



# A BRIEF GUIDE TO GRADUATE STUDENT MENTORING

for students & their mentors

**UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH**

The DIETRICH School of  
**Arts & Sciences**

Prepared by Dietrich School Graduate Council, 2016

---

---

Graduate students and their faculty mentors share responsibility for ensuring productive and rewarding mentoring relationships. If the Dietrich School's ambition for excellence is to be sustained, faculty must provide dedicated mentoring that supports students as they develop their skills as scholars, researchers, and teachers; students must be empowered to actively manage the mentoring they receive.

## MENTORING IN THE DIETRICH SCHOOL

In some departments, especially in the natural sciences, the roles of advisor and mentor go hand-in-hand. Research advisors/mentors are faculty members who guide the student's program of study and research, and assist the student in his/her varying needs during graduate training.

In some other departments, advisors may provide academic assistance as the student progresses through graduate study, while faculty mentors serve a more nuanced and broader supportive role to engender success and prepare the student for the future.

The advisor/mentor role in many departments falls somewhere between these two models, and different programs define the terms differently.

*Mentors are coaches, guides, advocates, and counselors.*

## THE ROLE OF THE MENTOR

The purpose of mentoring within the Dietrich School of Arts and Sciences is primarily to ensure that graduate students have every opportunity for success both during and after graduate study.

It is important for mentoring to begin as soon as possible. In conjunction with other appropriate departmental faculty, the Director of Graduate Studies (DGS) either oversees the assignment of a primary advisor to each graduate student upon matriculation, or assists the student in his/her selection of a principal research advisor and/or mentor as needed. This process requires careful and cooperative consideration among the student, faculty mentor, and departmental leadership.

Mentoring is a relationship that should evolve over time, and it is important to ensure that the relationship continues to be productive. Each mentor should consult his/her mentee regularly to evaluate the mentoring relationship and to determine whether there is anything missing from the guidance and training being received.

It is often helpful for graduate students to have mentoring teams composed of mentors within and beyond the department. This may be the case, for instance, in a situation where the advisor's and student's research aligns, but the student has additional needs for personal or professional development that would be better met by other mentors.

## **FOR MENTORS:**

### **BEFORE COMMITTING TO A STUDENT:**

- Assess what you can offer as a mentor and what you cannot
- Ensure that you have current knowledge about departmental and university policies surrounding graduate study
- Acquaint yourself with professional, academic, and student support resources and opportunities for graduate students, both within and outside of the university
- Meet with the student and discuss expectations that you each have for the relationship

### **AT THE VERY BEGINNING OF MENTORSHIP:**

- Establish a goal to meet regularly and communicate often
- Discuss the mentee's initial career goals; do not assume that the student will follow the same path as your own
- If you are not comfortable providing advice in some area, consider who may be able to do so, and help initiate the contact.



## **FOR MENTORS:**

### **STUDENTS WANT MENTORS TO:**

#### ***Build an authentic relationship***

- Be available and responsive to communications
- Practice active listening
- Provide support for work-life balance
- Provide contingencies when you will be away from campus or on leave
- Be aware of differences in terms of age, race, gender, and other attributes, and be sensitive to challenges and demands that your mentee may face
- Be willing to have difficult conversations about perceived problems with your mentee's progress

#### ***Foster research & teaching***

- Build intellectual conversation and critical thinking into discussions with your mentee
- Pursue and provide resources, when possible, for your mentee (grant support, stipend, travel, and lab support)
- Challenge your mentee to develop independent ideas and research topics, when appropriate, and guide him/her in this pursuit
- When appropriate, offer to observe your mentee teaching and provide feedback afterwards

#### ***Guide & support professional development***

- Discuss the norms and expectations of scholars in your field
- Be forthright in your assessments, providing constructive criticism as well as encouragement and inspiration
- Advocate for your mentee among professional colleagues
- Promote the mentee by introducing him/her to professional networks, collaborators, and opportunities
- Nominate the mentee for appropriate fellowships, awards, and committees

## **FOR MENTEES:**

### **HOW TO CHOOSE YOUR MENTOR:**

#### ***Is he/she a good fit?***

- Identifying a good mentor begins with introspection. If possible, wait to select the mentor until you are confident that he/she is a good fit along multiple dimensions
- Talk to current mentees about their experiences
- Select someone with a compatible personality, with whom you feel comfortable talking
- Select someone with compatible research interest
- Consider whether your unique identity or experiences should impact your selection
- Consider mentoring style (e.g., someone who encourages your independence by letting you work solo for long stretches of time, or someone who is more detail-oriented in managing your day-to-day activities)
- Consider the mentor's perspectives on work-life balance and his/her expectations for your schedule

#### ***Is he/she available & willing?***

- Consider how accessible he/she is, both in-person and via email
- Select someone who is invested in his/her students (i.e., someone who will advocate for you, and who will find the time to interact with you regularly)

#### ***Can he/she help you meet your goals?***

- Consider his/her expertise and interest in your chosen field
- Ensure that he/she is knowledgeable about departmental and university policies and procedures
- Ensure that he/she is committed to your timely progress through graduate milestones
- If you expect to work in a laboratory environment, consider whether the faculty member will have sufficient funding to support you
- Consider his/her prior mentoring and placement record
- Select someone who gives good advice, but fosters your independence in research and scholarship

