Choosing a thesis advisor: Choose wisely and avoid years of tears in graduate school

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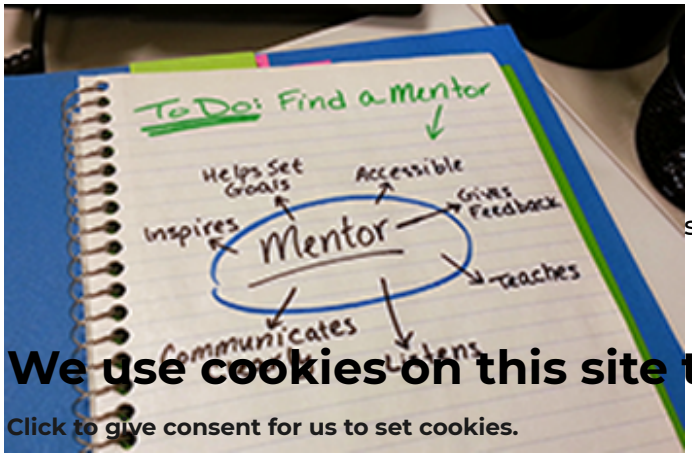
Finding the correct thesis adviser can be a bit problematic for first-year graduate students. It is a 5+ year commitment and it needs careful analysis. Finding a strong mentor can be the key to success for a graduate student, in combination with the positive influence of a research area that students are passionate about. Here are some guidelines to help you choose an advisor:



Rotations are important to get to know your prospective mentor and the research lab. Lab rotations are useful to explore different research areas of interest and to meet prospective peers. Before choosing a lab for a rotation, make a list of professors whose research area align with your interests. By choosing different research areas for your rotations, it will expose you to different opportunities. Reach out to these professors and schedule a meeting. Having a quality discussion will help you to find out more about their research, the composition of their lab, and it will help you to completely evaluate your options for lab rotations. Funding is always one of the main issues when deciding to join a lab, so there is a chance that the research lab you most want to join may not be able to fund you. You can take steps to minimize this possibility by securing your own funding (http://ijobs.rutgers.edu/wordpress/2016/11/08/six-survival-tips-for-the-fellowship-application-process/#sthash.9qvUrTmK.dpbs)

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Before joining a lab, interview lab members. Having candid conversations with members of your new potential lab about how the lab dynamic is and how the adviser's style may match your own, will help you visualize the lab is a good fit for you. Before the interview, prepare questions that will aid you in this process. Ask other members of the laboratory if the adviser is available to help in experiments, give you training, and review your progress; if you are someone that needs frequent feedback, take that into consideration. Find out how good the advisor is at providing feedback. What kind of work environment there is in the lab? What kind of facilities and equipment are accessible for doing your research? What is the average time that takes for a student to graduate with that advisor? It may also be helpful to have this conversation somewhere outside the work environment, so that current students can feel more comfortable speaking freely.

Understand your limits. Know yourself before selecting an advisor. Do you prefer to work independently or do you need supervision? How available is the advisor to help you? Be sure to understand what are the advisor's expectations, in terms of the time you need to spend at the lab and the pace of the research project. If you are not willing to adjust to the pace, you should then consider other options.

Pick an advisor that is active in the research area. An advisor that attends conferences, has recent publications and funding available, and has a good size lab, are all indications that he/she is active in the field. Having an active advisor will help you identify a gap in knowledge and create a hypothesis. A research oriented adviser will share his knowledge with you and will help you find the latest technologies for your research. Having someone like that around you will open many possibilities for you.

Choose someone that motivates you and excites you. There will be days when your research won't go as planned and feeling apathetic is normal. Having an advisor that believes in you, knows how to push you even on bad days, and respects your hard work is crucial. You should choose an advisor that will help you look the big picture and towards your end goals: becoming a strong scientist that will be successful throughout your career. You are going to spend 5+ years interacting with this person, so having a good relationship with your advisor is important.

Select someone that has a good balance between being a scientist and a mentor. A good scientific advisor can be identified in several ways. You can start by looking at the number of publications, the quality of them, and whether they were published in high impact journals. The quality of the research is more important than the number of publications. An advisor who has not been published in the last 5 years, could be a red flag, but so could frequent, low-quality publications. You can also check if the advisor has NIH, NSF, HHMI or any other grant support. Unless you are considering to develop your thesis project in a young professor's lab, not having funding can be an indication of problems in productivity to merit support. However, an advisor's scientific experience is not enough to pick the best fit for you. Being able to help you formulate a good hypothesis, address an experiment, and encourage the student are all characteristics of a good mentor. If the mentor is more hands-on research oriented, it will spend the day with the student running experiments, troubleshooting, and following up on their research progress. Others expect more independence so they will be following up your progress but expecting that you can do it by yourself.

Once you select your advisor it is time to get to work. First, be authentic and be you. Don't compare yourself with other students. The progress and the experience is completely different for each one of us. This career is for you and you should embrace it. Second, you won't establish trust from day one. Building that trust into your relationship with your advisor will take time. You will have to demonstrate that you can be trained and polished to be a good scientist. Lastly, having a good advisor will help your career but being successful is more up to you. Just remember to enjoy the journey!

JCM

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