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Accomplishing the Mission: Creating a Partnership with Your Advisor*

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The faculty advisor is all important to a student's success in graduate school, and most students figure out immediately that this is a significant partnership. In fact, the relationship with an advisor can be one of the most important of a lifetime. Not only can the advisor affect the kind of thesis or dissertation the student does but also the time it takes to complete the degree, the kinds of career options available, and the trajectory of research and scholarly interests. Whether the relationship is good or bad, productive or ineffective, an advisor and advisee are connected for a lifetime by reputation ("So you studied with . . ."), professional association (meeting at conventions will be the least of it), and even friendship—some advising relationships become and remain close over a career.

Advisor and advisee can be thought of as partners on a mission to ensure that the student successfully completes the degree. Most students, used to seeing themselves as lower in status than their advisors in terms of expertise, skills, experience, and length of time in the academy, often act deferentially in the

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advising situation, accepting and putting up with whatever the advisor hands out. They often assume there is little they can do if they end up with an advisor who does not meet their expectations. There is another option for the student, however, and that is to work behind the scenes to facilitate an effective and productive partnership. The advisee can engage in actions—systematic, clear, and appreciative—that increase the chances the partnership will run smoothly and result in the desired outcome: a completed degree and a strong start to the academic career.

The suggestion that the student engage in covert activity makes sense given the power dynamics of the partnership. Advisors do not necessarily like to think of themselves as in need of help or behind-the-scenes “management” of any kind. But faculty members are busy people with the demands of teaching, publishing, and service that pull them in many different directions (Kalbfleisch, 2002). Perhaps they were not mentored well themselves and do not know what good advising looks like. The advisee, however, can assume agency by initiating certain processes and engaging in certain behaviors that increase the possibilities of an effective partnership. The advisee, in other words, can turn any advisor into a helpful and valuable one despite any distractions or difficulties present.

There are two basic steps in which the advisee engages in the process of creating the ideal advisor who will assist rather than hinder the completion of the degree: *establishing the partnership* and *maintaining the partnership*. By giving these two steps careful and systematic attention, the student can promote a productive partnership with the advisor.

ESTABLISHING THE PARTNERSHIP

The task of the first phase, establishing the partnership, is for advisor and advisee to come to a shared vision about process and product. Together, advisor and advisee answer the question: What is our mission and how do we intend to get there? Many advisor-advisee pairs simply jump into the advising process without considering what expectations each brings to the process, whether those overlap at all, and how they wish to enact the advising partnership. Achieving the desired mission smoothly and efficiently is virtually impossible without a shared vision. The task of this first phase, then, is to make explicit the nature, goals, and processes of the partnership.

A starting point for arriving at a vision shared by advisor and advisee is to consider differences or similarities in demographics and life experiences. These influence the expectations each brings, often unconsciously, to the partnership. For example, the sex of the advisee and the advisor may be an issue. Perhaps both are women or both are men, and certain assumptions of similarity get made on that basis. If both are women, the advisor might make the mistake of assuming that all female advisees are like her—completely devoted to the profession. An advisee who is a mother, on the other hand, might assume that a female advisor will always understand the constraints she is under in the simultaneous roles of wife, mother, and student. Sex also can interact with age, producing traditional sex-role behaviors in either or both of the participants in the advising relationship. A young woman with an older male advisor may fall unconsciously into a father-daughter role, potentially confusing or irritating the advisor and/or the advisee.

Race or ethnicity also can affect the assumptions upon which the advising partnership is established. A person of color may gravitate to an advisor of the same race, thinking that person will be especially understanding and supportive. The advisor, however, may consider it part of the job to toughen up students of the same race to ensure that they will succeed in the academy. Demographics of all kinds can affect the working relationship as the advising partnership begins. These issues may not necessarily be talked about explicitly by the advisor and advisee, but each half of the partnership should be aware of such issues and be prepared to discuss them if they become problematic.

Other issues involved in the establishment phase of the partnership should be discussed explicitly by the student and faculty member: reaching agreement on guidelines about communication in the relationship, reaching agreement on the advising model to be used, and reaching agreement on expectations about the thesis or dissertation. A student should make an appointment with a potential advisor for at least an hour to talk over these issues so that the partnership starts on a clear and solid footing. By initiating discussion about expectations involved and the processes for achieving them, the student is asserting agency and demonstrating a commitment to the advising partnership.

