

# Promoting Civility in Graduate Student Education

Holly L. Mason

## *INTRODUCTION*

Civil behavior in a graduate program is a key underpinning that predicts overall success for the participants in the program. Both faculty members and students can be on the giving and receiving end of uncivil behavior. Because faculty members typically have more experience and a more fully developed set of behavioral standards, they tend more often to be the recipients of uncivil behavior. However, when uncivil behavior is demonstrated by a faculty member toward a graduate student, there is more potential for harm to the recipient. Bruce Berger, in his introductory article, refers to incivility as “speech or action that is disrespectful or rude” (1). Although this definition is adequate for the purposes of this article, it should be noted that incivilities that occur in graduate programs are often such that the disrespect or rudeness is subtle and is not always intended. This paper explores why graduate study presents a relatively high risk for incivilities, the kinds of incivilities that occur in graduate study, the effects incivilities have on the parties involved, and strategies for responding to and preventing incivilities in graduate programs.

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**UNDERSTANDING THE POTENTIAL FOR INCIVILITIES:  
THE NATURE OF GRADUATE STUDY**

The graduate student is relatively powerless in the academic system. Graduate students must rely on the faculty to guide them through their educational experience. If a relationship with a faculty member turns bad, it could have lasting effects on the student's career. The faculty member might be the only person in a department who is able to facilitate completion of the student's degree program because of specialty area expertise. Further, the graduate student is dependent on the advisor to support applications for employment and, if the student ultimately obtains a position at an academic institution, he or she will most likely continue to encounter the former advisor throughout his or her career (2). This is particularly true in academic pharmacy where most of the faculty in a given discipline know each other well. A graduate student who runs afoul of some faculty member risks having to live with long-term consequences. Even with these dangers, faculty-graduate student relationships sometimes do go bad, often accompanied by very visible uncivil behaviors on the part of one or both parties.

Graduate study is stressful, in part, because of the power differential inherent in the academic system. Students entering a graduate program often have only a vague idea of what graduate school involves. They want to "do research" but do not know exactly what that means. Students rely on the faculty to guide them in this regard. Even students who have had extensive undergraduate research experience usually have not yet developed the ability to conceptualize and conduct research projects at the level required in graduate study. However, before students get to the stage in their program where they are able to become independent researchers, they need to confront the multiple responsibilities that graduate school presents. They are required to take challenging course loads, work as a graduate teaching assistant or a research assistant, and manage their personal and family life. Oftentimes these responsibilities coincide without the students having a good sense of how to get to where they want to go. This contributes to a sense of isolation that some graduate students feel during their program.

Graduate students are expected to develop independence, but they are dependent on an advisor to get them to that level. They are seen as more mature than undergraduate students, but the nature of graduate study is quite different from the undergraduate experience. Thus, the maturity needed to be successful at the graduate level cannot be assumed. Success in graduate study does not come only from taking a pre-

scribed set of courses; it requires students to accept the open-ended time frame ubiquitous to the research process. Many students, when confronted with a task such as the dissertation, for which no end seems to be in sight, respond to their stress by demonstrating uncivil behaviors toward their faculty, their fellow students, and/or the undergraduate students they instruct.

Besides being relatively powerless and often under stress as they progress through their program, students must endure competition among themselves. This competition ranges from performance in courses to success in acceptances of abstracts and publications to recognition by faculty for their accomplishments. Although such competition can be healthy to some degree, it can become destructive if taken to extremes and may result in uncivil behavior among graduate students. Faculty members and specific features of a given graduate program can help keep stress and inappropriate competition at manageable levels. However, faculty members need to be careful that students do not become over reliant on them to solve the various routine problems and stresses faced by students during the course of graduate study.

