question to guide this study: What positive or negative characteristics do doctoral students assign to their advisors?

Related Literature

An examination of the extant literature suggests that doctoral advising has focused on four primary areas: advisor selection, roles and functions, types of relationships, and outcomes.

Advisor Selection

Advisor selection could significantly affect the success of an advisor-advisee relationship. Fischer and Zigmond (1998) suggested that students need to be certain that their advisor expresses a compatible temperament and offers guidance suitable for their needs. While the process of matching

students and advisors differs across disciplines (Zhao, Golde, & McCormick, 2007), it can greatly influence the nature and quality of the advisor-advisee relationship as well as the postgraduate productivity of the student (Hilmer & Hilmer, 2007). Based on both survey and interview data with doctoral completers and noncompleters, Lovitts (2001) found that students who selected their advisor based on a common interest or mutual respect enjoyed better advisor-advisee relationships than students assigned to their advisors randomly. Similarly, Schlosser, Knox, Moskovitz, and Hill (2003) concluded from their qualitative research that doctoral students who were able to personally select their advisors reported being more satisfied with their advising relationships than peers who were assigned their advisors upon entry into the doctoral program. Golde and Dore (2001) reported from their survey research "a strong association between the number of factors that a student considers when selecting an advisor and the student's satisfaction with that relationship" (p. 37).

Roles and Functions

To frame the role of doctoral advisors, scholars have advanced several definitions. For example, Winston and Polkosnik (1984) described doctoral advisors as "faculty members who guide graduate students through their programs of study, serve as evaluators in written and oral examinations, and direct dissertations and theses" (p. 288). Holland (1998) defined an advisor, either assigned by a doctoral department or chosen by a doctoral student, as a faculty member who is typically responsible for communicating basic departmental procedures, policies, and expectations for the doctoral advisees. According to Holland (1998), the doctoral advisor "typically signs required documents the student may need from department personnel during the period of doctoral study" (p.11). Schlosser et al. (2003) defined a doctoral advisor more generally as "the faculty member who has the greatest responsibility for helping guide the advisee through the graduate program" (p.179).

Beyond specific definitions of an advisor, scholars have characterized the role of faculty advisors during the doctoral degree process (McLure, 1989; Winston & Polkosnik, 1984). Winston and Polkosnik (1984) contended that doctoral degree advisors must fulfill several essential roles and functions if they are going to be successful in their advising: reliable information source, departmental socializer, advocate, role model, and occupational socializer. In an effort to build on the work of Winston and Polkosnik, McLure's (1989) research focused on understanding the roles that graduate students desire in their faculty advisor during the doctoral degree process. Based on a survey of 107 participants from a large southwestern university, McLure identified four primary roles that both degree completers and noncompleters desired from their faculty advisors: role models, red-tape cutters, encouragers, and reliable sources of information. McLure concluded while both degree completers and noncompleters desired their faculty advisor to perform the same roles, students who completed their degrees reported having more quality interactions with their advisors than did students who failed to graduate.

Spillett and Moisiewicz (2004) suggested that to effectively guide their doctoral advisees, particularly during the dissertation stage, advisors must be cheerleader, coach, counselor, and critic. Similarly, to build an empowering mentoring model between advisor and advisee, Selke and Wong (1993) suggested that an effective advisor must act as teacher, encourager, socializer, role model, and counselor.

Although most of the early research pertaining to the doctoral advising role was conducted with doctoral students rather than faculty members, more recently, researchers have aimed to understand the roles and responsibilities of the advisor from the advisor's perspective (Barnes & Austin, 2009; Knox, Schlosser, Pruitt & Hill, 2006). In their interviews with 25 doctoral advisors from various disciplines, Barnes and Austin (2009) identified five primary responsibilities of advisors for their advisees: to help them be successful, develop as researchers, develop their professional capacity, find their passion, and make a successful transition into their doctoral programs. Through interviews with 19 doctoral advisors from several different counseling-psychology programs, Knox et al. (2006) found that advisors saw their role as supporting and advocating for their advisees by serving as mentors and role models, addressing their advisees' professional goals, and tailoring the advising relationship to meet the needs of the advisee. The results from both the Barnes and Austin (2009) and Knox et al. (2006) studies suggest that the advisors see their roles in less bureaucratic ways and instead consider themselves in mentor-type roles.

