Practicing mentorship: Graduate-student supervision of undergraduate research assistants

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Many research universities rely on graduate students to supervise undergraduate research assistants (RAs) who collect data and handle research logistics. This experience can be mutually beneficial, as RAs receive hands-on learning, and graduate students practice mentorship in preparation for assuming a faculty role. However, assistantships must be intentionally designed to meet educational (not just practical) goals. What training and support do graduate students receive to take on this mentorship role? In two surveys, RAs reported on their satisfaction, educational benefit, and desired changes; while graduate students reported on their goals, challenges, and the support they receive.

The benefits of undergraduate involvement in research have long been touted, and are now beginning to be documented through rigorous research (see Kardash, 2000, and Seymour, Hunter, Laursen & Deantonio, 2004, for a review). However, less is known about the specific elements of RA programs which make them educationally valuable. The inclusion of meaningful tasks and the importance of a good mentoring relationship has been suggested (Swager, 1997).

When asked what changes would make their experience more educational, 50% of RAs requested more data analysis, and 45% more reading literature. As the graph shows, such activities are now rare, though 63% of RAs who did data analysis found it “extremely educational”, and 42% of those who read articles found that “extremely” or “very” educational.

Most RAs were mentored by graduate students, and were generally satisfied with the mentorship they received. 85% of RAs who met with graduate students (either individually or in groups) found this “very” or “extremely” educational. 50% of RAs, however, wanted more meetings with graduate students, and 60% of RAs requested more discussion on the topic of graduate school. (100% of RAs surveyed intended a graduate career, but 45% were still unsure of that decision.)

Graduate students report seeking multiple sources of support to solve these problems: at least once a year, 85% seek other graduate students, and 54% their advisor (69% tackle some of these problems alone). 86% said it was “very important” to them to be a good mentor, but none of the graduate students surveyed had received formal training (course or workshop) in preparation for the role. 29% were given a copy of the lab manual, 36% had a “how-to” talk with their advisor, and 64% said they received no training at all.

The undergraduate research assistants surveyed were generally satisfied, but sought more opportunities for advanced activities, such as data analysis and reading/discussing journal articles. Graduate students reported little training for the challenging role of mentor, and mostly resolved problems that arose amongst themselves. Greater formal support from faculty might help the RA experience reach its full educational potential for both undergraduate and graduate students.

This poster was presented at the 30th Annual National Institute on the Teaching of Psychology: Jan. 3-6, 2008 (St. Petersburg, FL). It is available online, with contact information, at http://ok-lima.blogspot.com.