

By Rachel Bernstein

Improving student advising

In the midst of his graduate chemistry studies at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), Carl Brozek stumbled into a new challenge: a yearlong campaign to improve advising for graduate students. His effort began 2 years ago, after the head of the chemistry department called a town hall meeting to discuss the results of a departmental survey that identified areas of dissatisfaction. Brozek felt the department was proposing good plans to address most of the problems raised. But when it came to students' concerns that their advisers weren't giving them the mentorship they needed, he was struck by the lack of ideas. "I realized it was a very, very, difficult challenge," recalls Brozek, who is now a postdoc at the Clean Energy Institute at the University of Washington, Seattle.

But he also saw a possible solution, or at least a step in the right direction. Though he didn't have complaints about his own advising experience, he decided to pursue the issue in part because "I've always been interested in these kinds of social justice causes," Brozek says. "I saw little failures of advising here and there that were just so obviously due to problems with communication." He reckoned that one way to start addressing the problem would be by documenting what graduate students and their advisers expect from the system so that at least everyone would be on the same page.

Brozek began by reaching out to graduate students from across the university, and to the postdoc association. Over snacks and wine, the participants brainstormed about what they saw as their rights and responsibilities, and those of their advisers. He shared the list with as many students as he could for further input. The only rule was no deleting.

Next he sought out university administrators, including heads of divisions, the chancellor, and the chair of the faculty policy committee. He asked them whether his effort was helpful and how to move forward with it. And he requested their input about the role of advisers and their feedback about the students' comments. "My goal was to have one good, meaningful meeting with an administrator once a week for the summer of 2014," he says. He ended up taking the result to MIT's Committee on Graduate Programs, which institutes and oversees policies and procedures related to graduate education. Last February, after some fine-tuning of the language, the MIT dean of graduate education approved his two-part document.

The first part concisely lays out existing policies related to



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graduate student treatment, such as protection from discrimination and harassment, which had previously been scattered across many sources. The second goes a step further to promote "common values" to guide the behavior of both students and their advisers. "Faculty members and their graduate students are strongly encouraged to build their relationship by establishing common expectations on the major elements of their professional interactions," the first item reads. The remaining guidelines emphasize the importance of clear communication for building a productive relationship.

"It isn't a battle cry, or a shield, or a last resort," Brozek explains. Nor is it a directive. "A lot of the items are pretty vague, and we deliberately kept them vague, because what works for one adviser may not work for another." The document has been distributed at various MIT events, and Brozek has anecdotal evidence that it has made an impact. "I hear stories from students saying, 'Carl, what have you done? My adviser keeps asking me if he or she is a good adviser; what's happening?'"

The work required to create the document provided a welcome outlet after long days in the lab, Brozek says. "At the end of the day, even if I was exhausted with working on my project, I still had a little energy that wasn't really meant for research. I could expend that reserve energy on going to the gym, or on sending a couple of emails, or thinking about what my next step should be." Overall, he says, "it was a great experience, learning what it takes to make something like this happen." ■

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