



THE POWER OF MENTORING

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The relationship between a mentor and a graduate student is the most influential relationship in the student's career. Effective mentors are much more than advisors or teachers. They are role models, consultants, problem solvers, and supporters. They provide timely and constructive feedback, career guidance, professional contacts, sources of information about research grants and fellowship and job opportunities, and letters of recommendation throughout your professional career.

A mentor can make a world of difference. Doctoral students with effective mentors take shorter time to complete their degrees, are more productive, are better connected professionally, and are more successful over the course of their careers.

Where Does the Word “Mentor” Come From?

From Homer's *Odyssey*. During the ten years that Odysseus struggled to return home from the Trojan wars, Mentor served as a surrogate father to Odysseus's son Telemachus.

What's the Difference between an Advisor and a Mentor?

An advisor provides curricular advice. A mentor's responsibilities are far broader, including all facets of professional development. Effective mentors model professionalism, demystify the graduate school experience, and help their student enter the profession. Effective mentors' responsibilities don't end with graduation. They take a personal interest in their students' future and provides assistance and advice at crucial moments during the student's career.

The Mentor-Mentee Relationship

The mentor relationship is a highly personal relationship that will evolve over time. Initially, you are a student or an assistant, but over time you will gradually become a colleague or even a collaborator. To be successful, there needs to be good chemistry between the student and the mentor, and this, in turn, involves:

- Effective communication

The mentor will provide encouragement, but also clear, critical, but constructive feedback.

- **Accessibility**

If the mentor is to effectively monitor student progress, there must be ongoing contact.

Choosing a Mentor

Selecting a mentor is one of the most important professional decisions you will ever make. It is both an interpersonal relationship and an “instrumental” relationship, one that can assist you with conference presentations, professional contacts, publishing, fellowships, postdocs, and academic and non-academic jobs. Therefore it is essential that you ask yourself a series of critical questions:

1. Is the faculty member interested in working with you and be able to devote the time and patience that the relationship will require?

2. Does the faculty member have a successful track record working with other students?

3. Are you able to interact and communicate comfortably with the faculty member?

4. Can the faculty member contribute to your intellectual growth and provide useful feedback on your scholarship?

5. Is the faculty member in a position to help launch and promote your professional career?

6. Will the faculty member likely remain at Columbia until you complete your doctorate?

Should Your Mentor Be a Junior, Mid-Career, or Senior Faculty Member?

Each offers potential advantages and disadvantages.

- ***Senior faculty***

Are well-recognized professionally

Have a well-developed network of professional connections, including former students.

Have more experience suggesting research projects.

May have more stable and secure sources of funding for their students.

But they:

May have less time to devote to you.

May adopt a more “laissez faire” approach to advising

▪ ***Mid-career faculty:***

Have begun to achieve a strong professional reputation

Are often at the cutting edge of their discipline

But they:

May have limited time to devote to you due to sabbaticals, research leaves, and departmental obligations.

▪ ***Junior faculty***

May have a better understanding of your needs and the challenges and career issues you face.

May be more hands on in providing support

But they

May have limited time to devote to you due to tenure pressures

Have less mentoring experience

May have less access to research funding

May not achieve the professional visibility that one expects

Does Your Mentor Need to be “Like” You?

It can definitely be helpful to have a mentor who understands your needs and insecurities and any special challenges that you face. But you need to be aware of all of your professional as well as personal needs, and identify a mentor who can best meet the totality of your needs.

How to Have a Productive Relationship with Your Mentor

There are many ways to be a bad mentee. Bad mentees

- Expect instant feedback on drafts of dissertation chapters.
- Fail to have clear agendas for meetings with their mentor.
- Expect your mentor to be your confidante, therapist, and friend
- React badly to criticism.
- Expect the advisor to provide explicit advice about researching and writing up your dissertation.

To have a productive relationship with your mentor:

- Have realistic expectations
- Use your meeting time efficiently

- Identify the areas that your mentor can realistically help you most and focus on those

Potential Problems

Your relationship with your mentor is one of the most intense relationships you will ever have, and it is susceptible to all of the potential problems found in any unequal relationship. Be realistic in your expectations and be sure to have a support network that can fill gaps or needs unmet by your mentor. But sometimes you will encounter bigger problems. Examples include:

Mentors who abuse authority (for example, asking mentees to do personal chores)

Mentors who pick favorites

Mentors who are overbearing or over controlling

The goal of mentoring is to produce students who can demonstrate initiative, independence, and self-reliance. The key is to:

- Take students seriously and address their concerns.
- Not dictate answers, but to offer various alternatives.

Consider meeting on neutral ground.

Pay attention to warning signs (for example, delays in completing projects or poor time management skills).

Set high but realistic goals.

Sexism

Sexism can take many forms from “mindless” idiocy to an uncomfortable working environment to outright harassment. Sexism, like racism, is a violation of university policy and Columbia has instituted a variety of mechanisms for dealing with this matter.

Disputes over Co-Authorship

A basic principle is that co-authorship should be offered to anyone who has made a material contribution to a work. The best advice is to clarify agreements about co-authorship at the very beginning of a research project.

Abuse of Power

A mentor’s primary obligation is to further the student’s education and professional development.

Becoming a Mentor

Being a mentor can be one of the most personally satisfying roles you will ever hold. You will experience the joy of launching students in their professional careers. From your students, in turn, you will learn about new areas of research as well as new concepts, theories, and methodologies.

But being an effective mentor is hard work and requires time, patience, and discipline. You must serve as a role model. You must create a sense of community. You must integrate your students into the profession.

Especially at the early stages of your career, mentoring can pose a particular challenge. Here are some practical recommendations:

1. Clarify expectations early and explicitly.

Discuss how often you will meet with your students. Tell your students that you expect them to develop an agenda for the meeting and to share it with you in advance.

2. Require your students to develop a work plan with an explicit time frame.

3. Discuss how you will handle drafts of their written work and whether you want to see rough drafts.

4. Learn how to write letters of recommendation with impact.