Types of Relationships

Scholars have also sought to understand the types of relationships that exist between doctoral advisors and their advisees. Holland (1998) con-

ducted a study to examine the salient characteristics of the types of relationships African American doctoral students developed with their advisors during the degree process. Participants represented the fields of education, humanities, social sciences, and the hard sciences. Based on interviews with 42 participants (23 doctoral students and 19 doctoral recipients), Holland identified five types of advisor-advisee relationships: formal academic advising, academic guidance, quasi-apprenticeship, academic mentoring, and career mentoring. Although these categories were derived from interviews conducted with African American doctoral students, nothing in Holland's work suggests that these types of relationships are unique to African American students or that these types of relationships cannot and do not characterize students of other races and ethnicities.

Heinrich (1991) investigated how female advisees characterized their relationships with their male doctoral advisors. The findings suggested that male-female advisor relationships could be characterized by three approaches: masculine, feminine, and androgynous. Heinrich concluded that male advisors who displayed either masculine or feminine advising behaviors created ineffective advising relationships with their advisees and misused their power. As a result of this misuse of power, advisees graduated from their doctoral program with a weakened sense of professional self-esteem. In contrast, women whose male advisors exhibited androgynous advising behaviors owned their power, felt professionally affirmed, and were more productive after they graduated.

Outcomes

Effective academic advising at the doctoral level plays a critical role in determining if students will complete their degree or withdraw before graduating (Girves & Wemmerus, 1988; Golde, 1998; Lovitts, 2001). Jacks, Chubin, Porter, and Connolly (1983) found that 44% of "all but dissertation" (ABD) students in their study cited poor relations with their advisor or committee members as one of the primary reasons for not completing their degrees. Similarly, O'Bara (1993) found that among 123 doctoral degree completers and 107 noncompleters, completers described more positive interactions with their dissertation chair than did noncompleters. Another noteworthy finding from O'Bara's study was that personality characteristics of advisors were extremely important in discriminating between completers and noncompleters. Specifically, completers rated their advisors as more approachable, helpful, and understanding than did noncompleters. Golde (1998, 2000) also acknowledged the critical role that advisors play in whether or not doctoral students complete their degree. Golde interviewed 58 doctoral students who did not complete their degree and discovered that their advisor-advisee relationships had problematic features stemming from mismatched expectations and working styles.

Examining time-to-degree based on departments clustered into high/short (high completion rate and low time to degree), low/short (low completion rate and short time to degree), high/long (high completion rate and long time to degree), and low/long (low completion rate and long time to degree), Ferrer de Valero (2001) found that students who were clustered in the departments that were high/short described their advisors as excellent, nurturing, mentoring, caring, loving, and exceptional. These students also reported having closer relationships with their advisors and having advisors who were involved in their doctoral degree process from the very beginning to the end. Conversely, some students from the low/short and low/long clusters reported that to some degree their advisors impeded student progress. Finally, although students in the high/long clusters did not describe their advisors in the same glowing terms as their peers in high/short clusters, they reported having advisors who promoted their academic success.

Maher, Ford, and Thompson (2004) examined factors that differentiated women who were early degree completers (completed degree in 4.25 years) and late degree completers (competed in 6.75 years). They found that nearly 75% of early completers reported having established and maintained positive working relationships with their advisors, and several reported having advisors who were advocates and roadblock removers to degree progress. In addition, a large percentage of the late degree completers found advisors who were emotionally and intellectually supportive to be helpful to them.

