Do I need to mentor?

A Quick Start Guide for Faculty

Introduction:

Graduate students consider their faculty members to be critical players in this phase of their academic experience, and providing mentorship or structured professional development opportunities is an important aspect of their academic success.

When graduate students (or undergraduates) seek mentorship from faculty, it is important to remember that these students are engaged in a whole new level of learning, and many of them are embarking in new programs with some degree of anxiety or trepidation with regards to self-efficacy and likelihood of success. That these students are seeking you out for mentorship reflects their professional regard for your own demonstrated success.

Quality mentorship takes time and emotional resources. Depending upon the faculty mentor's career stage and other professional obligations, engaging in multiple mentoring relationships with graduate students, postdoctoral scholars, undergraduates, or junior colleagues may be overwhelming. Most of us went to graduate school to receive training – that is, breadth and depth – within a specific field. Developing into a high-quality mentor (in addition to being a stellar academic and lauded teacher) was something that many of us probably never received training in during our own experiences. [As an aside, I do remember going on the job market in 2009 and having to submit a *Teaching Philosophy Statement* as part of my application, something that I had never heard of in my graduate or postdoctoral training. A grant proposal? Of course. Teaching Philosophy? Never heard of it].

This guide is meant to help faculty members who are already stretched in many different directions who receive requests from students for mentorship. Please remember that students may confuse the need or request for mentorship with a need to build or belong to a community. In either case, students are wanting to find a sense of belonging and purpose by identifying with not only their field of study but the participants – fellow students and their faculty – who engage in it.

Actionable Tips to Improve Mentoring Relationships:

1. **Rewrite your faculty bio on your website to share your personal values and motivations for your academic work.** Invite your student mentees to get to know you as a person outside of a producer of academic capital. Mentoring relationships are stronger when the participants have shared outlooks, perspectives, and values in addition to shared project goals. To support this, use the *Professional Icebreaker Tool*. Get to know one another as people before you work together.

2. **Write the Responsibility Rules for your professional interactions.** What are the mutual expectations of your interactions with one another? For faculty mentors who run a research group or a physical laboratory, such a document might be developed once and shared with newly recruited students to the group. For other faculty mentors, this document may be re-developed for each student who seeks a formal, professional mentoring or advising relationship with a faculty member. Use our template for *Responsibility Rules*.

3. **What is my student asking of me in this mentoring experience?** Have the student articulate their own professional goals and why you are the person to help them develop required skills to meet that goal. To support this, have your student use the *Do I Need Mentoring Tool?*

4. **Have the student lead a conversation to develop a Communication Plan for your subsequent meetings.** By asking the student to take the initiative, this requires that students understand that guiding the mentor/student relationship is upon them. To support this, have your student use the *Communication Plan Tool*.

5. **Determine the length of your mentoring relationship.** Some students need mentorship for the length of their graduate degree, especially for programs that require a student to complete a lengthy, multi-year research project. For other students, a mentoring relationship may only last the length of an academic semester. Honor the time terms of the mentoring relationship.

6. **When appropriate, have the student develop their advising committee sooner rather than later. Have them communicate early and often with their committee members.** Use your fellow faculty to provide shared mentorship! Committees are developed for the purpose of supporting student trainees, but they also provide balance to a chair's expectations.

7. **Work with faculty within your program or discipline to embed mentorship conversations in graduate courses.** If you are fielding questions from students about aspects of their graduate experience (writing a thesis, preparing a defense, applying for travel funding, writing a proposal to IRB, career development, finding an internship site, etc....), chances are that your colleagues are also addressing similar topics with their own students. Consider the values and mission of your graduate program and embed these mentorship conversations in required courses. Having all students in these required courses builds community, streamlines conversations, and ensures fairness.

8. **Develop a Syllabus or Project Contracts with your students.** Before embarking on a project or internship (or similar experience), make sure that you and your student understand mutual expectations. Just as faculty are required to write syllabi for their lecture courses, syllabi for graduate professional experiences should be guided by these contractual statements that express expectations and how students will be assessed. Use templates provided on our website.

9. **Don't micromanage student mentees.** It can be frustrating to pour time and energy into a student when they aren't making the progress or reaching their potential. Set your boundaries and engage your Graduate Program Director as a resource. You can't want or work for the graduate degree on your student's behalf, so be mindful and persistent in sharing your expectations with students.