



On Making and Becoming a Professor

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The title of "graduate student" is perhaps the greatest inequity in academia. While there are intellectual differences between assistant professors and full professors, there is no greater intellectual disparity than between a first semester master's student and a doctoral candidate on the day of her dissertation defense. Yet, we call them both graduate students.

Going from an incoming master's student to a defending doctoral candidate takes a great deal of work, several years, and perhaps most importantly a reshaping of one's attitude or an overhaul in the way in which one thinks of and presents himself. This is particularly true in the realm of teaching if one is aiming to pursue a career in higher education.

Beginning graduate students have usually just completed 17 years of being taught. That is, they have finished four years of college preceded by 13 years in grades K-12. For the most part the first 13 years were spent in classrooms, mainly listening to authority figures who by state law were required to teach. The burden of education at this level is entirely on the teachers. Students are expected to learn what their teachers teach. They are not expected to do much creative thinking or pressing received wisdom. Indeed, doing so is generally punished rather than rewarded. This is doubtless why college professors' greatest complaint about undergraduate students is that they often lack initiative, and why these students often refer to their professors incorrectly as "teachers." Our title is professor, not teacher! The difference between

the two often eludes students for good reason--13 years of indoctrination.

By the grace of God, with loans from the bank, under pressure from their parents, and with the knowledge imbued by their professors (in that order!) many college students finally graduate. A few go on to pursue graduate degrees and they soon discover an entirely new and often unexpected world.

If they thought high school was different from middle school, they quickly discover that graduate school is much different from that of their undergraduate experience. It soon becomes painfully apparent that professors do not teach students, per se, but students are expected to learn from professors. The burden of education is now theirs. Graduate school, therefore, can be seen as a process in which one transforms herself from being a passive recipient of knowledge bestowed by a learned professor, to a professor from whom students learn (Figure 1).

A large part of graduate education is research, as no one will receive a Ph.D. without having made "a significant contribution to knowledge." Doing so, however, requires the student becoming an authority on the chosen topic. This involves formal course work, participation in informal seminars, colloquia, and a great deal of independent reading. However detailed, focused, and narrow the dissertation topic might be, it still needs to be framed in the context of a larger and broader body of literature. Professors can, do, and should provide guidance and mentoring in locating

