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# Great Mentoring in Graduate School:

A QUICK START GUIDE FOR PROTÉGÉS

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## Abstract

*Great Mentoring in Graduate School: A quick start guide for protégés* by Laura Gail Lunsford and Vicki L. Baker provides a practical, student-oriented perspective informed by the authors' experience and research on mentoring. The guide includes helpful advice and tips on a range of topics such as identifying a mentor, engaging with mentors to develop a professional identity, cultivating networks, and serving as a mentor to others.

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# Introduction

Why is mentoring important for and to graduate students? Many successful people attribute some of their success to their mentors. Thus, one answer is that mentors may help you achieve your goals and aspirations. Another answer, for graduate students in programs that require a thesis or dissertation, is that mentoring activities are at the core of these research experiences. Participating in a mentoring relationship also involves some skill. If you wish to stay in academia then learning how to mentor will be important to your career success. Alternatively, mentoring is an important activity in corporations and nonprofit organizations. In fact, being known as a good mentor is one way you may be evaluated for future promotions. Talented mentors can develop and hone the intellect and skills of graduate students.

Our goal in creating this guide is to help you understand, early in your graduate experience, the role of mentoring in graduate school. There is a lot to know about mentoring. In fact, one of us teaches a semester-long course on mentoring. Clearly, we can not cover all of that material here, and unless you like to study mentoring, you probably would not want to read it!

This guide provides basic information that many students are unaware of but will benefit from knowing. We hope to expand your thinking about what mentoring is and what it can do for you. We also hope that you learn what it means to participate in a healthy and flourishing mentoring relationship. Most mentors develop their mentoring skills in graduate school. We hope you will build a strong mentoring foundation so you might become a great mentor for others.

We have attempted to make this a readable, user-friendly guide. Some chapters include self-assessments and practical steps to developing your mentoring network. Each chapter begins with a quick overview and ends with a section on challenges and some tips. Make this guide work for you as you take ownership of your mentorships and developmental network.

## CHAPTER 1

# What Is (NOT) Mentoring?

*In this chapter, we address the important question—What Mentoring IS and is NOT. We highlight the faculty relationships students encounter during their graduate training and provide a brief overview of the primary roles and responsibilities of each.*

Throughout your graduate experience, you will interact with a variety of individuals who provide professional and personal support. Faculty members, in particular, are vital resources both in and outside of the classroom. A few of the individuals you will encounter include an academic advisor, supervisor, dissertation chair and/or a mentor(s). Each of these individuals will serve complementary, yet differing roles for you as you move along the path to degree completion. Given the variety of relationships you will develop in graduate school, we felt it important to briefly discuss each of these primary relationships in order to address the critical question—“What Is (NOT) Mentoring?”

Graduate students sometimes confuse the relationships described above, which then leads to unrealistic expectations and discontent. An academic advisor may also be a mentor, but that is not always the case and nor does it have to be. All students are likely to work with an academic advisor at some point in their graduate experience. Thus, we first begin with a discussion of the academic advisor. We provide a description of a graduate supervisor followed by the dissertation chair and mentor. Our hope is to help you better understand the functions of these relationships, set appropriate expectations, and take control of your **developmental networks**, which are described last.

## Definitions

### Academic Advisor

An academic advisor, sometimes referred to as a “gate-keeper” is a professional and institutionally-driven relationship. This individual supports students in their quest to complete academic tasks and helps the student gain the necessary permissions and approvals associated with graduate level training. Such tasks include helping students complete major academic duties and requirements in a timely manner, ensuring progress towards degree completion, and compliance with departmental and programmatic rules and regulations. Researchers suggest that, in graduate school, academic advisors are responsible for the facilitation of learning about the craft of research through dissertation or thesis work. In other words, the academic advisor is primarily focused on supporting students as they work to complete academic tasks. Academic advisors can be assigned by the academic program or selected by the graduate student.

### Supervisor

The supervisory relationship is particularly important in graduate education, given graduate supervisors serve as skilled experts overseeing the professional knowledge and skill development as you work to become a scholar or practitioner. Supervisors are the individuals who oversee research assistantships, teaching assistantships, graduate assistantships, work study positions, or part-time positions that may or may not be associated with the graduate program. The supervisor provides “on-the-job-training” by providing guidance on work tasks, completion deadlines, feedback on work products, and helps the student manage work hours. The term ‘Supervisor’ is used in the British system of higher education to mean PhD advisor.

## Dissertation/thesis chair

The dissertation (or thesis) chair is the person who serves as the leader and manager of a doctoral student's dissertation (or thesis) committee. Often referred to as a gatekeeper, the chair has the responsibility of overseeing a student's progress towards the development of original scholarship that contributes to a body of work in the given field of interest. An effective chair serves as an advocate for the student and "protects" the student from other committee member demands deemed contradictory to the direction of the research or agreed upon goals. Finally, the chair helps the student meet program and departmental guidelines in terms of content, structure, completion time, and any other submission requirements. This person is the primary advisor.