Students' satisfaction with their doctoral experience has also been associated with the quality of the advisor-advisee relationship. Schlosser et al. (2003) interviewed 16 third-year doctoral students in the interest of understanding the type of relationship they had with their advisors. In one of their most compelling findings, students described their advising relationship as being either satisfactory or unsatisfactory, and pronounced differences characterized how the students from each group described both the interpersonal and instructional compo-

nents of their relationships. For example, students who said they had a satisfactory relationship with their advisor described their relationship with their advisor positively, highlighting that their advisors were supportive, friendly, collegial, and respectful. Conversely, students who said they had unsatisfactory relationships with their advisors described the relationships negatively or in neutral terms, such as "shallow" and "business like."

Lovitts (2004) identified six elements underlying doctoral students' satisfaction or dissatisfaction with their relationship with their advisor: intellectual-professional development, interest in students, professionalism, personality, advising style, and accessibility. Lovitts concluded that students who were very satisfied with their advisor along all of these dimensions were positive about the relationship they had with their advisor whereas those who were not too satisfied or not at all satisfied were uniformly negative about their advisor.

In summary, while a review of the literature indicates that a great range of issues pertain to doctoral student advising—advisor selection, roles and functions of advisors, and types of advisor-advisee relationships—the advising relationship clearly has an important impact on student satisfaction as well as student outcomes such as degree completion or attrition. The results from previous studies also suggest that particular characteristics that doctoral students attribute to their advisors may influence their degree progress.

We add to the literature on doctoral advising by providing a more nuanced understanding of doctoral students' perceptions of positive and negative attributes of advisors. Because most advisors do not receive any formal instructions on advising functions, findings from this study should encourage advisors to reflect on their own advising practices to evaluate how their actions, behaviors, and attitudes might be impacting (positively or negatively) their relationships with their advisees.

Method

We generated data from a broad survey-based study aimed at gaining an in-depth understanding of graduate students' advising experiences. We conducted this study at the behest of the graduate school dean and focused primarily on graduate students' experiences and satisfaction with their primary advisor (PA), which was operationalized in the survey as the faculty member upon whom students rely most for advice and/or guidance about program requirements, academics, or career matters. The survey was designed to investigate a variety of facets of the doctoral student-advisor relationship, including the following: a) how students are matched with their primary advisor, b) the nature of advisee relationships with the PA (e.g., committee chair, chosen official faculty advisor, assigned official faculty advisor, etc.), c) student level of satisfaction with their relationship with their PA, d) their reasons for choosing their particular PA, and e) functional and behavioral aspects of this relationship (e.g., roles their advisors take and do not take). In addition to 58 closed-format items, the survey included 2 open-ended questions designed to solicit additional information regarding doctoral students' perceptions of their advising experiences. The 2 open-ended items were worded as follows: "Please provide one or two examples that illustrate the kind of advising experiences you have had in your program," and "Please give a few examples of how your program shows you that advising/mentoring is or is not a priority."

We conducted this research at a public, doctoral-extensive university in the northeast. A Web-based survey was conducted in April 2006 of all students currently enrolled in a university graduate program (N = 4,800). The final survey response rate was 50% (n = 2,391). The research we report here focuses exclusively on the open-ended responses of doctoral students. As illustrated in Table 1, demographics of doctoral-level survey respondents closely match those of doctoral-level nonrespondents, suggesting that a demographically representative sample was achieved for this study.

We conducted a qualitative content analysis of doctoral students' open-ended responses. Hsieh & Shannon (2005) defined qualitative content analysis as "a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns" (p. 1278). This data-analysis method flows from a humanistic tradition and is inductive as opposed to deductive (White & Marsh, 2006).

