



What is a mentor and why does mentoring matter? A mentor is a person who “takes an interest in developing another person’s career and well-being; has an interpersonal as well as professional relationship with those they mentor; advances academic and professional goals in directions most desired by the individual; tailors mentoring styles and content to the individual, including adjustments due to differences in culture, ethnicity and gender.”¹ Mentors are not simply advisors or supporters, they also act as role models, providing a living example of what it means to be an engaged, ethical and balanced scholar.

Mentoring is important because successful graduate students are rarely born; they can and should be developed. To that end, research suggests the importance of robust mentorship that enhances graduate student productivity, self-efficacy and career satisfaction. Effective mentoring is also an important predictor of transitioning from a graduate student to a successful researcher.

Guidelines for Effective Mentoring. The NIH-funded National Research Mentoring Network identifies several core competencies practiced by successful mentors.²

Align expectations and responsibilities. Successful mentoring requires a shared understanding of expectations and responsibilities. When students fall short of our expectations it may be because we have not stated our expectations clearly. How can expectations be established? At the beginning of the mentoring relationship (for example, when a student approaches you about being on their dissertation committee), take the time to have a discussion with students. Ask them about their short- and long-term goals, and discuss with them their feasibility. Be very clear about your expectations of students: what are the timelines for achieving goals? how often you will be able to meet with students?; what are the expectations for a face-to-face meeting? Some mentoring programs encourage faculty to set up Individual Development Plans (IDPs) and to enter into written contracts with graduate students clarifying both expectations (of graduate students) and responsibilities (of faculty) as the student moves through the program.

Foster Independence and Build Research Efficacy. An important goal of mentoring is to help students develop as effective researchers. One helpful way to do this is to be deliberate about providing scaffolding strategies which promote mentee’s research efficacy. Think about the skills that you believe students need at different stages in the program, and consider how you can help graduate students build these skills. For example, rather than telling a student to write a dissertation prospectus or to ‘come up with a question’, you might build research efficacy by helping them to break the task down into smaller, discrete tasks. When these tasks are completed, provide praise for the student—this helps build their confidence. Set milestones between candidacy and dissertation completion which are tailored to a given student’s personality. When the student has accomplished a research milestone, recognize that achievement.

¹ University of Michigan 2019.

² Sorkness 2017.

Maintain Effective Communication. Effective mentoring requires effective communication, both verbal and non-verbal. This means not only providing feedback but an awareness of how feedback is delivered. Research suggests that effective mentors provide timely, concrete and constructive feedback to graduate students about their work. Effective mentors also are aware of non-verbal communication: they engage in active listening, maintain eye contact, and attend to body language (ie, don't cross arms, lean back and frown when a student shares something). If a student disappears, don't assume it is because they are not committed to the work. Take the time to reach out, and be open to the possibility that they may have something else going on in their lives.

Promote Professional Development. Develop strategies for guiding professional development. Be available to advise students' development as teachers, providing constructive commentary and advice. At the appropriate stage, encourage students to apply for fellowships and grants, participate in national conferences, and integrate into a larger community of scholars. Also recognize that not every student who seeks your mentorship will choose an academic career. Draw on your network of colleagues and former students to help students evaluate career options.

Address Diversity. Graduate study can be an isolating experience, leading students to loneliness and self-doubt; in severe instances, isolation can lead to depression or dropping out. This dynamic, while general, can be more severe with students from under-represented groups. Research suggests that *women* and *minorities* tend to attribute negative experiences they have in graduate school to personal deficiencies, while men tend to attribute them to insufficient guidance or problems within the department (Nerad and Stewart 1991). Be attentive to these potential dynamics. Similarly, many *international students* are adjusting to a new set of cultural and educational norms (Trice, 1999), and need to become acclimated to life in a new country where they may have few social supports. Try to de-mystify the process of graduate school for your students from these non-traditional backgrounds. Also be sensitive to students with family obligations who need extra support.

Additional Resources:

University of Michigan Rackham Graduate School (2019). *How to Mentor Graduate Students: A Faculty Guide*.
<https://rackham.umich.edu/faculty-and-staff/facilitating-academic-success/mentoring-advising/>

UC-Berkeley Graduate Council (2006). *Best Practices for Faculty Mentoring of Graduate Students*.
https://academic-senate.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/gc_mentoring_guidelines-final.pdf

UC-Davis Graduate Council (2016). *Mentoring Guidelines*.
<http://gradstudies.ucdavis.edu/gradcouncil/mentoring.pdf>

National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, Medicine. *Comments on Faculty Mentoring*. (Mentoring assessment form)
<http://www.nap.edu/readingroom/books/mentor/>

Christine Sorkness et al (2017). "A new approach to mentoring for research: the National Research Mentoring Network."
BMC Proceedings. 11(Suppl 12):22.

Training:

University of Wisconsin Center for the Improvement of Mentored Experiences in Research (CIMER)
<https://cimerproject.org/training/>