Agreement about Communication

Establishing an effective working partnership requires an explicit understanding between advisor and advisee about the ground rules governing their interactions. Discussing and reaching agreement on guidelines for communication ensures that the relationship will begin well, with each participant clear about what each can expect from the other as the advising partnership begins. These guidelines will carry the partnership through all of the processes required for the degree—from what courses to take and the plan-of-study meeting to studying for and defending comprehensive exams to writing the thesis or dissertation to finding a job.

A natural starting point for a discussion about ground rules is the extent, nature, and form of communication between the pair. How often will communication occur? Will there be regular meetings—once a week, once every other week, once a month? Or will e-mail or phone calls be the preferred mode of communication? Can the advisor be called at home? Are there limits on when those calls can occur—not before 8:00 a.m. or after 10:00 p.m., for example?

What process will be put in place to record the decisions that are made between advisor and advisee? A frequent problem with advising relationships that span several years is that what is not written down gets forgotten. An advisor may offer several ideas for courses to be taken in other departments but forget about that discussion by the time the formal list of coursework is to be submitted to the graduate school. Or perhaps the student’s timeline is discussed, but the advisor keeps asking about it because it has not been written down. Especially frustrating is when an advisor throws out several interesting suggestions for a dissertation or thesis and forgets about them at the next meeting when other interesting ideas come to mind. The advisee benefits from having things in writing to keep the ground from shifting—whether the notes relate to coursework to be completed or a topic for the dissertation.

Not only is it beneficial for the advisee to assume responsibility for keeping track of agreements, but the student should consider the form in which decisions will be recorded. Will the advisee take notes and e-mail them to the advisor after the meeting? Or is the advisee taking notes on a laptop during the meeting and e-mailing them to the advisor immediately at its close? Both parties need to take a few minutes shortly after the notes arrive to look them over and make sure they accurately capture what was agreed upon at the meeting.

After particulars of communication are discussed, issues about how to communicate in order to develop the best working relationship are an appropriate next step. A graduate student may wish to share information with the advisor about preferred learning and working styles. Does the advisee learn by doing, by modeling, or by talking things through? Does the advisee like to be left alone to work on a project once its basic parameters are agreed on? Or does the advisee like constant nudging, reminders, and questions about how things are going? What happens when the student gets stuck? What can the advisor do that will be most helpful when that occurs? What motivates the advisee—rewards, guilt, acknowledgment, praise, or something else? A quick way to get at the heart of the matter is for the advisee to figure out and share the one thing the advisor should never say in an effort to motivate. Then, when the student gets stuck, stress levels rise, and deadlines near, the advisor is communicating in ways that are truly helpful to the student rather than pushing buttons that shut the student down.

Finally, what are the communication practices that will govern the writing process for the thesis or dissertation? This is the part of the advising relationship that often puts guidelines to the test, so talking through communication particulars before the process begins is useful. Issues to address include whether the advisor wants to be notified in advance that a chapter is coming in. Does the advisor want the chapter delivered in hard copy or electronically? Within what time frame will the advisor return a chapter—two weeks, one week, a few days? These discussions enhance the likelihood of creating a successful advisee-advisor relationship that can endure throughout all phases of the student's degree program.

Agreement about the Advising Model

The advising model that will be used is another major area for discussion important to establishing a strong partnership. Many faculty and students think advising is just advising and assume that the same basic process for guiding and directing academic work applies to all students. In fact, several advising models are in operation in the communication discipline; the three most common models are replication, apprenticeship, and co-creation. All three are legitimate and appropriate, all three can result in good and productive working relationships between students and advisors, and all three can produce high-quality work that results in degrees that are completed on time. What is important is that advisee and advisor agree on the model they will be using throughout the advising process.

One advising model is the replication model. Replication does not mean becoming a clone of the advisor—engaging in identical research or service activities as the advisor, going on to the same Ph.D. program the advisor attended, or taking a job at an institution similar to that of the advisor. Rather, replication

means following the lead of the advisor, who suggests professional activities the student may find useful, invites the student to participate in funded research or other research projects, and asks the student to become a co-author on an essay. The agency lies primarily with the advisor in this model to suggest research avenues, publishing outlets, and co-authorship possibilities.

