

Setting Expectations  
*and*  
Resolving Conflicts  
*in*  
Graduate Education

A publication by  
the Council of Graduate Schools



*Council of Graduate Schools*

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# FOREWORD

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One of the most important topics confronting any organization, including graduate schools and graduate programs, is that of conflict management. In all organizations, differences in perspective between individuals may arise. In a graduate degree program, if these differences are not addressed through a mechanism that recognizes the interests of all involved parties, such differences can magnify, ultimately becoming major obstacles affecting student progress toward the degree and the program's ability to carry out its mission. While conflict resolution is not an aspect of the graduate experience that all of us feel comfortable discussing, it is an area that, given sufficient attention, can have an important impact on the quality of the graduate experience for students, faculty, and administrators.

*Setting Expectations and Resolving Conflicts in Graduate Education* provides a model specifically adapted to the faculty-student relationship in a graduate education setting. The model makes individual and joint interests visible and thereby expands options for both the articulation of expectations and the resolution of conflicts. In providing this model, this monograph makes a significant contribution to the literature on mentoring in which conflicts between advisors and students are frequently cited as contributing to student attrition from graduate programs but which rarely include concrete advice for students and advisors for overcoming those conflicts.

This publication developed out of a series of workshops that the authors presented at annual CGS meetings and at CGS member universities since 1997. Because of the popularity of these workshops, the steady interest among our member universities in the topic of conflict management, and the need for a resource that is both sufficiently general and sufficiently detailed to be implemented on any campus, CGS is grateful to Karen Klomprens and the

co-authors for their permission to share this model with our members as a CGS publication. As a particularly useful “case study” in addressing one of graduate education’s most general challenges, *Setting Expectations and Resolving Conflicts* resonates with CGS’s overall goals of improving graduate education, increasing degree completion, and promoting quality mentoring. It should be of interest to faculty advisors and graduate students, as well as administrators, all of whom share responsibility for graduate student progress and degree completion.

# CHAPTER 1

## WHY THIS TOPIC AND WHY NOW?

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*Ten eager Ph.D. students sit around a conference table in their new department for their student orientation session. While they wait, they chat about their backgrounds, their undergraduate programs, their desired areas of concentration, and their hopes and fears in taking this next step in their educational and professional career.*

**T**he meeting starts with the arrival of the graduate program director. Within the first few minutes of the meeting, one student decides that graduate education is not for him and another follows a few minutes later because of a death in the family. The meeting goes on for some time, and two more students leave because they are frustrated with the personal conflicts they will face with faculty members or with the financial problems they will encounter on the road to the doctorate. At the end of the meeting, the program director welcomes the remaining six new graduate students to campus and assures them that though the road is tough, the six will see their programs to completion.

Far-fetched? Of course it is. A graduate program faculty would not expect, nor would they tolerate, that nearly half of the group of talented incoming graduate students leaves before the end of the orientation session. They would find it unacceptable because they would have had additional bright applicants who could have been admitted, and who could have made a contribution to the academic life of the department and to the future of the field. If such attrition occurred in a single day at the start of a graduate program, faculty would shift attention to the problem and mobilize the necessary

resources to stop it. Of course, it is not the nature of graduate student attrition to occur so quickly and concisely.

Yet, Ph.D. attrition accounts for a similar percentage loss from U.S. institutions over the life of a given student cohort. At the onset, we can't predict who, but we know from the national data that 30 to 50 percent of doctoral students, depending on their programs of study, will not complete their degrees (Bowen and Rudenstine, 1992; CGS, forthcoming). Despite the considerable research and the recommendations for interventions designed to reduce graduate student attrition, the completion rate of doctoral students has been a consistent matter of concern for forty years (Tucker, Gottlieb, and Pease, 1964; Bowen and Rudenstine, 1992; CGS, forthcoming).

Completion for Master's degree students (more than half of whom are in education or business fields) is marginally better at 60 to 71 percent (Nevill et al., 2007). Nearly two thirds of all graduate degrees granted in the U.S. are at the Master's level and are often linked to licensure requirements, as well as professional enhancement (Conrad, et al., 1993). Master's degree programs are typically shorter than doctoral programs, yet attrition is considerable.

Attrition/completion data demand a change that acknowledges the fundamental importance of the faculty-graduate student relationship.<sup>1</sup> Such a change must be embedded in a university willing to support the use of tools and skills to improve communication, minimize interpersonal conflict, and manage conflict when it arises. These activities will also result in more effective mentoring. While the graduate education community does not expect to achieve 100 percent completion, as there are valid reasons for students not to complete a graduate degree, the current success rate is seen by many as an unjustified waste of human and institutional resources.

## **THE GRADUATE STUDENT EXPERIENCE**

Graduate education, in particular doctoral education, is a complex system.<sup>2,3</sup> It is characterized by multiple inputs, multiple processes, and multiple outcomes with the final goal being a productive career that contributes to the discipline and society—nationally and/or internationally. This system is also influenced by interruptions and delays that complicate our understanding of the impact of various interventions on the desired outcomes of improving the environment

for graduate education and for higher completion rates. Superimposed on this complex educational system is the reality of the key interactions between an individual graduate student and his or her major professor/advisor and research/guidance committee. These interactions create their own system with inputs, processes, and outcomes.

The process of graduate education involves expectations and rules that are written (e.g., program curriculum or graduate handbooks) and unwritten (e.g., politics, myths, history, ethos). The “unwritten rules” and expectations can confuse or trip up students, especially those who may be more isolated than others based on gender, race, ethnicity, socio-economic, or other cultural or demographic characteristics. Setting explicit expectations is the first important step to help all students meet those expectations.

In most of the research and other national initiatives on graduate education in the past ten years,<sup>4</sup> positive systemic change in graduate education, especially for degree completion, is linked explicitly to the importance of clarity of expectations and the primacy of the faculty-student relationship. With this consistent message, why do graduate education processes still persist with so many informal implicit expectations? And why are interpersonal conflicts, which often result from unmet expectations, not recognized or managed more effectively? One reason is that these extensive research efforts do not readily translate into specific tools or processes that meet the challenges of improving graduate education.

Promoting improved communication of explicit expectations and resolving conflicts to improve the graduate experience and to increase completion are attainable goals. This monograph describes the needed tools and processes in the form of an approach based on interests that can lead to setting more explicit and mutually-understood expectations. That same process can also be used to resolve conflicts effectively.

The approach described herein is a rational, systematic process that makes faculty and student interests visible, expands options for both setting expectations and resolving conflicts, and preserves the fundamentally important faculty-student relationship.

## HOW THIS MONOGRAPH IS ORGANIZED

The approach described in this monograph is based on the results and insights from research in several fields, as well as from first-hand experiences of the authors. It is also largely common sense, although, at some points, the process may seem to run counter to commonly-held personal tendencies. Many individuals find it difficult to follow these steps in an organized and rational manner once embroiled in a conflict or in a heated discussion about unmet expectations. With practice, however, these steps can become an automatic and effective process, a habit of mind.

Chapter 2, “Setting Explicit Expectations to Enhance Graduate Education,” and Chapter 3, “Managing and Resolving Interpersonal Conflicts,” are based on a process called an **“interest-based approach.”** While there are many approaches to setting expectations and resolving conflicts, an interest-based approach is endorsed here because it is organized around informed decision-making. It is a rational process that does not rely on quick responses to a “bad act,” anger or other negative emotions, or the historical, “we’ve done it that way since the program was formed” approach. Further, it provides mechanisms for discussion of topics and concerns while protecting the integrity of the important relationship between graduate students and faculty.

Chapter 4, “Engaging Your Campus Community,” provides practical advice on introducing and using an interest-based approach in graduate program settings or campus-wide and includes a section on Frequently Asked Questions. The “Endnotes” section includes detailed explanations on some of the background concepts for those who wish to read more broadly.

The interest-based approach forms the content of an interactive workshop on setting ex-

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pectations and resolving conflicts developed at Michigan State University over ten years ago with initial funding from the U.S. Department of Education Fund for the Improvement of Post-secondary Education (FIPSE) and the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation (1997–2000). The PowerPoint slides are included in the Appendix. Readers may find it helpful to consult these, or the animated version on the MSU Graduate School Web site (<http://grad.msu.edu/conflict.htm>), as they read the text. Some of the many video vignettes that serve as discussion triggers in the workshop are also on this Web site. The Appendix provides information on accessing the conflict resolution workshop materials and training opportunities.

Note: Terms used to describe the steps in graduate education vary by field and by campus. A “guidance committee” in one program or on one campus may be a “research committee” or “advisory committee” on another. The monograph descriptions strive to be as generic as possible.

# CHAPTER 2

## SETTING EXPLICIT EXPECTATIONS TO ENHANCE GRADUATE EDUCATION

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*“What don’t you understand about what I didn’t tell you”?*

**W**hile this question may invoke a smile, this is often how students report feeling about the lack of explicit expectations and the prevalence of implicit expectations about the “what” and “why” of a number of key graduate education experiences, processes, and decisions. These key activities (e.g., seminar attendance, minimal required grades, comprehensive exam format and grading, the definition of a “quality” dissertation, travel to professional meetings) are topics that effective mentors will explain to students. This ensures that student time and effort are not wasted trying to figure them out and faculty time and effort are not wasted trying to “fix” something after a problem arises. The ideal approach to information sharing is to jointly set explicit expectations that are mutually understood, and to do so in a timely manner.

### **THE IMPORTANCE OF SETTING MUTUALLY-UNDERSTOOD EXPLICIT EXPECTATIONS**

Research shows that a better working relationship with faculty advisors develops when new Ph.D. students receive information about program expectations early in their programs (Green, 1991). And further, that “highly supportive advisors were associated with



students generally being both more committed and more productive in their research activities” (Green, 1991; p.403). Students who were “engaged in research activities at a greater level were more productive” in terms of later publications (Bauer and Green, 1994; p.221). Hartnett and Katz (1977) stated that clarity about expectations results in more accountability on the part of both graduate students and faculty. Doctoral degree completers identify academic integration (interactions with faculty, other graduate students, and life in the graduate program) and an understanding of informal expectations as the most important aspects for successful graduate education (Lovitts, 2001). Further, explicit performance expectations related to a doctoral dissertation facilitate evaluation of the research itself, especially interdisciplinary research (Lovitts, 2007).

Ehrenberg, et al. (2006) analyzed data from the Mellon Foundation’s Graduate Education Initiative, which focused primarily on Ph.D. completion in the humanities. They reported that the “advising factor is perhaps the most important factor” (p.10), and also that financial support, especially in the first three years, is of importance, but that “improving clarity of expectations” and “departmental expectations about finishing the dissertation” (p.10) also bear on completion.

King (2003), Lovitts (2001), and others note that misunderstandings about implicit and explicit expectations are serious concerns, especially when the mismatch is between a faculty advisor and his or her student. The question is, “What can be done?” “Negotiate” is often the answer, but that advice is rarely matched to an explanation of an effective process/method, especially for a situation where there is a clear power differential between individuals. Thus, this advice provides little practical guidance if students (and faculty) are not prepared to “negotiate” productively and in a way that preserves and enhances their professional relationship. Who teaches faculty and graduate deans how to “negotiate” within the context of graduate education? For example, while laboratory bench scientists may be familiar with the idea of “principled negotiation” (Cohen and Cohen, 2005), others will not have access to practical information on this valuable skill. Too often “negotiate” is equated with “persuasion among equals,” or collective bargaining—and faculty may want no part of that. Negotiation in the

context of this monograph is encouraged as a form of mentoring; that is, a process that permits productive, principled discussion between faculty and their students, even when students are the subordinates in the power relationship.

### **Where Do Students Learn About Expectations?**

There are many ways that students learn about the processes and steps in graduate education. These vary in their quality, effectiveness, and usefulness. Sometimes, graduate program directors, faculty, or staff tell students what they need to know when the program or the students are “ready” (“just-in-time”). Time to plan and/or coordinate activities is obviated by this approach. Another method is that someone else, who may not be as well-informed, tells the student. The graduate student network can be valuable, but there is no guarantee that the person delivering the advice knows all of the facts; at worst, they may provide misinformation. Also, all students will not have equal access to a well-informed informal network. “It’s in the Graduate Program Handbook” is a useful reminder, but only if the Handbook is up-to-date, easily accessible, and accurate (visit <http://grad.msu.edu/staff/ght.htm> for an example of a graduate handbook template). Collective bargaining agreements, where they exist, are generally very explicit, but cover only the student experience as an employee. In the least effective model, the student is not told anything at all. The latter exemplifies a “Darwinian” approach: “I figured it out myself. It is good for them to do the same if they want to survive.”

A more effective and fair way to approach the setting of explicit expectations for mutual understanding is to seriously examine the many graduate education processes and structures and to ask, “What explicit expectations might be set early on to maximize the use of time and productivity and prevent misunderstandings or conflicts from arising in the first place?”

