

Getting the Most out of Mentoring

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Choosing a mentor is one of the most critical decisions you will make during your career.

The mentor's role is often described as that of a trusted counselor. For instance, a mentor can:

- Clearly explain the expectations and criteria for promotion whether it be from fellow to junior faculty, or from assistant to associate professor.
- Identify and facilitate the acquisition of resources to meet these expectations.
- Provide frequent and honest feedback.
- Warn you of potential obstacles to progress.

This essay is written from the point of view of the potential mentee. To that end, we discuss how to find and choose mentors. We also discuss what a mentee needs to do in order to maximize and promote a long-term, productive relationship with his/her mentor. The responsibilities of the mentor are only briefly touched upon. For more information regarding this topic, the reader is referred to

<http://faculty.washington.edu/olmstd/research/Mentoring.html>

What is a Mentor? In its broadest sense, a mentor is someone who is concerned about you and helping you to succeed. Importantly, the responsibility of a mentor is also to “give,” and that his/her advice and actions only benefit the mentee and not the mentor. In this way, mentoring is quite distinct from “training” and being a “trainer.” Although the trainer is also concerned about you and helping you to succeed, the trainer also benefits from his/her actions.

As cited by Morris Zelditch, 1990: "Mentors are advisors, people with career experience willing to share their knowledge; supporters, people who give emotional and moral encouragement; tutors, people who give specific feedback on one's performance; masters, in the sense of employers to whom one is apprenticed; sponsors, sources of information about

and aid in obtaining opportunities; models, of identity, of the kind of person one should be to be an academic."

Advantages and Disadvantages: A mentor can play a critical role in the formulation of your career plan. For instance, s/he can help you to understand your institution's culture by explaining its formal and informal norms, values, and expectations. A mentor can also facilitate the development of a supportive and productive colleague network. It is critical that both the mentor and mentee recognize their responsibilities and be able to communicate effectively. A poor mentor, or a mentor-mentee relationship filled with conflict, leads to failed expectations and results in the trainee or junior faculty member feeling like a failure and isolated.

What is a good mentor? A good mentor should be a good, objective listener. S/he should try not to project his/her preconceptions/biases onto the mentee's problems or goals, but instead, demonstrate sensitivity and empathy. Ideally, s/he will be aware of cultural, gender, and disability diversity issues. A good mentor should serve as a professional and personal role model in terms of integrity, compassion, and enthusiasm for the job. Above all, a good mentor should be approachable and patient. A good mentor always thinks what is best for the mentee and often sacrifices himself/herself to provide a more nurturing and giving environment for the mentee.

Choosing a Mentor: While accomplishments in teaching and research are important, also consider the following:

- Enthusiasm for advising students.
- Experience in directing postdoctoral fellows and junior faculty.
- Management and organization of his or her research group.
- Reputation for setting high standards in a congenial atmosphere.
- Funding sources and how long they will last.
- Successful track record of mentoring trainees to next phases of academic career development.
- Fairness.
- Successful record of promoting trainees.

- Be sure to talk to present and former advisees and to gain personal impressions through face-to-face interviews. A key question is whether a particular mentor's style is compatible with your personality.

Multiple Mentors: In addition to a primary adviser, we strongly recommend having one or two secondary advisers who have an interest in your research/career and are prepared to offer counsel. It's rare that a single person is able to adequately deal with all of the personal and professional issues that come up as a part of professional development. In other words, people have different strengths. What one adviser is lacking in experience and temperament can usually be found in the others. Don't forget to look outside your division or even department. It can be very helpful to get an outside perspective on issues such as grant applications or even local politics. Often, an advisor outside the institution can also provide a balanced view of any conflicts or decisions a mentee needs to make for continued successful career development. For instance, the decision to move out of the mentor's laboratory is always a difficult one, and an outside perspective can be very helpful. Be careful—don't choose a mentor the same gender as you and expect the person to be especially sympathetic regarding gender-specific concerns. This is not always true.

Getting Ready: How to Get the Most Out of Your Mentoring Relationship(s):

- **What is your vision of life?** The clearer you are on what you want to achieve in your life and work, the better you and your mentor(s) will be able to focus on constructive ways to help you attain your objectives. What type of research do you want to pursue? What are you good at? What skills do you need to develop? On a broader scale, Senge defines vision as what you want to create of yourself and the world around you. In addition to work-related goals, what does your vision include? Raising happy, well-adjusted children? Living on a beach? Being very fit and healthy? Visiting every continent? Helping others with their spiritual development? What do you love to do? Communicating these tenets and beliefs of your life with your mentor can be both enriching and effective.