At the thesis or dissertation stage, the replication model typically is used when the advisor has a funded research project, selects the advisee to work on the grant, and the work done for the grant becomes the thesis or dissertation project. Under this model, the advisor generates the basic plan or formula for the project. The student essentially studies the same topic as the advisor, uses and extends the advisor's data set, and explores the same or similar research questions as the advisor. The advisor structures the bulk of the choices including topic, data, research methods, and questions. The preferences of the advisor drive the student's work throughout the degree process.

Apprenticeship is a second type of advising model. Not unlike apprenticeship positions of all kinds—from the art world to the building trades—the advisee learns from the advisor how to navigate the academic world, but the choices offered are less constrained than in the replication model. Perhaps the advisor and advisee share a research interest, so the advisor suggests various topics that might be possible research projects within that subject area but does not insist that the student participate in the advisor's research program, use the advisor's data set, or adopt the advisor's methodological preferences. Instead, the advisor supervises, suggests, and critiques as a student conceptualizes and works through the choices appropriate at each stage of the process. The student has more agency than in the replication model but still is closely directed by the advisor.

The third advising model available is the co-creation model, and in this model, both advisee and advisor cover territory new to them. This kind of advising model often does not come into play until the thesis or dissertation stage primarily because the earlier aspects of the degree program are fairly rule governed in terms of the number and kinds of courses to be taken, the nature of the comprehensive exam, and the like. But if advisee and advisor have confidence in the ability of the other to engage material in new ways and to ask significant questions, the co-creation model may be an appropriate choice.

The plan for the thesis or dissertation under the co-creation model typically emerges from several long conversations to map out the plan for the project. The pair explores the student's interests, with the faculty member asking probing questions to enable both to figure out the key interests and issues important to the student. As the conversations continue, the particulars of the project—research question, areas to cover in the literature review, and methods of data collection and analysis—get worked out, culminating in a relatively complete outline of the project.

The co-creation advising model gives most of the agency to the student. The advisor has more expertise than the student but does not attempt to tell the student how something should be done or offer patterns to follow in the design and completion of the project. Instead, the advisor takes the lead in asking questions to help the student conceptualize the design of the project. As the project emerges, conversations about it continue, with both advisor and advisee generating new ideas and perspectives that help move the project along. The

thesis or dissertation that emerges from the co-creation model truly is something collaborative and something neither could have produced alone.

Gaining agreement on the kind of advising model under which to work is an important consideration for advisee and advisor, especially at the thesis- or dissertation-writing stage. While a vision of the advising process will not necessarily correspond in terms of every detail, a discussion of the basic model will clarify what is important to each party and will assure that there is enough overlap for them to be a productive team.

Agreement about Expectations for the Thesis or Dissertation

A final component to consider when creating an advising partnership is expectations about the thesis or dissertation itself. Again, this is the stage at which the advising partnership is most stressed, so discussing expectations about this part of the process up front is crucial. This means finding out about the requirements of the department and university for all stages of the process from writing the prospectus to filing the completed document as well as understanding the advisor's and student's (often different) expectations for a thesis or dissertation.

In terms of the prospectus, questions to ask include: What does a prospectus look like? Does it consist of the first three chapters of the thesis or dissertation, or is it a truncated summary of these parts? What is the procedure for having a prospectus approved? Is there an oral defense of the prospectus? If so, what happens at the defense? Is the student asked to give a presentation? Is the student expected to bring refreshments for those present? Does paperwork of some kind have to be filed following the prospectus defense?

For the thesis or dissertation itself, knowing from the beginning the deadlines and expectations for the official submission of the final document is important to prevent problems that could delay graduation. What is the deadline for graduation in a particular semester? How many copies of the document must be submitted? Are they to be submitted electronically or in hard copy? What does the process of binding the dissertation involve? Is it required? What are the expectations of the department about giving copies, bound or otherwise, to committee members? Does the department require a copy for its library?

What requirements does the Graduate School have for writing and formatting the manuscript itself? Is a particular style guide required—*APA*, *MLA*, or *Chicago*? What is the required width for margins? Are block quotations single or double spaced? Is there a required format for headings? Where can the required signature pages, which often are bordered in red or some other color, be obtained? Does the advisor have samples of outstanding dissertations or theses that can be used as models?

