There is a famous Korean epigram called “Gunsabuilche,” which basically means that the king, father, and teacher are the same. In other words, it means that the father and the teacher should be treated as being equal to a king with absolute obedience. This pithy remark, which has lasted for more than a thousand years, is one of the core principles that clearly demonstrate the hierarchy of relationships in Korean society.

As teachers in college, professors are treated like kings in Korea. It is therefore almost impossible to question the authority of a professor. In fact, people refer to the relationship between the professors and their graduate students as that of a “master and slave”. Although it is obviously an exaggeration, there is some truth in this expression. Korean graduate students indeed demonstrate a tremendous sense of obligation in their relationships with professors. They go to the extent of doing anything that is asked of by their professors—driving a car, making coffee for them, and helping them with the tedious and laborious parts of research knowing that they cannot even hope for any authorship. I personally found such a relationship difficult to maintain, but I did not question it as I accepted the status quo.

Then I encountered eye-opening experiences since I came to the US for graduate school studies. I was very surprised by the relationship between professors and graduate students. Several episodes come to mind in this regard, which I want to share in this essay.

Episode one: Culture shock at the first orientation

I remember in August 2013 I was very nervous on the first day at the orientation as much as I wanted to make a good impression to the faculty. Then, an elderly man’s smile broke the ice. He shook my hand and said “hello” to me. I was quite surprised and mumbled, “I am really sorry that I did not recognize you, Dr....” In response, he gave another smile and said “Hey, just call me Jim.” I later realized that he was a famous researcher and the chairperson of my department. After a brief orientation, the professors and the students altogether went to a
park to grill and play baseball. At first, I thought only students would play baseball, because students and professors do not usually play sports together. I saw several faculty members on the ground, but my mind naturally interpreted that they must play as umpires. Later, those professors turned out to be bad pitchers. Students teased one of the professors, yelling “You are a bad pitcher! I can't hit the ball!” I was actually worried that the professor would get angry, but the professor rather laughed off the remarks, and the game went on in good spirits. Finally, we went to a bar. Teasing continued at the bar and I could see that professors and students really treat each other as equals. It was almost impossible to distinguish between the professors and the students by simply observing their interactions and use of language. That night, I thought about what it would have been like if it was in Korea. Students probably would have avoided hitting the professor's ball far away because doing so would be considered rude. Students would have turned their face and drunk up the cup as a courtesy in front of professors, and typically, professors would have controlled over conversations while students passively listening to them. Compared to this, the first day with the department faculty was quite a culture shock to me and was therefore an unforgettable experience.

Episode two: Advisor as a companion

After the semester began, I began working with my advisor, Dan Bergan. Dan is a brilliant researcher and is considered a “rising star” in my field. However, he always asks for my opinion before launching any new projects. He respects my ideas, and tries to understand what I say even though my English is not strong. One day, I created several new message stimuli to use for our pre-test data, but they did not really work well. Later, I realized that my ideas went off-topic. Now that I think, Dan could have simply told me that I was wrong. But he said instead, “Hey Sangwon, I think this is a very good idea, but I am going to make some minor changes.” He actually changed the complete sentence, but he did not tell me about this not to hurt my self-esteem. In this way, he did his best to treat me as a companion and I could feel that he genuinely respect our relationship.

Episode three: Should I just change the flight schedule?

This episode is a quite recent one, which shows that I am still struggling to adjust to the new culture until now. Last month, I was planning to visit another school for a program visit. There was a renowned researcher in their program, whom I asked for availability to meet me
on the day I arrive there. The situation got suddenly complicated because he told me to meet him at a time that was before my flight arrival time. Now that I have lived in the US for more than a year, I knew that I could simply say “Sorry, I cannot make it at 2PM, so can we meet at another time?” However, I felt extremely uncomfortable making such a bold remark and asking the professor to change his schedule for my convenience. Domestic students would have not even thought twice about such an issue; moreover, there would anyway be an additional $150 fee for changing the flight. I, however, requested a different time slot only after agonizing for an hour. Within ten minutes, I got a response from him saying “Then, let’s meet at 4PM. Does that work for you?” We went on to have a great time that day, and I was doubly happy to have not lavished $150 for American Culture 101.

Before coming to the US, I felt that its culture is a little impolite and lacked courtesy. I have now realized that my impressions without real experiences were completely inaccurate. Having experienced the culture personally, I feel that its culture rather binds both professors and students to really respect each other. Professors consider graduate students as friends, colleagues, and mentees, and graduate students consider professors as friends, colleagues, and mentors. At no point did any professor do any special favors for me. Rather, their actions were simply a reflection of their everyday beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors.

In fact, I think that interactions with professors are one of the most exciting things about graduate school. Professors who have achieved a lot in academia treat me as a colleague. This feeling of being respected as a companion is a major driving force for me to continue studying albeit challenging. Professors in the US broke down my stereotype of professors as being hidebound and hierarchical. Instead, I think that being a professor would be the most wonderful job in the world because of its critical position to support student’s learning and, as seen from my case, adjusting to the real world. Not surprisingly, I am now following in their path.