The data analysis process consisted of five distinct steps. Initially, Barnes read through all of the open-ended responses to gauge the entirety of their content. She identified advisor attributes as a prominent content category and flagged for inclusion in the content analysis all comments that described an academic advisor specifically (e.g., "my advisor is accessible to me"). Altogether, 659 comments that described advisor traits, provided by 564 individual doctoral students (see Table 1), comprised the subset of open-ended data that she targeted for analysis. The third step in the analysis

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of study participants who answered the open-ended questions

Characteristic		*n*	%
Gender			
	Female	316	56.0
	Male	239	42.4
	Other	4	.7
	Missing	5	.9
Race/Ethnicity*			
	African, African American or Black	49	8.7
	Asian or Asian American	113	20.0
	Hispanic or Latino(a) or Chicano(a)	42	7.4
	Native American, N. or S. American Indian or Alaska Native	14	2.5
	White or Caucasian	347	61.5
	Other	28	5.0
Year Entered Program			
	1999 or previously	51	9.0
	2000 or 2001	115	20.4
	2002 or 2003	183	32.4
	2004	108	19.1
	2005	95	16.8
	2006	8	1.4
	Missing	4	.7
Degree Program			
	Masters/Doctoral	71	12.6
	PhD	396	70.2
	EdD	97	17.2
Stage in Program			
	Taking courses	166	29.4
	Preparing for comps/orals	114	20.2
	Have completed comps/orals	47	8.3
	Writing thesis/dissertation proposal	73	12.9
	Ready to defend/have defended thesis	115	20.4
	Other	38	6.7
	Missing	11	2.0

*Survey participants were asked to mark all that apply.

process consisted of developing categories and coding schemes (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Barnes developed a coding dictionary that included categories, definitions, and codes (see Weber, 1990). In the fourth step of the analysis, Archer began reading, categorizing, and coding the tagged responses. Then, Archer and Williams completed the coding and conducted consistency checks to establish and maintain intercoder agreement. The final step in the analysis process consisted of drawing conclusions from the coded data (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Limitations

Three noteworthy limitations characterize our study. First, we conducted the research at a single institution and data may reflect an advising culture unique to this particular university. Second, we did not ask survey participants to comment on the positive or negative attributes of their advisors specifically; the 2 open-ended questions posed to students were broad in scope. If students had been asked directly to name both positive and negative attributes of their advisors, different themes may have emerged. Finally, we offered the 2 open-ended questions subsequent to the 58 closed-format survey items. Consequently, the survey content provided a context and stimuli that likely influenced doctoral students' thoughts about their advising experiences.

Findings

From the qualitative content analysis of the open-ended survey questions, four broad themes emerged that we identified as positive advisor attri-

butes and three broad themes emerged that we identified as negative advisor attributes (see Table 2). Because we did not ask the students to detail their advisors' positive and negative attributes, these categories emerged directly from the data and were not determined a priori.

Positive Attributes

The four most prevalent themes associated with positive attributes include being accessible, being helpful, socializing, and caring.

Accessible. Being accessible was the most frequently mentioned positive attribute that the students stated about their advisors. Respondents talked about it in two different but related ways: an advisor's flexibility to have in-person meetings and prompt answering of advisees' questions. As far as accessibility via in-person meetings, one student in social and behavioral sciences wrote, "My advisor is highly accessible; she makes herself available outside of regular office hours to me, be it at her home, for lunch or for coffee." Another student in education wrote:

> My advisor has made himself available at hours that work for me as well as him—I have had to work until 9 pm at night and at times I've been online at 11pm writing to him to ask an important question and he would write back stating, "call me at home now if you can." I believe my advisor is dedicated to my success.

An example of an advisor who promptly addressed an advisee question came from a natural science and mathematics student: "My advisor replies to emails almost instantly although she is ultra busy." Another student from natural science and mathematics wrote, ". . . my advisor returns emails and phone calls in a very timely manner."

Having an advisor that is accessible personally as well as professionally is a highly desirable trait (Hawley, 1993). Because most students realize that their faculty advisors are very busy, they seem to appreciate those who will meet with them regularly or at odd times that are convenient for the student or at places that relax the power differential (e.g., the advisor's home or a coffee shop). Such faculty accommodations appear to give these students very positive feelings about their advisors and their relationships with them.