With this information in mind, the next consideration is the advisor's and student's expectations for the dissertation and whether those expectations mesh. What does each see as the function and scope of the thesis or dissertation? Is it an obstacle to be overcome with little assistance from the advisor? Or is the student's competence and ability to design and complete the final project assumed, and the process of writing it expected to be a pleasant and enjoyable one? Is it seen as the culmination of the student's career or simply the beginning?

These questions about expectations for the thesis or dissertation, perhaps more than any others, affect how quickly and smoothly the final project—and thus the degree—gets done. An advisor who took six years to complete a dissertation might assume that a dissertation is supposed to take six years, whereas the advisee conceptualizes it as a very doable project that can be done in nine months. A cautionary note is in order here: Sharing perceptions *per se* is not all that is necessary. Perceptions of the scope of a dissertation can line up but with dysfunctional results. An advisor and advisee might agree that the dissertation is a protracted struggle, and both work to support that vision to the extent that the student never finishes.

Yet other factors for the student to ask about include how to work with the committee. What system will be used for reading the thesis or dissertation? Will the advisor read and approve all chapters first, before the other committee members see them? How much time will the committee need to read the final draft of the thesis or dissertation?

There are additional questions to ask about the defense of the dissertation itself. Is there an oral defense? Who can attend? Is the student expected to make an opening presentation? If so, how long and how formal should it be? What kinds of questions typically are asked at the defense? If outsiders can attend, can they ask questions? Is the student expected to bring refreshments for those present? What will happen at the end of the defense? Is the candidate sent out of the room? If the committee deliberates a long time, what might it mean? What is the range of possible outcomes for the defense? Are revisions likely? Who will approve revisions—the advisor or the entire committee? What happens if the student does not pass the defense?

After completing the thesis or dissertation, students may question whether their work is a good candidate for a conference paper(s) and/or is of publishable quality. Most manuscripts will take cutting and refining, sometimes significantly, for presentation and/or publication. Students may also question whether the advisor should be a co-author on some or all of the work that comes from the thesis or dissertation. Students should initiate discussions about these topics with their advisors. Unless the department or university prohibits it (and some do), many students invite the advisor to be a co-author on some or all of the subsequent manuscripts. First, the advisor can contribute his or her expertise to the project. Second, inviting the advisor is a way to recognize his or her significant contributions to the project. The most important thing is to talk with one's advisor about these questions and know his or her expectations and preferences. If the advisor would like to co-author with the student, the pair should come to an agreement about the timeline and the role the advisor will play in the process.

If the advisee and advisor discuss the thesis/dissertation process in this degree of detail, the student will be as prepared as possible for the process that lies ahead, and the advisor will be confident that the student is fully informed. With this foundation, the partnership is launched, and the advisor-advisee pair can be confident that it is starting off on a solid footing.

MAINTAINING THE PARTNERSHIP

With the partnership between advisor and advisee established, the advisor and advisee put into practice what they have agreed upon in their process

discussions. There are sure to be bumps in the road, however, and the advisee can take the lead in communicating in ways that smooth over these bumps and promote a strong and continuing partnership. Being professional, framing issues collaboratively, backing up the advisor, and appreciating the advisor are some ongoing strategies available for the student to use.

Behaving Professionally

One set of behaviors in which the advisee can engage falls under the rubric of being professional. This means the advisee acts in ways to uphold the agreements made with the advisor in the establishment phase. Respecting the ground rules, then, is the first and perhaps most important element to being a professional because those rules provide the foundation for the advisor-advisee relationship. The ground rules were developed out of a concern for each other and for a process in which both will engage together, so respecting them is paramount.

Professional behavior is also demonstrated by keeping appointments, being on time for them, and meeting deadlines. While taking appointments seriously may seem like a small and perhaps obvious point to make, many students are casual about such aspects—seeming to forget that faculty are busy with many different demands and simply will not have time for a student who is late, wishes to make up a missed appointment, or turns in a draft long after the faculty member expected it. The irritation factor begins to creep in as well: A student who is perpetually late to meetings or late submitting chapters will become increasingly annoying to the advisor, who may be less likely to take the student and the student's work seriously.

