

# How Many Degrees of Separation? Preparation, Proximity and Professionalism

## Commentary on 'Help from Faculty: Findings from the Acadia Institute Graduate Education Study' (Anderson, Oji and Falkner)

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**Keywords:**

What makes a professional? It takes more than just time and more than just content knowledge. But how much more—and more to the point—by what mechanism do students acquire the extras that turn them into “a professional”, whatever that might be? The paper reporting some of the results of the Acadia Study by Anderson and colleagues<sup>1</sup> is aimed at illuminating whether, and how well, information of this sort is transmitted from advisors or mentors to students. Predictably enough, it found some unevenness in transmission.

Whether or not you subscribe to the paper's conclusions, we should heed the message that the acquisition of subject-matter expertise is necessary, but not sufficient for accomplishing the transition from student into professional.

In considering the multiplicity of elements that comprise professional behavior, it is worth considering the effects of the overall size of the academic enterprise on transmission of standards of appropriate professional behavior. By any measure, the American academic enterprise is huge. We do not often talk about it, and even less often do we reason through the implications of the unprecedented increase in the magnitude of the post-graduate education system in a relatively compressed period of time.

Stanley Milgram's “small world problem”,<sup>2</sup> as popularized in John Guare's play ‘Six Degrees of Separation’,<sup>3</sup> introduced the concept that any two people in the world can link to each other through six acquaintances. We frequently proceed as if all members of a given academic community are connected through one, or maybe two, degrees of separation. I have written before that the persistence of this belief system likely accounts for much of the resistance in the scientific community to formalized regulations for dealing with scholarly misconduct.<sup>4</sup>

In small, and personally-connected systems, informal methods of inculcating professional behavior can be highly effective, not least because those who deviate from

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accepted norms and practices tend to be known, and because effective responses to misconduct (including shunning) are available. But in today's larger world, with more scholars than ever, there is more necessity to provide training in "survival skills" for graduate students than there was when the professional communities these students were joining were smaller and more personally interconnected.

In larger social systems, more formal mechanisms are required to assure that most people, most of the time, are exposed to the full range of issues that comprise professionalism. Thus we have seen the creation of "group mentoring" programs, including the well-regarded (and oft-emulated) curriculum developed at the University of Pittsburgh by Michael Zigmond and Beth Fischer covering a range of items from writing grants and papers to handling ethical dilemmas and job hunting. (See article in this issue.<sup>5</sup>)

My own experience in presentations on research ethics nationally tells me that two perennially popular topics are how to conduct disputes professionally<sup>6</sup> and how to handle complaints and difficult people.<sup>7</sup> Interest in these topics is not limited to students. Critically important professional skills in this arena include developing appropriate boundaries between professional and personal spheres, of honing self-knowledge so that one's responses to problems are based upon principle instead of emotion, and of learning the multiple junctures at which the intuitive response is often the wrong response to problems. These skills are required to make factually-rooted choices and decisions that will withstand scrutiny and that serve the aims of our institutions and professions.

Degree programs with a large throughput of graduate students should consider a formalized approach to assure that all students achieve competence not only in their subject, but also in acquiring professional skills. For students who have a connection with an advisor or mentor who can guide their development broadly, the program may provide another perspective on some topics that may be useful—or it may be superfluous. For the students who do not have such a connection, however, it may be essential.

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