### ***WHAT TYPES OF INCIVILITIES OCCUR?***

Numerous examples of incivilities can be cited. They are somewhat difficult to cleanly classify, as there are overlaps among them. However, listed below are examples of incivilities demonstrated by graduate students and faculty and incivilities that may be demonstrated by either. I have also commented on, as part of the section on graduate student incivility, incivilities in the classroom or teaching laboratory for which a graduate student has responsibility. Although examples of incivilities are provided, explicit solutions are not. In the subsequent section on “Preventing and Responding to Incivilities,” suggestions are provided to address these problems.

#### ***Graduate Student Incivilities***

*Not Respecting Faculty Time.* The student who does not show up for a scheduled appointment, the student who is chronically late for appointments, the student who abuses the faculty member’s time by constantly extending the appointment with an effect on the faculty member’s other responsibilities—these are all simple examples of not being respectful of the faculty member’s time. Similarly, students who expect

an unreasonably quick turnaround by the faculty member who is asked to review a proposal, a paper, or a data analysis are guilty of uncivil behavior. For a faculty member, the most frustrating situation occurs when the student demands that such a review be done that day because a proposal, project, or abstract is due the next day!

*Not Meeting Responsibilities.* There are a variety of manifestations of the graduate student not meeting his or her responsibilities. These include not performing tasks in a timely manner, doing incomplete or sloppy work, not making progress toward a degree objective, and neglecting one set of responsibilities for another (e.g., focusing on research and not performing acceptably as a teaching assistant). Because of the open-ended nature of graduate study, these kinds of behaviors can string out a program indefinitely if action is not taken to address the situation. This is particularly problematic if a graduate student is receiving financial support from a department, since willingness to fund a continuing student will affect the ability of the department to admit, support, and supervise new students.

*Not Maintaining Quality Standards.* Students sometimes do not realize that the faculty advisor is responsible for monitoring the accuracy, validity, and integrity of the student's research and for ensuring that the contributions of all participants in the research are properly acknowledged in disseminating the work. Students who submit abstracts or papers without review and oversight of a faculty member risk harming the reputation of their advisor and their department if problems are identified with the work. This kind of incivility is most often the result of the impatience of a student who wants to get the product of his or her efforts published quickly, without the recognition of the need for the quality control function played by the faculty advisor.

*Plagiarism and Cheating.* Outright cheating is relatively rare in graduate programs, but just as with undergraduate programs, graduate students who have previously taken a course do share papers, projects, and materials with students currently taking the class. This sometimes does provide opportunities for the student to make improper use of the shared materials. This same concern holds true for students working to develop thesis or dissertation proposals. There are also instances of occasional misconduct in terms of data fabrication or intentional misinterpretation of those data. In addition, just as with undergraduate study, there has been an increase in concerns about information obtained from the Internet. The vast amount of material available on the Internet is often inadequately referenced to begin with, and ease of retrieval make its use without adequate attribution tempting. And this is not just a problem re-

lated to the Internet. Sometimes graduate students are unwilling to make the effort to obtain original reference sources to properly reference and verify the accuracy of statements obtained through secondary sources.

*Violence.* Extreme examples of aggression by graduate students leading to the murder of university professors have been reported in the literature. Less extreme—but nonetheless troubling—student incivility includes physical assaults and threats made against the faculty (3). This kind of incivility is often the culmination of other, less severe incivilities. Thankfully, violence is seldom a problem in graduate programs, but it is something of which we need to be aware.

*Graduate Students in the Classroom or Laboratory.* Issues related to classroom incivility are not greatly different when the instructor is a graduate student or a professor, and this topic has been addressed by other authors in this issue. When a graduate student functions in the role of a teaching assistant, however, it is important to remember that he or she is not that far removed from the undergraduate experience. A typical teaching assistant has had little teaching experience and probably little instruction on how to teach. In general, they are similar to the students they are teaching. Because of their own role as a student they may tend to be more focused on their performance than on the needs of the students they are teaching.