In addition, the advisee should seek to give the advisor polished work at every step of the way. This means preparing carefully for a plan-of-study meeting by thinking through all of the issues to be discussed and giving committee members the documents they will need to assist with the planning process—a curriculum vitae, a list of courses taken at previous institutions and as part of the current degree, preliminary thoughts about the dissertation topic, and a statement of career goals, for example. At the thesis or dissertation stage, where writing many, many drafts is to be expected, each draft should represent the best of the student's thinking, organization, and writing abilities at that moment. The student should check the document for spelling and grammatical errors, make sure references are complete, and follow the appropriate style guide.

By engaging in professional behaviors at every step of the process, the advisee enacts a relationship of respect and competence. Advisor and advisee are moving toward being peers and colleagues, and practicing professional behavior lays the foundation for a strong, professional relationship now and in the future.

Framing Issues Collaboratively

Despite the work that goes into creating an effective partnership, conflicts can arise. Often, in a conflict situation, problems and issues tend to get framed as opposing positions. The conflict then becomes a conflict of wills because the positions have to be defended. The more time a student and an advisor spend explaining their positions and defending themselves, the more committed each becomes to the different positions and the harder it is to resolve the conflict.

To avoid this kind of polarization, a student can take the lead in framing the issue or difficulty in a way that makes it a problem to be solved together. Perhaps the issue is the advisor's non-responsiveness or tardy response when the student submits chapters of the thesis or dissertation to be read. A typical conversation about the issue might go as follows: The student says feedback on each chapter within a week is necessary for timely progress; the advisor responds by saying that reading each chapter that quickly is impossible due to the many obligations the advisor has at the time. Choosing a collaborative framing, the student can say instead, "It's important that I get feedback to produce a good dissertation. Without timely feedback, I'm at a loss as to how to proceed. Is there something we can do to ensure that I get the feedback I need?" The issue has been framed as one that enables the student and the advisor to collaborate in coming up with an answer that is satisfactory to both.

Another approach to solving a problem collaboratively is to focus on the interests and goals that the student and advisor share. To focus on interests means searching for the shared concerns underlying the different positions. For example, a student's interest might be in graduating at the end of the semester. The advisor might articulate several interests: completing a manuscript due to a publisher in two weeks, giving chapters the time they deserve, and wanting the student to graduate this semester. This conversation reveals a common interest in the student graduating this semester; the student and advisor can build on that shared concern, brainstorming possibilities until they find a workable solution. Perhaps the student volunteers to grade a set of papers or exams or give a lecture in a class the advisor is teaching to give the advisor time to read the latest draft of the thesis or dissertation. The student could offer to bring the advisor lunch one day so the advisor can hole up in the office and read a chapter. Or perhaps the advisor can dictate comments about the chapter into a tape recorder instead of having to write them out. The point is to turn the conversation to a focus on new solutions instead of endlessly discussing the problem and defending the respective positions involved.

Backing up the Advisor

Backing up a partner during a mission is a common theme of spy and police dramas simply because failure to do so often has dire consequences in real life. While usually not a life-and-death situation in the academy, backing up the advisor is often something advisees do not think about doing. But this kind of back-up can be important to the overall effectiveness of the working relationship.

Backing up an advisor can take the form of understanding the advisor's perspective on a topic or issue. An advisor and advisee will not always see the world the same way, but the advisor undoubtedly has considerably more experience, greater understanding of the nuances of the field, and more astute political savvy. Rather than insisting on a point and not budging, some latitude and even deference are valuable on the part of the student. Perhaps this means taking the advisor's suggestions for a job talk, even though it is not what the student feels most comfortable doing because the student has not been on an academic

job interview before. Maybe it means at least thinking about combining methods to use in a research paper—upon the suggestion of the advisor—rather than adamantly sticking to the one originally selected. Maintaining some perspective is helpful: If the student can keep the bigger picture in mind, giving in to a few requests is not difficult.

A second means of backing up an advisor involves accepting feedback. Accepting feedback is part of being in the academy. Extensive feedback is typical whenever a paper is submitted to a conference or journal or a book to a publisher. Feedback will also be involved throughout the tenure and promotion process and at the close of semesters when teaching is evaluated by students. Accepting feedback graciously is not always easy—and it may be especially difficult coming from an advisor who is respected and admired. Keep in mind that feedback is given for the purpose of improving a project—and it usually does—so learning to accept and take feedback into account is crucial to academic success.