## **FOR MENTEES:**

### **TO CREATE A SUCCESSFUL MENTORING RELATIONSHIP:**

#### ***Be sincere & respectful***

- Be honest and authentic
- Be polite and professional
- Thank your mentor for his/her assistance when appropriate
- Treat it as a two-way relationship (show interest in the mentor and his/her work too)
- Be flexible

#### ***Be open & communicative***

- Clarify your expectations about the mentoring relationship and discuss these up front with your mentor (review annually, as your needs and expectations evolve)
- Take the lead. Set up regular meetings to ensure timely communication
- Follow up important meetings with an email summary (with action items, etc.)
- Ask for what you need; be proactive in expressing what types of knowledge, relationships, or advice would be most helpful to you
- Be straightforward about goals
- Provide feedback to your mentor on how the mentoring relationship is working
- Realize that your mentor might not be able to effectively address every issue; talk to your mentor about gaps and ways to fill them (this might include help finding an additional mentor)
- Be responsive to feedback; show that you value your mentor's time and advice

#### ***Be committed & responsible***

- Understand that you are ultimately responsible for setting and achieving your goals
- Meet deadlines and be reliable
- Meet and exceed expectations
- Review the departmental graduate student handbook and policies so you can ask informed questions and manage your own progress

## **FOR MENTEES:**

### **PREPARE FOR MENTORING MEETINGS:**

- ⇒ Come to meetings prepared with an agenda and questions (be respectful of the mentor's time)
- ⇒ Use the "Topics for Mentoring Meetings" to help you frame the agenda
- ⇒ Include topics that are most timely and important for you
- ⇒ Give your mentor advance notice of your agenda so he/she can prepare and/or provide resources
- ⇒ Do your own research before the meeting so that you can ask good questions and use limited time wisely
- ⇒ Design an Individual Development Plan (IDP) and discuss it with your mentor. The IDP helps students identify goals, assess skill-sets relative to goals, and develop a plan to acquire the skills and competencies to achieve their goals  
For assistance building an IDP, visit:

<http://www.asgraduate.pitt.edu/node/426>

*Be sure to talk to a wide range of faculty and build additional relationships; remember that you are not limited to a single mentor and it often is useful to solicit viewpoints and support from others.*

# TOPICS FOR MENTORING MEETINGS

## THE MENTORING RELATIONSHIP:

- Define the mentoring relationship and expectations (meeting times, frequency, communication methods, meeting content, etc.)

## GRADUATE STUDY:

- Timelines and expectations for completing milestones
- How to set appropriate goals for timely progress
- How to stay on target and manage time effectively
- Appropriate courses and course sequence
- Sources of support for internal and external funding
- How to apply for grants and/or fellowships, and how to be competitive

## RESEARCH:

- Guidance on current research path and possible research directions
- Research skills that you should develop and practice
- Guidance in exploring and critiquing published literature
- Constructive feedback on, and discussion of, writing
- How and where to publish research
- Academic conferences to attend
- Creating and submitting research abstracts and manuscripts

## TEACHING:

- Expectations about teaching, grading, and teaching evaluations
- Sources of support for teaching at the university
- Feedback after teaching observations and evaluations
- Expectations for mentoring undergraduate students

## LIFE IN THE DEPARTMENT:

- Informal norms and expectations of academic life in the department
- How to build networks with faculty at Pitt and elsewhere
- How to build networks with fellow graduate students
- Social dimensions of becoming a departmental colleague
- Which departmental and university events it is important to attend

## CAREER:

- Range of career paths in the field
- Skills needed in a variety of career types and sectors
- Introductions to appropriate colleagues or professionals in desired career; guidance on networking
- Job search resources and information about open positions
- Mock-interviews, job opportunities, and interview guidelines



## RESOLVING MENTORING ISSUES

- ⇒ Refer back to guidelines in this booklet and ask your mentor to meet with you to discuss your mentoring relationship
- ⇒ Explain areas of the relationship that are problematic, or where you need more support
- ⇒ Consider whether you should add another mentor to fulfill specific needs that are currently unmet
- ⇒ Discuss the situation with the Director of Graduate Studies, Chair, program or certificate director, or departmental ombudsman to see if he/she can intervene or act as an intermediary
- ⇒ Explore university resources related to your specific needs (e.g., Counseling Center)
- ⇒ Consider the costs and benefits of changing mentors, which will shift as you progress through your graduate program

## IMPORTANT RESOURCES

Dietrich School Office of Graduate Studies:

<http://www.asgraduate.pitt.edu/>

University's graduate studies resources:

<http://www.pitt.edu/~graduate/>

Graduate and Professional Student Government:

<https://pre.gpsg.pitt.edu/>

Student Health Services

<https://www.studentaffairs.pitt.edu/shs/>

Counseling Center (incl. group support for dissertation-writers)

<https://www.studentaffairs.pitt.edu/cc/>

Departmental resources (ex. Graduate Handbook, TA/TF Mentor)

Check departmental website or with Graduate Administrator

*Thanks to all focus group  
and survey participants who contributed to  
the development of this booklet.*