

Effective Mentoring

(adapted from <http://www.gradsch.psu.edu/facstaff/practices/mentoring.html>)

Effective mentoring of graduate students by faculty members is one of the most important keys to a successful graduate program because of the one-on-one nature of most graduate programs. Each of us recognizes that mentoring takes work, experience, and patience. Mentoring extends beyond advising because of the personal nature of the relationship between the mentor and the mentee.

While a good advisor assists students in learning about their discipline and the skills needed to conduct research or practice their profession, a mentor develops a relationship with her or his mentee on several levels. A mentor is a trusted guide. A mentor can offer support in difficult times. A mentor socializes her or his mentee, to quote the Council of Graduate Schools, "to the values, norms, practices and attitudes of a discipline and university; [mentorship] transforms a student into a colleague." A good mentor must be a good listener (key to good communication), be a good problem-solver, and be a good observer (able to spot "problems"). In essence, a mentor is:

1. An advisor, who has career interests similar to the student and shares their knowledge with the student informally or in the classroom.
2. A supporter, who gives the necessary level of emotional and moral encouragement, as for example, prior to the final oral examination.
3. A sponsor, who provides sources of information about research, grant, internship, employment, or other opportunities.
4. A tutor, who gives specific, timely, and constructive feedback on performance.
5. A model, who is a professional with integrity, thereby serving as a good role model.

Good mentoring can make the difference between not only recruiting good students but also retaining the student and helping the student to be marketable upon graduation. With good mentoring, a student will be well prepared to enter his or her profession not only with the requisite disciplinary knowledge and skills but also with an understanding of the pathways to success and the self-reliance to embark upon them with confidence.

In most cases, good mentoring practices do not happen overnight. Learning how to be a good mentor may take some time. Moreover, the mentoring role will change, depending on the needs and stage of professional development of the student. For instance, mentoring of a first-year master's student will likely differ from that of an all-but-dissertation doctoral student.

Each faculty member will have his or her own set of good mentoring practices. Below are just a few that may be worth considering to help faculty members be more than an advisor and, instead, become an effective mentor. A good mentor works closely with the student to help him or her:

1. Understand the scope of the discipline as it relates to their graduate program.
2. Become acquainted with the discipline via sharing books and journals in the discipline and by providing support for attendance to professional meetings.
3. Optimize the graduate experience by routing important information or using "senior" students as mentors for "junior" students.
4. Find a supportive group of graduate peers.
5. Obtain sufficient financial assistance.
6. Select a committee that not only balances out the necessary expertise but includes faculty members who also can play a supportive mentoring role.
7. Clearly understand the mentor's expectations, e.g., with regard to research or authorship on manuscripts.
8. Understand the importance of knowing the contents of the program's graduate handbook or Web site, i.e., it is ultimately the responsibility of the student to meet programmatic and Graduate School deadlines.
9. Receive timely feedback on her or his progress on research, obtain necessary direction in selecting coursework, solicit advice from the student's committee (see Graduate Student Committee Policies and Procedures and Committee Appointment Signature Form).
10. Obtain the opportunity to network and present research findings to peers and professionals at regional and national meetings.
11. Submit a dissertation/thesis in its "final" form with regard to content, style, etc., before it goes to the student's committee, prior to the final oral examination.