How to be a Terrible Thesis Advisor

by Nigel Ward

(a young faculty member and advisor who hopes others can learn from his mistakes)

- Assign students thesis topics based on the section headings in your grant proposal, or on the boxes of the flowchart for your master plan.
- When someone brings up a research paper, tell anecdotes about the author, his or her advisor, and his or her colleagues. This will impress on students that who you know is more important than what you do.
- When laying out your laboratory, give first priority to minimizing the cost of cable, last priority to good workplaces for students, and no priority to fostering interaction among students.
- Read your students' papers at most once.
- When honest differences of opinion arise, paper them over with words. For example, say "Well, we could talk about this forever, but I think we're all working towards the same basic idea, let's call it a 'neologistic/noetic knowledge representation'. Now let's move on."
- Regarding other schools of thought, make sure students know just enough to be able to point out the "fatal flaws" in each, and so can be good foot soldiers in the crusade for your own approach. A useful phrase is "Why do you want to waste your time reading that?"
- Never visit the laboratory; learn about students' work only from what they tell you.
- Define your research aims with catch phrases ("dynamic X," "emergent Y," "the Z problem," etc.).
- Have students handle computer system administration, and let them think it counts as research.
- Mumble.
- Assign older students to guide the younger ones.
- Involve students in decision-making for unimportant things. For example, you can easily wile away an hour of seminar deciding who should be discussion leader for what chapter of the reading.
- Share your most trivial thoughts with your students. Better yet, bring them up as seminar discussion topics ("In the shower this morning, it struck me that whitespace is really important. Let's think about whitespace from an AI perspective").
- Avoid conflicts with your students; in particular, don't be too demanding.
- If a student reveals that he is confused about what counts as meaningful research, ridicule him.
- Take no interest in what courses your students are taking.
- Pick up ideas from going to conferences, then bring them up in seminar without explaining from whom you got them or explaining the context in which they arose.
- Plan for research seminars to last at least two hours.
• Avoid meeting with students individually. Do all advising out in public, at seminars.
• Never go near the laboratory in the evenings or on weekends.
• Always come unprepared for seminars; you're smart enough to fake it.
• Never do any programming yourself. After all, you went through that once, and now you're an ideas man (or woman).
• Let your students see you rushing to meet deadlines.
• Avoid critical discussions of research strategy. A useful phrase is `We'll do it this way. Why? Because I'm the professor and you're a student.'
• Expect nothing much from your students, and subtly let them know this.
• Give all your students the same research topic, but with slightly different names. If this is the same topic as your own dissertation topic, all the better.
• Let your students see your grant proposals and learn the art of doublethink.
• Enforce disciplinary boundaries. For example, say, "That sounds like the sort of thing that people in software engineering would work on, so let's leave that topic alone," or "Why do you want to worry about that? That's a software engineering issue."
• Never suggest that your students contact other professors or other researchers.
• Let your students submit articles to third-rate journals.
• If a student's work is not giving the results expected, belittle her.
• Encourage your students to work on fashionable problems.
• State your opinions loudly and frequently, so your students know what to write in their theses.