

Should I Trust Him?

MS. MENTOR

Words of wisdom about academic culture

Question: It's time to choose a dissertation director, and I'm leaning toward "Professor A," noteworthy in his field and always helpful to me. But other students have told me that he has a reputation as a sexist, and that I won't get the help that male students do. What to do?

Answer: Ah, gossip -- one of Ms. Mentor's favorite subjects, for it is the opiate of the underdog. The mighty needn't gossip -- they conspire, call a press conference, deploy weapons of mass destruction. Their underlings are left to use the more colorful and indirect tools of the powerless: eavesdropping, backbiting, lampooning, whining, rumor mongering -- all the things that graduate students do so well.

Unless they're unionized, grad students are smart trout in a vast, underpaid pool. Especially in English, math, and introductory languages, they teach the same beginning-level courses, share the same bullpen offices, and handle the same slings and delights of fledgling instructors -- the "great class," the "bad class," the spontaneously perfect moments, and the resentment that goes with feeling that "I taught them that, and they refused to learn it." It's boot camp. And so are many graduate seminars, as students jostle to impress the profs.

Outside school, the younger singletons often drink and party together. Some pair up, others form romantic rivalries, and one or two may hook up with a professor (Ms. Mentor does not approve, and believes they should be spanked).

But then, suddenly, at the dissertation stage, grad students must leave their cozy-but-contentious cohort and step out on their own. If they've stayed in school all their lives, doing their homework dutifully and getting A's, they must now -- for the first time -- make a decision that will determine the shape of their careers, and the direction of their lives.

Choosing a dissertation director is as important as choosing a spouse, and so Ms. Mentor, in her infinite wisdom, discussed what to do when you're not your dissertation adviser's favorite [in her maiden column](#) for the Career Network.

The ideal director treats all of his or her charges equally -- doling out valuable scientific projects, suggesting grant opportunities, warning against unreliable sources or immense

projects that will take a lifetime. The director may have to cajole or bark about deadlines. The ideal director is neither The Great Man (who has no time for anything except his pursuit of the Nobel) nor The Great Mom (who has too many fledglings to nurture, and not enough time to challenge any of them). The director should be a well-known scholar who pays close attention to shepherding his or her flock, whether they be ewes or rams.

But is Professor A a sexist? Ms. Mentor reminds you that a piece of gossip rarely survives unless it is colorful or scurrilous. "Professor Generous is so wise and kind" will not travel far in the rumor mill. It isn't entertaining, nor is it a warning. "Professor Viper hates Professor Generous and has always humiliated and flunked Prof. G's students" is a rumor that will survive for generations, even if there was no truth to it in the first place.

Often, out of an us-versus-them solidarity, grad students place great faith in student folklore. One of the functions of grad school is, after all, to make you question your own intuitions, so you'll feel ignorant and small. But you're also learning to use research tools, and it's time to turn them on Professor A.

He does have a track record. Check his past students' dissertations in the library, and read the acknowledgments -- often perfunctory, but sometimes revealing. Notice whether he's directed students of both sexes, and how much time they've taken to finish their Ph.D.'s. Did the students' committees consist of both genders? (If he's an arrant sexist, female faculty members may not want to work with him.)

You can also check his publications. Does he collaborate with women, acknowledge women?

Watch Professor A's behavior with his colleagues and students. Does he listen to women as well as to men? If he's middle-aged, does he seem to have trouble with women's voices? (Many well-meaning men do lose the ability to hear high-pitched sounds, and the wise woman will learn to speak lower, and louder.) Observe his wife at department parties.

Meanwhile, since you've been told that Professor A is sexist, ask for proof. Ask for stories. Ask his former students, in an offhand, upbeat way: "What was the best thing about working with him?" If they hem and haw, you'll know something. Resist the temptation to interrogate: "Is he a sexist bastard?" That just puts them on the defensive.

Once you are at the dissertation stage, you must be publicly loyal. If you hear that Prof. A is having an affair with Dr. Head, share the rumor only with your best nonacademic friend. Let her be the one to put it on the Net -- not you. Prof. A, after all, needs to be able to trust you.

For academe is a sieve and an echo chamber. Like the Greek gods, tenured academics often don't have enough to do with their time -- and so they do indulge themselves in mild flirtations and convoluted power plays. Ms. Mentor hopes that Professor A is not in the thick of those battles, but occupied in his lab, in his books, at his computer, pushing

forward the frontiers of knowledge. For man or woman, that is what he owes his students - -not only someone to trust, but a role model.

You want a mensch you can trust. In short -- a mentor.

Question: According to the newspaper, the college where I'm untenured may lose its accreditation and go under, yet my department head, who's close to retirement, tells me not to worry and not to apply anywhere else. Might he be an ostrich?

Answer: Yes.

SAGE READERS: Ms. Mentor's column on [sullen spouses](#) who hate where they live, continues to generate vivid and furious mail. One correspondent complains that "Your response was 799 words too long. A simple 'dump him' would have sufficed," while another diagnoses Ms. Mentor as "sociopathic."

Ms. Mentor reminds print and online readers that some 60 other columns, nestled in her archive, cover such topics as tattling, time management, sexual harassment, liars and tenure, what to wear, and when to grab a sword. As always, she welcomes questions and rants for this column and a second tome in the works, and she thanks contributors to future columns on tenured whiners and coming out in academe. Ms. Mentor rarely answers letters personally, and guarantees anonymity to all correspondents, including the brave faculty wife who donated a "dating and romance tip for academics": "Shut up and listen."

Ms. Mentor, who never leaves her ivory tower, channels her mail via Emily Toth in the English department of Louisiana State University at Baton Rouge. Her Chronicle address is ms.mentor@chronicle.com

Her views do not necessarily represent those of The Chronicle.

Ms. Mentor's Impeccable Advice for Women in Academia, by Emily Toth, can be ordered from the [University of Pennsylvania Press](#) by calling (800) 445-9880 or from either of the on-line booksellers below.

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