## Mentor

Traditionally, a mentor has been defined as a more senior individual who provides career and psychosocial support to a junior member of a given organization. Recently, mentors have been found to exist laterally, virtually, among peers, and with individuals outside of the professional context. Mentorships center on an emotional commitment, which focuses on the protégé's **personal and professional growth**. Mentoring relationships, by nature, are reciprocal and more enduring than relationships with an academic advisor, supervisor, or dissertation chair.

## Developmental Relationships

During the past 10 years, research has revealed that one person alone cannot provide all the necessary professional and personal support needed by a protégé. Instead, it's important to include a variety of individuals in a support network, referred to as a developmental network (discussed in more detail in Chapter 3). A **developmental network** includes mentors, or **developers**, who provide a range of support including personal, professional and emotional. Developers can include individuals from within and outside of the academic community as well as family and friends. Your developmental network may include all of the individuals noted above or perhaps none of them. We strongly encourage you to engage in a self-assessment (see Chapter 2) as you seek to develop and cultivate your developmental network.

## Challenges & Tips

Each of these relationships is distinct and serves an important purpose in the graduate student experience. The challenge for most students is managing these relationships appropriately. Knowing the primary function of each helps you know how to engage with these individuals, be more informed about their expectations of you, and understand the role they play in your experience. One, or all of these individuals, may also act as a mentor but do not expect any of them to serve as a mentor without having an explicit discussion with this individual about your interest in him/her also serving in a mentoring capacity.

Another challenge is when there is not a good fit between you and your academic advisor. Warning signs of poor relationships include dreading meeting with your advisor or reading emails from your advisor; your advisor frequently misses appointments scheduled with you; or you are unclear about the progress you need to be making on your degree program. There may be a different faculty member in the department with whom you work well and who shares common academic interests. Switching advisors is ok and not something to be concerned about as long as you handle switching advisors in a professional manner. First, have a discussion with your new, intended advisor to be sure he/she is interested and willing to take you on as an advisee. Second, schedule a meeting with your current advisor to let him/her know you are switching and why you are switching. Students often feel uncomfortable about doing this, but in reality, both parties are usually pleased and supportive of the decision. Finally, complete any necessary paperwork to have the new advisor on record.

Note that you might be able to 'rescue' your relationship with your advisor, especially if your advisor is the 'right' person in your field for your interests. First, initiate a conversation about your specific concern. You need to provide specific examples rather than general statements. For example, saying that 'I am frustrated when I email you three times with no responses even a week later' is better than saying, 'I wish we communicated better.' These are difficult conversations, but it is important you learn how to have them. Acknowledge your role in the miscommunication

and discuss ways you prefer to have an exchange take place, e.g. 'May we schedule weekly 15 minute meetings if email is not your preferred form of communication.' The goal is to ask for what you need and to determine if you and your advisor can agree on how to communicate or work together to meet these needs. You might also need to adjust your expectations and it will be good for you to learn how to do that early in the relationship. Again, we realize how challenging such an interaction can be, however, these types of relationship building strategies are critical to success in graduate school, in working with colleagues and co-authors, and in shaping your own effectiveness as a mentor.

## Quick Tips

- Within a month of arrival on campus schedule a first meeting with your academic advisor to introduce yourself, ask questions about the program, and get a feel for program and departmental expectations.
- Switch early (if possible) to another academic advisor if this relationship is not a good fit. Be professional about this change and realize it is not uncommon.
- Initiate an 'expectations conversation' with your advisor if a problem has persisted on several occasions.
- Reach out to other program faculty or administrators to get advice (and support) on how to proceed to work better with or change your advisor.
- When in doubt – ask for help! This is a sign of strength, not weakness.

## CHAPTER 2

# What Can I Expect from a Mentor?

*In this chapter we discuss how to identify and communicate needs you have that could be met by mentoring. Mentoring behaviors are discussed first. Developing short and long-term goals for your mentoring experiences are discussed next. A checklist of mentor behaviors is presented.*

## Your Context Matters

The role of mentoring varies depending on the graduate program (e.g. masters versus doctoral), discipline (e.g. engineering versus education), and your personal preferences. For example, one-on-one faculty mentoring is critical for completion of most doctoral research and dissertations, but it may be less important in programs where independent research is not a degree requirement, e.g. a Masters of Business Administration or Juris Doctorate. Some disciplines have mentoring 'built in' more so than other disciplines. Disciplines with large laboratories and a team of doctoral students and post-doctoral scholars may provide more opportunities for mentoring from advanced graduate students than disciplines where students work alone in a library, e.g. English. Many graduate students successfully complete their schooling without a mentor in the traditional sense. However, learning to identify advisors, supporters, and even mentors is an important professional skill set. We refer to these individuals as your developmental network.

