

Philosophy about Graduate Students

I have either co-advised or have been on graduate student committees since the start of my own Ph.D. During this time, my philosophy about working with graduate students has substantially evolved as I have learned to accept that not all graduate students have the same goals or aspirations, nor do they all perform at their best under the same circumstances. However, while components of my personal philosophy about graduate students evolve, the core remains largely unchanged and can be characterized by three tenets: 1) take individual responsibility, 2) embrace the task with passion, and 3) live with an underlying integrity and ethic.

1) Individual responsibility. My role is to provide a positive atmosphere for learning, to guide students through difficult professional decisions, and to reveal the consequences of these decisions, thus allowing students the greatest chances for personal future success. However, graduate students will have setbacks, personal difficulties, and outright failures. How the students handle these difficulties is a mark of character. A Martin Luther King Jr. quote rests above my desk that states: “The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy.” My philosophy is to provide graduate students the tools and guidance they need, and make them aware that this is their journey and any decisions made will primarily impact their lives. If the student misses a thesis deadline for a personal reason or even to complete a field season, they must accept responsibility for this. This doesn’t mean I won’t work with them to overcome the difficulty, but part of an advanced degree is learning to handle multiple competing demands, challenges, and controversies, and yet still be successful in moving forward personally and professionally.

2) Embrace your work with passion and enthusiasm....or leave it for someone else. The opportunity to do a graduate degree is a luxury and a privilege. There are billions of people struggling for simple survival in the world, while a student obtains the opportunity to untangle nature’s mysteries or advance a personal career. It is practically immoral to squander such privileges and opportunities by approaching a graduate project with apathy, entitlement, or by simply biding ones time until the degree is over. Each year I meet dozens of passionate wildlife biologists, ecologists and conservationists who would be thrilled to be in a graduate program. Thus, I want my students to metaphorically live their topic and embrace it with unbridled enthusiasm. Rarely will they have another chance to focus on a single idea again in their careers and I hope they have the maturity to embrace this time. While, in general, I believe that there must be a balance in life, there is a difference between balance and becoming overcommitted with other life activities. Graduate school is a time for focus. Thus, I commend the graduate student who plays in a band or on a sports team to release the pressures of grad school, as the best thoughts often occur in the break after one has pondering a problem for substantial time. On the other hand, I don’t applaud the student who tries to do graduate school without sacrifice to other parts of their life; it is rarely a successful model. Finally, it is often said that, “A graduate student will only get out of graduate school what they are willing to put in”,

but there is more to it than that. Graduate students only get out of graduate school what they *and their fellow graduate students* as a group are willing to put in. My Ph.D. taught me this lesson, as the highlights of my graduate career were interactions I had with other graduate peers with similar enthusiasm, dedication, and passion. The synergy we obtained from our group propelled my career. We all put a lot into the effort into our degrees and all received incredible returns.

3) A student must have an underlying integrity and ethic

There are many capable people in the world who could attend graduate school. I want to supervise those that are highly creative and have a personal integrity and ethic. When someone acts with integrity in one arena in their life, this integrity follows in other arenas (i.e., Kantian idea of “good will”).

My studies are of two essences: trying to understand nature, and providing tools/answers for those who have the responsibility of managing natural systems. I am passionate about both, but for different reasons. My desire to understand nature is ultimately a component of my individual spirituality, which tries to follow a tradition of philosophers and theologians who believed that to understand “truth” or “a creator” one should understand natural history (e.g., St. Thomas Aquinas’ natural theology). My second goal is to conduct research that provides managers the tools they need to be good environmental stewards while still making practical and economic decisions. Given my commitment to these ideals, I take on graduate students that also have these similar passions. This ethic is projected outward when either my students or I leave our microcosm of graduate school/academia. A student with a strong personal ethic will represent themselves and thus “the lab” and Wildlife Program in a positive light.