Helpful. Another positive characteristic that students mentioned repeatedly in this study was helpfulness. Respondents most often described a helpful advisor as one who provides his or her advi-

Table 2. Names and descriptions of positive and negative advisor attributes

Positive Attributes		Negative Attributes	
Accessible	Is flexible; will have in-person meetings and promptly answer advisee questions	Inaccessible	Unavailable for meetings or unresponsive to questions via E-mail, telephone, or in-person
Helpful	Provides advisees with programmatic information that helps the student better understand the formal or informal rules of the program and assists with degree progress	Unhelpful	Provides student with limited or incorrect information about the formal or informal rules of the program
Socializing	Aids students in extending professional networks and learning the habit of the mind for their discipline as well as encourages professional development	Uninterested	Exhibits a lack of interest either in the student academically or personally as well as in the student's research area (uninterested can be seen as a contrast to both socializing and caring)
Caring	Demonstrates an interest in a student holistically; goes beyond helping and socializing to being interested in students' academic progress and personal well-being		

sees with programmatic information that helps with understanding the formal or informal rules of the program and contributes to degree progress. Their descriptions also consisted of an advisor helping an advisee to secure funding or being knowledgeable about the courses a student should take. This characteristic tends to be instrumental; that is, it consists of an advisor who aids students in getting a specific benefit that leads to their academic progress as opposed to support in an emotional (caring) way. For instance, one student from education described his advisor as being helpful by setting up structures that kept him from getting lost in the process. Another student from education wrote, "My advisor . . . helps me in the pursuit of my research goals; *[she] uses her cultural capital to help guide me through a process that feels convoluted, full of hoops, and [that is] process rather than person oriented"* (emphasis added). Another student in natural science and mathematics wrote about how her advisor was helpful in securing a couple of research grants:

> When I needed a pre-dissertation grant, my advisor helped me find appropriate granting agencies, wrote me an excellent letter of reference, and went over the grant proposal with me . . . . She used her professional experience to help me present my proposals in a way that would be most relevant to the granting agencies, and I received both grants that I applied for.

Another student (from public health and health science) wrote about how his advisor was helpful in developing a strategy for minimizing his time in the graduate program:

> At the end of my first semester my primary advisor and I made an appointment to discuss my time at [names institution]. We set up goals so I could be done within four years. This was extremely helpful and I've stuck with the plan.

Advisees consider the advisor's ability to understand and communicate the formal and informal rules and policies a positive advisor attribute, and it is an essential requirement for students' graduate school success (Winston & Polkosnik, 1984). Most students in this study viewed their advisors' knowledge of program requirements as being helpful and contributing to their academic success.

Socializing. The doctoral degree experience is commonly considered a socialization process (Austin & McDaniels, 2006; Gardner, 2008; Gardner & Barnes, 2007) with the advisor as the socializing agent (Barnes, 2005; Winston & Polkosnik, 1984). Numerous students in our study wrote about their advisor as socializer who helped them extend their professional networks and learn the habits of mind for the discipline as well as encouraged their professional development. With respect to helping students extend their professional networks, one student in natural science and mathematics wrote: "My advisor has put me in touch with other people in the field, helping me extend my networks." Along those same lines, a student in education wrote, "[my advisor] has gone out of his way to introduce me to professionals in the field to increase my networking opportunities."

Students also wrote about how their advisors have socialized them in terms of preparing them for academic careers:

> My [advisor] has been extremely helpful in my academic career. Ever since the inception of her awareness of my desire to go into academia on a tenure track position she has persistently and consistently put me on the track of working on publications jointly and individually. Overall, my [advisor] is not just a catalyst to my academic progress, but she's also looking ahead into the nearest future on my behalf by preparing me for my choice career assiduously. (Student in agriculture)

A student from social and behavioral sciences wrote, "My advisor is very generous in teaching graduate students the skills they will need as academic professionals. He encourages student involvement in departmental activities and involves students in planning and hosting professional events."