Setting explicit, understood expectations about the many graduate education processes (e.g., guidance committees, coursework, thesis defense) is a key responsibility of the faculty. Unit, college, and university administrators also play a role. For example, information on who may serve on guidance committees and why, as well as who decides, can provide students with insights and context about the role of committee members, by which criteria

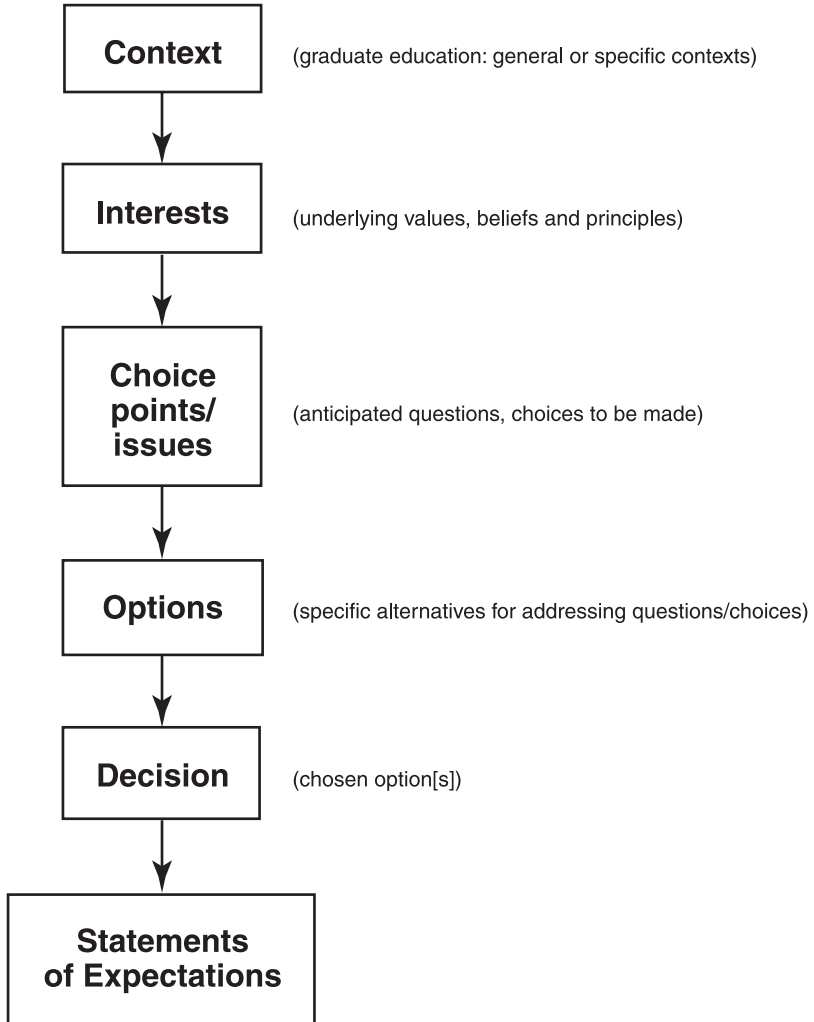
they are chosen, and how members may be changed. A description of the format, content, or process for a comprehensive exam helps students understand the relationship between coursework and comprehensives. A defined vacation policy for students on assistantships or fellowships makes a clear statement about the balance between time-on-task and the need for time with families. Explicit information about who receives funds to attend professional conferences and under what circumstances defines the value of professional society, networking, and sharing of data. Statements of explicit expectations are an important function of a graduate program handbook, orientation programs, the stated academic curricular requirements, and the policy guidelines and statements at the graduate school/college and university levels.

Using an interest-based approach to set explicit expectations for the key steps in the process of graduate education can help avoid interpersonal conflicts due to unmet expectations. Such an approach may also contribute to easier, timely resolution of conflicts that do occur. Using multiple opportunities to set explicit expectations (orientations, retreats) can clarify and reinforce those expectations across the diversity of students and their learning styles (see Chapter 4).

### **How Does the Interest-Based Approach Work to Set Explicit Expectations?**

This section and Chapter 3 rely on an understanding of terms that are the basis for each of the steps used in an interest-based approach for setting expectations and resolving conflicts. These terms are explained using specific examples in this section and Chapter 3. The basic definitions follow and are explained in the order in which they are used (Figure 2.1).

**Figure 2.1.** The steps used in setting explicit expectations using an interest-based approach. New statements of expectations become part of the context.



## DEFINITIONS

### CONTEXT

The **context** in any situation is the academic, cultural, and social setting or environment in which it takes place, as well as the experiences, perceptions, assumptions, and explanations of the environment individuals may have. The context includes the policies and

procedures, organizational structures, the relationship of the individuals to each other and to other individuals, and any/all conditions that apply to the situation (specific examples of context are given in the next section of this chapter and in Chapter 3). The context may be viewed differently by faculty and students or differently by demographic groups, based on individual backgrounds or experiences. The context and process may be the least explained parts of graduate education (Austin and McDaniels, 2006; Lovitts, 2001, 2007).

Faculty members want to focus on ideas, subject matter, research, and teaching; these are what brought them to the academy. Students also focus on the same concepts and activities, but the understanding of process is also critical for their success.

Included as a central part of **context** are **expectations** and **stakeholders**.

### EXPECTATIONS

**Expectations** are both implicit and explicit. “A comprehensive exam will be given” is an explicit statement, but it carries with it many implicit (and important!) details, such as when it will be administered, whether it is oral or written, who will grade it, what reading is required prior, and how many times it may be taken. In order to meet expectations, students must know what they are.

*Faculty members want to focus on ideas, subject matter, research and teaching; these are what brought them to the academy. Students also focus on the same concepts and activities, but the understanding of process is also critical for their success.*

## STAKEHOLDERS

**Stakeholders** are those individuals who will be directly affected, personally or professionally, by activities or decisions made or by the outcome of a conflict and/or who can affect the outcomes or decisions. Additional stakeholders are those who care about an issue or decision in more general terms, perhaps from a departmental or university perspective, general reputation concerns, a fairness perspective, or as a funder of research.

## INTERESTS

**Interests** are the underlying core needs, values, and principles that individuals and organizations (e.g., the graduate program) bring to a particular situation.<sup>5</sup> Interests may relate to choices or decision points in the graduate education process or to issues that may lead to a conflict. There are always multiple interests that exist in relation to choices or decision points. More importantly, interests exist independently of specific issues and continue to exist even after a particular conflict is resolved.

Interests are the starting point for setting explicit, mutually-understood expectations and are fundamental for effectively resolving conflicts.

*Interests are the starting point for setting explicit, mutually-understood expectations and are fundamental for effectively resolving conflicts.*

Each stakeholder has interests. There are common interests, as well as those that may be held by only one of the individuals or stakeholders. Interests do not specifically answer the question posed in any discussion or conflict situation.

Interests include those core needs that will be met, or not, over the time span of a graduate education experience. The student and his or her mentor should understand the range of interests (e.g., quality research that can be published, a reasonable time-to-degree), so as to ensure that they can plan to meet them in any and all ways that are appropriate.

For example, if a student has a strong need to “feel respected,” the mentor can discuss how respect is both assumed and earned in

graduate education, and distinguish between ways in which it can be diminished and increased throughout the process. Or, in another example, a student's desire for a wide-ranging trans-disciplinary experience can lead to a fruitful discussion of the myriad connections that the department has, or does not have, for such involvements. Other examples of interests that might be held individually or jointly by faculty and students include finding a balance between career goals and deadlines and family needs; quality research that can be published in order to gain additional grant funding or to enhance personal and institutional reputations; a reasonable time-to-degree; and developing skills to be able to successfully compete globally for positions, visibility, and funding.

Thus, discussion of interests is an effective form of mentoring and will increase student understanding of the graduate education process.

Discussions of these issues with students not only support the primacy of interests in setting expectations and resolving conflicts, but also serve to identify and explain goals and principles that promote success in graduate education.

Open discussion of recognized goals and principles for professional success is a key instrument for the socialization of graduate students. It helps prepare students to manage their academic responsibilities and future conflicts effectively.

Faculty may have some particular concerns or even interests that may not be appropriate to share with students (e.g., a tenure and promotion decision, personal individual issues). There may also be conflicts of commitment or financial conflicts of interest that occur. Even with interests that cannot or should not be shared, faculty have both an individual and a collective academic responsibility to make sure that

***Discussions of these issues with students not only support the primacy of interests in setting expectations and resolving conflicts, but also serve to identify and explain goals and principles that promote success in graduate education.***

such interests do not adversely affect rights of students (individually and collectively) to have the quality graduate educational experience they expect. Graduate dean advocacy of the implementation of university policy can play an important role in ensuring responsible mentoring of students.

## ISSUES

An **issue** is defined as “the immediate question that needs an answer now” and is used in this monograph in connection with a conflict. An issue may also serve as a **choice or decision point** in the graduate education process: What step or decision in the graduate education process is the focus of the discussion; e.g., how are comprehensive exams structured, administered, and graded? In this case, the term “choice or decision point” is used when addressing a future or anticipated question (see Figures 2.1 and 3.1).

## OPTIONS

**Options** are choices, alternatives, or preferences that provide an answer or multiple answers to an immediate question or to address a choice point. It is most effective to brainstorm as many options as possible, without an immediate critique of each one. All options are evaluated first based on whether each may satisfy the choice-point or answer the question/issue and then on whether each satisfies at least one interest. There may be multiple options or combinations of options that provide a satisfactory outcome. The selected option or options do not require that individuals have common interests or that the maximum number of interests is served, although in reality, that is often the case. The stakeholders may have different interests satisfied by one or more options (a “win-win” choice).

Sometimes, individuals embrace a particular option without considering interests or any alternatives, or they may consider interests, but focus early on a single option. In such cases, the option is a **position**. A position is an issue-specific claim made by an individual. A position is often stated as the (only) solution to the problem/issue at hand. It is usually the first option that comes to mind and it can be stated without an understanding of even why it was chosen. It can be stated as a “*My way or the highway*” approach. Positions are discussed again in Chapter 3 in reference to the approaches to conflict resolution.



## DECISIONS

A **decision, or solution**, is the final choice or set of choices selected or derived from any list of options. Each decision results from the evaluation of options in reference to identified interests.

## STATEMENT OF EXPECTATIONS

A **statement of expectation(s)** is derived from the discussion of the options and the resulting decision and becomes part of the **context**.

## APPLYING AN INTEREST-BASED APPROACH TO SETTING EXPLICIT EXPECTATIONS

In this section, a specific example is presented to illustrate the application of each of the steps, shown in Figure 2.1. The example is **guidance committee membership and constitution**, which is based on a process common to all doctoral programs and many master's programs. Experienced faculty members usually regard questions about the composition of a guidance committee as straightforward and often have a cadre of colleagues who serve in this capacity with regularity. Junior faculty and faculty who are engaged in cross-program or cross-collegiate graduate programs may not be as certain. And for many graduate students, the issue may be much less clear. How might an interest-based approach to setting more explicit expectations about changes in guidance committee membership unfold as part of a discussion to revise that section in a graduate program handbook? An example of such a process follows and is based on the steps illustrated in Figure 2.1.

The **context** for this choice or decision point will include a multitude of factors, among which are whether this is a master's degree committee or a doctoral committee, what the university (often through an academic governance body) establishes as minimum criteria for guidance committee service, whether an outside reader is required, how many active faculty members are in the program, who comes in contact with the students early in the program, and the advice of a program director. The context might also include a practice of regular sabbatical leaves by faculty members, which affects their ability to serve as committee members.

The **context** includes **expectations** and **stakeholders**. A graduate handbook or graduate school/university policy manual usually defines in general terms who may serve on a guidance committee. While an explicit expectation is often stated (e.g., only graduate faculty or only tenure-track or tenured faculty), there is rarely specific guidance on how to select from the body of faculty members in a graduate program (or outside a graduate program) who might be most appropriate. The faculty members are important **stakeholders** in the decisions, as are the graduate students, department chairs, academic deans, other faculty in the field of study, granting agencies, journal and book publishers, and future employers.

Stakeholders have **interests**. Faculty have interests in high-quality research and teaching, in the productive use of their time, in achieving excellence, and in working with bright and engaging graduate students and helping those students succeed. Students have interests in the quality of their research and teaching, as well as the quality of advising, being mentored, completing a degree in a timely manner, and in a productive career placement. Students and faculty share other common interests, such as securing financial support for the student and generating high-quality research that is informed by appropriate expertise. A department chair will have an interest in the quality, quantity, and content of coursework that meets high standards or may wish to focus on mentoring junior faculty and introducing them to the role of faculty on guidance committees. Quality and reputation are interests of former, current, and future students and faculty, as well as of the institution. Granting agencies and publishers have an interest in the quality of the research. Future employers have an interest in the quality of the education and training of the students.

The “**choice or decision point**” or **issue** for this example is, “How does the graduate program define the composition and constitution of guidance committees in order to maintain the necessary standards related to coursework and/or research”? Or simply, “When is the committee constituted? Who serves? And who decides?” Establishing the membership of a guidance committee is the usual choice point for ensuring quality. Changing membership may arise as a choice or decision point depending on context and interests of the stakeholders.

Some of the **options** for this discussion to make explicit the expectations regarding guidance committees could include defining the process of establishing guidance committees by identifying when to establish the committee (e.g., after the first two semesters), defining the criteria (e.g., subject matter expertise, graduate faculty status), and who decides or approves the membership (e.g., major advisor, program chair, graduate school/college). Such a description in a graduate handbook might also further explain how guidance committee membership may be changed and provide guidelines and criteria for approving a change (e.g., change in research focus, faculty sabbatical leave). Who decides and/or approves of changes would need to be defined.

One obvious caveat of this process is that it is simply not possible to establish a single set of written policies that will encompass all of the variations on the theme of guidance committees for each student and faculty member in a graduate program. Students must understand what the expectations are in order to meet them. That said, however, the additional “why” explanations for the expectations may seem unnecessary to faculty, but they are often of key importance to graduate students and their understanding of expectations.

At this point, a long list of possible options for revising the section of the handbook that covers guidance committees should be available, and now these options need to be evaluated. This evaluation is a two-step process prior to a **decision**. To capture the essence of the process, we present it in a rather mechanistic fashion in Figure 2.2. However, when implementing the approach, focusing exclusively on the mechanics can easily overshadow the depth and usefulness of the dialogue and could narrow the scope of the discussion as options are evaluated.

The first step is to determine *which of the options satisfies the choice point or answers the question raised as an issue* (e.g., who should be on guidance committees? Who decides?). Keep in mind that while there may be multiple options that satisfy the choice point, some may not be directly relevant. Viable options must answer the question raised by the choice point/issue. If an option does not provide an answer to the question at hand, it is not considered further. In Figure 2.2, the list of options (A–G) is presented to the right of each panel and each option is first tested

against the “Choice/Issue.” For example, Panel (c) depicts the fate of an option (Option B) that fails to directly address the issue and is immediately dropped.

The second and most important step in the evaluation is to determine *which of the options that are kept after Step One satisfies the interests of the individual stakeholders*. The list of identified interests is used to further “prune” the list of viable options. Options that do not satisfy any of the interests are excluded from further consideration. It is important to understand that the list of interests should be created together or at least shared, but all the listed interests need not be “mutual” (i.e., shared by all stakeholders). This is not a small distinction and without it, the individuals may spend inordinate time trying to persuade each other that a particular interest is mutual (or not).

