

Raymond 'will never make it'

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After the first meeting with his advisor, Raymond felt something was not quite right.

Raymond, an international student and a Ph.D. student at a university in the United States, entered the program hoping to graduate as soon as possible. Little to Raymond's knowledge, Raymond's advisor Professor Gaspery was known for her fierceness. Professor Gaspery is a very disciplined professor who believed that all Ph.D. students should sit in the library whole day. The approach Professor Gaspery took was intense - whatever Raymond did, it should go through her, or at least consult with her, including the courses Raymond was going to take.

Professor Gaspery pushed Raymond a lot even in the first year. Yet, no matter how many papers Raymond submitted, Professor Gaspery never found it sufficient in terms of progress. While Raymond's classmates were hanging around exploring courses that might be relevant to their dissertation topics without writing anything, Raymond already started writing, from research agenda to chapters.

Despite the fact that Raymond kept writing, he never got substantive feedback from Professor Gaspery. In the beginning of the project, Professor Gaspery was able to push Raymond to go deeper in research questions. However, after a few months, Professor Gaspery was unable to provide Raymond with any substantive feedback regarding Raymond's topic. The two of them had a diverged interest in terms of the topic. Nevertheless, Professor Gaspery requested weekly meetings with Raymond; Raymond obliged diligently.

As time went by, Raymond found it difficult to get satisfactory guidance from Professor Gaspery, not only substantively but also for the writing. Every time Professor Gaspery read Raymond's article, she would say it was good, and that "Your English is not good; you should bring it to editors." Professor Gaspery emphasized almost every time to Raymond in their meetings that "it must be difficult for you to write in English." Raymond followed Professor Gaspery's instructions, and the editors provided valuable comments, but none of them were about Raymond's ability to write in English. No matter how hard Raymond tried to communicate his frustration in research to Professor Gaspery, he always got the feedback that "Your English is not good."

That was the snapshot of Raymond's life as a Ph.D. student in the first 4 years. As an international student, Professor Gaspery advised him to look for jobs in his ethnic community career-wise. When Raymond needed an extension for the student visa, unlike other classmates who got full support from their advisors, Raymond needed to beg Professor Gaspery for permission and ask other professors to help explain the process to Professor Gaspery because Professor Gaspery refused to believe what Raymond was explaining to her.

By the time Raymond was hoping to graduate, he submitted his first draft, which was not as many pages as Professor Gaspary requested for, and Raymond still needed time to wrap it up. Professor Gaspary gave positive feedback on Raymond's draft.

A week later, without any notice, Raymond received a formal letter from the school claiming that he is not qualified as a Ph.D. student and that he must leave the program at the suggestion of Professor Gaspary. Raymond's world was shattered. He looked for dispute resolution mechanisms, yet he was told that the only way he could appeal was to speak to Professor Gaspary because it was an academic decision. In despair, Raymond asked Professor Gaspary for another chance. Professor Gaspary told Raymond, "Your English is not good. Don't be so hard on yourself. You will never make it."

After months in lament, Raymond found another advisor because of many other people's help. Raymond resumed his studies later on. While the trauma exists, Raymond is gradually getting back on track. What kept him going through that horrific experience were the encouragement from friends and family, inspiring stories on this website, and his belief in social justice. Raymond got to know many other people who went through similar situations and were forcibly driven out of the Ph.D. programs.

Raymond is now continuing writing his dissertation. Challenges remain, like all other Ph.D. students, but he gets to do what he loves about the topic. Some of his colleagues also have trouble working with their advisors, mostly because many of these advisors are busy with many commitments; a couple of them find it difficult because of different working styles with their advisors. These Ph.D. students support one other on a daily basis because writing a dissertation is a lonely process. The program also strives to meet these students' academic needs by holding events for them.

By sharing this experience, Raymond hopes that schools would put efforts in managing student-advisor relationships and create mechanisms for dispute resolutions with a due process. This situation is especially difficult for international students because the interruption of studies also equals to leaving the country abruptly after lots of investment of resources. Students from foreign countries give up many valuable things to pursue their dreams in institutions that they choose to believe in. Give them hope, not only knowledge, but also support; show them that your institution is worth their faith, time, and trust.