Previous research findings suggest that the professional socialization process, particularly for the professoriate, begins in graduate school (i.e., the anticipatory stage) and is often guided by the advisor (Austin, 2002; Lovitts, 2001; Weidman, Twale, & Stein, 2001). The purpose of the anticipatory stage of the socialization process is to bring students into the fold, to teach them the norms and culture of the profession, and to prepare them to enter the profession (Weidman et al., 2001). The findings of our study indicate that advisors encouraged students to attend conferences and publish, which are parts of the anticipatory socialization phase of doctoral education.

Caring. In her research on how exemplary advisors successfully guide their doctoral students through the doctoral degree process, Barnes (2005) concluded that demonstrating an ethic of care is

essential for advisors. A number of students in our study suggested that they had caring advisors. For them, a caring advisor demonstrated an interest in both their academic progress and their personal well-being. For example, one social and behavioral sciences student stated:

> Every time my advisor sees me (in the hall, in a class, etc.) she asks how things are going, looking for a real answer (not just the passing nicety). It reinforces that she cares how we're progressing and that her door is always open if we need help with something.

Similarly, a student in engineering wrote, "[My advisor] is concerned as much with my development as a well-rounded professional as he is with my academic progress and performance. The result has been that I think I am a success in both." A student in the social and behavioral sciences expressed a similar sentiment when she wrote, "My advisor is always interested not only in my academic progress, but also in my life outside of the department. He is trying to do everything so that I am successful and don't regret coming here." Caring, as identified by the participants in this study, is holistic in nature. It includes both academic concern and personal well-being.

Negative Attributes

Despite the significant influences that doctoral advisors can have on their advisees, not all advisor-advisees relationships are positive (Barnes & Austin, 2009; Minor, 2003; Schlosser et al., 2003). Although most students who made specific comments identifying various behavioral attributes of their advisors were positive in nature, some wrote about the negative experiences they have had with their advisor, emphasizing negative advisor attributes. The three most prevalent themes associated with negative attributes were the advisor as inaccessible, uninterested, and unhelpful.

Inaccessible. While students greatly appreciate their advisors when they are easily accessible, they do not appreciate inaccessible ones. They characterized inaccessibility as being unavailable for in-person meetings or unresponsive to student requests via E-mail or telephone. Two students, who were in two different departments within natural science and mathematics, expressed their discontent:

> [My] dissertation chair never has time to meet with me or to advise me about my progress or to read my comps document. Therefore, very little movement is taking place toward degree requirements. . . . I am left in limbo about guidelines or rubrics to use to complete required research.

> My dissertation chair advised me to drop an independent study course that I had registered for to discuss my comps research as it was being completed . . . [because] she was too busy to meet with me. Therefore, *I completed my comp research without ANY guidance*. My dissertation chair has . . . personal issues that constantly take her away from advising or meeting with me. *I went for a two year period without a meaningful meeting with my dissertation chair*. (emphasis added)

Inaccessible advisors have been dubbed as useless (Hawley, 1993). Holland (1998) found that students who had inaccessible advisors described their overall relationship with their advisor as "formal," business-like," and "nondevelopmental." Likewise, the students in our study who described their advisors as inaccessible suggested that their advisors were useless in guiding them through important milestones that leads to academic success and degree completion.

Uninterested. Students descriptions about their advisor's lack of interest often encompassed accounts of uninterest in both personal issues and in their research topic. For example, one natural science and mathematics student shared:

> [My advisor] who [is] uninterested in my research [has]not been able to properly advise me in a way that makes wise use of my time. . . . I never received constructive positive feedback and felt stifled. Regular meetings were canceled by him without warning and without rescheduling. Sometimes these meetings were interrupted or my comments went unheard due to his smiling and waving to people walking by in [the] hallway.

