

Matching expectations on supervision

Disclaimer:
I am a student - I am biased



CAREERS | EXPERIMENTAL ERROR

Scientists aren't trained to mentor. That's a problem

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You'd think graduate programs would be trying to outdo one another with the quality of the mentorship they offer. But then you'd be forgetting that the lifeblood of a science program isn't happy trainees—it's grants. Professors can even be told that their job is *less* secure because they've invested too much time and energy working with students, and it's

SUSTAINED SATISFACTION

A majority of respondents are still glad they decided to pursue a PhD, although the attitudes of some have worsened over time.

Q: How satisfied are you with your decision to pursue a PhD?

Very dissatisfied **6%**

Somewhat dissatisfied
10%

Neutral
10%

Somewhat satisfied
37%

Very satisfied
38%

6,320
RESPONSES

Q: Since the start of your graduate school experience, has your level of satisfaction increased, worsened or remained the same?

Neutral **13%**

Worsened
45%

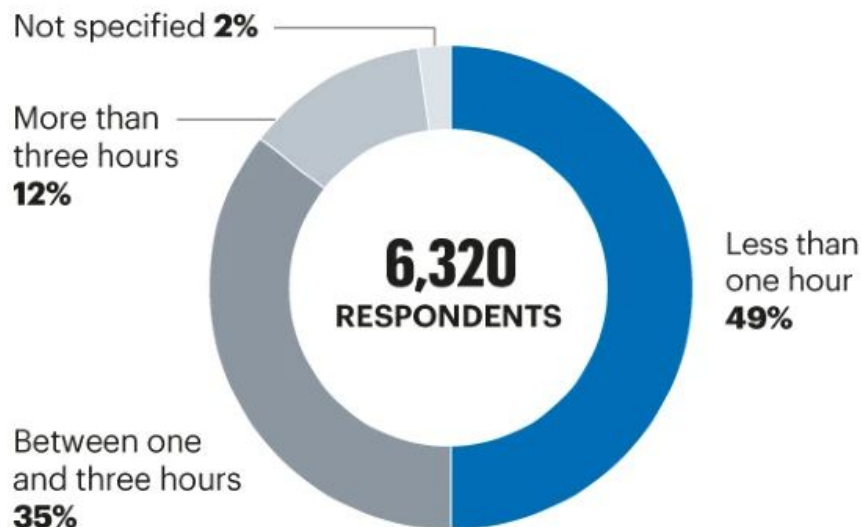
Increased
42%

6,320
RESPONSES

BRIEF ENCOUNTERS

Interactions with a supervisor can be a crucial part of PhD training, but some students get much more individual time than others.

Q: On average, how much one-to-one time do you spend with your supervisor each week?



*Percentages do not add up to 100 because of rounding.

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Unmet expectations can be a major source of dissatisfaction and disappointment. Nearly 40% of respondents said that their programme didn't meet their original expectations, and only 10% said that it exceeded their expectations – a sharp drop from 2017, when 23% of respondents said that their PhD programme exceeded their expectations.

36%

of respondents have sought help for anxiety or depression caused by PhD studies. One-third of them sought help from places other than their institution, and 18% sought help at their institution but didn't feel supported.

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Everything is the supervisor's responsibility?

Table. Diagnosis and Treatment of Mentee Missteps

Phenotype	Description	Diagnostic Signs	Potential Solutions	
			Mentee	Mentor
Conflict Averse				
The Overcommitter	Lacks the ability to say no. Ends up overcommitted and underproducing.	Résumé is filled with a host of committees, volunteer roles, etc, yet few have resulted in academic products such as publications.	Learn to use your mentor or allocated effort as a reason for saying no. Before saying yes to a project, determine which project is now getting a no.	Add new items to this mentee's list only after old ones are completed. Have mentee identify his or her career goals, then stick to projects that align.
The Ghost	Appears extremely enthusiastic and energetic, but then disappears without a trace and without notice—especially when problems arise.	Mentee may agree to assignments but fail to follow up. When questions regarding project deadlines arise, the mentee avoids discussion.	When uninterested, suggest an alternative person who may be interested. Address issues early. To reduce anxiety, be prepared with a planned solution.	Mentees should gauge their true interest in new projects and be allowed to decline. Set goals to address problems forthrightly, and praise mentees for their candor when issues raised.
The Doormat	Mentee is on the receiving end of a manipulative mentor. The mentee's energy is used for things that do not further their career, or for which they do not receive credit.	Mentee spends time on work unrelated to their own career. Review of mentee's progress shows few first-authored papers in mentee's field of interest.	Ask directly how new projects align with goals. Trial of setting goals and boundaries. Seek new mentors. Establish a mentoring committee.	Before assigning a project to a mentee, evaluate if it is in their best interest. Allow mentees to use you as an excuse not to participate in another's projects.
Confidence Lacking				
The Vampire	Mentee requires constant attention and supervision, leaving mentors drained and empty.	Mentee requests approval or clarification for every step of a project, regardless of prior or similar discussions. Lacks conviction; pivots to mirror mentor.	Recognize and embrace feelings of insecurity; talk with other junior faculty likely struggling with similar decisions. Before taking questions to a mentor, vet a solution with a colleague.	Set clear goals and boundaries, including what questions require approval and what do not. Have mentees "put their nickel down" when asking for help.
The Lone Wolf	Assertive, self-motivated, and determined; prefers working alone; believes mentorship is a luxury, not a necessity.	Does not trust others or is afraid to ask for help. Does not work well as part of a team.	Realize that asking for help is critical for learning, not a sign of weakness. Appreciate that working with a team is a key skill for success.	Be specific in things that can be done with and without mentor consultation. Define the mentee's role, as well as the role of other team members.
The Backstabber	This mentee rarely fails, but when this does occur, makes excuses or assigns blame to others rather than to personal missteps.	People who work with this mentee once often don't want to do so again. Has difficulty accepting responsibility for any mistake; avoids negative feedback.	Reframe mistakes as a learning opportunity. Make giving credit and accepting responsibility a daily goal.	Emphasize that honesty, not perfection, is critical in a mentee. If mentee cannot accept this responsibility, seek a new mentee.

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Communication is critical and I periodically have dis-

subject knowledge. Convergently, Fleming et al. (2013) determined that the key ingredients for a good working relationship are effective communication, aligning expectations, assessing understanding, addressing diversity, fostering independence, and promoting professional development.

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academic careers and how these jobs can benefit from PhD-related training and skills. Discussing student's aspirations in academia or beyond is crucial and can only be facilitated if supervisors are clear in defining the supervision relationship and expectations and students feel supported regardless of their desired career path.

**‘It’s a PhD, not a Nobel Prize’:
how experienced examiners assess
research theses**

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Take initiative, be honest and
take care (of yourself and others).

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