Graduate students may be assigned to teach a course that is not in their direct area of expertise. Even faculty members have difficulty keeping up with content in their field that is not of day-to-day relevance to their work. Superficial knowledge about content, often combined with minimal teaching experience, can be an invitation to incivility by less mature undergraduate students. On the other hand, because of their limited classroom experience, graduate students are somewhat more prone to mistakes that even experienced faculty members sometimes make, such as handling sensitive subjects, inappropriate personal disclosure, and the handling of confidential information. Graduate students also need to be sensitive to misuse of power. Teaching assistants can respond to “being in charge” by abusing the power they have in making assignments, assigning grades, setting classroom policies, etc. They also must be aware of avoiding inappropriate romantic relationships with the students they teach. The potential for problems is sometimes magnified for international graduate students. International students often do not come from the same academic tradition, share the same educational values, or engage in the same communication style as students who are completing an undergraduate degree in this country.

### ***Faculty Incivilities***

*Demonstrating Arrogance, Condescending Behaviors or Attitudes.* Faculty sometimes fall into the trap of believing their superior experience and knowledge justifies conveying to students that they are only being tolerated and not respected as individuals with their own background knowledge and skills. This “overlord” attitude by faculty is easy to adopt given the relative powerlessness of graduate students, as discussed above. Abrupt or dismissive communication often goes hand-in-hand with arrogant or condescending behavior. Rather than listening to a student explain a problem or a plan, the faculty member may want to cut off the discussion and dictate to the student how the situation will be addressed. I have heard a faculty member say, “I don’t want to hear any more about it. This is the way you will do it, if it is going to be done at all!”

*Not Respecting a Student’s Time.* We have all encountered the case of a faculty member who, in an effort to encourage progress on a project, sets an unreasonable deadline for a student to complete the analysis of a data set. Although this strategy may be justifiable in the mind of the faculty member, it may be perceived by the graduate student to be an unfair, stress-producing task that he or she is being pressured to complete or suffer negative consequences. Other examples illustrating the faculty member not respecting the student’s time include: frequently canceled appointments, constantly running late for appointments, not showing up at all for appointments, or not granting student appointments within a reasonable time frame. Neglecting to grade work or failing to comment on work in progress when promised shows disrespect for a student’s time as well. Graduate students have multiple responsibilities. They need to be able to manage their time to complete a variety of tasks in a given week, ranging from course work, assigned projects, teaching assistant responsibilities, family responsibilities, and personal renewal time. Faculty members whose behaviors have a negative impact on this time management in a significant way are guilty of incivility.

*Violating Academic Publication Traditions.* Authorship disputes are potentially a major source of incivility in a graduate program. In many areas of research, it is not always clear who did what work or the most significant work on a study. When authorship credits are not clearly discussed in advance of publication, there is the real possibility of error. We have all heard of the professor who does not give authorship credit to the student who made a substantive contribution to a project, or worse, the faculty member who takes credit for the student’s work and

then unfairly omits the student's name from a research paper. Similarly, there are instances where an advisor may appropriate the ideas of a student to enhance the advisor's own reputation, thereby depriving the student of credit for the ideas. Scholarly activity and its dissemination are serious business in graduate programs. Both the faculty member and the student have much at stake when these kinds of disputes arise. If disputes are not handled appropriately, long-term harm can be done to both parties.

*Abuse of Power.* Consider the case of the graduate student who is assigned to teach a weekly laboratory section offered in conjunction with a larger lecture course. The student has the responsibility of developing a laboratory manual, setting up experiments, demonstrating the appropriate way to conduct the laboratory, and preparing and grading weekly quizzes. The student's advisor happens to be the instructor in charge of the course, and she asks the student to create slides for her lectures, write examination questions, and keep the grade book for the lecture portion of the course. The student is assigned to the course for ten hours a week, which is what is required to meet his assigned obligations. He finds that the additional tasks take up to 20 additional hours a week. This is certainly abuse of power on the part of the faculty member. Sometimes abuse of power is much less subtle. For example, expecting a graduate student to house-sit or baby-sit without pay is obviously an abuse of power. It becomes somewhat less clear when the faculty member asks the student to do outside tasks for pay. Does the student really have the opportunity to refuse the assignment?