Ideally, once the list of interests is generated, there is no ownership of particular interests by individual stakeholders. In reality, this is difficult to achieve. When the discussion reaches this important evaluation step, the attractiveness of each viable option may be uneven across individuals, depending upon which interests they value most. Individuals may prioritize interests, define short- or long-term interests (and value one over the other), or value an intangible interest (Atran, et al., 2007) over a more material interest. The danger here is that the discussion may take the form of a “positional” debate about the importance of a particular interest and how it is best served by a particular option, as compared to the importance of another interest, which is served by an alternative option. This clearly undermines the goals of an interest-based approach.

To avoid this potential pitfall, it is important for individuals to be aware of its importance and mindful of the discussion, in case it becomes positional. The stakeholders must agree at the onset not to adopt a purely utilitarian decision-making approach, guided only by self-interests. Fortunately, when we use an interest-based approach in graduate education, the objective interests (see endnote 5) that commonly surface (e.g., quality of scholarship, collegiality), although they may not be valued equally by all stakeholders at a particular time, are nevertheless very likely to be respected by all involved in the discussion. This feature of the context of graduate education minimizes the tendency to adopt an extreme utilitarian

approach when deciding among options that serve one or more interests, but not all.

In Figure 2.2, the interests (1–7) are listed to the left of each panel. For example, Panel (d) depicts the fate of an option (Option D) that, despite surviving Step One, is nevertheless dropped from further consideration because it fails to meet any of the interests. Thus, viable options satisfy at least one of the identified interests, but they need not satisfy all the interests, nor the “most” interests, nor only the “common” interests. What is important is that individuals recognize how the interests inform the sorting of options and how well any option meets the multiplicity of interests.

The “wheel of options and decision-making” in Figure 2.2 is a pictorial representation of a two-step process to evaluate options. The diagram is presented here in detail because it is a useful tool in teaching the interest-based approach and may be viewed as an animation by visiting <http://grad.msu.edu/conflict.htm>. The list of options (A–G) is shown on the right and the list of interests (1–7) on the left of each panel.

As the evaluation circle turns in a counterclockwise manner, each option is judged on its ability to meet the following criteria: Is the option an answer to the choice point/issue (Step One)? If not, it falls away and is no longer considered. If it is a possible answer to the question, it moves along the circle to be tested against the interests (Step Two). Options that do not satisfy at least one of the interests are excluded from further consideration. The selected option does not require that all stakeholders have the same interests. The individuals (and stakeholders) may have different interests satisfied by one or more options.

a) As the “evaluation wheel” turns counterclockwise, the options are evaluated one at a time (starting with Option A) based on whether they satisfy the choice or decision point/issue and then whether each satisfies one or more interests. Each viable option is listed next to the interest(s) it satisfies.

b) Option A satisfies the choice point/issue and several interests (1, 2, 3, 6, and 7), and so it is left on the list for consideration.

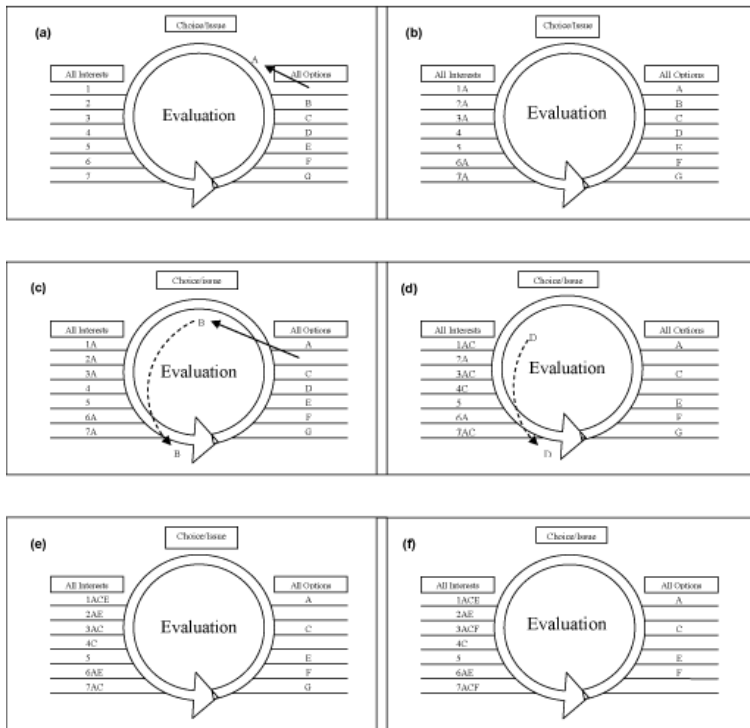
c) Option B does not satisfy the choice point/issue, so is dropped from further consideration.

d) Option C satisfies the choice point/issue and several interests (1, 3, 4 and 7), and so it is kept for further consideration. However Option D, while satisfying the choice point/issue, did not meet any of the interests, and so it is dropped from further consideration.

e) The evaluation continues for the remaining options.

f) At the end, Options A, C, E, and F satisfied the choice point/issue and one or more of the interests. The list of interests notes which ones are satisfied by which of the viable options that remain.

**Figure 2.2.** Evaluation of the options.



The selection of a final option or combination of options from those remaining (in Figure 2.2., Options A, C, E, and F remain) should take into account a multitude of factors associated with context. These contextual factors might include the standards in the field of study, as well as a careful consideration of the consequences of

choosing any one of the remaining options; discussion of the intended and unintended consequences is an important part of this final consideration of options. There may also be specific program, departmental, or university policies, contractual agreements, or federal compliance expectations that preclude certain options and require a separately defined and facilitated process. Thus, the selected option may be the one that best adheres to standards of the field of study, or to university or graduate program stated policies, which are in turn a reflection of the interests of the stakeholders. If a particular policy no longer satisfies the interests or has become irrelevant given the current context, an interest-based approach may be used to consider options for a policy change.

The key point is that implementing an interest-based approach generates options derived from a logical sequence of steps that considers context and stakeholders' interests and is therefore preferable to an idiosyncratic or positional approach in which only one option or two competing options are considered.

From discussions of interests and options and/or from policies or other guidelines, an **explicit statement of expectations** is constructed. Once a draft is complete, the intended and unintended consequences of the statement should be considered. In the guidance committee example of this section, the statement would provide guidelines that explain the general criteria for guidance committee selection and why these criteria are important, who approves the committee, and the process for changes and subsequent approval. Such statements of explicit expectations, in fact, change the context that would then be the background for future discussions of this and related processes in the graduate program. A periodic review of the final decision after implementation is an effective check on whether the expectations continue to serve the interests and choice point/purpose(s).

As the earlier example illustrates, using an interest-based approach to revise sections of a graduate handbook not only results in the clarification of expectations, but also serves to identify the interests served by the selected option. Extending this process to the example of an individual guidance committee, a faculty member and his or her advisee can then discuss the interests related to an individual student's plan of study in order to construct the most appropriate committee and/or to make changes in membership. The

exercise serves to clarify not only the interests, but also criteria used to select committee members.

The result of such a rational discussion is often more than a plan of action for a future event; it is also an explanation of explicit expectations held by the advisor and student that would have continued to be only implicit, if the discussion had not taken place.

*The key point is that implementing an interest-based approach generates options derived from a logical sequence of steps that considers context and stakeholders' interests and is therefore preferable to an idiosyncratic or positional approach in which only one option or two competing options are considered.*

In this case, the professor and student (and, if the discussion took place in a graduate program retreat, a wider set of participants) might discuss how to facilitate positive professional interactions, how important research expertise is to the quality of a research project, or how changes to guidance com-

mittee members should be managed, and why.

As an increased number of graduate education process questions or choices are made explicitly between an individual faculty member and his or her graduate students, the result will be a student experience with fewer surprises and one in which students who may be isolated are more well-informed about what faculty members expect of them. In addition, graduate students will have an opportunity to explore what they expect of faculty and their graduate programs and to prepare themselves for the eventual role of faculty member or leader in any field.



## SETTING EXPLICIT EXPECTATIONS: OPPORTUNITIES FOR GRADUATE DEAN LEADERSHIP

There are a number of specific activities that can begin to reinforce the practice of setting explicit expectations to enhance graduate education (see also Chapter 4).

The focus on explicit expectations can positively influence graduate program review. Graduate dean input during a review can acknowledge that many expectations about graduate education are still implicit and can highlight how clear communication of formal and

explicit expectations reduces the guesswork for students and can minimize or prevent some conflicts. Part of program review, therefore, could include an examination of graduate handbooks for explicit formal expectations and point out where implicit expectations exist.

Workshops or training sessions on the interest-based approach during orientation or professional development opportunities may benefit faculty and graduate students, as well as staff members who are engaged in the graduate education enterprise (see Chapter 4). Departments are home to multiple examples of implicit understandings and organizational folklore that affect the lives of graduate students and faculty, both as individuals and as a group. Workshops conducted every fall semester for new and returning graduate program directors and/or secretaries could include considerable attention to the key role that clarifying expectations, while considering the interests of all stakeholders, plays in student retention and success.

*The result of such a rational discussion is often more than a plan of action for a future event; it is also an explanation of explicit expectations held by the advisor and student that would have continued to be only implicit, if the discussion had not taken place.*

An interest-based approach could be used by faculty to discuss their understanding of departmental policies and goals and to ensure that these are commonly understood. Such a discussion might be included as part of new faculty orientation programs. In addition, faculty can build a framework—a safety net of common expectations—that they can then use for discussions with students in setting individual expectations and goals. A second approach, which we believe holds the greatest promise, is a joint discussion and expectation-setting experience involving both graduate students and faculty in a single graduate program or sub-specialty area. Graduate students and faculty would gain a common understanding of the problematic areas within graduate education (e.g., authorship, financial support), explore areas that may not be as explicit as they could be, and build a web of departmental understandings and expectations within which faculty and students would be expected to operate.

The graduate dean can share graduate program data, including completion rates and time-to-degree numbers, with both faculty and graduate students, in order to provide a reality check for the context of a given program. Introducing and discussing peer-reviewed research, such as studies that link early and explicit communication to productivity for faculty and for their students (Green 1991) can also be an effective incentive for change. Lovitts (2001), for example, reports a strong connection between highly productive faculty, excellent interpersonal relationships between those faculty and their students, and high student persistence rates. These data provide the foundation for a powerful argument that good working relationships between faculty and students that are based, in part, on the sharing of explicit program expectations, result in higher future productivity of students, which in turn reflects positively on the perception of the quality of individual faculty, departments, and the institution.

Even with explicit expectations that are set and then discussed for mutual understanding, there are always opportunities for misunderstanding and for interpersonal conflict to arise. The same interest-based approach can be applied to effectively resolve those conflicts (see Chapter 3). The steps in the conflict resolution process also focus on the interests of the stakeholders and the generation of creative options. The conflict itself defines the issue or question to

be immediately answered. With avoidance as a common strategy for conflict resolution in the academy, and with anger and other negative emotions heightened by the conflict, the rational, objective approach using interests becomes even more important to continue to preserve the faculty-student relationship that is so important to student success and overall productivity.

# CHAPTER 3

## MANAGING AND RESOLVING INTERPERSONAL CONFLICT

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A common response by faculty and academic administrators to questions about conflicts in graduate programs is: “Conflicts? We don’t have any conflicts in our graduate program.” Reports from graduate students, and much of the literature cited in Chapter 1, differ from that optimistic response.<sup>6</sup> A discussion with the university ombudsman or graduate school/college staff will demonstrate just how common interpersonal conflicts are in graduate education. Two examples:

***Vignette: Double Bind:***

*Professor: Gloria, why did you cancel your discussion section of my course yesterday?*

*Graduate Student: My daughter woke up with a temperature and was sick. I didn’t have anyone to take care of her at the last minute. So I had to stay home. I’m a single parent and there was nobody to call at the last minute.*

*Professor: Do you realize that this is at least the third time that this has happened this semester, and that undergraduate students are beginning to complain? If you don’t take care of this situation soon, it may impact your ability to be assigned a section next semester.*

***Vignette: Jump on the Journals:***

*Professor: Well, I think this is ready to send out for publication.*

*Graduate Student: Great, I already was approached at the national meeting by the editor of the Western Journal of Quantum Quality, and she said we could have it out by June.*

*Professor: The Western Journal of Quantum Quality? That would be a waste of a great article. Nothing from this lab has ever been printed in anything less than a first-tier international journal.*

*Graduate Student: But that could take forever! I need the acceptance now for my job search.*

*Professor: Not in that journal, not with my name on it, and not from this lab.*

***Interpersonal conflicts can be formidable barriers to success in graduate education. The lack of mutually understood explicit expectations creates the greatest potential for interpersonal conflict.***

Depending on your perspective as a faculty member or a student, these conflicts can be considered more or less serious. Faculty may consider these as minor annoyances and easily resolved. Students, however, may believe that these are serious issues that begin to loom large in their relationship with the faculty advisor. Both of these examples reflect conflicts that may have arisen due to unmet, implicit expectations.

## **THE CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES OF CONFLICT IN GRADUATE EDUCATION**

Conflict exists when two (or more) people (or groups) perceive their values, actions, or activities as incompatible. With its diversity of academic, cultural, and personal backgrounds and perspectives that our programs encourage—and that research requires in order to

advance knowledge—the very nature of higher education makes some amount of conflict unavoidable. Higher education is an environment where new ideas flourish (or are resisted) and in which, inevitably, people with different responsibilities, training, and positions are going to adopt different and, at times, opposing views. **The skill to productively navigate through conflicts is a talent that good mentors bring to the educational experience and teach to their mentees.**

Conflict itself is neither good nor bad; its usefulness is measured in its outcome. The outcome is directly related to how the conflict is managed. There are researchers (see for example de Dreu, 2006) who challenge the notion of conflict in the workplace as being useful, except in very narrow circumstances. But when conflict is managed well, it can lead to positive outcomes. The creative and constructive effects of conflict include prevention of stagnation, stimulation of interest and curiosity, encouragement of a rigorous examination of problems, and motivation toward solving them. Conflict can help personal growth and development by challenging the individual, and it can promote group identity and cohesion.

