

Kecia Ali, Boston University



Kecia Ali is an associate professor of religion at Boston University and co-Chair of the AAR's Study of Islam Section. Her research focuses on Islamic law, gender, and biography. Her most recent book is Imam Shafi'i: Scholar and Saint (Oneworld Publication, 2011).

Like most everyone who came through graduate school, I had amazing professors who gave generously of their time and energy to shepherd me through difficult portions of my coursework, research, and writing. I also had professors who savaged my papers, didn't respond to my increasingly panicky e-mails for weeks on end, and ignored my pleas for substantive guidance. They were sometimes the same people.

A decade later, I teach, advise, and mentor graduate students and confront some of these issues from the other side. I see the past differently now that I am not consumed with delusional worry that my advisors were ignoring me on purpose — sending me the message that I was doomed to flunk out of graduate school or languish forever in ABD purgatory. Now, myself required to balance teaching, faculty meetings, and “administrivia” of various sorts, I understand how a week or two could elapse without a reply to a proposed reading list or draft prospectus — my advisors were busy people doing their best by me while maintaining their own professional, not to mention personal, lives. Graduate students can be assured their professors are almost certainly not consciously snubbing them. But professors must remember that they loom much larger in their graduate students' consciousness than vice-versa.

Spiderman's uncle said it best, “With great power comes great responsibility.” Mundane abuses of faculty power generally fall into two categories: cruelty and neglect. Scathing comments on seminar papers can send students into a funk, or possibly a tailspin. But ignoring students is even more pervasive and problematic. Some fixes are simple. If a graduate student sends an e-mail, advisors should reply within a day, even if only to say “Got the draft. Please e-mail me again if you haven't heard back in a week.” But sometimes things are more complicated and the

remainder of my reflections here concern those cases where students are not progressing satisfactorily.

The trickiest issues that arise in working with graduate students, whether through formal advising or informal mentoring or some combination of the two, include how to judge what kind of attention and support are appropriate, how to know when one is overdoing it (as female faculty have a tendency to do), and when the responsible as well as kind thing to do is to stop propping up someone who is failing to thrive (not everyone is suited for doctoral work — not even everyone who gets into a doctoral program). These issues become even more fraught where issues of production or quality arise with students who are disadvantaged in some way or who do not conform to the image of the free, unencumbered male scholar.

My perspective on these matters is colored by my own history: I had children in graduate school, starting partway through coursework; my third arrived when I was deeply involved in my dissertation. From matriculation to defense took me nine years, during which time my husband and I honed our tag-team parenting skills. It's difficult to balance parenting and producing scholarship, even with a supportive spouse. And yet I wonder if having survived the process makes me sometimes less sympathetic to graduate students who aren't coping. Certainly, it makes me less sympathetic to those without pressing caregiving responsibilities. But it also can make me less willing to accept sub-par work — either in terms of quantity or quality — from those who spend significant chunks of their days with their kids. Isn't it *impossible* to write with a newborn or a toddler or two children? Well, no. I am aware of the challenges that childbearing and rearing pose to doctoral work, but having done it, I know it is possible.

I do not mean to suggest that the solution is for students to work heroically to overcome obstacles, or for advisors to urge students to do so. Others have amply documented the institutional, structural, and cultural barriers that hamper mothers and, to a lesser extent, fathers from flourishing in graduate school. It is an advisor's role to go to bat with an unsupportive administration, intervene with other faculty if necessary, and direct the student to the office that funds subsidized child-care (ha!). Even something as simple as one faculty member announcing at orientation that students can come to her to discuss university policies about caregiving, parental leaves, and work-life balance issues can make a difference in a departmental climate. (New students will not know which faculty members are likely to be supportive or even who has children.)

Transforming university culture is vital but will take years. In the meantime, personal practices can improve things. Helping a student strategize about how to get work done (don't use naptime to do laundry; work on your prospectus instead) is within the advisor's role; making

accommodations, as my dissertation advisor did, to talk by phone in the evenings after the kids go to bed works too. Faculty should be realistic about deadlines and philosophical when sick kids necessitate reshuffling a schedule. Ultimately, though, getting work done is a student's responsibility. Finishing a doctorate demands a certain ruthlessness — and faculty can help students think about how to be ruthless without being callous or irresponsible.

If a student is flailing and the issue is not merely time management but work quality — something that affects students in all types of family configurations — how can one deliver a strong message that is motivating rather than devastating? Evaluations must be honest but not brutal. This may not be enough, though — sometimes students do not hear advice, no matter how clearly given. Advising or mentoring a capable student who gets her work done on time and well, who listens to advice and takes initiative, and who doesn't encounter any traumatic or life-altering personal events along the path to a doctorate is already time-consuming. A student who fails to progress despite adequate support and guidance poses a problem, especially for junior faculty members. Some departments discourage or even prohibit untenured faculty from taking on graduate students. This is partially to protect students should the faculty member fail to receive tenure and partially to protect the faculty members' time.

Here again, structural issues intervene. Done right, advising and mentoring are time-consuming and, potentially, emotionally taxing in addition to being rewarding. Someone lucky enough to be on a tenure clock is vulnerable and must carefully calibrate energy devoted to graduate students or, for that matter, any students. Yet not doing one's share leaves the burden to others. Most of the panelists at the AAR Status of Women in the Profession Committee-sponsored Special Topics Forum on mentoring at the 2011 AAR Annual Meeting — where many of the topics I discuss here emerged — noted cases where male faculty minimize time spent with students, leaving others, often women, to pick up the slack in order to keep students from going without the support they need.

One thing that can help here is being clear about expectations: what faculty expect from students and what students ought to expect from faculty. (This is especially important for those who are informal mentors not assigned advisors, but it matters in both cases.) Lack of clarity about advisor expectations can be a tremendous source of anxiety for students, who do not know if they should be sending chapter outlines or conference paper proposals, or how often they should be dropping by to talk about preparation for comprehensive exams. Although departments should have minimum standards, individual faculty members will have varying comfort zones and styles. It is up to faculty — especially female and junior faculty, to the extent that they work with graduate students — to set boundaries about availability. Within established limits, one can find ways to guide students more efficiently, since no one has time to hand-hold through six iterations of a grant application. Though it takes longer initially, it is a good idea to follow up on conversations with e-mail summaries and action points. If things do go wrong,

having a paper trail makes it easier to figure out when and (sometimes even) why decisions were made or paths were taken. It also helps suss out patterns in student behavior and in one's own behavior as an advisor or mentor. No one likes to be the bearer of bad news, so faculty may deceive ourselves that students are progressing adequately; in doing so, we deceive them too. This does no one any favors. Being able to review evidence clearly can help faculty decide whether time is well-invested in going above and beyond basic responsibilities to support a particular student through a tricky stage.

A last piece of advice: Mentoring is not only for students. Faculty should find mentors who can offer guidance when they encounter difficulties with a student. Who's mentoring the mentors? Answer: Usually, no one.