



Cornell University

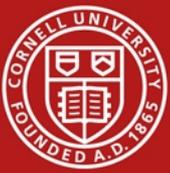
Some Reflections on Graduate Teaching and Mentoring: Their Success Is Your Joy!



Christopher B. Barrett, Cornell University

August 7, 2018

Agricultural and Applied Economics Association annual meetings



Cornell University

Working with grad students is the best part of a faculty job!

Meet fascinating, smart young people keen to improve the world

Time is our scarcest resource. Students multiply our time, take our ideas to the world, and improve them.

Our greatest impacts typically come not from our research findings but from our contributions to the development of others ... our students, our children.

So invest accordingly ... and enjoy!



1. Know your customer/student!

Why do students pursue a graduate degree?

- Fame? Power? Money? **Probably not!**

Probably more:

1. intellectual stimulation (i.e., tackle interesting problems)
2. opportunity to have an *impact* (i.e., tackle important issues)
3. believe they might enjoy teaching

So structure interactions/opportunities accordingly!

**Help them make the transition from student to scholar
... a different mode of learning.**



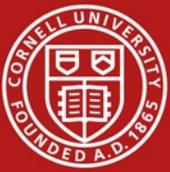
2. If realistic, help them achieve their goals

a. Learn the unspoken art and science of research: Involve them in research projects – brainstorm with them; talk theory, data, methods; have them write and present regularly. My weekly research group meetings build community and foster ideas.

b. Learn the challenge of translation to non-academics: Real world impact requires making research widely accessible. Write and rewrite at least every other day.

c. Engage them in teaching and undergrad supervision: Don't use undergrads as guinea pigs, but push grad students to mentor. Real test of expertise is: can they teach the material???

Respect your grad students' intellect and skills – students teach me as much as I teach them.



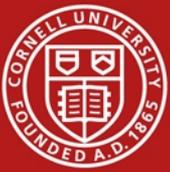
2a. The unspoken art/science of research:

- i. Don't give them research topics. Listen patiently while they find questions they desperately want to answer: keeps them going and removes temptations to cut corners
- ii. Encourage voracious, but critical, reading. Send them articles/wps.
- iii. Push them to identify and relax 1st-binding constraints:
 - *Knowledge*: Tech up! Only take electives/workshops about material you can't teach yourself easily.
 - *Time*: Manage it carefully. Make time for yourself and loved ones. Gossip and worry are time thieves (and typically misleading).
 - *Access*: Seize opportunities to meet faculty, seminar speakers, research stakeholders, etc. Make manageable requests, but don't be shy!
- iv. Show enthusiasm for students' work. Small shows of support can loom large.
- v. Remind them they make their own breaks! Plan, prepare but seize opportunities!



2b. Learn to translate from/for non-academics:

- i. Great research almost always addresses a question that interests non-academics. So take time to talk with *and listen to* non-academic experts.
- ii. They can help you identify good questions and help with model specification, with inference wrt –and ultimately action based on - your findings.
- iii. Speak and write clearly. Minimize jargon and be precise. Set aside time to write every day. And rewrite ruthlessly. The Art Goldberger lesson.
- iv. Social media can be an asset ... or a time sink. Use carefully!



2c. Engage them in teaching/student supervision:

- i. Model that outstanding teaching and research are complements, not substitutes.
- ii. Excellent classroom teaching requires lotsa prep time. Make that time. And make sure your TAs do too.
- iii. Be available. Office hours are crucial. And respond promptly to emails.
- iv. Always remember that some students face hidden challenges. Grad school can be emotionally grueling. Share your own struggles and exhibit empathy.

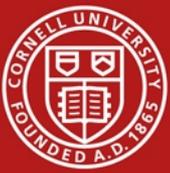


3. If their goals aren't realistic, be honest.

No one benefits from false expectations.

Not a good teacher (or just doesn't enjoy it)? Point them towards non-academic options and help connect them.

Target academic jobs realistically. Recognize it's a long game. The rookie academic job market is a stochastic integer programming problem. Don't expect an immediate optimum!



Most importantly: they are people first.

People face challenges and choices. Help them weather the inevitable challenges without babying them. Help them think through the right choice for them (not for you).

Students may be scared to tell you about their challenges, afraid of disappointing you or being dismissed by you.

Empathy and encouragement go a very long way.

Create a community. And model the 'no assholes' rule. A group brings out our best (and dampens our inner jerks).



Cornell University

Good luck and Godspeed!