When interpersonal conflict is not managed well, it is costly for students, faculty, and administrators and can tarnish the reputation of the department and university. Real costs are lost time and opportunity to the graduate student who does not complete his or her degree, diminished self-esteem, learned helplessness, the institutional investment lost when students leave (even for academic reasons), and/or the damage to faculty or departmental culture and reputation. Conflict is never without some cost. Succinctly put: “Someone is paying for it” (de Dreu, 2006; pg. 16). It is likely that many are paying the costs of time and resources for unresolved conflicts. The time and energy that conflict diverts from the university’s core missions of teaching, research, and outreach are all real costs that may be avoided or at least minimized, if faculty and students learn to resolve conflicts effectively.

Conflict in the academy is dealt with in a number of texts (see endnote 6 and Cheldelin and Lucas, 2003; Holton, 1995, 1998; Warters, 1995, 1999). Eight “meta-themes” identified as causes of conflict in higher education include: structural issues, miscommunication, harmful behaviors, interpersonal differences, personal charac-

teristics, negative history, difficult issues, and emotions (Barsky, 2002). Many of these same themes are described in studies on the graduate experience (see Chapter 1 and endotes).

Interpersonal conflicts between faculty and graduate students and others engaged in the graduate education process have been linked to attrition (Nerad and Miller, 1996; Lovitts, 2001; see endnote 1). Very few of these texts provide specific guidelines to resolve or prevent such conflicts. Notable exceptions are Cohen and Cohen (2005), who deal explicitly with conflicts and conflict resolution in the natural sciences fields, and Fiske (1998), who provides advice related to “dysfunctional advisee-advisor relationships” and, moving beyond conflict, also in the natural sciences and engineering.

Interpersonal conflicts can be formidable barriers to success in graduate education. The lack of mutually understood explicit expectations creates the greatest potential for interpersonal conflict.

These conflicts pose a fundamentally different set of challenges than those the students may have faced as undergraduates. Graduate students often express the belief that because they are quite powerless, conflicts they face with faculty supervisors are either irresolvable or resolvable only by the student accepting the path chosen by the faculty member, with students paying a high price for voicing concerns at all. In addition, the fear of retribution is commonly cited as the reason students avoid any attempt to resolve a conflict in the first place. This personal and reputational cost is cited as the most common reason why students (or postdocs) choose not to use the formal grievance procedures in place on most campuses to resolve conflicts. Faculty, department chairs, and others may express concerns about the time or the “hassle” required to resolve conflicts, especially protracted or repeating conflicts, and the resulting reduction in both faculty and student productivity.

The practice of academic argumentation is a part of university life, as faculty and students defend their research or scholarship, data analyses, or experimental design, or as scholars criticize the work of others. In this case, a “position” is generally vigorously supported by data, analysis, and interpretations and is based on a shared understanding of what is valued as evidence. The remainder of this chapter describes the various approaches to resolving interpersonal conflicts, with an emphasis on an interest-based

approach as the most appropriate for graduate education. In an interest-based approach, discussion is focused on what is valued, and the process can be just as rational as a discussion about research.

An interest-based approach uses the evidence-based approach to resolve conflicts, but avoids embracing specific positions without first exploring a variety of options.

## **STRATEGIES FOR MANAGING AND RESOLVING CONFLICTS**

When facing a conflict, the first strategic decision is whether to exit or continue. Exit means leaving the field of conflict. In the case of a student, this could be as extreme as dropping out of the program.

*An interest-based approach uses the evidence-based approach to resolve conflicts, but avoids embracing specific positions without first exploring a variety of options.*

For a faculty member, it may mean resignation as the student's advisor. If the decision is to continue, then the options are: (1) to act alone (unilateral strategies), (2) to seek a third-party solution (trilateral strategies), or (3) to manage the conflict via one-on-one negotiation (bilateral

strategies). Multiple approaches within one particular situation are common. Each general strategy is defined below in order to set the stage for the process that we believe is most appropriate for graduate education: the interest-based approach—a bilateral, collaborative strategy.



## UNILATERAL STRATEGIES

### **Avoidance**

Conflict avoidance is a common method of conflict management in the academy, even though the research and teaching missions are dependent on engaging in open discussion, critical thinking, and participating in a “culture of critique” that challenges the scholarship of others (Barsky and Wood, 2005; Lewicki, et al., 1999).

Avoiding conflict might reduce stress in the short-term and may be a useful temporary strategy while individuals develop effective communication and conflict management skills. Avoidance may also be the strategy of choice for students concerned about retribution for even asking questions that appear to challenge the authority of faculty members. However, the close working relationship between a graduate student and one or a small group of faculty that characterizes graduate education does not lend itself to the easy use of conflict avoidance as a successful strategy in the long run. Avoidance or denial also may lead to the very situations that the research links to lack of optimal completion rates in graduate programs. Thus, the costs of avoiding a conflict may include apathy of one or both individuals, anger and other negative emotions, and decreased productivity. In addition, avoidance of a conflict, as well as avoidance of the efforts needed to resolve a conflict, without questioning the basis of the conflict can leave the situation ripe for reoccurrence.

For graduate students (and postdoctoral trainees), a sense of vulnerability makes avoidance “safe,” but not effective in all situations. They are keenly aware of the power differential, based on status and expertise, among other attributes, between them and their faculty advisors. Avoidance or even exit may mean the end of one’s career at the specific institution, and interpersonal rancor may lead to problems that follow the student to other institutions either as a student or as a professional. Administrators, such as graduate deans, chairs, or graduate program directors, are in a position to assist students with navigating the power differential. They can also help find productive ways to manage and resolve conflict and, ultimately, to prevent interpersonal conflicts.

## **Accommodation**

Cheldelin and Lucas (2004) define accommodation as a result of a “low regard for one’s own rights and needs and a high concern for the others” (p.15). The result is to “preserve harmony at all costs” (p.52). Students may aim to preserve themselves (and their progress in the graduate program) by giving up their interests. While this may be expedient in the short run, it does not encourage an effective faculty-student relationship or the development of independence and runs the risk of generating additional conflicts. Further, accommodation does not help graduate students (or faculty) develop the skills needed to resolve the conflicts that are an unavoidable part of personal and professional life.

Graduate students often opt to deal with conflict using a combination of avoidance and accommodation. This may get them through their programs, but the experience is not very satisfactory. In addition, the relationship with the advisor is rather shallow and often ruled by intolerance or even resentment. In the rather small communities that define academe, the relationship between faculty and newly-minted Ph.D. students can persist for years, productively or not. Accommodation may also prevent students from learning how to effectively manage conflicts and become good mentors for their own future students.

## **BATNA**

Another unilateral approach is the construction of the “best alternative to a negotiated agreement,” or BATNA (Fisher and Ury, 1991). Utilizing a BATNA, one individual (e.g., a student or post doc) analyzes all the things that he or she controls in his or her situation and also analyzes all the possible outcomes that may result from faculty action. The individual constructs a pathway that does not assume that the individual in power (i.e., faculty member) will ever negotiate anything. The BATNA is based on a politically-savvy understanding of the environment by the student and is virtually the construction of a “most likely” set of scenarios within which the student can then plan his or her actions and reactions (Bazerman and Neale, 1993). A component in the construction of the BATNA is the elucidation of the needs and values of oneself and those of others. Thus, a BATNA borrows from an interest-based approach,

which was introduced in Chapter 2 and is discussed in detail later in this chapter as a bilateral strategy to manage conflicts.

From a graduate student perspective, the use of a BATNA when facing a conflict about the composition of a guidance committee would involve an evaluation of his or her interests such as research needs and financial support as well as those of the faculty. The student would also take into account other factors including the history of collegial interactions of the advisor with other faculty members, the strength and weaknesses of the advisor and those of other potential members of the committee, and the funding situation of the different research programs. From such an analysis, the student develops options that serve his or her interests and those of multiple stakeholders. Options may include taking classes with particular faculty members, arranging for research rotations, or bridging collaborations between the advisor and other researchers. By formulating a BATNA, the graduate student expands his or her understanding of the situation at hand and can move forward with an active strategy to manage the conflict.

The use and success of this strategy depend completely on the ability of the student to accurately “read” his or her environment, understand the range of choices available, and make choices that minimize conflict and prevent failure. It is dependent on faculty and others acting logically in each situation. If a student is isolated for any reason within the graduate program, he or she may not be able to accurately “read” the environment. One student’s successful BATNA is not likely to result in positive change in the system and does not ensure future success by other students in similar situations.

### **Unilateral Decision Based on Authority/Power or Responsibility**

Power (“my way or the highway”) is a unilateral approach available to faculty when responding to conflicts with graduate students. For many students, the definition of power means the absence of discussion. Students are usually very conscious of the power differential between them and faculty. They believe that even achieving a “victory” could result in irreparable professional harm with respect to financial support, good letters of recommendation, and entry into the disciplinary field. Such perception tends to bias

students to use avoidance and accommodation as the modal approach to deal with conflicts with the faculty. It is not always clear to students that faculty decisions are based on a sense of responsibility and not simply a use of power. Discussion about explicit expectations can provide this important contextual information.

Faculty members know they have the power to make many decisions. Many of these overall graduate program decisions should be made unilaterally by faculty, making use of their experience, knowledge, and level of responsibility (e.g., all doctoral students write a dissertation, graduate education should represent cutting-edge knowledge). In fact, one important role of faculty authority is to make clear which decisions are negotiable and which ones are not. But should faculty use their power on every issue? Faculty may like the certainty of things being clearly spelled out (as some students may as well), but would all the faculty choices for students be the appropriate or the wisest ones (e.g., career choices)? Lack of discussion of options with students, many of whom will interact with undergraduate students as TAs or work with their own graduate students as mentors in the future, denies them an important professional development opportunity. Using faculty power may be the fastest solution in the short-run, but may not be effective in the long-run, nor does it provide mentoring and professional development for the student. Multiple decisions based solely on power do not enhance the faculty-student relationship and may result in individuals not wishing to continue to work together.

## TRILATERAL STRATEGIES

### Mediation and Arbitration

Third-person interventions, especially mediation, are widely discussed approaches to conflict resolution on college campuses across the United States (Holton, 1995, 1998; Warters, 1995, 1999) and include such processes as mediation, arbitration, and formal grievance systems. These “third-party” systems work by having an additional individual involved in conflict situations in one of two roles, either as “intermediaries” or as “judges” (Lewicki et al. 1999).

There are a number of alternatives in the “intermediary” role. Intermediaries can shuttle between the two individuals in a communicator/advisor role that does not demand the direct participation of the parties with each other. The intermediary can discuss what he or she thinks is the best course of action, may add the certainty of policy and/or law for context, and may invent the solution, or a range of solutions, for the individuals to consider, some of which neither individual may have seen for themselves. Acting as an intermediary may be the role of graduate school/college staff or an ombudsman in a dispute between a graduate student and his or her faculty member.

An in-depth understanding of the specific graduate program context can be fundamentally important to finding a solution that will be acceptable over both the short- and long-term.

Lack of this understanding can be detrimental to the student. This is one potential risk of the standard mediation process in graduate education. That said, students may seek advice from the graduate school staff or ombudsman as they sort through context, interests, and options for resolving a conflict.

The “judge” role is quite different from the mediator role because this person actually makes decisions for the individuals embroiled in the conflict, finds fault, and assigns damages and consequences (Lewicki et al., 1999). The judge is taking the decision from

*. . . a third person intervention, unless absolutely needed, may well negatively affect that relationship.*

the individuals and making it his or her own. While this may be a role a Graduate Dean may play in the “nth hour” (or the role of a misconduct panel), it is generally not one that enhances the relationship between the graduate student and his or her advisor. It may not lead to an acceptable outcome because, over time, the number of options has been reduced as people say and do things that may escalate the conflict. The role of judge, however, may well be the role played by a department chair, academic dean, or graduate dean and may be the only viable strategy, especially late in a conflict, when options are limited.

Mediation may serve people in the short-run, but may reduce an individual’s confidence in his or her own ability to confront and resolve conflict. And, within the context of the very important faculty-student relationship, a third-person intervention, unless absolutely needed, may well negatively affect that relationship.

Extending this idea to the institution itself, one of the unintended consequences of mediation is the increased dependence on external intervention to resolve interpersonal conflict.

If graduate students are expected to develop into colleagues, it is important that they have the skills to resolve the inevitable conflicts that arise.

## **BILATERAL STRATEGIES**

A bilateral approach is characterized by negotiation between the individuals involved in the conflict. Negotiation is a process in

*If graduate students are expected to develop into colleagues, it is important that they have the skills to resolve the inevitable conflicts that arise.*

which individuals may give and take to get what they want. If the choice is to negotiate, then there are two alternative paths. One path is to adopt a positional or competitive approach, in which any power differential is likely to dictate

the outcome of the negotiation. The alternative path is to adopt an interest-based or collaborative approach.

## **Positional Approach**

A traditional approach to setting expectations and resolving conflicts through negotiation is the stating and defending of a position. This approach is common with collective bargaining agreements or buying a car. Individuals start out at opposite extremes (often inflated) and incrementally work toward a compromise. A position is an issue-specific claim made by each person and is stated as the (only) solution to the problem/issue at hand. Positions often obscure what people really need, because behind the opposed positions, there are often shared and compatible interests that are rarely discussed. Locking into positions sets up a difficult context for the possibility of win-win solutions and often leads to a quick end to a discussion, rather than providing the opportunity to start one. Such an approach may damage relationships and/or stop the process of mentoring.

In the positional bilateral negotiation, individuals state starting positions, which they vigorously defend in response to perceived attacks. As the debate continues, commitment and emotional attachment to particular positions grow (Fisher and Ury, 1991). The back-and-forth of the negotiating results in amending the starting positions in order to reach an agreement. The outcome is usually a compromise. Although a compromise is often viewed as positive, the best option for resolving a conflict is rarely a simple compromise between competing positions. Frequently, the compromise is a solution that actually satisfies no one. A serious additional danger associated with adopting a positional approach is that it strains, and may ultimately destroy, the relationship between individuals.