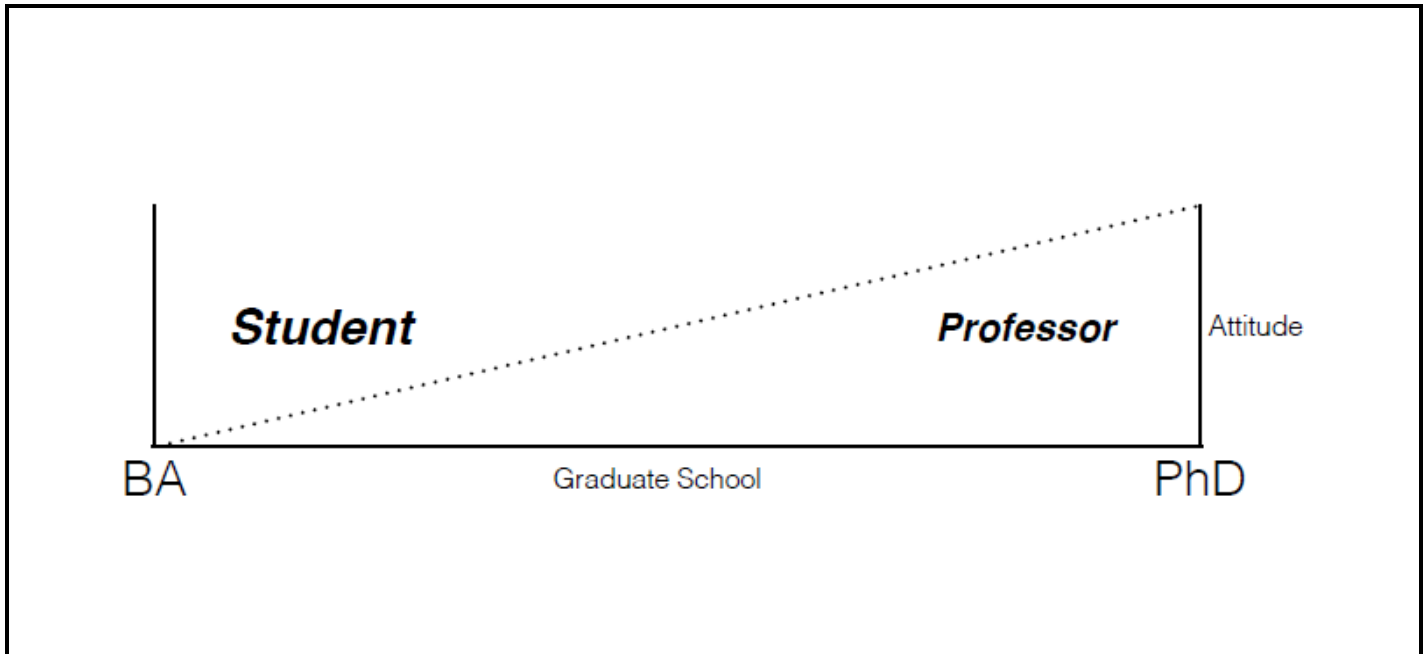


Figure 1. The transformation in attitude from student as consumer of knowledge to professor as producer.

that literature, but it is the graduate student's responsibility to digest it and build upon it.

The production and dissemination of knowledge is a profession. As such, a major yet unspoken aspect of graduate education is learning how to be professional. There are probably countless books on how this can be done, but cutting to the proverbial chase, I have a few simple suggestions based on decades of experience.

For professors:

1. Treat graduate students as peers. You have more experience and knowledge of a particular subject than they do, but you are not smarter or more intelligent. If you think you are, compare your GRE scores with theirs. Chances are, you might not be admitted to your own program today!
2. Do not attempt to place yourself in a position of superiority, or your students in a position of supplication. If you do, you are only fooling yourself. Students (good ones at least) see through your pretentious hierarchy. Big dogs command respect. Small dogs demand it. All academics have egos, but do everyone especially yourself a favor and keep your Napoleon Complex under wraps, it is not flattering and it does no good.
3. Expect graduate students to act, behave, dress, and perform in the same manner as you. No more. No less.

They are professionals; fledgling professionals to be sure but professionals none-the-less.

4. Give your students the best you have and all of it. They are the future that you do not have. Remember the words of John McCray, "To you from failing hands we throw, the torch be yours to hold it high."

For graduate students:

1. Stop acting like students, NOW. You want to be a professor? Start acting, behaving, dressing, and performing like one. No one is going to "teach" you anything. It is up to you to learn on your own. You can certainly learn a great deal from professors (and other students) but the onus is on you.
2. Remember your nights of partying and weekends of kicking back? They are over. You think you need a "life?" Well, you don't have one anymore. Get over it and get to work.
3. Do not expect anything. You are entitled to nothing. Live with it.
4. Publish a lot or you will most certainly perish, and sooner rather than later. Look at the cv of the most recent assistant professor hired by your department. That person probably had four or five articles published before completing their doctorate. If you can, look at the cvs of the 100+ applicants that did not

get hired. They, too, have publications. See number 2, above.

5. Do not make excuses for why you cannot do something. There are none...that are acceptable.

6. Never say you cannot afford something professional (e.g., going to a conference). You cannot afford not to do it. In the long-term scheme of things, what might seem like huge expenditures now, will be miniscule years into the future. Think of expenses as investments. They will yield handsome returns eventually.

Finally, whether you are a professor or a graduate student, remember we are all in this together. Help and be helped. And, if you are not having fun, you are doing the wrong thing.