Mentoring Up: A Guide for Graduate Students

Vibrant and intellectually dynamic relationships between graduate students and faculty mentors lie at the heart of graduate education. A successful mentoring relationship is based on the principles of honesty, integrity, collegiality, mutual respect, responsibility, and accountability; in other words, trust. Mentors play a significant role in the lives of graduate students that can help shape the academic experience and future career of students.

Mentoring is a two-way street; an effective mentoring relationship takes effort from both parties. Being mentored requires good communication, attentive listening, self-awareness, and problem solving. Students must learn the necessary technical and research skills to become an independent researcher, both through a mentors’ guidance and using previously attained knowledge.

For many students, a single mentor cannot be effective in all roles. First and foremost is the student’s academic advisor, who helps the student adapt to the culture of the department and the discipline and to navigate important relationships for professional success. A mentor provides advice and guidance on formulating research questions and on acquiring the skills needed carry out the research. Students are encouraged to seek our additional mentors to provide career guidance and professional development advice, or to provide personal support in times of difficulty.

The key elements of being mentored are listed below.

* **Maintaining effective communication.** Students must learn how to communicate with their mentors, even those with differing backgrounds, and ask for clarification when necessary. Students should feel comfortable asking questions, providing their ideas, and being direct when communicating with their mentors. Key skill sets include preparedness, active listening, and the ability to accept and incorporate constructive feedback.
* **Aligning expectations.** A critical element of the relationship is two-way communication to minimize misunderstandings about expectations. Because expectations can change as students advance, these conversations should occur frequently—at least several times per semester. Mentors should communicate clear goals and consider how personal and professional differences may affect expectations. Expectations about the nature of the mentor-student relationship must also be clearly communicated with the input from both the mentor and the student. Alignment of mentor and student expectations will create a productive and functional relationship.
* **Multidimensional Mentoring.** Students should identify mentors that can be most effective in each area of their lives. A student’s faculty mentor should be able to provide support in preparing for and carrying out thesis and dissertation research and scholarship, but other mentors may be better able to provide support in professional and personal development.
* **Self-Efficacy.** Students should understand that mentors play a critical role in shaping the research experience to increase student’s self-efficacy and, ultimately, student performance. There are four factors that build self-efficacy beliefs: past accomplishments, vicarious modeling, social persuasion, and positive affective states. Students should learn how to be their own advocates by making their needs clear to the mentor.
* **Promoting Professional Development.** Students should work with their mentors to identify and strive for academic and professional success. Students should develop a written strategy for professional development with concrete milestones and review it with their mentors. Students should engage in an open dialogue with mentors about balancing competing demands, needs, and interests of both mentor and student (e.g., teaching, research productivity, grant funding, creativity and independence, career preference decisions, non-research activities, personal development, work-family balance, etc.).
* **Cultivating Ethical Behavior.** Students should demonstrate ethical behavior and expect it from others, including their mentors. Mentors should model ethical behavior in the conduct of research, the drafting of presentations and publications, the fair assignment of authorship, and the treatment and evaluation of students. In particular, mentors must not abuse their position of power and influence.
* **Creating Healthy Spaces.** Mentors should be sensitive to the possibility that students could be facing serious non-academic issues, including physical or mental health challenges; financial stress; family tensions; caregiving responsibilities; or personal distress, such as grief over the death of a loved one or sadness from being away from home or apart from a partner. Students may or may not feel comfortable discussing these issues with their mentors, and mentors should be sensitive to the fact that students may not want to discuss specifics with their mentors. Mentors should, however, create an atmosphere that encourages students to share information about mitigating circumstances and reassures them that such challenges will be taken seriously and accommodated. While mentors should be open to learning about challenges faced by their students, they should not overstep professional boundaries by asking overly personal questions or making inappropriate personal requests. While faculty mentors should be understanding and supportive, students should bear in mind that faculty are experts in their academic field and are not trained counselors. Students should make use of counseling, legal, and other resources available on campus as appropriate.
* **Providing Feedback.** Students should receive clear, prompt, and regular feedback regarding their skills, progress, and potential. Providing students with constructive feedback is a crucial part of the mentor’s job and contributes significantly to the student’s to academic and professional development.

Mentoring Resources

For Students

Publications

* “[Mentoring Up: Learning to Manage Your Mentoring Relationships](https://tomprof.stanford.edu/posting/1525)”
* “[Making the Most of Mentors: A Guide for Mentees](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/19116494)” Judy T. Zerzan, Rachel Hess, Ellen Schur, Russell S. Phillips, Nancy Rigotti
* “[Introduction to Mentoring: A Guide for Mentors and Mentees](https://www.apa.org/education/grad/mentoring.aspx)” (APA)
* “[Creating Psychological Safety in the Workplace](https://hbr.org/ideacast/2019/01/creating-psychological-safety-in-the-workplace.html)” Amy Edmondson

For Mentors

* [UMD Graduate Statement of Mutual Expectations](https://gradschool.umd.edu/forms)
* [Individual Development Plan](https://gradschool.umd.edu/professionaldevelopment/career-self-management)
* [Office of Civil Rights & Sexual Misconduct](https://www.ocrsm.umd.edu/)
* [Office of Diversity & Inclusion (Diversity Training & Education)](https://www.diversity.umd.edu/)
* [Office of Graduate Diversity & Inclusion](https://gradschool.umd.edu/ogdi)
* [National Research Mentoring Network](https://nrmnet.net/)

**Publications**

* [Entering Mentoring](https://www.macmillanlearning.com/Catalog/product/enteringmentoring-revised-pfund), Christine Pfund , Janet L. Branchaw , Jo Handelsman
* [Effective Mentoring in STEM: Practice, Research, and Future Directions](https://gradschool.umd.edu/sites/gradschool.umd.edu/files/uploads/effective_mentoring_in_stemm-proceedings.pdf)
* [Making the Right Moves: A Practical Guide to Scientific Management for Postdocs and New Faculty](https://www.hhmi.org/sites/default/files/Educational%20Materials/Lab%20Management/Making%20the%20Right%20Moves/moves2.pdf)