As stated earlier, the approaches of avoidance and accommodation, rather than the positional approach, are commonly used to deal with conflicts in higher education. But often, an event or series of events triggers anger in the student and/or advisor, and this emotion changes the strategy from passive accommodation and avoidance to swift action and often aggressive competition. When energized by anger, there are numerous factors that predispose people to approach conflicts with positional/competitive strategies that put the student/advisor relationship at risk and inflate the role of power in determining the outcome of any negotiation.<sup>7</sup>

## **Interest-Based Approach—the Preferred Approach for Graduate Education**

Another bilateral approach to resolving conflict is an interest-based approach. The basic tenets of an interest-based approach were introduced in Chapter 2<sup>8</sup> and include having each person identify his or her underlying interests, identify all of the stakeholders who care about resolving the conflict and/or who can affect the outcome, and craft multiple options to consider. The individuals evaluate the options to determine if each addresses the defined issue and whether each satisfies interests of the key stakeholders. This interest-based approach is in contrast to the traditional “positional” negotiation approach in which the focus is on the position of each person, rather than the underlying interests and concerns of the individuals.

Sharing of underlying interests moves the two individuals from a one-dimensional frame anchored by two firm (sometimes seemingly inflexible) positions, to a more creative and comprehensive set of solutions to resolve the conflict. An interest-based approach is the most appropriate for the graduate education context, precisely because it permits relationships to remain intact and encourages their development. In addition, it uses the creativity that defines the academy to work through the challenges of an interpersonal conflict.

It is possible to apply the interest-based approach in a more unilateral way (e.g., BATNA). An individual may identify his or her interests and then use personal knowledge or knowledge derived from other discussions to infer the interests of the individuals who are involved in the conflict and/or are stakeholders. While not the most effective way to apply an interest-based approach, this unilateral application of the process can serve to provoke a level of self-reflection and examination of circumstances that is important for graduate students and their professional development.

Interests might be misused to rationalize a position in a manner that resembles academic argumentation about ideas or analyses. The goal may solely be “to win” rather than to understand. In this way, interests would be used to ignore or deny other individuals their interests. In the most extreme cases, this is a tactic used in the positional approach—that is to deny important things that individuals know to be true in order to not give up any ground in a



conflict. This is an inappropriate and ineffective way to use interests.

## **FOUR STRATEGIES OF AN INTEREST-BASED APPROACH**

An interest-based approach to resolving conflicts relies on four main strategies (as modified from Fisher and Ury (1991):

1. Separate the people from the issue or conflict. The individuals involved must deal with both the people and the problem separately. Discussions take place between people with differing backgrounds, attitudes, and perspectives. Emotions and relationships can become entangled within substantive issues. The objective is to have a working relationship—one that can address differences. This is of fundamental importance in graduate education. Focus on the problem to be solved and the context in which it arises.
2. Focus on the interests of the individuals. It is important to identify the needs, desires, values, and fears that individuals bring to an issue and then to cultivate the options that may lead to resolving the conflict. Focusing on interests will pull attention away from stating firm positions. It is important to note that there are often more than just the two primary individuals who may have interests in the resolution of a particular issue.
3. Brainstorm a variety of options from a range of possible solutions that advance individual and shared interests, and creatively reconcile differing interests that emerge before making a final decision. Inventing prior to critiquing and deciding encourages creativity. These options can then be evaluated, relative to both the issue being discussed and the interests of the individuals.
4. Establish ongoing discussions that can lead to a process whereby the individuals respect flexibility and the ability to reenter the process again as the context changes.

An interest-based approach holds the greatest promise for preserving the relationship between the graduate student and his or her major

professor/advisor during the resolution of conflicts. A rational, systematic discussion based on interests also plays an important role in the socialization of the student(s). It encourages a more objective process for making decisions (even if the final decision is the position of the person in power). It provides students with an important skill for all facets of professional and personal life. And, if a conflict appears to be intractable, the third-person-intervention approach can be an effective next strategy.

**A note of caution: There are instances where this approach, as well as the others described in this chapter, should not be the process of choice. Examples would be federal and state laws relating to discrimination, drug and alcohol use by public employees at work, research misconduct (falsification and fabrication of data and plagiarism), sexual harassment, and similar issues. These would fall into the category of “non-negotiable” and have a separate, explicit university-defined protocol to follow for investigation and definition of options/solutions. Students and faculty should understand these university policies. The explicit expectation is that everyone will use the defined processes for formal investigation and redress in these particular circumstances.**

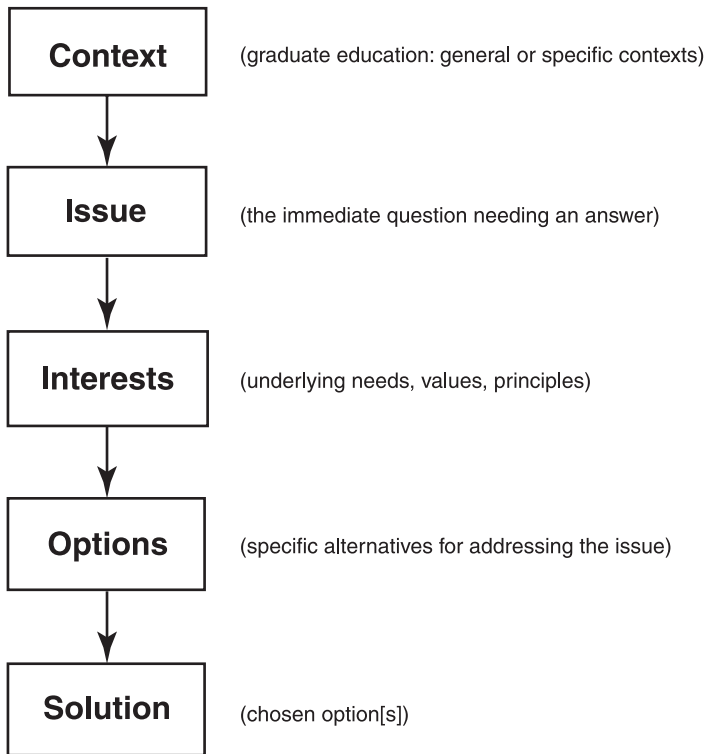
## **HOW DOES THE INTEREST-BASED APPROACH WORK TO RESOLVE CONFLICTS?**

This section is a detailed explanation of how to use an interest-based approach to resolve a conflict. The example is a case study that uses the text from one of our brief video vignettes that demonstrates a common conflict situation in graduate education. The video vignettes permit quick clips of situations with all of the mannerisms and body language that contribute to communication and are more effective than written case studies. Vignettes may be viewed by visiting <http://grad.msu.edu/conflict.htm> (retrieved on 10/10/07).

Each step (see Figure 3.1) in the process of an interest-based approach is explained and consists of:

1. The label of the step based on the definitions provided in Chapter 2
2. The application of the step to the specific vignette/case study, based on past participants' discussion
3. A general commentary to further explain the step and provide interpretive/experiential information

**Figure 3.1.** The steps used to resolve a conflict using an interest-based approach. As in Figure 2.1, the solution becomes part of the context for future discussions.



## **THE VIGNETTE (case study): “Restacking the Committee”**

In the video, the scene is a small conference room. The white male professor, who appears to be a senior faculty member, is engaged in discussion with a white female graduate student. You can view this vignette by visiting <http://grad.msu.edu/conflict.htm> (retrieved on 10/10/07).

*Professor: So, what’s happening?*

*Student: Well, I would like to talk to you about Dr. Roberts taking Dr. Black’s place on my committee.*

*Professor: Why would you want to make a change?*

*Student: Well, I’ve been finding it really difficult to work with Dr. Black. And, I’ve had several classes with Dr. Roberts, and I’ve had really good experiences in them.*

*Professor: Well, I don’t know. I don’t think you should base your decision just on the coursework. The reason I pushed Dr. Black for your committee is that he is really an expert in your research area (student nods in agreement). I know he can be a bear to work with. You may . . . you may find him cantankerous, but I think in the long-run, he’s going to be the best person. I can’t see making a change.*

*Student: What about how I feel about the committee?*

## **CONTEXT**

### **The graduate program context matters!**

Graduate programs are based on disciplines that have their own lore, professional rules (implicit and explicit), and processes. Careful attention must be paid to the specific graduate program context in order for creative and realistic options to be accurately defined.

The specific context for the “Restacking the Committee” vignette is the function (and importance) of guidance committee members and/or advisors in graduate education. The more general context may be defined in graduate handbooks or policies and relate to who may serve on committees and the specific function(s) of such committees.

There may be unstated facts. For example, the professor in the vignette might not get along with or might be competitive with Dr. Roberts. The student may have been sexually harassed by Dr. Black. Issues related to tenure, promotion, co-principal investigator status for the research process, mentoring of junior faculty, reputation, quality of the dissertation or coursework, or long-range career goals may all play a role in this scenario. Other stated or unstated contextual facts, such as an impending sabbatical, funding constraints, or a job opening for the student or faculty member may also affect the nature of the conflict.

**Commentary:** Well-explicated expectations or descriptions of the role(s) of the guidance committee members in a graduate handbook or policy manual can assist in reaching a consensus on the reality of the context for this vignette.

Before an interest-based approach can be effectively implemented, there must be consensus about the facts and conditions in which an issue is embedded. In the vignette, the two individuals agreed about some features of the context (e.g., the importance of research expertise). Their conversation quickly moved to a focus on competing positions to address the issue. Although the two individuals disagree with respect to what to do, they share their perception of reality (i.e., Dr. Black is an expert, but he is also “difficult”). Starting a discussion to identify the key issue, while the individuals hold biased or erroneous perceptions and assumptions, undermines the process in fundamental ways. In cases where there is a serious or continuing dispute over the situation or context relating to the issue, a department chair, graduate program director, or member of the graduate school or college may need to assist with “the facts” or in defining the issue(s) at hand.

***Graduate programs are based on disciplines that have their own lore, professional rules (implicit and explicit), and processes. Careful attention must be paid to the specific graduate program context in order for creative and realistic options to be accurately defined.***

## **EXPECTATIONS** (as a key part of context)

“Restacking the Committee” expectations:

- Professor: Some of the Professor’s expectations were explicit: “The reason I pushed Dr. Black for your committee is that he is really an expert in your research area.” Other expectations were implicit: I have expert power and should have (major) authority when deciding who serves on the guidance committees of my students. I know my faculty colleagues. My opinion should be the final word: “I can’t see making a change.”
- Student: The student also has explicit expectations: It is my committee and I should play a role in determining who should serve as members: “What about how I feel about the committee?” And, the student has implicit expectations: It is my committee and I should have more control over it.

A conversation about the pros and cons of Dr. Black or Dr. Roberts would help the student understand *why* Dr. Black was chosen, the criteria used to select members of a guidance committee, and, ultimately, who may choose and/or approve members.

**Commentary:** Unstated, implicit expectations in the graduate education process lead to confusion, unproductive time and effort on the part of both graduate students and faculty, often resulting in needless attrition (as opposed to attrition based on sound academic or intellectual reasons), as well as stress. Individuals cannot meet expectations, unless they know what they are.

## **STAKEHOLDERS** (as a key part of context)

The most obvious stakeholders in the “Restacking the Committee” vignette are the professor, Dr. Roberts, Dr. Black, other members of the guidance committee, the student, other students of the professor, the department chair, and funders of the research. Who else? Other students have an interest in the outcome, especially if Dr. Roberts or Dr. Black serves on their committees. Faculty members’ personal and professional interactions and relationships, often not obvious to students, may also be part of the context and/or interests. Creative discussion usually identifies other stakeholders outside the immediate graduate program: family members of all of the obvious

stakeholders, Board of Trustees or Regents (depending on how serious the conflict), undergraduates (depending on the conflict itself), and journal editors.

*Commentary:* The important point here is that most conflict situations have multiple stakeholders, and many of these are simply not visible to the student (and/or may not be visible to the faculty member).

## ISSUE

### “Restacking the Committee” issue:

- Who should be on the student’s committee, Dr. Roberts or Dr. Black?
- Secondly, who decides/approves which faculty members serve on guidance committees and/or as advisors? Based on what criteria?

*Commentary:* When using an interest-based approach for resolving conflicts, the issue is defined as the immediate question that needs an answer now. Because graduate education is a complex system (see endnote 3), there are often related issues that contribute to the conflict, but “what needs attention now?” is the question that guides the identification of the issue. Both (or all) individuals involved in the discussion must agree on what the issue is.

What happens if the individuals do not agree on the issue? In this case, as was true for disputes over the context or “facts,” an informed third party may assist in defining the issue. Often, several issues emerge simultaneously. When this occurs, each issue should be considered separately, in sequence, rather than in parallel.

## INTERESTS

Each person or stakeholder who has a concern about the general issue or the specific conflict has interests.

In the “Restacking the Committee” vignette, the stakeholder interests are:

- Professor’s interests (among others): Quality of the research, balance of expertise, control, reputation, career advancement, productive use of time/effort, career options for his or her

student, and balancing the needs of multiple students for effective guidance committees

- Student's interests (among others): Quality of the research, good relationship with faculty advisor and members of the committee, access to a quality advising experience, control, maximizing career options and timing of those options, family issues, and funding.
- Dr. Roberts/Dr. Black interests (among others): Personal research agenda, reputation, and career enhancement
- Other faculty members (on guidance committee) interests (among others): Quality of the students who complete and reputation of the program
- Interests (among others) of other students of the professor in the vignette: Consistency of application of policies, fairness, quality research experience, and product
- Dept. Chair/Head interests (among others): Quality of the dissertation, financial support, student completion rates, time-to-degree, and avoiding conflicts with faculty, especially over frequent committee changes

**Commentary:** As in setting expectations, interests are at the heart of resolving interpersonal conflicts. When an interest-based approach to conflict resolution is taught to groups of students and/or faculty (see Chapter 4), the participants are asked to step back and develop a list of interests for the main stakeholders depicted in the vignette, in this case the student and the faculty advisor. In the workshop setting focused on a conflict depicted in a vignette, participants quickly identify interests. The goal is to develop and practice those skills so that they are applied in a real conflict where negative emotions, time, and resources may contribute to the difficulty of the discussion.<sup>9</sup>

For the interest-based approach to be most effective, individuals need to move from the most common process of jumping reflexively to establishing positions to expanding on the interests of the stakeholders.

