

Your Graduate Adviser May Have Imposter Syndrome, Too


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By Jay Daniel Thompson

I'm sitting in the university cafe, playing with my phone, when my graduate-student advisee appears. My heart begins pounding wildly as she weaves through the tables. She's going to want my advice on something. Is this the moment when I'll be revealed as a know-nothing?

Imposter syndrome is, by now, a well-known term used to describe that feeling many scholars get that we are frauds in our particular field and about to be exposed at any moment. This "syndrome" has been known to affect researchers of all ages and ranks, from graduate students to department chairs. At its mildest, impostor syndrome can entail persistent and discomforting feelings of self-doubt. At its worst, it can cripple careers.

The prevalence of impostor syndrome in academe shouldn't be surprising. It's an industry that attracts the high-achieving and the emotionally fragile (those categories aren't necessarily mutually exclusive). Yet few writers have tackled how the syndrome plays out within a crucial component of faculty work at research universities: dissertation supervising.

At a time when the tenure-track market is supercompetitive, Ph.D. candidates are looking for guidance not just on their scholarship but also on the job market both in academe and in other labor sectors. As an adviser, you may frequently fear that you don't know how to help. How do you manage that sometimes debilitating state, and deliver the goods for yourself and your advisees?

The thesis adviser as impostor. Seeking answers beyond my own, I spoke with four academics at different institutions and levels of seniority (I teach in Australia so I interviewed academics there). All reported that they had experienced impostor syndrome in thesis advising.

What that often entailed: a persistent worry that you don't know enough to advise graduate students competently and that your perceived lack of knowledge will somehow disadvantage them.

These anxieties can be exacerbated by the presence of other academics on your student's advisory committee. John Weldon, a senior lecturer at Victoria University in Australia, recalls sitting on committees and observing that "when other [academics] talk about what they know, they seem to talk about that in ways that are very impressive."

Class, gender, and age may play a role here. Weldon speculated that his feelings on this front may have related to his "working-class migrant" background. I also spoke with a gender-studies scholar — she did not want her name used, so let's call her "Abigail" — who told me that being "young/young-looking" and "femme-appearing" had sometimes left her fearing that advisees wouldn't take her seriously.

A lack of seniority can also affect your confidence as a dissertation supervisor. An academic in the social sciences, "Mary" (a pseudonym), noted that she advises graduate students yet completed her own dissertation only a few years ago. Her sense of inadequacy as an adviser is, she said, "compounded by my immediate comparison to senior colleagues who have supervised students to completion before."

Do they think graduate students can spot impostor syndrome in an adviser?

Probably, said "Joshua" (a pseudonym), whose field is in the molecular sciences. Students, he said, are "aware that there are times when I have very little confidence in my knowledge/expertise on a subject — because I will tell them and encourage them to work with me. I don't think they are aware that sometimes I am trying to figure out how to stay one step ahead of them so I can maintain the facade of being a supervisor."

Mary tries to avoid demonstrating "any overt self-doubt" with her advisees. Graduate students have enough pressure already, she said — they "need to feel that they are guided properly throughout their candidature."

How to start conquering your advising anxieties. In truth, you may never fully conquer them, but you can combat — or at least alleviate — them. Here are a few suggestions based on advice from the academics I interviewed and from my own experience as a relative newcomer to thesis advising (since 2016).

- Acknowledge to yourself your strengths. You are an academic for a reason. Actually, you're an academic for a number of reasons, but chief among these would be that you actually do have a grasp of a particular area of research. And that grasp is probably stronger than that of your advisees. You can thus play a vital role in enhancing their knowledge and research skills, at the very least in your subfield.
- Acknowledge your limitations. Be upfront with your graduate students about the scope

and the limitations of your knowledge. Abigail takes that approach, and said it prevents situations in which her students expect her to know things that she doesn't (and then get disappointed when they realize they were wrong). Remember, too: You aren't supposed to be all-knowing. The most effective dissertation committees contain a mix of scholars who bring different skill sets and research foci to the table. This helps produce a well-rounded Ph.D., and prevents a situation where the student's success or failure lies solely in the hands of one faculty member.

- Learn from your colleagues. Especially look to the senior ones who have a reputation as good advisers after decades of experience. Most people appreciate being asked to share their wisdom and experience. All you have to do is ask: What tips do you have on advising? What techniques have you found effective in particular situations and with particular types of students? What kind of feedback do you provide, and how often? Of course, seniority doesn't always equal quality. But even those particular professors who exhibit unhelpful and even harmful supervisory practices can be used as case studies in what *not* to do.
- Accept that your imposter syndrome may never disappear. And that's not necessarily a bad thing. Academics are perfectionists. Nothing will ever be good enough for us — whether it's the lecture we've just delivered or our grasp of 20th-century continental philosophy. Our perfectionist pangs are enhanced by the hypercompetitiveness of academe itself. In an excellent article from *The Chronicle*, Sindhumathi Revuluri cautions academics not to mistake "genuine humility for feeling like an imposter." Humility is good. Advisers can demonstrate humility by acknowledging that we are not the font of all knowledge. That way, you avoid setting up your advisees (and yourself) for disappointment when they discover you're not.
- Do what you have to do to get better. After all, the mission of your institution is education. So keep educating yourself until you feel more confident in your advising skills. Besides watching and listening to advisers you admire, there are plenty of things you can read (to start: here, here, and here) about advising and mentoring. I would also recommend two excellent vlogs — "How to Be an Awesome Supervisor" and "Winter Is Coming: Ph.D. Supervision in the Neoliberal University" — created by Tara Brabazon, a professor of cultural studies and dean of graduate research at Flinders University in Australia (her tips for advisees and advisers are not just applicable in Australia).

As academics, we have a responsibility to train our dissertation advisees. We also have a responsibility to continue learning, whether this be learning new insights in our research fields or how to become a better thesis adviser.

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