## What Mentors Actually Do

We find that people can get confused quickly about the difference between a mentor, and advisor, or other individuals who provide support to graduate students. In addition to understanding the definitions presented in Chapter 1, it is useful to think about the behaviors involved in mentoring as you think about your own needs.

Mentoring behaviors can be reliably categorized into the functions of **psychosocial** support, e.g. builds confidence, or provides a role model, or career support, e.g. teaches you how to ask good research questions, or collaborates with you on scholarly projects. One way to think about mentoring relationships is to consider the behaviors you expect or desire. We consider mentoring expectations to be the "must haves" or the "price of admission" for engaging in the mentoring relationship. These expectations need to be met for you to find the mentoring relationship to be a fulfilling one. Desires are the items on your wish list. A wish list includes the behaviors, characteristics, and interactions that would be nice if they were present in a mentorship but are not relationship requirements. Students vary in the amount of each function they require and may need to rely on several mentors to meet all of their needs. What is important is for you to communicate clearly and explicitly to your mentors what your needs are. In addition, consider how you wish to give and receive feedback and critique.

Figure 1 presents a Checklist of Mentoring Behaviors drawn from the Advisor Working Alliance Inventory<sup>1</sup> and the Ideal Mentor Scale.<sup>2</sup> You may use this Checklist to rank behaviors you expect from mentors. This activity may help you begin to identify your immediate needs, which will change during your time in graduate school so we encourage you to revisit and revise periodically. If you need support that does not relate to the categories listed in the Checklist you might need to revise your expectations of a mentor. In graduate school mentors' main functions are to provide career support and some psychosocial support.

1 Schlosser, L. Z., & Gelso, C. J. (2001). Measuring the working alliance in advisor–advisee relationships in graduate school. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 48(2), 157.

2 Rose, G. L. (2003). Enhancement of mentor selection using the ideal mentor scale. *Research in Higher Education*, 44(4), 473-494.



In graduate settings mentors are not, and should not be, friends, lovers, or parental figures. Students sometimes mistake warmth and interest for other kinds of relationships and mentors sometimes cross professional boundaries with students. Students with a strong family or communal identity may even think of a mentor as their “academic” mother or father. However, this analogy is an imperfect one as mentors have different roles than do parents. Faculty mentors have influence on your graduate success, in a way parents do not, and are expected to uphold ethical and professional standards. You can and should expect your mentors to establish boundaries on their relationships with you.

## How to Identify Goals

Learning how to identify and express realistic and appropriate goals is an important skill in developing effective mentoring relationships. Graduate work is a transition for many students, who are expected to work more independently than they may have worked during undergraduate studies. As a result students may enter mentoring relationships expecting that the mentor is going to set the agenda. Your mentor probably has a good idea about what you might need and the goals you might have, but he or she will not know all of your needs and goals. It is essential that you are an active and early participant in sharing what you hope to learn and achieve as a protégé. In other words, consider crafting a vision statement that describes the ideal you at the end of your graduate school experience. Use that vision to then develop specific goals. Your vision should include how you might contribute to your mentors’ successes as well.

Consider developing goals for the beginning, middle and end of your graduate school experience. These goals should be ones where mentors can provide guidance.

*Beginning goals.* In the short term learn the ‘unwritten rules’ for navigating your department and program in the first year.

*Mid-range goals.* The goals might relate to outcomes during graduate school like summer experiences or internships, presenting at conferences, and collaborating on a journal article.

*Long-term goals.* These goals might relate to preparing for job talks and interviews, and exposure to the career skills you will need. If you choose an academic career you might want to have goals around learning to teach well, advising students, balancing your workload in addition to conducting research. Think about possible career paths, e.g. the professoriate, industry, government or non-profit organizations. What do you need to learn or accomplish to pursue your career path or to keep your options open? How can your mentors help prepare and connect you?

## Learn from Advanced Graduate Students

Connect with advanced students, and add them to your network, to explore possible goals. Consider asking advanced students questions such as:

- What are departmental expectations of graduate students?
- Who are the people in the department or university I should get to know?
- What university-level support is there for graduate students?
- What goals do you wish you had in your first and second years of graduate school?
- What do you wish you knew in your first year?
- What advice do you have in setting out goals for working with advisors and mentors?
- What goals do you have as you consider applying for jobs?