*Controlling Behavior.* Controlling behavior is a more specific type of abuse of power. Sometimes a faculty member behaves in a way that denies a student the opportunity to make his or her own decisions. The faculty member who withholds information from a student about a grant opportunity or a summer internship because he believes the student would be better served focusing on his or her current research could be accused of incivility. Certainly, information is power, but that power is abused when it is used to control the student's behavior. The faculty member who refuses to forward letters of recommendation for certain job opportunities because the faculty member believes the positions are not a good "fit" for the student also demonstrates uncivil, controlling behavior.

*Biased or Discriminating Behavior.* Sometimes it appears that certain students, regardless of merit, receive more than their share of honors and opportunities in a graduate program. The problem is exacerbated when a given faculty member is advising multiple students but his or

her “pet” student receives a disproportionate share of the rewards in terms of desirable teaching assignments, office or laboratory space, equipment, or opportunities to represent the department at various events or competitions. The appearance or reality is that some students are more valued than others in a program.

### ***Joint Incivilities***

*Criticizing Faculty Members or Graduate Students.* Making negative comments to fellow students or other faculty about the knowledge, skills, or behavior of a faculty member or student in a department or school may be considered uncivil behavior, particularly when the comments fail to provide the proper context for the comment. Sometimes when older students with experience in the field of study return to school, they are not shy about challenging their professor’s knowledge about the applications of material. Although there is nothing wrong with doing so in a respectful manner, the utmost care on the part of the student is necessary to avoid the appearance of criticizing the knowledge of the faculty member. There is nothing as devastating to the morale of a department as public comments regarding abilities or behaviors of fellow department members.

*Sharing Confidential Information.* Both students and faculty members sometimes share personal or confidential information during their discussions. Students, in particular, often look to the faculty advisor as a source of advice regarding very personal matters that affect their work as graduate students. Students and faculty often assume that whatever is disclosed in meetings will be held in confidence (2). This is not necessarily true, and sometimes it is in the best interests of one or the other party to disclose certain types of information, depending upon the circumstances. Examples of these disclosures include issues that deal with student health and safety concerns, as well as gross violations of faculty or student behavioral standards. If ground rules have not been established between the faculty member and the student regarding information disclosure, it opens up the possibility of significant harm to one or both parties.

*Displays of Anger.* It is certainly not productive when a professor yells at a student or when a student displays the same behavior. This is true whether the interaction occurs when others are present or during private conversations. Even closed-door discussions that feature raised voices have a way of becoming known to others in the department. It does not help the faculty member-graduate student relationship when

either displays anger in response to the perception that the other is “wrong.” These displays are rightly viewed as degrading treatment, and incivility often begets further incivility.

*Sexual Harassment or Misbehavior.* Most universities have clear guidelines and policies related to sexual harassment or misbehavior, and the consequences to all parties involved can be significant. Beyond outright sexual misbehavior there are special risks in any sexual or romantic relationship between individuals in inherently unequal positions of power and authority. Such a relationship may undermine the integrity of the supervision and evaluation provided and may be less consensual than the individual whose position confers power believes it to be. Often such involvement may not even be recognized by the participants as inappropriate. However, such relationships certainly have the potential to harm others involved in the graduate program. The tensions involved in inappropriate relationships can affect the work of all others in a department who interact with the involved parties.

### ***Incivilities Among Graduate Students***

Many of the incivilities outlined previously similarly occur among graduate students. As noted, there is competitiveness among students in most graduate programs. In an attempt to “get ahead” of their fellow students or gain favor in the eyes of the graduate program faculty, students may be tempted to break the rules of civil behavior. The same strategies outlined in the subsequent section on preventing and responding to incivilities are relevant for these situations.

