

MENTORING MATTERS

for Graduate Students



What is mentoring and why is it important?

Mentors are:

- Advisors, who have career experience and share their knowledge.
- Supporters, who give emotional and moral encouragement.
- Tutors, who provide specific feedback on performance.
- Masters, who serve as employers to graduate student "apprentices."
- Sponsors, who are sources of information and opportunities.
- Models of identity, who serve as academic role models.

Mentoring is important to you—as a graduate student—because of the knowledge and skills that are shared, but also because of the many other aspects of professional socialization and personal support that are needed to facilitate success in graduate school and beyond. Benefits of mentoring include:

- Mentors support your advancement in research activity, conference presentations, publication, pedagogical skill, and grant-writing.
- You are less likely to feel ambushed by potential bumps in the road, having been alerted to them, and provided resources for dealing with stressful or difficult periods in your graduate career.
- The experiences and networks of professional contacts your mentors help you to accrue may improve your prospects of securing professional placement.
- The knowledge that someone is committed to your progress, someone who can give you solid advice and be your advocate, can help to lower stress and build confidence.
- Constructive interaction with a mentor and participation in collective activities they arrange promote your engagement in the field.



How do I find a mentor?

Start the selection process by undertaking a critical self-appraisal. You must understand what you personally need to thrive as a graduate student before you can recognize who might meet those needs. Ask yourself, and discuss with people who know you well, such questions as:

- What are my objectives in entering graduate school?
- What type of training do I desire?
- What are my strengths?
- What skills do I need to develop?
- What kinds of research or creative projects will engage me?
- How much independent versus team work do I want to do?
- What type of career do I want to pursue?

Think about creating a mentoring team rather than relying on one mentor. One person is unlikely to fill all of your needs and a team provides a broader network of support.

- Familiarize yourself with the work of faculty within and outside your department
- Consider mentors outside of your department, university or academia
- Take part in department activities to observe how faculty interact with students and colleagues
- Attend faculty presentations and/or enroll in courses
- Ask senior graduate students about their experiences with faculty and mentors



How do I establish a mentoring relationship?

Request a meeting to introduce yourself and talk about your interests and goals. The objectives of these initial meetings are to make a positive impression and to establish a working rapport. You also want to assess whether a particular faculty member is a good fit for you. Keep in mind that the mentoring relationship is one that evolves over time and often begins because of a particular need. Come to this meeting ready to generate a conversation that will reveal what the faculty member would like to know about you:

- Mutual interests
- Goals
- Initiative
- Skills and strengths
- Availability
- Expectations
- Potential support
- Drafts
- Publishing and presentations



What are my responsibilities as a mentee?

It is imperative to show by your attitude and actions that you are a responsible junior colleague. As a graduate student, it is your responsibility to develop and demonstrate your abilities to be an independent scholar and researcher.

Work Plan

- Develop a work plan that includes both short-term and long-term objectives as well as a series of deadlines for completing each step.
- Discuss and agree upon any modifications to the work schedule with your mentor.
- Contact your mentor at regular intervals to discuss your progress.

Meetings

- Show up for scheduled meetings on time.
- Meetings will be most productive when you accept responsibility for leading the meeting.
- Your role is to raise the issues and questions while the mentor's role is to respond.

- At the conclusion of the meeting or through email, summarize any agreements that have been reached. Also restate what you will be doing and what your mentor committed to do to assist you.
- If your mentor is facing a work emergency at the time of your meeting, offer to reschedule the meeting, shorten it, or handle the matter over email. Be flexible, but remain committed to getting what you need in a timely manner.
- If you need to cancel a meeting, make sure that your message is left in a manner that reaches your mentor. Do not rely solely on one form of message.

Critique and Editing

- Clarify how often your mentor will give you feedback about your general work and your progress.
- Ask when you can expect them to return papers.
- Find out if they tend to provide a lot of comments or very few, so that you will not be taken aback later on.
- Ask other graduate students about this faculty member's feedback style
- Do not submit a draft to a faculty member in its roughest form (unless otherwise instructed by the professor)
- Do not ask a faculty member to re-read an entire paper if only certain sections have been revised. Instead, mark the new or edited sections by underlining them, putting them in boldface, or by using a different font.
- If you disagree with a particular criticism, demonstrate that you are willing to consider that point. If after thinking about it for some time you still disagree, demonstrate your ability to defend your ideas in a professional and well-thought-out manner.

Professional Development

- Attend departmental lectures and other activities such as job talks.
- Join professional associations and societies.
- Attend conferences and use these opportunities to network with others.
- Seek out opportunities to present your work in your department or through outside conferences, publications, or performances.

Portfolio and References

- Maintain a professional portfolio in both electronic and paper-based versions that serves to document your accomplishments.
- When requesting a reference, provide updated copies of your curriculum vitae and the location or copy of your portfolio for materials that can amplify the CV.
- Leave clear written instructions as to when the letters are due and to whom to send them.
- Provide a short description about the fellowship, grant, or program for which you are applying.
- Provide details about how you are structuring your application and what points you would like your mentor to emphasize.
- Submit these materials with enough advance time for your mentor to write a letter.
- In case your mentor misplaces the application materials, keep extra copies of all forms.
- Ask how your mentor prefers to be reminded of deadlines, if needed.

Advisor

- Occurs formally AND within the academic unit
- Provides technical guidance that facilitates student's progress and serves as primary contact
- Academic and thesis/dissertation advisor may be the same or different
- May direct a dissertation or thesis
- May be sporadic
- Unidirectional relationship
- Student nearly always report having an advisor

Mentor

- Can occur informally and from within or outside the academic unit
- Provides support and socialization to department and discipline
- Generally self-selected for professional and personal guidance
- Ongoing and involves time element
- Mutual relationship
- Only 50 - 70% of students report having a mentor

Advisor

“A person who is typically assigned to a department of program to meet with the student, to provide advice on degree plans and what courses to take and address other academic issues or concerns” (Creighton, Parks, & Creighton, 2007, p. 4).

Mentor

“A person who helps the protégé set goals, standards, and develop skills; protects the protégé from others to allow room for risk and failure; facilitates a successful entrance into academic and professional circles...(Nerad & Miller, 1996, p. 72).



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