

FEATURE

Graduate education: How to stay on track when you hit a roadblock

Feeling harassed or treated unfairly in graduate school? Here are eight ways students can address the problem

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October 2016, Vol 47, No. 9
Print version: page 60



Most students recognize that, along with the enlightenment and fulfillment of graduate school, there will be some bumps in the road, including demanding workloads and long hours. But what if a student encounters a more formidable obstacle in his or her program, such as sexual harassment, perceived discrimination or other serious conflicts with faculty?

"I get calls every other month from students who are ready to leave their program due to a conflict," says Nabil El-Ghoroury, PhD, associate executive director of the American Psychological Association of Graduate Students (APAGS).

Often, he says, those calls come in too late to do anything about them, possibly because many students fear reprisal if they complain. But intervening early and carefully is essential to keeping one's education on track. Here are eight ways students can prevent and address tricky program problems — and maintain their well-being in the process:

1. Start a dialogue From the start, students should strive to communicate well and often with their advisors, says McGill University doctoral student Devin J. Mills, who leads seminars on how to avoid conflicts. "We stress that this is an interpersonal relationship that you're going to want to work on because you're eventually going to become colleagues," he says.

At the beginning of a course, students should find out how a professor grades, too, suggests past APAGS Chair Christine Jehu, PhD. "If the requirements aren't clear, be proactive in asking, 'What are your expectations for this paper? What do you look for?'"

And as soon as a student encounters a problem, he or she should speak up, says Mills. "The vast majority of professors are great at what they do," he says. "They may not be aware they are not connecting. If someone doesn't speak up, it's hard to know if they're addressing a student's needs as well as they could be."

2. Know their rights and responsibilities Students may not think they have any power, Jehu says, but schools are obligated to address their concerns. Most institutions have a central office that is responsible for graduate education and training that will give students a handbook outlining their rights and responsibilities and how to resolve any issues before they become overwhelming, says Garth A. Fowler, PhD, APA's associate executive director for Graduate and Postgraduate Education Training. Students are entitled to fair and respectful treatment from programs, including solid mentorship and timely feedback, as spelled out in a statement on student rights ([apags/issues/student-rights-position.aspx](#)) that APA is considering making policy.

3. Get it in writing A common cause of disagreements between advisors and students is a mismatch of expectations for lab work and practicums, Mills says. At McGill, both parties are encouraged to sign a letter of understanding that outlines expectations on the scope of work.

4. Find out who to talk to All schools have procedures for student grievances, and students need to find out what they are and which office is responsible for overseeing the process. Before filing a grievance, students should try to address the issue first. Mills suggests a stepped approach: Take up issues first with an advisor. If the student doesn't get results, he or she should see the program coordinator, then department chair, then associate dean and so on. Students should have a suggestion in mind about how they want the issue addressed, advises Jehu: "Don't go to somebody's office just to complain. Go in there with an ask."

Students in APA-accredited clinical, school or counseling programs have some extra protection because accredited programs are required to have due-process and grievance procedures, says Jacqueline Wall, PhD, director of APA's Office of Program Consultation and Accreditation. If a supervisor has questioned a student's competency, for example, he or she should also tell the student how to improve his or her performance and give him or her regular feedback.

5. Keep records of all actions related to your claim Take notes when incidents occur, hold on to pertinent papers and sum up any meetings in emails sent to all participants. For example, instead of complaining that they are not learning anything in a class, students should "have the syllabus and show your notes and how you were graded," says Jehu, who faced such a situation in her graduate program. She and her fellow students went to their department head, and the professor was taken off some courses.

6. Get emotional support Other students, mentors and friends can be valuable allies and can help validate students' experiences. When Allison Lopez* feared she was a victim of racial discrimination at her school, for example, she asked her colleagues such questions as, "Am I being irrational or overreacting? Or am I really just not cut out for this work?"

Students may also seek counseling to help them cope with disturbing encounters. Florence Rich,* for example, sought counseling to help her deal with slights from her advisor. "I was hoping to emotionally detangle myself because I had swallowed a lot of the feedback I had gotten, and my self-concept was super weak," she says.

7. Organize When Natalie Harmon* sensed a pattern of favoritism from a professor, she asked fellow students if they felt the same way. Many did, and as a group complained to the department chair, who promised to be on the alert for discrimination. The students felt better after speaking up, Harmon says.

8. File a complaint As a last resort, if a student believes the grievance is a systemic issue — such as poor program oversight or unclear grading practices — he or she should file an official complaint. "You will need to be aware of what it means to file an official complaint, and be sure that you are submitting your grievance to the right governing group," advises Fowler.

Overall, here are the steps to take:

If the issue has to do with the quality of your education and training, the student should go to the office that oversees graduate education and training.

If the concern is about research protocols or grant funding, students should see their institution's provost or research office.

If a student is facing a case involving sexual harassment or discrimination, a school's Title IX office would handle complaints. Many institutions also have an official student government group that can be a source of information on how to handle such issues.

Once the on-campus resources have been exhausted, the next step is to contact the state department of education and follow its grievance procedures. Students should also note that APA's Commission on Accreditation has a process for receiving and evaluating complaints—though it is designed to address a program's purported lack of consistency with accreditation guidelines, not to reconcile situations between individuals and programs.

Legal help may also be in order. Amina Bis,* for example, hired a lawyer to send a detailed letter to her large professional psychology program claiming its irregular and discriminatory grading and testing policies had unfairly threatened her graduation; the school addressed the issues.

*Name changed upon request.

For more information, search for "What should you do if you have a complaint about your program?" on APA's website.