One of the important reasons to have interest-based approaches become a “habit of mind” is to think more openly about interests



and options early and often, rather than to focus only on taking quick positions.

Subsequently, evaluation of options needs to address explicitly whether the option provides an answer to the defined issue and where it meets at least one interest of either individual, not necessarily the largest number of interests or only common interests.

*One of the important reasons to have interest-based approaches become a “habit of mind” is to think more openly about interests and options early and often, rather than to focus only on taking quick positions.*

## OPTIONS

### “Restacking the Committee” stated options:

The two initial positions (professor and student) are two of the options.

*Professor’s position: I don’t see any reason to change committee members. I chose Dr. Black for his expertise in your research area.*

*Student’s position: I want to replace Dr. Black with Dr. Roberts.*

**Commentary:** Two initial options are the positions that individuals may have originally brought to a discussion or conflict. By examining the interests of all persons, it is possible to devise additional options, or at least to continue the discussion about the issue (of who should be on a guidance committee and who decides). Again, as noted in Chapter 2, it is more productive to “brainstorm” as many options as possible, without an immediate critique of each one. The evaluation of the options to decide on the most appropriate choice is the next step.

What might be additional, viable options based on interests germane to the individuals in this vignette? When this vignette is used with groups of graduate students and/or faculty, a number of options are suggested: a) keep Dr. Black and add Dr. Roberts; b) continue discussion with the student to elicit his or her concerns about Dr. Black (perhaps harassment, perhaps some other personal

issue) or the faculty member's concerns about Dr. Roberts (maybe he or she has not successfully helped a student complete or is not familiar with the current literature); c) change research topics; d) add another committee member; e) use Dr. Roberts as a consultant; f) change the major advisor; g) meet with Dr. Black to discuss issues with an advisor to mediate; h) change graduate programs, or i) quit.

## **EVALUATION OF THE OPTIONS**

Evaluation of the options is a two-step process prior to a decision (see Figure 2.2). The result of this exercise is a short list of options that address the issue and serve at least one or some of the interest(s). The final discussion of these remaining options is completed in relation to the context. This discussion includes factors such as the standards of the field of study, professional standards or requirements, university or graduate school policy, fairness, and experience. A discussion of the intended and unintended consequences of each option should be included in this final analysis. A final option or set of options is selected and implemented. For effective conflict resolution, as for setting expectations, a later check on the effectiveness of the option(s) chosen is very useful.

**“Restacking the Committee” evaluation of options:** The options that provide a solution to the issue in the “Restacking the Committee” vignette and that best serve the interest of establishing an effective and collegial committee to facilitate research might be considered a priority by both the student and the professor, as well as other committee members. Dr. Black's expertise may be required because the advisor lacks skills in a particular methodology.

The faculty advisor and student may continue their discussion and determine which interests are met by which options. It may be that Dr. Black is the content expert and may have connections important for a career choice of which the student is unaware. It may be that Dr. Roberts is a new faculty member that the advisor may be willing to help mentor if she is also added to the committee.

**Commentary:** This process of objectively discussing interests and how options that serve them interact with the context of the graduate program serves two purposes. First, it heightens the student's awareness of the importance of a guidance committee and helps to clarify for students the rationale behind faculty advice and

choices. A discussion of interests also constitutes an opportunity for the faculty member to contribute to the development of the student as a future faculty member in the academy or to the development of the student as an effective contributing member to any team effort he or she will be involved in no matter what career path.

# CHAPTER 4

## ENGAGING YOUR CAMPUS COMMUNITY

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**W**hy should graduate programs and universities invest time and effort in training graduate students, faculty members, and graduate school/college personnel in an interest-based approach to resolving conflicts and setting expectations?

*“The better one’s understanding of the informal expectations, the longer the duration in the program.”*  
(Lovitts, 2001)

*“Frustration as a result of unfulfilled expectations is cited as a primary reason for leaving by students who exit within the first two years. And, students who leave later in their programs cite a poor advisor-student relationship, as well as the lack of financial aid and unsupportive departmental climate as their primary reasons for attrition.”* (Nerad and Miller, 1996)

*“Not surprisingly, graduate student relations with faculty are regarded by most doctoral students as the most important aspect of the quality of their graduate experience, but many also report it as “the single most disappointing aspect of their graduate experience.”* (Hartnett and Katz, 1977)

*“Conflict and its resolution cannot be left to be done at the level of personal spats amongst academics in departments, but must be raised to the level of the entire university.”* (West, 2006)

*“I was exposed to this workshop during my first semester on campus and I think it’s one of the best things I did in terms of shaping my expectations for my doctoral*

*plan of study. It helped me to realize that conflict is inevitable and that even though I'm a student that I can negotiate with faculty. I learned to look for the [reasons] underlying . . . positions. . . . I've used these skills in setting expectations for my assistantships and, thus far, conflicts have been handled before they escalate.”*  
(Participant in Resolving Conflicts workshop at Michigan State University, 2000)

Ample evidence from research and national surveys demonstrates the need and the positive consequences that result if expectations are made explicit and are mutually-understood and if there is a constructive process to resolve conflicts. Improving the understanding of expectations and developing skills in conflict management will help to improve the completion rate for all graduate students, to welcome those who have been educationally disadvantaged, and to enhance the experience and productivity for graduate students and faculty. An interest-based approach to setting expectations and resolving conflicts is one activity that will assist in these efforts.

There are a number of ways to engage a campus community in using the strategies introduced in this monograph. For significant systemic changes, an iterative plan must be developed. As stated earlier in this monograph, but important to reiterate here: Disciplinary differences must be understood and then appropriately considered in order for this model to be effective. The most effective model is for students and faculty to learn these skills for themselves. Expectations of the faculty, who are ultimately the gatekeepers and the stewards of the discipline, define the acceptable norms for behavior; for productivity; for what constitutes “excellent” research methods, analysis, experimental design, or scholarship; and success. In addition, engaging faculty support at the program level for the approach described here is important for the process to be adopted and for it to have a positive impact on the environment in the graduate program. Faculty support for using an interest-based approach to setting expectations and resolving conflicts depends on their understanding that the goals are in their individual and collective interests (Damrosch, 1995).

An important criterion for opening opportunities to present and use an interest-based approach to setting expectations and resolving conflicts is the credibility of the graduate school/college and/or

collegiate deans with faculty and graduate students. The assistant and associate deans, the dean, as well as other graduate school/college staff who are well-regarded and trusted on campus will be the most likely to engage department chairs or heads and/or graduate program directors in conversations about trying an interest-based approach to setting expectations and resolving conflicts. These are also the individuals on campus who understand the nature, frequency, and seriousness of conflicts that might arise between faculty and graduate students in the specific graduate programs. If a campus has an ombudsman, that individual is also knowledgeable about conflicts, and is often trusted by both faculty and graduate students as being a good problem-solver. Perhaps the most important challenges for the implementation of the interest-based approach endorsed here are understanding the differences in disciplinary cultures and respecting the level of intensity and critical nature of faculty-student relationships between doctoral and master's degree students and their advisors.

There are many opportunities to set explicit expectations and to help students and faculty learn to resolve conflicts effectively. Multiple reinforcing initiatives will improve the environment for graduate education. Graduate school/college deans and staff could organize and facilitate programs centrally or assist with local-level program efforts. Examples include:

- Establishing minimal requirements for, and regularly updating, graduate program handbooks with the goal of providing explicit expectations.
- Providing conflict resolution workshops for students, graduate program directors, and others.
- Organizing an extended orientation program focused on expectations in a graduate program and/or in the professional field of study.
- Reinforcing an understanding of expectations in newsletters, program meetings, flyers, and contracts.
- Incorporating an opportunity for a discussion of setting expectations prior to a particular step in the graduate education process, such as prior to cohort-based internships or comprehensive exams.

- Establishing graduate program mentoring committees and/or student advocates who understand and value the importance of explicit expectations and who may teach skills in resolving conflicts to others.
- Educating faculty and teaching assistants about setting explicit expectations and resolving conflicts in the classroom.
- Linking setting expectations and resolving conflicts training with projects designed to increase student diversity and/or in training grant activities.
- Inviting outside speakers to discuss expectations in the field of study, responsible conduct of research, career expectations, and/or professional behavior.
- Modeling interest-based approach behaviors, for example, as part of workshops and later, in one-on-one discussions with the ombudsman or graduate program directors.

## **ESTABLISHING A WORKSHOP ON SETTING EXPECTATIONS AND RESOLVING CONFLICTS**

The complexity of the graduate education system makes it difficult to determine the impact of a specific intervention on graduate degree completion. One-time training in an environment with little or no reinforcement will not provide a platform for real change (Goldstein and Ford, 2001). As Damrosch (1995) points out, “local changes, if they can be carried through gradually and cumulatively, can have profound consequences across the entire system” (p. 159). A process, such as an interest-based approach, is easier and more effective to teach and to learn in an interactive group setting, but such a workshop is not sufficient alone. Reinforcement of the skills using one or more of the initiatives suggested above will maximize effectiveness.

The need to resolve existing conflicts captures the immediate attention of graduate school/college staff or graduate program directors. Resolution of conflicts is of great importance to graduate students. A workshop is an effective means both to teach the

interest-based approach and to provide a setting that contributes to the socialization of graduate students to the academy. The skills learned in a workshop setting, however, should result in behaviors that are instrumental in achieving positive outcomes as faculty and students interact to manage conflicts and to set explicit expectations. The positive outcomes reinforce those behaviors and, thus, augment and extend the impact of the workshop.

### **How to Get Started**

In planning for a workshop series, there are helpful individuals with whom a graduate dean might consult. These individuals can provide advice on who may already have the necessary training to help facilitate such workshops. Examples include an ombudsman; campus mediation center; faculty in communications, labor relations, or similar fields; international student office staff; and faculty development office staff. It is also quite effective for graduate school staff to be trained to be presenters. In fact, these individuals are likely to have the knowledge of the graduate education cultures and environments across the campus that is important for workshop success.

### **A Case Study: How One University Promoted the Interest-Based Approach**

There are also resources for graduate deans, including this publication, that can serve as source materials for workshops or other training activities. Michigan State University, for example, has made available an animated PowerPoint presentation, a multitude of video vignettes that serve as discussion triggers, participant worksheets, and other materials (see Appendixes A and B). These materials have served as the basis for workshops on campus and at the annual meeting of the Council of Graduate Schools. Some of these are available now, and others will be made available in spring 2008, for download at: <http://grad.msu.edu/conflict.htm> (*retrieved on 10/10/07*).

MSU established four goals for workshop attendees:

- 1) Learn an interest-based approach to setting expectations and conflict resolution skills



2) Participate in facilitated discussions, using video vignettes as conversation triggers, about the specific areas of conflict that may arise within their graduate program

3) Use interest-based conflict resolution skills to collectively establish agreed-upon departmental understandings of mutual expectations and responsibilities

4) Learn and use other communication skills that strengthen and reinforce the interest-based conflict resolution skills, and that may be used during the process of setting expectations

Active learning in an interactive workshop is an effective method for training students, faculty, postdoctoral trainees, and/or staff in the use of an interest-based approach to setting expectations and resolving conflicts. It is also an effective method to help socialize graduate students by exposing them (via the video vignettes) to the conflicts that may arise from the various choice/decision points in every graduate education experience. The workshop setting itself provides a context within which to strengthen social connections amongst the students. It can also increase the visibility of graduate school/college personnel, who can often provide a “safe” environment in which to discuss issues and seek advice beyond the power structure of any particular department. This safe environment may be particularly attractive to international students, non-traditional students, and those from under-represented groups. The opportunity to solve conflicts early by knowing the helpful personnel and the necessary skills helps preserve the relationship and avoids compounding the original issue to be resolved. The obvious caveat here is that in a workshop setting there is no guarantee of complete confidentiality. Students who wish to discuss their own situations should be encouraged to do so in a more private setting.

While the workshops that are presented in a department or disciplinary setting, engaging both faculty and graduate students, are likely to have the largest positive effect on improving the culture, other venues are also productive. For example, the staff of the Graduate School at MSU has also presented these workshops to graduate students alone from single or multiple disciplines. While the disciplinary differences may present additional challenges to the facilitators, who must understand the nuances of these differences as questions arise, they resulted in greater understanding among the students themselves across the various graduate programs. Interna-

tional graduate students appear to use the workshops not only to learn the conflict resolution skills, but also to better grasp the graduate education enterprise as it operates in the United States.

### **Workshop Format**

The *Setting Expectations and Resolving Conflicts* program is designed for use in three types of workshops. One workshop is for graduate students alone. Graduate students can come from one department/program or across campus where they learn from each other. The workshop for graduate students is designed for a 2- to 2.5-hour period. The second type of workshop is for faculty and graduate students from the same department or graduate program. A few minor modifications of the student workshop, such as choice of vignettes and role of the facilitator to ensure that student voices are heard, are needed for this joint faculty-student workshop. The department specific program is designed for approximately 2 to 3 hours. A final type is a workshop for faculty alone. This workshop includes all of the activities of the student workshop or department/program workshop and may be focused on setting expectations (e.g., changes in policies or practices), conflict resolution, or both.

Our experience is that it is easier to sponsor the graduate student workshop because the students are willing to spend 2 to 3 hours learning skills they believe are important for their success. The workshop involving both graduate students and faculty, however, may be more effective because the graduate education process is, in fact, a partnership between faculty and students, especially at the doctoral level. When using the video vignettes on the responsible conduct of research (see Appendix), the workshop can also be used for post-doctoral fellows.