## Challenges & Tips

Our research suggests that identifying and sharing your needs may be a complex task, fraught with frustration for mentors and protégés. Faculty mentors may believe that their student protégés have unrealistic expectations. At other times, faculty may feel that students have difficulty expressing what they need. Indeed, protégés may not be sure about what they need and may believe that expressing any questions may reveal a lack of competence. We encourage you to err on over-communicating in terms of frequency. Faculty members often express frustration at how little students share feelings about expectations and needs in a mentorship. Give faculty members the opportunity to tell you what they can and cannot do based on your expectations and desires. As the student, it is YOUR responsibility to schedule the meeting to discuss what you need and/or expect from the mentorship. Know that your expectations and desires may change over time requiring you and your faculty mentor to revisit the conversation.

### Figure 1. Checklist of Mentoring Behaviors

RANK the items in order of importance in each category.

I need mentors who:

#### Category 1: Career Support

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. introduce me to professional activities (e.g., conferences, writing articles).
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. help me conduct my work within a plan.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. have invited me to be a responsible collaborator in his/her own work.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. help me establish a timetable for the tasks of my graduate training.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. engage me in productive meetings.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. help me recognize areas where I can improve.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. facilitate my professional development through networking.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. strive to make program requirements as rewarding as possible.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 9. educate me about the process of graduate school.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 10. are available when I need her/him.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 11. show me how to employ relevant research techniques.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 12. help me plan the outline for a presentation of my research.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 13. help me to maintain a clear focus on my research objectives.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 14. give me specific assignments related to my research problem.

#### Category 2: Psychosocial or Relationship Support

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. like me.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. believe in me.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. encourage my input into our discussions.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. are kind when commenting about my work.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. respect me.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. offer me encouragement for my accomplishments.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. welcome my input into our discussions.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. take my ideas seriously.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 9. have my best interests in mind.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 10. make me feel comfortable.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 11. avoid making me feel intellectually “lost” during meetings.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 12. recognize my potential.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 13. are role models.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 14. advocate for my needs and interests.

Look for individuals to meet your top ranked needs (no one can meet them all).

## CHAPTER 3

# Why do I Need A Mentoring Network?

*In this chapter, we talk about the importance of creating a developmental network that consists of multiple mentors/developers that support you, both professionally and personally, in your pursuits. We offer advice on how to cultivate your developmental network.*

In her groundbreaking work on mentoring, Kram (1985) suggested that career and psychosocial support may be provided by a range of developmental relationships which she referred to as the **relationship constellation**. The notion of the relationship constellation suggests that one individual alone may not have the time, the ability, or the skills to provide all the necessary support for career progression. Rather, a multitude of relationships may offer different types of support and experiences that are more beneficial both personally and professionally for the individual receiving the support. In 2001, Higgins and Kram expanded on this notion and offered the concept of **developmental networks** defined as the “set of people a protégé names as taking an active interest in and action to advance the protégé’s career by providing developmental assistance” (p. 268). This movement, in research and practice, beyond the traditional dyadic mentoring relationship has yielded positive results.

For example, Higgins (2000) found that both the amount of mentoring assistance received and the number of developmental relationships maintained yielded significant and positive effects on work satisfaction for members of the legal profession. Higgins and Thomas (2001) examined the effects of an individuals’ primary and multiple developmental relationships in a longitudinal study of lawyers. They found that an individual’s primary developmental relationships were likely to affect short-term career outcomes such as work satisfaction and intentions to remain in the work organization, whereas long-term outcomes such as organizational retention and career advancement were influenced by the composition of individuals’ developmental constellations. Other research including the work by van Emmerik (2004) sought to determine if university faculty members who successfully invest in multiple developmental relationships would be more satisfied with their careers. Findings revealed that mentoring was positively associated with career satisfaction and that larger advice networks were found to be positively related to intrinsic career success (i.e., job satisfaction). de Janasz, Sullivan, and Whiting (2003) also argued that multiple mentors are a necessity due to the changing nature of the workforce and the need for continuous knowledge acquisition that one mentor alone may be unable to fulfill: “It is not enough just to increase the size of the mentoring network; it is important to conduct a careful analysis of what competencies you wish to build and find the best resources for development” (p. 86).

While we know that we should engage in mentorships with multiple individuals, graduate students often ask – how do I go about cultivating a developmental network? In the following section, we offer advice based on existing literature and our own research. It is important to note, however, this advice is based on students assuming a high level of personal agency and efficacy (e.g., completing a self-assessment, being honest about needs and personal expectations) as they seek to identify possible mentors. Mentors do not come to you; you must seek them out and be proactive about your needs, targeted areas of improvement, and goals and expectations for the relationship(s). Without your own personal clarity around these ideas (and others as we will discuss), you may experience an uphill battle when identifying, cultivating, and managing your mentorships.

## Three Steps to Cultivating a Developmental Network

### Step 1 – Conduct a needs assessment.

As discussed in chapter 2.