Not taking feedback personally is important: Just because an advisor writes all over a thesis chapter, for example, does not mean the chapter is flawed or the writer is a bad person. Feedback should be taken for what it is—something to help the student learn and grow as a scholar. The advisee, of course, can ask questions about the feedback so there is no confusion about where to go next with the ideas. Also quite appropriate, if the advisor does demand drastic changes, is to ask how what already has been written might fit with the suggested changes: “I’m quite excited about the explanatory schema I’ve developed for making sense of my findings; is there a way you see that schema fitting with what you are suggesting?”

The process of backing up an advisor is never separate from issues of face. Face is the image that someone wants others to see and believe. Just as students want to present themselves in certain ways, advisors also want to manage the impressions others have of them. Like the student, they want to be seen as competent, professional, and reputable. When there is disagreement, a student can threaten the face of the advisor—usually unintentionally—by saying what first comes to mind, either directly to the advisor or to others behind the advisor’s back, without thinking about how the advisor might receive the information. Criticizing, blaming, attacking, and disparaging are all face-threatening acts that generate embarrassment, guilt, anger, or frustration for the advisor. A student committed to an effective working partnership acts in ways to ensure that the advisor experiences none of these as a result of an interaction.

A number of ways are available for communicating so that the advisor saves face. Students can be tactful—speaking in thoughtful, diplomatic, respectful ways. They can frame issues in ways that preserve the advisor’s face—asking to talk about a “minor” issue that has come up or asking for clarification about feedback rather than complaining or arguing about what the advisor has written. If an advisor has not read a dissertation chapter, for example, despite having had it for two months, the student can preface a request for quicker feedback by saying something like, “I know how busy you have been recently with your responsibilities on the university search committee for a new provost. . . .” In

essence, behaviors that save face help the advisor remain committed to the project and willing to be there for the student.

One way for students to remind themselves to think about issues of face is to imagine how they will feel in the future as a result of having engaged in a particular kind of communication. Will they feel embarrassed? Stupid? Guilty? Unprofessional? Students can also imagine how their advisors might feel as a result of an interaction. Will they feel angry? Inadequate? Frustrated? Unenthusiastic? Taking a moment to imagine how both parties might feel after the conflict ends can help students choose to communicate in ways that foster respect and enable the advisor to save face.

Appreciating the Advisor

Although academicians do not do it as often as they should, appreciating is another strategy that can be used by students who wish to facilitate a successful outcome of the mission to accomplish their degree. A major way students can show appreciation is to do their best to follow their advisors’ guidelines, suggestions, and advice. They can be attentive to suggestions about coursework, about how to study for and write comprehensive exams, about how to prepare for and manage a defense, and about how to revise the thesis or dissertation. Nothing irritates an advisor more than giving direct advice but not having it followed, whether in preparing for a prospectus defense or in revising a thesis chapter.

Explicit demonstrations of appreciation are also appropriate. A student can directly thank an advisor for support, for the quick turnaround of a manuscript draft, or for help with a job talk, for example. This can be as simple as a verbal “thank you” at the end of a conversation, putting a thank-you note or card in the advisor’s mailbox, or bringing the advisor a cup of coffee when the student stops for one on the way to a meeting with the advisor. At the final defense, a card, gift, invitation to dinner, or other demonstration of appreciation is a nice touch.

Disseminating information about advisors’ positive qualities is another way that students can show their appreciation for what advisors do for them. Advisors appreciate when students talk favorably about them to other students and faculty. Students also can nominate their advisors for awards in the department, at the university, or in the discipline as a tangible sign of appreciation and acknowledgment.

The advising relationship is a reciprocal one. Just as students like to have their needs met and to achieve certain outcomes as a result of the advising relationship, so do advisors. Advisors want to feel that they are not just giving and giving and getting nothing in return, and appreciation reinforces the mutuality and reciprocity of the relationship.

The advisee, then, is not at the whim of the advisor in an advising relationship. In both the establishment and maintenance of the advising partnership, the student has considerable agency and can help orchestrate a healthy, productive working relationship with the advisor. When such a partnership exists, there is greater likelihood of a successful mission—the timely completion and awarding of the graduate degree.

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