A student from the social and behavioral sciences described his advisor's lack of interest this way:

> I am in my 10th year [of the program]. I have written approximately 20 drafts towards my prospectus and perhaps five different drafts towards my dissertation. I am writing my dissertation practically on my own. *My advisor has too many advisees and too little time and interest in what I do.* It has been a very traumatic process, unfortunately.

Doctoral students' perception of their advisor's interest in them (personally and academically) can have an influence on their time to degree. It can even influence whether or not she or he will persist to degree completion (Lovitts, 2001). For the students in our study, advisors' lack of interest was manifested in aloofness when meeting with students as well as through a lack of engagement, support, and guidance.

Unhelpful. Students primarily characterized unhelpfulness as advisors who did not have sufficient knowledge to guide them through their program requirements. While helpful advisors walked students through programmatic requirements and formal and informal rules, the reverse was often true for unhelpful advisors. One student from natural science and mathematics responded, "My advisor is an inexperienced junior faculty member who is my same age, and I advise him more than he advises me." Similarly a student from humanities and fine arts wrote:

> My advisor has *very little knowledge about the requirements needed to complete my degree*. I had several questions pertaining to these requirements and sent them to my advisor in an email. He did not respond. A few weeks later I sent him an additional email. Again he did not respond. It took him at least six weeks to respond and even then his answer for many of my questions was, "I don't know." I was very disappointed. (emphasis added)

Winston and Polkosnik (1984) noted that being a reliable information source was an essential role that advisors must fulfill to be deemed successful. This particular function consists of knowing, understanding, and being willing to communicate both the formal and informal department rules and policies to their advisees. Students in our study typically described unhelpful advisors as nonreliable information sources.

Discussion

Previous researchers on doctoral advising have cogently argued that advisors play a critical role in the academic experiences and successes of their doctoral advisees. Therefore, the relationships that students develop with their advisors can be crucial. In this study we examined open-ended responses from a survey on graduate students' advising experiences, highlighting passages that characterized specific attributes of the advisor. The four positive attributes—being accessible and helpful as well as socializing and caring—that emerged support the contention of other scholars about positive character traits of effective advisors. For example, Bloom, Cuevas, Hall, and Evans (2007) found that the MD-PhD students value advisors who demonstrated an ethic of care, were accessible, served as role models, actively socialized them into the profession, and tailored their advising style to match their needs.

The three negative attributes described by our respondents—being inaccessible, uninterested, and unhelpful—corroborate previous research findings. For example, Schlosser et al. (2003) found that students who were dissatisfied with their advisors characterized them using negative terms such as *cold*, *disinterested*, and *superficial*.

Despite the previous research that characterized attributes of advisors, few scholars have examined how the attributes that advisors demonstrate enhance or hamper various aspects of the doctoral experience. Based on the rich and detailed description used by students in our study to describe their advisors, we see that attributes impact more than a student's perspective of an advisor as positive or negative. Indeed advisor characteristics appear to influence, at least in part, students' overall attitudes about their doctoral experience, the nature of the relationship that they experience or can experience with their advisors, as well as their ability to make progress toward their degrees.

We found messages of hope and despair embedded in both the positive and negative comments about advisors. For example, while they commented about their advisors accessibility and level of caring, the students also related the message that they matter to their advisors, that their advisors cared about both their academic and personal success, and that they were hopeful about and happy with their graduate school experience. Students who reported being provided socialization into the profession, it appears, were receiving a message of confidence because their advisors were ensuring that they have the skills, knowledge, habits of mind, and social networks that they will need to be successful in their academic profession and in their chosen careers.

Conversely, students who wrote about the negative attributes of their advisors, such as inaccessibility or uninterest, hinted to personal despair as reflected in terms such as *hopelessness*, *disappointment*, and *failure*. In many cases, students implied that they felt abandoned by their advisors. As a result, many did not know if they will complete their degrees, possibly due, in part, to their advisors' lack of attention, support, and interest.