### Step 2 – Seek the “right” mentors.

It is not enough to increase the size of your developmental network. You must seek out the “right” mentors. Identify the “right” mentor by first assessing your needs and then identifying the individual(s) who you believe have the skill set(s) to support you in the areas you identify or seek the most assistance.

In our work, we have seen students seek mentorship from the most prestigious faculty mentor in their department. While this may work in some instances, we have seen that these much sought after mentors may not, in fact, be effective mentors. Reasons for this include limited time due to their own career commitments, limited interest in working with students as that is seen as time away from research, and limited skill in being an effective mentor. Rather than go for name, prestige, or access to other social capital as primary drivers, seek out the individuals who can support you in the areas identified in your needs assessment, who are willing to serve in a mentoring capacity, and who see a mutual benefit to engaging in such a relationship. This foundation has a greater likelihood of resulting in a successful mentorship.

### Step 3 – Diversify your network.

In graduate school, students often seek faculty mentorships and we agree with the importance of such relationships. However, we encourage you to look to non-faculty mentors, e.g. administrators and peers within the academic community, and seek mentorships *outside* the immediate academic community. Research reveals the importance of peer mentors to graduate student success and satisfaction (Allen, Russell, Maetzke, 1997; Grant-Vallone & Ensher, 2000). Peer mentoring also contributes to higher perceived levels of knowledge creation and sharing (Bryant, 2005) and psychosocial support. Peer mentoring goes beyond just friendship in that a peer, who has expertise, is providing professional guidance. Also, friends, family, and community members or others in your field of choice can also serve as important mentors and contribute to your overall success.

Consider also diversifying your mentoring network based on *types of support* provided. Graduate students in our research often seek mentors who can provide professional support. Faculty mentors are expected to provide such support as letters of recommendation, co-authorship and other collaboration opportunities, and access to important social capital perceived to be necessary for career advancement. However, graduate school can be an isolating experience full of self-doubt and personal challenges. We encourage graduate students to seek mentorships with individuals who can provide psychosocial and emotional support as well.

The graduate student experience can be daunting and riddled with pressure and self-doubt. Developing key relationships to rely on for a range of support may help you to not only survive your graduate student experience, but to excel and establish a solid base of resources for your future career. The career landscape is ever evolving due to changes in technology, societal needs, and economic pressures. Understanding the role of relationships to helping individuals cope and manage these changes is critical at all academic and career stages. In today's career context, individuals are becoming more strategic and deliberate about building their developmental networks as a means of staying competitive and ensuring the necessary resources to continue professional and personal development along one's career path.

## Challenges & Tips

Developmental networks are evolutionary by nature. Some relationships may endure for a lifetime, while other relationships may serve a distinct purpose for a given period of time. Graduate students often struggle with accepting this reality. Students also struggle with the need to continually engage in self-assessments to determine if new relationships need to be added to or removed from the network. Finally, we have found that students struggle in terms of impression management with members of their network, particularly professional relationships.

Students often ask us—How often should I be interacting with my developers? Is it inappropriate to ask for help if I haven't talked to him/her for a while? The beauty of having a developmental network is that you don't have to interact with all mentors/developers all the time about all matters important to you. These individuals are part of your network for a reason, so students should not feel uncomfortable seeking assistance or guidance when it's needed. Sending a note to check in and providing an update is always welcome.

## Quick Tips

- Aim to have 4-5 people you consider 'developers' in your network by the end of your first year in graduate school.
- Schedule routine times on your calendar to check in with mentors. When the date comes, if you have not been in touch, it will remind you to reconnect with individuals in your mentoring network.
- Check in occasionally with your developers, even if it is only to provide a quick update or send a note of thanks. Note these dates on your schedule so you make sure you follow through.
- Follow through on your commitments, big or small, to your mentors.

## CHAPTER 4

# How do I Engage with Mentors to Develop a Professional Identity?

*This chapter presents advice on how to engage with mentors in ways that will enable you to develop the skills, competencies and beliefs that will make you feel like a professional in your chosen field. New students may feel they do not yet belong in their profession. We present ideas for how you can actively search out mentors to develop your professional identity.*

While the individuals in your developmental network will provide a variety of support, the faculty will serve a vital purpose—they will help provide insights (and access) into the academic and professional communities with which you seek membership. As you engage in departmental practices such as brown bags and practice job talks and professional/disciplinary practices such as conference presentations and networking, you begin to learn what it means to be a member of the intended community. You learn about acceptable and unacceptable behaviors, what's valued in the community, and who are the individuals you aspire to be like either professionally or personally. All of these interactions, observations, and "trial runs" aid in your own professional identity development. We offer some advice to help you think through the type of practitioner and/or scholar you hope to become as you develop your own professional identity.