## ***THE EFFECTS OF INCIVILITY ON THE STUDENT AND FACULTY MEMBER***

The effects of incivility on the student are numerous and interrelated. Professors are in a position to encourage or discourage their students by the style and content of their comments and interactions with the students. A faculty member can be hurtful in a number of ways, as discussed above. It is very difficult for a student to maintain a sense of self-worth during the process of becoming a genuine scholar (4). As a result, the student may experience a substantial loss in self-confidence, not only because of the power differential between the faculty member and the student, but because of the nature of the interactions. The loss of self-confidence and self-esteem often translates into a diminished pro-

ductivity on the part of the student, and the student can lose sight of the goals that he or she has as a graduate student.

The faculty member experiencing incivilities may become frustrated, withdraw from normal mentoring responsibilities, and begin responding in a negative way to interactions with other graduate students and faculty colleagues. In the extreme, a faculty member can experience anxiety and fear for his or her safety.

### ***PREVENTING AND RESPONDING TO INCIVILITIES***

#### ***Making Expectations Known***

It is important to send the message that each person within the graduate program community contributes to the success of the academic mission of the school, department, and university. Making expectations known is central to this success. A key to doing so is strong graduate program leadership. The individual or individuals responsible for the graduate program have a responsibility to make sure all students and faculty members involved in the program know what is expected of them and what behaviors are not to be tolerated. Graduate programs should have written policies and procedures that address areas where conflicts could arise. New students should be introduced to the policies, practices, and procedures of the department and university by means of an orientation session. A faculty advisor can be very effective in identifying areas of potential difficulty within a program without casting program policies or anticipated behaviors of colleagues in a negative light.

Students need to be regularly evaluated on their progress and performance. It is especially important for advisors to provide graduate students with timely and candid advice if their performance is deficient or if that performance might prevent them from attaining their degree objective. If the student is demonstrating uncivil behaviors, he or she needs to be told that those behaviors are unacceptable so the student has the opportunity to change. Similarly, the key to avoiding uncivil behavior in relation to teaching duties is teaching assistant training, supervision, and feedback.

#### ***Good Communication***

It is important for the student's major professor to make a point of checking with the student frequently to see how things are going and to

identify problems before they become major conflicts. It is important for the faculty member to always be polite and listen to students, even when he or she must turn down a request. The goal should be to work toward speaking with, rather than speaking at, the student. Graduate students may have difficulty turning down assignments or activities suggested by their advisor. It is important for the advisor to encourage the student to speak out if he or she begins to feel overloaded and, further, the advisor must make it clear that something can be done to address the problem. Both faculty and graduate students must be assertive enough to negotiate such things as deadlines and authorship of papers. Students should be encouraged to communicate concerns or questions to their advisor as soon as they arise. If difficulties are not addressed, they could get worse. Direct person-to-person communication should be used to solve problems. E-mails and memos should not be the first line of communication when problematic issues arise. The goal of direct communication is to avoid escalation of problems. Usually, difficulties can be worked out if both parties are willing to communicate. Sometimes a simple apology goes a long way toward resolving a conflict. When the faculty member—and/or the student—acknowledges how he or she has contributed to a problem and takes responsibility for it, there is a foundation for moving forward. Sometimes, despite efforts to work through problems, an inherent incompatibility between the student and the advisor becomes clear. In this case, a change of advisors may be in the interests of both parties.

### ***Positive Role Modeling***

Faculty must remember that they are role models for graduate students. Their approach to solving problems, their interaction style, and their response to conflict situations will be observed closely by the students with whom they interact. Faculty members can serve as positive role models for their faculty colleagues as well.

Major professors should recognize the existence of the power differential between themselves and their students and be sensitive to it. Faculty members need to realize that each student is unique, and they must respect and value the background and experience the student brings to interactions. Key traits that a faculty member can demonstrate as a positive role model include respect, patience, tolerance, compassion, sensitivity, and understanding.