Students' perceptions of the positive or negative attributes of their advisors can be the linchpin in the type of relationship (good or poor) that they develop with their advisors. For instance, students who perceive that their advisors support and care for them may use these perceptions to build a healthy and sustainable relationship with their advisors. Similarly, students who perceive their advisors to be unhelpful or uninterested could thwart the students' desire to build a strong relationship with an advisor who is not interested in investing in them as students, people, or emerging scholars.

Furthermore, results from our study suggest that the positive and negative attributes that doctoral students ascribe to their advisors could critically impact the students' degree progression. For instance, students who identified positive advisor characteristics suggested that their advisor's accessibility and helpfulness contributed to their progress. The impact of negative advisor attributes followed a like pattern: Students who said their advisors were unhelpful or uninterested also alluded to periods of slow or stopped progress toward their degrees.

Recommendations and Conclusions

While the onus to build a strong and sustainable relationship with their advisees need not fall completely on the shoulders of advisors, the power differential inherent in the hierarchal nature of the advisor-advisee relationship (Aguinis, Nesler, Quigley, Lee, & Tedeschi, 1996; Hinchey & Kimmel, 2000) means that doctoral advisors may need to take the lead in establishing the foundation for a healthy and positive relationship. Advisors can use the findings from this and similar studies in two important ways. First, they can reflect on the messages their actions, attitudes, or behaviors send to their advisees. Advisors may want to consider whether they may be impacting the development of healthy and positive relationships with their students or if they may be hampering their students' progress. Doctoral advisors need to be constantly cognizant of the ways in which their behaviors and attitudes can positively or negatively impact their students' doctoral experiences. Second, advisors can use the results of this study as a springboard to start a conversation with their advisees about their advising roles and responsibilities. This conversation can include a discussion of their advising philosophy, expectations of their advisees, and accessibility.

Doctoral students also bear some responsibilities for developing a sustainable and mutually positive relationship with their advisor. They can use the findings to reflect on the qualities that they find most useful in an advisor and then seek out those who possess those traits. Doctoral students should also find an effective means to communicate their needs to their advisor so they and their advisor can develop mutually agreed upon expectations.

Finally, graduate deans can use the results of this study to prompt a university-wide conversation regarding the importance of advising at the doctoral level. They can also offer workshops and seminars open to both faculty advisors and doctoral students that identify these issues and focus on conflict resolution, communication strategies, and goal-setting skills.

In conclusion, the findings from this study contribute to the growing body of literature on doctoral advising by advancing the notion that students' perceptions of both positive and negative advisor attributes reflect more than behavioral characterizations. Furthermore, student perceptions of advisor attributes sizably impact students' views of their doctoral experiences, including progression to a degree, as successful. The overall tone of the students who reported positive attributes suggests that they were content with their advisor as well as their advising. Conversely, the overall tenor of the responses from students who used negative attributes to characterize their advisors suggests that not only were these students unhappy with their advisors and their doctoral experience, but their ability, and perhaps their desire, to make degree progress was affected.

While this study provides illuminating findings, in the future researchers should test more directly the relationship between students' perception of negative and positive advisor characteristics and the impact of these characteristics on doctoral students' degree progression and completion. In addition, they can design future studies to delve further into these issues, particularly of how advisors and advisees understand the power differentials inherent in the advisor-advisee relationship and how this impacts the perceptions and behaviors of both parties. This type of inquiry is particularly germane in light of concerns raised in the Carnegie Initiative on the Doctorate (Walker, Golde, Jones, Conklin Bueschel, & Hutchings, 2008) on power differentials related to gender differences, but other differences may be important to examine as well. As scholars continue to develop more nuanced understandings about the connections between advising relationships, student satisfaction, and degree progression, advisors will be better equipped to provide effec-

tive and productive advising that supports doctoral students in completing degrees in higher numbers.

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