### **Video Vignettes**

The workshops use short video vignettes depicting interactions between faculty and graduate students. Sixty-three vignettes are available (see Appendix for a brief sample description). These vignettes are key tools and are used to trigger discussion among workshop participants. Selection of specific vignettes that are closely aligned with the concerns of specific participants (e.g., lab-based vignettes, dissertation writing, coursework) enables the facilitator to

focus on those issues most likely to evoke discussion about issues of importance, or even contention, amongst participants. Discussion of vignettes allows participants to safely explore the issues in the vignette, as well as to learn an interest-based approach. In our experience, participants often generate creative solutions to the conflicts depicted in the vignette and begin to discuss expectations that might have been made explicit earlier in order to prevent the conflict in the future (a “roll the movie back” exercise).

### **Comments from Workshop Participants**

The effectiveness of the training programs via interactive workshops and, more importantly, the positive reinforcement and further experiential learning that takes place after the workshop is illustrated in several sample comments from student participants at Michigan State University:

- *“I was very hesitant to confront my advisor about my needs in terms of [comprehensive exams] and/or thesis. As it turned out, we negotiated a compromise that was much more helpful to me in both my professional and academic goals, and the end result means I have negotiated several new opportunities. I think these workshops were very helpful.”*
- *“While I have a collegial relationship with my advisor, the workshop helped me think about my work and graduate school from his perspective . . . . If I am not getting what I think I need (in the way of feedback, attention, etc.), I take a step back from the situation to evaluate it before proceeding with any kind of complaint. The workshop also offered ways of approaching asking for what I need that were non-confrontational and positive—I have tried to incorporate those approaches in my dealings with all professors and graduate student colleagues.”*
- *“I completed my Ph.D. degree at Michigan State University [and] . . . I am a postdoctoral research associate . . . . The workshop that I attended helped me to understand that there were people at MSU who actually cared about whether or not I successfully completed my degree program, and were willing to help me to accomplish my goal. It also helped me to realize that conflicts between students and faculty were*

*common, and that while faculty hold 99.99% of power in faculty-student relationship, it is not totally 100% as I had believed up until the time that I took the workshop . . . . Thank you for such a valuable workshop, which was a major assistance to me in successfully completing my Ph.D. degree.”*

## **FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS**

These are examples of questions that have been asked most often over a decade of workshop presentations.

### **Why not just wait and see if things will “blow over”?**

While conflict avoidance is the modal approach to issues in university settings (Barsky and Wood, 2005), one of the major disadvantages of this approach is that the more time that elapses, the less attractive the conflict resolution options become. In fact, the individuals involved may say and do things that preclude some options as viable. Graduate deans and others may talk with students only after a situation has festered for a long period of time (not unusual as students are loathe to discuss issues because of their feeling of vulnerability) when few options exist for resolution. And, over time, individuals may become angry.

### **What happens when one or both individuals are angry?**

A brief summary of a growing body of research on this topic that is easy to remember is, “Anger makes you stupid” (see endnote 7). Anger also (finally) initiates action. In graduate education, conflicts between students and faculty tend to remain under the surface for long periods of time. The shift from a baseline of conflict avoidance to an active attention to conflict, when it finally happens, often stems from an incident that triggers anger in one or both parties; different from other negative emotions, anger can motivate energetic goal-oriented behaviors, in part by increasing our optimism about the consequences of our actions (Lerner and Keltner, 2001). Also, laboratory studies (Lerner, 2005) indicate that anger, either incidental or triggered by an adversary in a negotiation, diminishes our ability to identify effectively our own interests as well as those of others while negotiating.

Taking action when conflict arises is the right approach under most conditions, but when we act in anger we tend to appraise the situation with an inflated sense of control and certainty (see review by Lerner and Tiedens, 2006), which are common psychological antecedents for the adoption of strong positions when facing an issue.

Anger deserves special attention when implementing an interest-based approach to setting expectations and resolving conflicts. Anger clearly interferes with key operational and attitudinal components of that ap-

proach in any context, but given some features of academic life (e.g., prevalence of conflict avoidance), the impact of anger may be particularly problematic for conflict resolution and the joint setting of expectations between graduate students and faculty.

**What does it mean to “negotiate”? Graduate education is not a “labor-management” activity.**

“Negotiate” is often suggested in mentoring manuals for resolving conflicts (Cohen and Cohen, 2005; King, 2003). In the graduate education context, “negotiate” means open discussion, doing one’s homework in terms of exploring stakeholders and their interests on issues, and coming up with creative option(s).

A part of graduate education may, in fact, involve “labor-management” issues. In these cases, collective bargaining agreements are negotiated either by the traditional positional approach or by an interest-based approach. The collective bargaining agreements explicitly state expectations. They also define a formal grievance procedure that must be used when resolving conflicts that arise within the narrowly-defined range of issues in such an agreement (e.g., wages, hours, and working conditions).

*. . . anger, either incidental or triggered by an adversary in a negotiation, diminishes our ability to identify effectively our own interests as well as those of others while negotiating.*

### **Are all interests of equal importance? Are there “priorities”?**

As explained in more detail in Chapter 2, the weighting of interests is not as important as a fair and open exploration of the options. Prioritization of interests or a focus on only a single, perhaps intangible interest (Atran, et al., 2007), can lead to positional behavior. An individual who focuses on the question, “Does this option meet my most important interest?” leads to demands that it must.

### **Questions Students Ask:**

#### **What about faculty who are so powerful that they don’t even want to talk to me at all?**

Advice to students is an important part of a workshop experience. We often advise students to try using the process to think carefully about stakeholders and interests, and to devise some options (e.g., a BATNA). If a faculty member still doesn’t want to engage in a discussion, the advice is to seek out a trusted faculty member to talk to, perhaps an ombudsman or someone in the graduate school/college. There may be issues/interests of which students are simply not aware.

Asking for assistance from an ombudsman, graduate program director, department chair, or graduate school/college staff member may, in fact, be very helpful, especially if a conflict has been lengthy or complicated. These individuals are likely to be aware of student interests, faculty interests, and the context of the program. Graduate students trained in the use of an interest-based approach are encouraged to do “homework” prior to discussion with a faculty member, to learn policies and practices, and to explore their own interests, as well as the interests of the faculty member.

#### **What if the interests of the two individuals are incompatible?**

Faculty and graduate students (as well as others in a graduate program) share the common interest of a high-quality graduate program, courses, theses/dissertations, and reputation. Students can seek additional advice on specific issues from an ombudsman, dean of students, member of a graduate school/college staff. In the end, faculty members often have the final decision in many matters based on their responsibilities and expertise, but a better understanding of

*why* a particular decision is made can help a student to continue successfully.

Some interests may well appear to be incompatible. A common issue with differing interests is a career trajectory for a student (e.g., the research university with faculty interests of visibility and/or reputation or a two- or four-year college with student interests being a focus on teaching, location, or family concerns). Or, interests by faculty in mentoring junior colleagues or in their own tenure/promotion by inviting participation on a guidance committee may occur. In these cases, the individuals may not share interests openly.

As laid out in the interest-based approach to setting expectations and resolving conflicts, however, the important point is not to have to agree on interests, but rather to talk about them in order to develop creative options. This is a key learning opportunity for students.

### **What about a “toxic” program context?**

Occasionally, there are contexts in which sexual harassment, discrimination, consensual relations, or other serious issues may arise. Students are urged and faculty/administrators are required to use the offices and policies on their campus that are set up explicitly to deal with these issues. In such situations, an interest-based approach between a student and a faculty member is not the appropriate (or even legal) approach.

### **How will this model work if faculty members don’t want to use an interest-based approach?**

Students or post-doctorates can use this model to think about their issues and concerns (e.g., a BATNA). The process can help individuals determine their interests, as well as to think broadly about other people who have a stake in what happens. Students can also think about more creative options that faculty may find acceptable. If an individual uses an interest-based approach to “do his or her homework” on a particular issue or concern, he or she will better be able to work out creative options to discuss with faculty.

### **What about my fear of retribution if I challenge a faculty member’s decision or position?**

This is one of the most difficult issues to discuss with students. Often, they feel quite powerless, and depending on the cultural

background of the student, the unquestioning respect for authority can render them unwilling to stand up to even unacceptable practices in a graduate program. Most graduate programs have a graduate program director or an associate chair/head whose job it is to assist students with complex situations. A complete graduate handbook might even identify that person and encourage students to seek out advice. Ultimately, the environment in the graduate program will determine the willingness of students to ask questions that may appear to challenge faculty authority.

### **What happens if one of the faculty options does not follow university or departmental policies?**

In this case, the student should be directed to seek an opinion from an informed third person, such as a department chair, ombudsman, academic dean, or graduate dean. In these cases, someone familiar with policy and/or responsible for monitoring policy may need to be involved.

### **Questions Faculty Ask:**

#### **Isn't this just "hand holding?"**

That would be an easy retort to avoid change. In fact, the graduate student population today is not the same demographically or culturally, as it was fifteen to twenty years ago, and it will continue to change. Being accountable for resources, such as time and funding, and being willing to improve and change as a result of research recommendations should be a part of our individual and collective academic responsibilities (Damrosch, 1995).

#### **Are interests what students "should" need or want or what they "think" they need or want? Sometimes, they just don't have enough experience to know what they should want.**

Individuals will express the interests they believe to be important to them. An effective faculty mentor will guide a student to interests that the faculty members believe they "should" value; i.e., quality research guided by experts or the integration of knowledge from multiple sources to prepare for comprehensive exams. Faculty, however, may not share or hold some interests that students have, such as completing a degree by a certain date. Effective mentoring allows for a full discussion of the context,



interests, and options connected to an individual graduate student's program.

**What about the *time* needed to do the necessary training?**

This is, perhaps, the most common question raised by faculty. Time is faculty members' most precious resource. Research cited earlier in this monograph noted the greater productivity of faculty and students if their professional relationship is effective. The time that is required to sort out a conflict, especially one that has escalated, and in terms of trust and willingness to continue a professional relationship, is not trivial. Serious, long-running conflicts often require the time of additional individuals in order to resolve. The time required to reestablish a tarnished reputation of a faculty member or department should also be considered. The question becomes *when* to invest the time—early in order to establish explicit expectations or later to resolve conflicts, tend to formal grievances, or mend reputations. Time spent later is usually much longer than the time spent initially to set expectations and to develop effective strategies to manage conflicts.

**Why don't you just use game theory as an approach?**

Conflict resolution based on “gains and losses among opposing players” (as game theory is defined by Webster's dictionary) is not compatible with the environment of graduate education, in part because such a model mischaracterizes the faculty-student relationship ([www.merriam-webster.com](http://www.merriam-webster.com), *retrieved on 10/10/07*).

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# APPENDIX

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**A**n animated PowerPoint presentation and the video vignettes, scripts, and notes are available online at: <http://grad.msu.edu/conflict.htm> (*retrieved on 10/10/07*). The static version of the PowerPoint is provided at the end of the Appendix.

## APPENDIX A. VIDEO VIGNETTES AND SCRIPTS

Sixty-three vignettes are available covering a wide range of topics, including responsible conduct of research, writing the thesis or dissertation, teaching assistantships, balancing work and family life, guidance committee membership, and funding issues. The scripts for three of these vignettes are in Chapters 2 and 3. A complete list is available on the Web site listed above.

Examples of a few of the video vignette topics are included below:

### MSU Favorites

1. **Fair Exchange**—faculty using a student’s classroom project as part of his library search for a disciplinary conference paper.
2. **The Balancing Act**—dormitory job (funding) vs. time for pursuing degree.
3. **Science on the Move**—authorship issue in science-rights of a female P.I. vs. rights of a student to control his research.
4. **Out to Lunch**—male faculty and female grad discuss her being included in lunch excursions that now just include his male students.



5. **Restacking the Committee**—female graduate student wants to change a committee member. Male faculty disagrees (for good reasons that are explained). Whose choice is it?
6. **Double Bind**—problems of a single parent with a sick child in meeting TA duties. Is there a back-up plan? Who knows about it? Minority male faculty and minority female student.
7. **The Sum of the Parts**—three co-authored publications do not equal a dissertation. Male faculty and female student discussion. Different expectations.
8. **Sunny Skies**—student plans to leave for Spring Break, faculty has other ideas; best time to do research.
9. **Unnecessary Questions**—“if you have to ask, maybe you don’t belong in graduate school.”
10. **Unused Advice**—faculty tells student that her failure to follow his advice will result in more time needed to collect data, and that her decision not to follow his advice affects more than just her.
11. **Holding Out**—“no magic checklist for a dissertation.” How much help is enough?
12. **Even More Revisions**—faculty encourages student who has just defended that it is OK and expected to have more revisions.

#### Responsible Conduct of Research

1. **Fair Exchange**—faculty using a student’s classroom project as part of his library search for a disciplinary conference paper.
2. **Science on the Move**—authorship issue in science rights of a female P.I. vs. rights of a student to control his research.
3. **Missing Data**—two students without data for a class project debate faking an issue.


4. **On the Dotted Line**—Graduate Assistant funded by a company, delayed publication of thesis, “I never signed the form.”
5. **Jump on the Journals**—student and faculty discuss where to publish a paper, “my name, my lab, my journal.”
6. **Promises, Promises**—Graduate Assistant support doesn’t materialize, grants cut, letter never promised money.
7. **Inconvenient Timing**—male faculty can’t write a letter of recommendation for his student until his patent application is filed. Student needs the letter to stay in U.S.; conflict of commitment.
8. **Moving Day**—Student packs up research project files after completing his degree. Faculty objects; project files stay in the lab.

A final note on communications skills:

The ability to communicate well is important when setting expectations and resolving conflict. Through the workshop on setting expectations and resolving conflicts, participants can analyze communication examples and body language shown in the vignettes and discover that the messages they and others create are a combination of what they say and how they say it. They also learn that messages should be considered in the larger context of the specific environment/culture, the audience, the communication goal, power relationships, timing, others involved, perspective taking, communication history, ability to read non-verbal cues, and the source as messenger.