- **Have realistic expectations.** Remember, advisors are only human; no one is perfect. It may be impossible for a person to single-handedly fulfill and address all the professional and personal issues involved in career development. Your advisor can at least help you find others who may be better prepared to deal with the issue at hand.
- **Optimize communication.** Make appointments. This way you will have your mentor's full attention. Be efficient and organized. Be on time. Be prepared. It is a good idea to have an "agenda" or list of topics/questions you want to discuss. After the meeting, summarize any agreements. *Tip:* If you need to cancel a meeting, make sure your mentor gets the message. Don't rely on email alone. Err on direct communication in person if you cannot decide to use either electronic or direct communication. When discussing conflicts or even mild disagreements, a one-dimensional email communication is sometimes ineffective and can be counterproductive. Periodically reassess your needs and goals. Keep your advisor/mentor updated on your progress and struggles.
- **Evaluation of creative work.** Do not submit "rough drafts" for input. Be sure the manuscript (or proposal) is presentable and free of typos. After re-writing, highlight the changed sections so that s/he does not have to re-read the entire paper. Accept criticism gracefully. It is the mentor's job to objectively evaluate your work and progress. While you may disagree, at least demonstrate that you are willing to consider your advisor's opinions. If, after thinking about it, you still disagree, it is crucial to demonstrate that you can rationally and reasonably defend your own position.
- **Requesting recommendations.** Have an updated CV on hand. Provide a short description of the grant (fellowship, program) to which you are applying. If you are requesting a letter of support for a grant, provide a copy of your objective and specific aims.
- **Respect boundaries.** Although friendship between mentor and mentee may develop, it is not necessary. An advisor may feel that friendship may interfere with his/her ability to

honestly appraise and deliver criticism.

How to handle disagreements: Conflicts are a part of life. The key is to remember that it's **your** life and career in the long run, and you have choices about how to respond. *But, respond with respect* for the other person's opinion. Something like: "Thanks for your excellent ideas. Let me take them into consideration and get back to you with my plan (thoughts, suggestions)." Most people will appreciate this type of positive, direct response. If you have multiple advisors, they may disagree on how to deal with a particular issue. Open and direct communication is the best way to handle disagreements regardless of how painful or uncomfortable they can be—email communication should be avoided.

When Does Mentoring Stop? "Mentoring is a lifelong activity—like parenthood." Professional Development neither begins nor ends with fellowship. While there are times when mentoring may be more important or needed, e.g., during formative years of career building or during times of transition, mentoring can be valuable at any stage. However, this does not mean that you will necessarily have the same mentor throughout your career. It is a good idea to periodically assess your relationship with your mentor. As you progress through your career, your needs will change and your mentors may change as well. As we discussed, personality issues, gender/cultural, or other conflicts may arise that negatively affect your relationship with your mentor. In that case, it is vital that you be able to discuss them before they impair the relationship to the point where your productivity and self-esteem are jeopardized. If necessary, find a trusted person to help mediate. As I mentioned in the previous paragraph, conflicts are inevitable in any relationship. The key is to deal with them in a positive, open manner. If you and your advisor feel that these differences are irreconcilable, work on finding a way to amicably find and move on to another mentor.

Once a mentor for a mentee, always a mentor!

Bibliography

Links:

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the Status of Women in Physics of the American Physical Society.

- <http://www.training.nih.gov/handbook/mentor.html> – section on mentoring from the NIH Fellows' Handbook. Extremely useful overview.
- <http://www.awis.org/careers/mentoring.html> – Mentoring site for the Association of Women in Science.
- <http://www1.od.nih.gov/oir/sourcebook/ethic-conduct/mentor-guide.htm> – “A Guide to Training and Mentoring in the Intramural Research Program at the NIH.”
- <http://www.nap.edu/readingroom/books/mentor/> - online version of Advisor, Teacher, Role Model, Friend (see below)
- <http://www.rackham.umich.edu/StudentInfo/Publications/StudentMentoring/contents.htm> – “How to get the mentoring you want.” Graduate student guide with many good ideas for mentors/mentees at all levels of training.
- Stanford University School of Medicine <http://facultymentoring.stanford.edu/> – link to their faculty mentoring program
- University of Northern Iowa: http://www.uni.edu/resources/faculty/fac_sta.shtml- In particular, check out “Tools for Teaching” located in the “Center for the Enhancement of Teaching” under Faculty Resources link.
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