## Four-Step Model

### Step 1 – What is/are my professional goal(s)?

You chose to attend graduate school for a reason. Be clear with yourself and the members of your developmental network about what those reasons are. In the process, work with your mentors/developers to establish short-term goals and activities that will support your long term goals. We strongly encourage you to be aspirational in the process – where do you see yourself (or where would you like to be) in 10 or 15 years? Work backwards from that "end point" to identify the professional and personal experiences that will get you there.

### Step 2 – Identify exemplars in the field.

An important way of learning is through observation and second-hand accounts of others' successes and failures. Identify the advanced graduate student(s) and the early career practitioner or faculty member who is viewed as a "rising star" in your field of interest. Ask to meet with him/her to learn about their experience, the steps taken to get to that position professionally and personally, and ask for advice. If you are lucky, one or more of these individuals will be a member in your developmental network. If not, you still have the power to seek these individuals out and pick their brain about how to get where you want to be. Be sure to come prepared to such a meeting – have questions prepared ahead of time, be sure to inform the individual of your intent in meeting with him/her (perhaps even share the questions ahead of time to be as efficient as possible), and create an action plan based on what you learn from that meeting.

### Step 3 – Ask for help.

Through our own work with students, we have come to find that graduate students are afraid to ask for help. They think they should already know the answer or are afraid of looking incompetent if they ask for help. This could not be further from the truth. Faculty members are interested in supporting you, especially the faculty members in your developmental network. They are happy to write a letter of recommendation, they are happy to let you observe their teaching and interaction with students, they are happy to introduce you at networking events, and they are happy to review job packets and job talks. They are also happy to speak honestly about the opportunities and challenges associated with your intended career. Remember, however, that it may be unreasonable to expect one

faculty member to do all of the items described above. You should be able to locate mentors in your network who can cover most, if not all, of these activities. We can't say it any other way – **LEARN** from them and **ASK QUESTIONS**. Be in charge of your development and let the important individuals in your life participate in that process – they are happy to do so.

#### Step 4 – Don't be afraid to fail.

Failure is part of development. If you are in graduate school, you were likely successful in college to get to this position. Perhaps the approach and work ethic you displayed in college was adequate to get you where you wanted to be. However, that can change in graduate school. You will be pushed in ways you have not been prior to that point. Faculty members and program/departmental staff will have high expectations of you, and there will be periods of self-doubt, isolation, and fear. That is normal. Everyone in graduate school has these feelings. It's ok. In times of failure, comes increased learning, clarity, and confidence (though it might not feel that way in the moment). Use these moments to engage in self-reflection, to revisit the goals you developed in step 1, and rely on your developers/mentors to help guide you through.

## Challenges & Tips

Graduate students whom we have encountered sometimes struggle with their developing professional identities. Members of your developmental network, particularly program faculty and staff, have expectations for you in terms of program performance and post-graduation career plans. Sometimes those expectations match yours, and sometimes they do not. Students struggle with reconciling these differences in expectations and fear a loss of support if they share their true feelings or career aspirations if they do differ from the faculty they respect and value the most. These differences in expectations may be a result of geographical constraints, family constraints, or lack of clarity around professional goals. Just know that you are not alone and we encourage you to have at least one person in your network with whom you can be honest about your goals, expectations, and the challenges you face, especially if your goals conflict with the goals your program faculty have for you. In other words, develop your mentoring network so you may call upon your network to help you decide between conflicting advice and expectations.

### Quick Tips

- Actively seek out opportunities for skill development (hint if you haven't been told no you have not asked enough). These "trial runs" give you a sense of what it takes to be successful in a given area.
- Ask to serve as a teaching assistantship if teaching is of interest to you.
- Ask faculty what it takes to prepare and deliver a course.
- If you need more practice in grant-writing, ask a staff or faculty member to see examples of past grants so that you can better learn what goes in to a successful grant proposal.
- If you want more experience with the publication process, work on a manuscript of your own and seek feedback via friendly review.
- Ask an advanced peer or faculty member who has been successful in publishing to see earlier drafts of a publication, feedback from reviewers, and the letter to the editor.

## CHAPTER 5

# What is Great (and no so great) Mentoring?

*In this chapter we describe the characteristics of high quality relationships. In addition, we present common sources of dysfunction and tips to avoid or reduce it.*

## Characteristics of High Quality Relationships

Individuals assume that mentoring is a universally positive experience. However, mentoring relationships, like other relationships you may have, vary in their quality. Our work suggests that many graduate students do not have high quality relationships with their mentors. We advocate that you can learn to identify the characteristics of high quality relationships and how to engage more frequently in them. People who engage in high quality relationships with their mentors are energized, are better able to achieve their goals, experience less stress, and better health and academic outcomes.

