

Resolving Conflict between Faculty and Graduate Students

This summary is adapted from a presentation done in 2009 by The Graduate School at Michigan State University, titled "Setting Expectations and Resolving Conflict in Graduate Education: Developing Communication and Conflict Management Skills to Save Time and Enhance Productivity"

It is important to attend to the maintenance of relationships and conflict between faculty and graduate students because these are two groups within the university system that are both reliant on one another and there are also strong power dynamics embodied within those relationships. While graduate students need the support of faculty members in order to complete their programs of study, faculty and the department as a whole are reliant upon graduate students to help keep the program functioning through teaching and research, and also reflect the overall success of the department through their retention and graduation rates.

Conflict between graduate students and faculty members can impact each of these areas. In fact, research has shown that one reason often cited that causes graduate students to leave their programs after having already invested at least 4 years is poor faculty-student relationships. Some of the unique environmental factors that heighten the potential for stress in faculty-student relationships are:

1. The research mentor, or advisor, is a key individual in guiding the progress of a graduate student and that relationship often follows the graduate student after graduation as connections via recommendation letters and professional societies and interactions continue throughout the careers of both parties.
2. Faculty power can be enforced through the allocation of stipends, work assignments, resources, and advice.
3. Within the university community there is a high overall dependence on a small group of faculty members, so that if one relationship becomes strained or contentious the options for sources of alternative guidance are more limited and there is less flexibility in even obtaining alternative sources.

Because of these heightened spaces for potential tension it is also important to evaluate the ways that conflict in these areas can be handled. The authors of this presentation suggest that while the most frequent approach to resolving faculty-graduate conflict is by using the Positional Approach. In this method the options for a solution are limited to two positions from the very beginning. For example starting a discussion with "You have to defend in the Fall or 2015" or "Dr. Green has to leave my committee." This stance may end with a winner and a loser, or even two losers, and harm the relationship as a result.

The suggested approach is an Interest-Based Strategy where both parties agree on the larger issue at hand (such as graduation) but also acknowledge that there may be multiple approaches. "When will I defend my dissertation" and "Who would be a good fit for your committee" are entry points into a conversation that could pose a lot of conflict that is more focused on issue identification and hopefully less of a stressor as a result. This type of approach is often counter-intuitive because we are so trained to be solution oriented, but with practice and awareness this is one tool that can help with faculty-graduate student conflicts.