# APPENDIX B. THE POWERPOINT PRESENTATION

MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY



Setting Expectations and Resolving Conflict

## Setting Expectations and Resolving Conflicts Between Faculty and Graduate Students

<http://grad.msu.edu/conflict.htm>

Program development and implementation are supported in part by grants from The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation (1991-1993) and the U.S. Department of Education's Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education (1994-1996).

The Graduate School  
Michigan State University 2007

1

## Why Focus on Graduate Students?

- Nationwide, only **50%** of students entering Ph.D. programs obtain that degree in 10 years. (Denesco, 2006)
- Differences between "early" and "late" leavers (Hered and Miller, 1995)
  - Early leavers (within 2 years): unmet expectations
  - Late leavers (after 4 or more years): Faculty-student relationship, lack of departmental integration (Lodts, 2001)

The Graduate School  
Michigan State University 2007

2

## Basic Assumptions

- Many issues in Graduate Education are not negotiable (Laws, Contracts, Requirements)
- Conflict itself is neither good nor bad – it's how conflict is handled that is good or bad
- The power differential between Graduate Students and Faculty will always exist.
- We should not expect 100% retention or completion

The Graduate School  
Michigan State University 2007

3


## Why Does the Faculty/Student Relationship Matter?

- Research mentor as a key individual
- Decades of continuous interactions via professional societies
- Careers depend on good letters of recommendation
- Faculty Power: stipends, work assignments, resources, advice
- Dependence on a small group of faculty (guidance committees)
- Limited flexibility within a small community

The Graduate School  
Michigan State University 2007

4

## Identify the Issue



What's the Question?

- An issue is the **immediate** question for which you need an answer (it may not be the only basis of conflict but it is the question needing attention now).
  - who should be on my committee?
  - when will I defend my dissertation?
- Both parties must agree on what the issue is.

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Michigan State University 2007

5

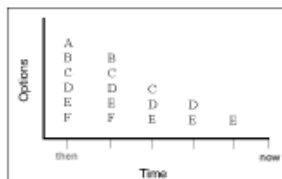
## Strategies to Resolve Conflict

- Avoidance Strategy
- Accommodating Strategy
- Positional Strategy
- Interest-based Strategy

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Michigan State University 2007

6

## Options Over Time



The Graduate School  
Michigan State University 2007

7

## Positional Approach

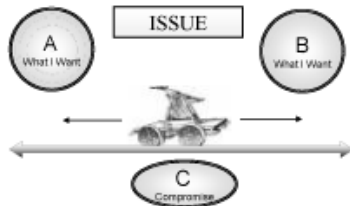
A position is a claim that one makes to answer the immediate question (the issue).

- "I want Dr. Roberts on my committee"
- "You will defend in the Fall of 2007"

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Michigan State University 2007

8

## The Positional Approach to Resolving a Conflict



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9

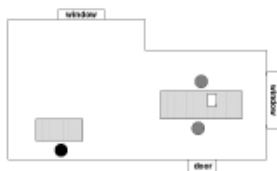
## The Positional Approach...

- Narrows options in the beginning to two positions; neither one may be the best answer to the issue.
- May produce a winner and a loser or 2 losers!
- May harm the relationship

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Michigan State University 2007

10

## The Library



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Michigan State University 2007

11

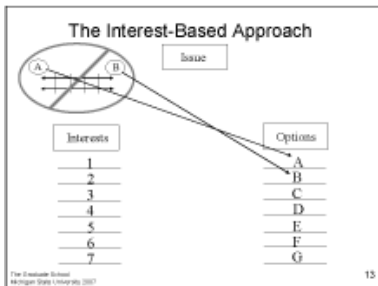
## What are Interests?

Interests are needs that must be satisfied and values that must be preserved.

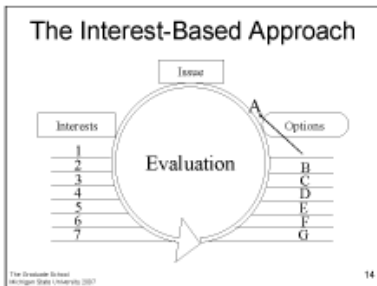
- Self-esteem
- Good working relationships
- Research excellence
- Financial security
- Reputation

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12



13



14

“Easy to understand, hard to practice” ... WHY?

- Trained to be solution-oriented
- Rewarded for defending our solutions well
- Against our “nature”?
- Strong emotions are triggered
- Faster

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15



16



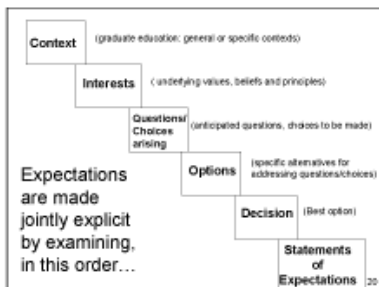
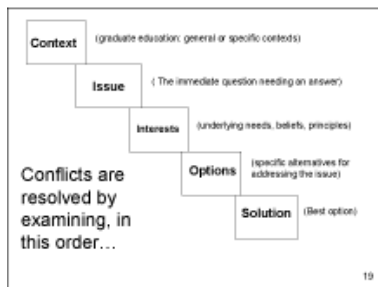
17

### Anger

- Predisposes one to use a positional strategy.
- Impairs one's ability to identify interests.
- Compromises one's rational decision-making abilities.

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18



### Implicit Expectations

**Implicit Expectations:** Not stated and rarely understood.

- "What didn't you understand about what I didn't tell you?"
- "What part of my silence didn't you understand?"

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21

### Explicit Expectations

**Explicit Expectations:**

- Clearly Stated (verbally or in written form)
- Checked for understanding
- Unilaterally or jointly set

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Michigan State University 2007

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## ENDNOTES

### CHAPTER ONE

<sup>1</sup>Lovitts's (2001) comprehensive analysis of reasons for attrition supports the central hypothesis that faculty and administrators tend to overestimate the role of the "personal disposition of graduate students" as a reason for attrition and underestimate the role of the graduate education climate in the department/unit. According to Lovitts, faculty do not see themselves as actors in the attrition decision; rather, they see themselves as "actors or co-actors for retention" for successful students. Dr. Lovitts's comment that attrition is a "silent" occurrence (Lovitts, 2001) is supported by our experience on our campus and talking to graduate school staff members from other campuses. Often, the only person in the department who seems to know which students left and, more importantly, when and why they left, is the graduate secretary! Legitimate reasons for leaving graduate school certainly exist, but for those students who are well into a graduate degree program, we do need to ask what happened and consider the effects on individual human beings. It is also useful to remember that while the cost of a disappointing faculty-student relationship is borne mostly by the student, the faculty member also loses the intellectual contributions made by the student, as well as time and invested resources.

The fundamental difference in educational expectations and actual processes at the doctoral level may be why students responded to some past surveys by expressing that they do "not like the people they are becoming" (Swazey and Anderson, 1996) or that they believe there is a "mismatch" between their education and their career aspirations, as well as the realities of the job market (Golde and Dore, 2001, Nerad and Cerny, 1999). Students also respond that they desire more mentoring and structured opportunities to become socialized into their disciplines (Austin and McDaniels, 2006). The profound professional and personal changes required of students support Dr. Lovitts's claim that social integration and having a support network are fundamentally important for successful completion of the degree (Lovitts 2001). Graduate student-faculty interaction and its effect on socialization are of critical importance for academic success (Baird, 1969; Barger and Chamberlain, 1983; Bauer and Green, 1994; Gerholm, 1990; Girves and Wemmerus,

1988; Golde, 1996; Gully, 1994; Hartnett and Katz, 1977; Kerlin, 1995; Lipschutz, 1993; Lovitts, 2001; Nerad and Miller, 1996; Tinto, 1993; Weidman, et. al., 2001). As a student progresses through his or her program, the guidance committee and/or major professor/faculty advisor become the center of his or her educational community (see Tinto, 1993).

<sup>2</sup>A useful concept for understanding (or remembering) the considerable professional and personal challenges that graduate students face was raised by Brown and Duguid in the *Social Life of Information* (2000). They describe undergraduate education as “knowledge extensive” and “learning about” a field of study (e.g., learning about history or plant biology), while graduate education is defined as “knowledge intensive” and “learning to be” (e.g., learning to be a historian or a plant biologist). The differences between these two modes of learning are non-trivial. They require that students change their comfortable way of learning and knowing practiced during sixteen to eighteen years of K-12 plus undergraduate education, undergraduate and, perhaps, master’s level, education. In addition, David Damrosch (1995) described graduate education as one that is “a process of acculturation as much as one of imparting information” (p. 153).

<sup>3</sup>One way to put the apparent slowness of reform/improvement related to completion rates into perspective is to consider that graduate education, in particular doctoral education, is a complex system. It has multiple inputs (e.g., student and faculty characteristics, expectations, and assumptions; program, department, and national disciplinary cultures; financial and other infrastructure resources; job/career possibilities), multiple processes (e.g., socialization, coursework, “qualifiers,” thesis/dissertation proposals, defenses, comprehensive exams, professional development opportunities, work related to assistantships), and multiple outcomes (e.g., successful completion, “ABD” status, Master’s degree, withdrawal, dismissal). This system is also impacted by systems delays (e.g., the relatively long period of time to complete a doctoral degree, stop outs, funding lapses, program changes, faculty sabbaticals) that complicate our understanding between inputs plus processes and desired outcomes. Juxtaposed on this complex educational system is the reality of interactions between an individual doctoral student and his



or her major professor/advisor and guidance committee in a manner that creates its own sub-system with inputs, processes, and outcomes. Doctoral programs, then, are integrations of these individual sub-systems into the academic and disciplinary environment defined by the multiple inputs, processes, and outcomes described above for the overall system of graduate education. While Master's degree programs, especially those based mostly on coursework, may be more straightforward, they are, nonetheless, also systems.

<sup>4</sup>In the past ten to twelve years, national attention focused on the need to improve graduate education, especially doctoral education. Surveys (Golde and Dore, 2001; Nerad and Cerney, 1999), the Carnegie Initiative on the Doctorate (and the Carnegie CASTL Leadership Initiative), the Woodrow Wilson Foundation Responsive Doctorate, the Sloan Foundation Professional Master's degrees in Science, the Council of Graduate Schools Ph.D. Completion Project, Re-envisioning the Ph.D. project (2000, <http://www.grad.washington.edu/envision/>), and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Graduate Education Initiative indicate strong national interest in graduate education. In addition, an increasing number of extensive individual research projects, most notably Lovitts (2001, 2007), Austin and McDaniels (2006), and Nettles and Millett (2006) address the need for systemic change. *On the Right Track: A Manual for Research Mentors* (King, 2003) and many other mentoring manuals focus on the importance of attention to improving graduate education.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

<sup>5</sup>Cohen and Cohen (2005) take an approach slightly different from ours and define interests as being equivalent to motives. In contrast, our definition of interests is based on objective needs and values. Thus, when Cohen and Cohen endorse the use of an interest-based approach, they ask the readers to examine their "motives and the thoughts and feelings that influence them" (page 39). This relatively subtle difference on how interests are defined has a predictable impact on the types of interests that are identified by the process. An emphasis on interests as "motivating agents" (i.e., Cohen and Cohen's approach) focuses the attention on what Provis (1996) refers to as subjective and instrumental interests (i.e., interests that

are contemporary motivators of the stakeholders' behaviors and often serve as a means to a more fundamental end). In contrast, our approach biases the process of interest identification to produce a list of what Provis (1996) refers to as objective and intrinsic interests (i.e., interests that promote the welfare of individuals and that represent ultimate goals or principles).

### **CHAPTER THREE**

<sup>6</sup>Increasing national recognition of the serious nature of interpersonal conflicts between graduate students and faculty was also noted by Lovitts (2001). Holton's 1995 book on Conflict Management in Higher Education did not mention conflicts between graduate students and faculty. In her second volume in 1998, however, this issue received attention, and Warters (2000) highlighted the importance of conflict resolution in graduate education.

<sup>7</sup>The influence of mood and affect in negotiations has received substantial attention in recent years. Perhaps the most visible work in this area is the book by Roger Fisher and Daniel Shapiro (2005). They explore the use of emotions to achieve agreement between negotiating parties. One limitation of the work of Fisher and Shapiro is their failure to appreciate the very different effects of anger as compared to other "strong negative emotions" (chapter 8 in Fisher and Shapiro 2005). Several social psychologists (see for example Lerner and Keltner, 2000; Lerner and Keltner, 2001; Bodenhausen et al., 1994; Lerner, 2005; Lerner and Tiedens, 2006), published compelling data supporting the claim for a unique role of anger in motivation, decision-making and negotiation, in sharp contrast to those reported for other negative emotions such as fear and sadness. Anger also favors the adoption of heuristic information processing (Bodenhausen et al., 1994), limiting our ability to implement the systematic evaluation of multiple options prescribed by our approach. Finally, most of the recommendations offered in the literature for buffering the negative impact of anger on negotiations (see for example chapter 8 in Fisher and Shapiro, 2005) focus on controlling the expression of anger (e.g., counting to ten before acting) and lack empirical evidence about how effective that may be with respect of anger's effects on key cognitive functions, such as information processing and decision making in negotiations.

<sup>8</sup>We acknowledge that an interest-based approach is still actively debated within the conflict resolution research and applied communities. (See examples in Gadlin, 2002; Constantino, 1996; Provis, 1996; Lytle, et al, 1999). We also acknowledge that the graduate education context is, by definition, one in which there is a basic power differential between graduate students and faculty. But, as Zartman and Rubin (1995) point out, asymmetric negotiations can still be quite effective. Most persuasively, Mary Parker Follett's 1924 writings on conflict resolution (as discussed by Kolb, 1995) that focused on the importance of maintaining relationships during the conflict resolution process is of fundamental importance for this adaptation of an interest-based approach for use in graduate education.

Use of an interest-based approach for setting explicit expectations is an MSU adaptation of an interest-based approach to resolving conflicts.

<sup>9</sup>One additional resource that is helpful during campus conversations is: Stone, D., B. Patton, S. Heen. 1999. *Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most*. Penguin Books.







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