

Your Advisor is Leaving!

By Darren J. Pierson, Instructor

Blinn College

It has happened to almost everyone. You show up at an appointment to see your physician and find out that they have left the practice. A person who has possibly held your life in their hands has just left you without warning. Confusion, anger, and possibly betrayal are all feelings that surge through you. Of course, you will find a new doctor and life will go on. But what if the doctor in question is your committee chair or advisor? What do you do?

The relationship between advisor and graduate student is critical to the success of higher education. Graduate students are caught in a multitude of overlapping roles. Often they are not only students, but also junior colleagues, menial laborers, apprentices, and (very junior) faculty. Each institution has its own rules for the responsibilities of its graduate cohort, but the committee chair has her or his own standards and expectations that must be met. This requires grad students to choreograph a complicated dance to satisfy their own academic goals, as well as the expectations of the chair and of the various powers that be. For most of us, though, the linchpin was the advisor or chair. They were our beacon in the storm-tossed sea.

Most grad students are told to be very careful in their selection of an advisor (if they are given a choice). Beyond fields of study and interests, personalities and work habits must be at least compatible for the relationship to succeed. Graduate advisors often hold the power of academic life or death over their charges. The proper choice of an advisor is essential to academic success. But what happens if your chair leaves your institution in the middle of your studies? This can and does happen, and you need to be prepared for it.

Research opportunities, promotions, personal issues, and other stimuli can lead a faculty member to pastures they hope will be greener. Do not take the departure personally. Hopefully, your chair has contacted you personally to inform you of the change that has embraced you, even if you have not yet embraced it. This should mean that you have time to plan for the academic divorce. It is now time to get busy to secure your future.

Keeping your lines of communication open is the most critical task ahead of you.

- Talk to the departing faculty member: What advice do they have for you? Will they recommend you to another faculty member? It is possible that they have already crafted contingency plans to help you.
- Talk to the departmental graduate advisor: What can the department do to help? Other faculty members have left before – what was the outcome?

- Talk to the Office of Graduate Studies: They will know the institution's resources that are available to you.

I have said talk, but do not forget to listen. If your faculty are worthy of their positions, then they really do want to help you succeed. Listen to what they are telling you. After initial communications are completed, take stock of your situation.

- How far are you into your program? Can you consider transferring to a new program or school?
- If your ambition is to study with your mentor, can you transfer to that new institution? Would your current advisor consider that to be an option?
- If you are committed to your present school, and you probably are, examine the relationships you have with the faculty. Who might be a good fit to take over your studies?
- Are you a degree candidate? If you are writing your dissertation, who in the department has been helping you? Who seems to be the most familiar with your line of inquiry?
- What are the politics of your department? Are there any divisional fault lines that you need to avoid? Office politics are a reality of the academy. Ignore them at your own peril.

After doing your research, examine your options. You have the evidence and now you need to come up with conclusions. Take the most reasonable options and write them down. Put them in order of desirability. Mark what steps need to be done to achieve them. Then take action to complete those steps. The key point is that you are the responsible party in this situation. You have to look after you. The best advice cannot help you, if you are not willing to put in the effort needed to get the job done. As the old saying goes, "don't get mad, get even." Hopefully getting even is not really the motivation, but continued success is the best outcome.

All of this has dealt with what to do in case of the departure of a faculty member, but do not wait for that to happen. When choosing a program, students often look at the age of faculty members, possibilities of sabbaticals, and other things that might disrupt one's studies. It might sound cold-blooded, but a student needs to consider long-term factors affecting her or his studies. When checking out the school, ask about the likelihood of faculty departure. Ask about what happens. Be proactive. Be prepared.

Everyone's situation is personal and has to be dealt with accordingly. I was lucky enough to have a chair and a committee member willing to work with each other and me after my chair's departure. My old chair guided my studies from afar, and my new chair helped with the local

issues. They were very helpful. Not everyone is that lucky. So, no matter what, keep your perspective and sense of humor. If the divorce gets messy, the only one who will lose is the student.

Take the high road and talk to your colleagues, friends, and committee members. Keep the goal in mind and do not stray from that outcome.

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