One of the most important things a faculty member can do to prevent incivilities is to provide encouragement and reinforcement of positive

behaviors. Graduate students respond to the positive comments and praise that their advisor provides. This goes a long way toward stimulating the kinds of behaviors desired in graduate students. It does not hurt to share with students appropriate disclosures about one's own positive and negative experiences as a graduate student. Again, this helps the student to visualize his or her own subsequent success in a program.

### ***Maintaining Appropriate Boundaries***

Some graduate students may actually be older or have more work experience in the field of study than the mentor or faculty. The close working relationship over time may result in the student misinterpreting the goals of the faculty member. Faculty members need to be careful to establish the boundaries of their working relationship with the student. There should be clear communication outlining the respective roles of the faculty member and student. The faculty member needs to make it clear that the relationship, although friendly, is strictly professional. This takes us back to the need for good communication between the graduate student and faculty member.

### ***Hold People Responsible for Transgressions***

If someone violates standards, action must be taken to hold him or her accountable or no real progress will be achieved. Often penalties for significant transgressions are specified in written policies. These penalties could range from loss of certain privileges to withdrawal of financial support to dismissal from the program. There should be an established procedure for putting the student (or a faculty member) on notice that particular behaviors will not be tolerated. Subsequent violation of the policy or a repeat of the behavior should result in previously specified penalties. Faculty have a responsibility to prevent inappropriate behaviors from continuing. They need to call attention to consequences of violating standards and to encourage students to think carefully before they speak and to avoid emotive or inflammatory language.

### ***Have an Effective Grievance Process***

To prevent graduate student-faculty or graduate student-professional program student conflict from escalating, a process must be in place wherein student complaints and concerns are taken seriously and appropriately investigated. It is not unusual for the aggrieved party to com-

plain that his or her concerns are trivialized or dismissed offhand. Most institutions have a grievance process in place. Such a process typically asks the parties involved to go through a chain of command such that if the parties cannot work out their conflict, discussion moves to the next higher level (an advisor, course director, program director, or department chair) for conflict resolution. The formal grievance process should be viewed as a last resort if a problem cannot be resolved. An intermediary step that can often be effective is the ombudsperson. Many universities have established ombudsperson offices in recent years. An ombudsperson is an impartial, independent, and confidential resource for helping to resolve conflicts or misunderstandings. Whether disputes are resolved informally or formally, there must be clear communication to all parties regarding resolution of the problem and safeguards should be put in place to prevent a recurrence of the situation.

### ***CONCLUSION***

Incivility in graduate education can have a deleterious effect on students, faculty, and the entire educational process. The nature and structure of graduate study is such that incivility can flourish unless mechanisms are in place to prevent it. Graduate education is conducted in a high-stress environment: the professional career of the graduate student and career advancement for the faculty member are at stake, at least to some extent.

Encouragement of civil behavior begins by having a shared set of expectations for behavior of graduate students and faculty members involved in a program. Shared expectations can then be reinforced by clear and frequent communication among graduate program participants. Success in expectation setting and effective communications is usually a function of strong graduate program leadership. Faculty members have an opportunity to further reinforce the behavioral standards of a graduate program by personally modeling the positive behavioral characteristics they expect of their colleagues and graduate students. When uncivil behaviors do occur, steps need to be taken to address them and the party or parties involved must be held responsible for their behavior. The existence of effective informal and formal grievance process features can facilitate resolution of disputes stemming from uncivil behavior.

The presence of the graduate program features enumerated above will increase the satisfaction of both faculty and graduate students in-

volved with the program. If one begins with the goal of having all parties demonstrate positive, civil behaviors in all aspects of their graduate program participation and there are mechanisms in place to encourage and enforce these behaviors, the need to address uncivil behaviors will be minimal.

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