P&T CONFIDENTIAL

Supervising Your Graduate Assistants

Whether you are comfortable with the label or not, you are the 'boss,' and you must act like one

By DAVID D. PERLMUTTER

You are officially an assistant professor. Just weeks ago you defended your dissertation and someone called you "Doctor" for the first time. This summer you will move to your new campus and start your first tenure-track job. You will make a thousand adjustments in your transition from student to professor. Among the most challenging will arrive at your door even before the semester starts: your first teaching and research assistants.

How can you, long used to being supervised, now become a good supervisor? How can you inspire your charges and advance their own careers, while at the same time managing them efficiently to help you in the trek to tenure and beyond?

The promotion and tenure system, like academe itself, reflects its ancient and medieval origins in style and substance. At its heart is a guild that takes in apprentices, tests them in the craft at the assistant-professor rank, and then, if it finds them worthy, offers them associate and then full membership.

In previous columns, I have written about aspects of the mentor-protégé relationship that both typify and transcend the master-apprentice model. Here I want to examine the task of supervising student assistants. Next month, I will reverse the viewpoint and write about being a successful graduate teaching or research assistant.

There are many species of student assistants. A novice assistant professor of biology at a major research university might suddenly find herself leading dozens of graduate students and postdocs in a big lab. Conversely, a sociologist, two years away from tenure, may be assigned a graduate student to help him finish a book. Or an associate professor at a community college might have a five-hour-a-week undergraduate assistant to help with a curriculum project. The money to hire such assistants can come from grants, endowments, the university, or even your own pocket.
You may be guaranteed an assistant as part of your hiring contract or provided one each semester at the whim of your department head. Your assistant may be passionately interested in your (mutual) research or an undergrad from another department working for minimum wage and holding a "this is just my job" attitude.

For any of those cases and many other variations, a good assistant, one who really helps advance your teaching and research, is valuable to an almost immeasurable degree.

I still recall how, caught in the haze of my new job, I was fortunate to find a wonderful master's student to help complete my first book. She intuitively located information, organized it, and even helped find patterns in the archival data I was studying. Finishing that book without her seems impossible to ponder.

However, my relationships with some other assistants, either because of my poor supervision or their own foibles, turned sour and unproductive. There was the teaching assistant who "forgot" to turn in my students' final exams at the scoring center, so that I ended up submitting several hundred grades late. Another was so bored by the content-analysis coding I asked him to do that he fudged many of the answers. He and I parted ways midway during the semester.

Clearly, good management of your research and teaching assistants can affect your future, and theirs. To that end, some common rules apply.

First, a fundamental precept: In these times of tight budgets, consider yourself lucky to have an assistant at all. Someone — the taxpayers, a grant agency, an endowment, the university — is paying for your assistants, no matter how much you feel you "earned" them. Therefore, you are under a legal and ethical obligation to supervise students who, while you may consider them protégés, or even friends, are also employees.

Keeping that professional obligation in mind is crucial; I have seen many problems arise when a faculty member, a student, or both consider an assistantship not to be a "real job." In my various administrative appointments, when I have been responsible for handing out assistantships to other faculty members, I have stressed to all parties that they are mutually responsible for the outcome of the professional relationship.

If at all possible, try to interview candidates for assistantships. It is hard to tell from a résumé how someone will work out. Graduate assistants with an outstanding record — having earned a prestigious scholarship, for example — may turn out to be problematic when put to work. A colleague in a scientific field described such junior stars as "thinking they deserve the Nobel Prize right now" and so are unwilling to wash the beakers and feed the rats. On the other hand, a shy, minimum-wage undergraduate may become a dynamo in the archives if properly trained and rewarded.

An interview could help identify some potential problems. Be as specific as possible about the nature of the work, the deadlines, and the daily schedule. Explain if on-the-job training (in, say, a software program or a data-entry technique) will be necessary. Don't
just note the students' verbal responses. Body language and mood are key indicators, too. Do they seem attentive, tuned in to what you are trying to accomplish?

Temperament also may count. A successful graduate teaching assistant may need to be upbeat and outgoing to supervise discussion sections of your large lecture course. Then again, research assistants who will spend all of their time cranking out stats might be taciturn but highly efficient.

You also need to work out an actual contract that goes beyond your college's "20 hours a week for $10 an hour" specification. A good contract outlines measurable outcomes for the week, month, or semester and how they will be gauged. A wall chart tracking the progress on your project, for example, will be a useful tool for both of you.

Another critical preliminary step is to make sure your assistants are aware of, and understand, all university rules and codes pertaining to their employment, especially those affecting safety and privacy rights. Many institutions have special training workshops or certification programs for assistants. At the end of the day, however, you need to confirm that your assistants are in compliance with the rules covering, for example, the handling of lab equipment, human subjects, student files and records, and so on.

As the work proceeds, it is vital for you to assess the project and give feedback. A friend once told me that his graduate assistant had consistently done poor work for the entire 16 weeks of the semester. He did not actually check her work, however, until the final days of the term, so he didn't find out until it was too late.

Besides inattention, a major factor in failed assistantships (or supervision) is what I call dysfunctional niceness.

At the start of my career, an assistant professor from a humanities department lamented (and I paraphrase here): "When I get lazy or distracted assistants, I let them get away with it. I can't bring myself to scold them or enact any real punishments."

I felt the same when I was on the tenure track. You don't want to be perceived as an old meanie, so you tend to overlook problems and poor work, even at the expense of your own project. Sometimes older, more mature (but not necessarily more competent) assistants can actually intimidate you into silence.

But failing to correct difficulties as they are happening is not only bad for your projects, classes, and career but also for the system itself.

Some graduate students may complain to other faculty members that while they worked long hours at a difficult task, another assistant "was doing nothing" for his paycheck. The senior professors who judge you at promotion-and-tenure time may take note. And the graduate assistants are getting a poor lesson that may undermine their careers.
A complicating factor is, of course, that assistants are students: They have to study for exams, their grandmothers fall ill, their love lives will go awry. Will excusing one or two absences, or blown deadlines, lead to more of the same?

Certainly be humane and empathic but, at some point, you may also have to be tough, and, at a further point, you may have to issue an ultimatum.

Say your research assistant also holds another job in the private sector. His corporate boss is no-nonsense; missed days or delayed projects mean real penalties, even termination. So week after week, your assistant comes up with excuses for why he can't put in the time or effort at the level of quality you require. You can let the problem persist and sabotage your own work. Or you can take action: give warnings, encourage a turnaround, supervise more closely. If all that fails, then a parting of ways may be the final option.

You can add kind phrases and regrets to your ultimatum, but in the end you need to be firm. This is, after all — no matter how friendly — a business relationship.

The "no good deed goes unpunished" rule applies here as well. Problem assistants rarely solve their own problems. Slacker management does not cure slacker labor. And sometimes having no assistant is better than having one who only aggravates you.

At the other extreme, asking too much from an assistant can be as bad as asking too little. Guard against adopting unrealistic standards. I mentioned the solid-gold research assistant that I was blessed with early in my career. Ultimately, of course, she graduated. I had adjustment problems for years afterward because so few other assistants performed to her level. It took me a while to accept that she was an outlier at the right end of the bell curve.

Over time I learned that supervising most graduate assistants required as much effort from me as from them. Few assistants are born lazy, inattentive, and sloppy: It's more likely that their supervisors failed to take the time and effort to consider the best ways to prepare, motivate, and manage them.

The key is to make a plan, write it out, agree on it, and faithfully and diligently execute it. Being someone's supervisor means being responsible for that person's performance. You are — and I know many academics cringe at this word — the boss, and you must act like one.

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