Work on high-quality relationships suggests they have three characteristics: resiliency, flexibility, and openness. As you develop relationships with your mentors you may wish to keep in mind these characteristics, which are described below.

**Resiliency** refers to relationships that can withstand difficult or challenging interactions. For example, individuals in a resilient relationship do not stop investing in that relationship because of a single failure or poor communication. Mentoring relationships are considered **flexible** when the protégé is allowed to be open and honest when seeking guidance. A protégé, for example, who can ask their mentor how to overcome a lack of confidence in presenting a paper would be said to have a flexible relationship with their mentor. Finally, **openness** refers to relationships that connect participants to new ideas and ways of thinking. This idea is also related to having diverse mentoring networks, which can expose you to diverse ideas and opportunities.

## Recognize and Reduce Five Sources of Dysfunction

Fortunately, truly dysfunctional mentoring relationships are rare. But even great protégés and mentors may sometimes engage in dysfunctional behaviors. There are common sources of dysfunction. We hope to increase your awareness of these sources so that you may recognize low quality relationships and reduce their negative effects or avoid them altogether.

Dysfunction in mentoring relationships originates from one of these five sources: mismatch, neglect, manipulation, general dysfunction, and lack of competence. Mismatch in the dyad and neglect are the two most common sources of dysfunction.

**Mismatch** refers to differences in goals and working styles. For example, a mentor who prepares work in advance may not be a good match for a protégé who procrastinates. Avoid mismatch by having a discussion early about your goals and needs and deciding what needs and goals can be met by your mentor. Establishing a network of mentors may also help you to avoid potential mismatch problems by identifying other individuals who can provide career assistance.

**Neglect** refers to situations when mentors or protégés fail to show up for planned meetings, fail to respond to email requests and questions, or engage in inattentive behavior. You may reduce neglectful behaviors by establishing a calendar and timeline for activities. If neglectful behavior continues you could discuss expectations and a need for responses on critical items. However, neglectful behavior is likely a pattern that will not change



quickly. You may need to identify additional mentors or even change mentors to deal with ongoing neglectful behavior.

**Lack of competence** may include skills you lack, which your mentor assumes you have. For example, if your mentor has a chemistry lab and you do not have the skills to conduct certain procedures this may create relational problems. Mentor lack of competence might refer to situations where a protégé wishes to learn how to write grant for the National Institute of Health (NIH) but the mentor has not written or received such grants. You may reduce this potential source of dysfunction by assessing your needs and skills. A candid conversation about expectations and skill development may help reduce dysfunctional interactions related to competency problems.

**General dysfunction** may occur when an individual is experiencing depression or other challenging life events that prevent him or her from engaging in the relationship. If you are the one having difficulty in this area it is important to seek professional assistance from a campus counseling office. The graduate school at your institution can also make referrals for you. If your mentor seems to be the source of the general dysfunction you may need to talk with your graduate coordinator to identify another mentor.

**Manipulation** may occur when a mentor takes credit, e.g. through authorship, for work done by the protégé. Alternatively, protégés can behave in manipulative ways to sabotage a mentor's research or teaching activities. It is unlikely you, as a graduate student, can reduce your mentor's manipulative behavior directly. However, developing a mentoring network may enable you to discuss these kinds of problems with mentors outside of your department who may provide advice on dealing with this kind of dysfunction.

## Challenges & Tips

You may feel that you do not have the knowledge or time or even options to develop high quality mentoring relationships. However, investing time in your first semester to identify your goals and needs may increase the chance of your developing high quality relationships with others. Learn to ask other graduate students about rewarding relationships they have with mentors. Further, recognize what a high-quality relationship is and seek to provide that kind of assistance to new students as you advance in your training.

Students often delay in addressing dysfunctional mentoring situations. It may be difficult at times to recognize the difference between a few negative interactions and a truly dysfunctional relationship. Developing a network of supporters is key to developing relationships with others to whom you can turn for advice and perspective in the event you experience dysfunctional mentoring.

### Quick Tips

- Know the three characteristics of high quality relationships and develop those characteristics in your relationships with your developers.
- Even great mentors (and protégés) might have an off day and engage in neglectful or dysfunctional behavior. This occurrence does not mean the relationship is a dysfunctional one.
- Bad is stronger than good – sometimes.....Negative interactions are more memorable than positive interactions, especially for protégés. There is evidence that you need more positive interactions to balance out one negative interaction.
- Ask others in your development network for advice if you encounter dysfunction with a mentor.

## CHAPTER 6

# From Protégé to Mentor

*In this chapter we propose that developing your mentoring skills are equally important to other graduate school activities. You can learn to mentor well by observing others and by practicing mentoring others. Developing skills of reflection and asking for feedback are important.*

## Use Your 'Window of Opportunity'

Mentors may play important roles for you at different transition points in your career. However, there appears to be a "window of opportunity" during graduate school when having a mentor is associated with greater benefits for protégés.

Furthermore, research suggests that most faculty develop their mentoring style during graduate school. Yet, we find that faculty rarely discuss how to be a mentor with their protégés. Our work suggests that if you have a great mentor you are likely to emulate that person. But what if you do not have a great mentor, or what if your great mentor lacks some skills that might benefit you?

In other words, how do you learn to be a great mentor? We propose that you take an active role in learning how to develop your mentoring skills and preferences. You have already started this process by reading this book. There are many unseen behaviors (implicit) that are involved in mentoring. Just like learning to teach or to conduct research, there is a lot that goes on "behind the scenes" with mentoring.

## Remember and Know the Fundamentals

You can easily master the fundamentals of mentoring to be sure you are aware of the behaviors of mentoring and relationship development. You have already learned many of the basics by reading this guide. Chapter 2 presented the main functions of mentoring as including both psychosocial (approachability, confidence building, trust) and career (learning the skills and norms of the profession) support. Chapter 5 presented the characteristics of high quality relationships as well as the common sources of dysfunction. Work towards interactions that are high quality and try to reduce dysfunctional mentoring interactions. Understanding and promoting that individuals develop a network of mentors is important and discussed in Chapters 1 and 3.

It is also helpful to think of relationships in terms of four stages. The beginning stage of the relationship is called initiation and is the time to get to know the goals, values, and working styles of the other person. The cultivation stage is characterized by collaboration and work together on shared activities of interest. Most people neglect the last two stages of separation and redefinition. Mentoring relationships, even informal ones, generally come to a close. Think about when the appropriate time is to end the mentoring part of the relationship. End the relationship in a positive way, perhaps a celebration or thank-you of some sort. In some cases you may keep a mentor or protégé in your network as a junior or senior colleague. It might be the case that you will want to stay in touch with a mentor for letters of recommendations or advice about career choices. In other cases it might be time to move on to investing in other relationships.

## Observe Mentors

Your first year in graduate school provides an opportunity for you to observe how mentors interact with you and other protégés. You should consider this opportunity for observation to be just as important as classes you take or time spent in a research laboratory. Make note of when you or others feel energized and motivated after an

interaction with a mentor. Pay attention to what the mentor did that led to this positive outcome. It is important to observe the experiences of others as great mentors seem to adjust their styles based on what their protégés might need.

Adopt an attitude of inquiry and reflection about mentoring in your first year. Because you are new, individuals are more likely to entertain your questions about mentoring. Consider asking advanced students about their best mentoring experiences. Ask your advisor or mentor what he or she considers to be important skills of mentoring. Think about your own preferences as you think about developing your mentoring skills. Identify the areas you might wish to develop and actively seek opportunities to do so.

## Practice Being a Mentor to Others

After your first year in graduate school you have an opportunity to provide mentor like support to new students. Reflect on how you might ask for feedback from your “protégés” or how you might support them better. Learn to also ask what you might do differently or what you do that annoys them. Work on creating a positive emotional tone in your work with peers and protégés. Watch out and identify potential sources of dysfunction for you and your peers.

As you advance in your studies you may have the opportunity to mentor formally undergraduates or new graduate students. If you are in a lab setting consider requesting assigned opportunities to support newer students. You have an opportunity to educate them about great mentoring, to avoid dysfunctional mentoring, and to improve your own mentoring skills.

You will inevitably encounter challenges in supporting your protégés. Consider how you can adopt an attitude of reflection to engage with your own mentoring network in deciding how to navigate these challenges in ways that benefit you and your protégés.

## Challenges & Tips

In our experience new students often wait for mentoring “to be done to them” rather than understanding that they are active participants in mentoring relationships. The challenge in your first year is to adopt an attitude of active observation of examples of great mentoring. It is true that you are a novice but the first year provides a great opportunity to learn and reflect about your needs and the skills involved in mentoring.

Challenges involved in professional programs like an MBA or Law School are their short duration. Actively seeking mentors in your chosen career may be challenging given the time demands of a two or three year program, much less finding time to practice mentoring skills. However, you may be able to engage in informal opportunities to support peers or new students. Many programs also provide formal opportunities, in the form of ambassador or orientation programs, to support incoming students. Seek these out.

Practicing mentoring while you are still in graduate school has few costs and many benefits. Once you begin your career, it is much more difficult to have the time to develop your mentoring skills. Further, in many professions the ability to mentor and coach others is considered in promotion and advancement.

### Quick Tips

- Use the “Window of Opportunity” to observe mentors in your first year.
- In later years volunteer for informal and formal opportunities to mentor others.

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## Further Reading & Resources

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