

## **Qualities and Behaviors of Productive Mentors Feedback from Graduate Students**

### **1. What are the qualities of a good mentor?**

- A good mentor should be available to the mentee to offer answers and advice. This means helping him or her conduct research on possible programs and scholarships, facilitating contacts, etc. It also means listening to the mentee and helping the mentee predict possible outcomes of a given career or life path so that the mentee can make the best informed decisions.
- Should be a good communicator, reliable, approachable, friendly but professional
- Gives timely feedback on writing

#### **Knowledgeable**

- A good mentor is knowledgeable of the appropriate topics, but is unafraid to admit his or her ignorance of things.
- Accepts own limitations to knowledge; readiness to read and learn new things
- Aware of recent developments and resources

#### **Responsive to needs/cares about well-being and success of mentee**

- Responsive to needs of mentee
- Responsible to emotional, psychological and intellectual needs of mentee
- A good mentor should have the best interests of his or her mentee at heart,
- Cares about success of mentee
- Interested in the well-being of mentee
- A good mentor takes genuine interest in the mentee and invests in his or her success.
- Accepting/ understanding of mentee's decisions and chosen paths

#### **Listens, provides guidance and advice**

- I think a good mentor is a good listener and puts the effort into figuring out what the mentee needs, the mentee's strengths and weaknesses in the field, etc.
- Ability to give guidance when desired, to listen otherwise
- A good mentor listens attentively to his or her mentee and responds to him or her.
- Approachable: mentee feels free in discussing whatever is on his/her mind and is willing to ask for help when needed.
- He/she creates a sense of "team" with the mentee.
- Helps provide larger-scale structure to the mentee's work, giving advice for the long term as well as the short term.

#### **Role model**

- Role model (display integrity, sound ethical practices, positive attitude, strong work ethic, etc.); practice (or has practiced) what you preach
- Role model for someone, responsible, motivated, open-minded (if dealing with people of different cultures), knows how to deal with delicate issues, calm,

helpful, puts a lot of effort, understanding, confident, trustworthy, able to communicate effectively, patient

**Adjectives frequently used:**

- Accessible
- Available
- Approachable
- Tolerant
- Realistic
- Reliable
- Responsive
- Respectful
- Honest
- Understanding
- Open-minded
- Confident
- Patient
- Friendly but professional
- Emotionally balanced
- Well regarded
- Ethical
- Knows boundaries
- Connected
- Experienced
- Prompt
- Tactful
- Punctual
- Organized
- Knows his/her own strengths and weaknesses
- Prepared for meetings

**2. What does a good mentor do?**

- Motivates the students to think, ask questions and answer questions
- A good mentor listens, but also gives their own opinion. They do not dictate, but rather advise. They are available to the mentee for support and as a resource.
- Provides guidance, advice
- Shares expertise and experience
- Provides encouragement, constructive feedback where necessary
- Educates the mentee about their options and what steps are needed to reach goals
- Offers advice for dealing with problems mentee encounters
- Discusses the goals of the mentee. Comes up with a plan to help the mentee achieve/ work toward the goal. Meets regularly to check on mentee's progress. Gives assistance/advice if mentee has trouble
- Assesses strengths and weaknesses of students and provides suggestions

- Connects student with opportunities
- Listens and acts as a guide for the mentee, suggesting possible courses of action and helping them think through and act on concerns. Be generally supportive. A mentor should not try to resolve a mentee's difficulties for them (like a "helicopter parent"). A good mentor should be able to point their mentee towards outside resources when the mentor's own knowledge/experience is not sufficient.
- A good mentor provides guidance on technical issues and career choices. A good mentor also provides motivational/ emotional support for mentees as they struggle with their work. They should give advice on long-term choices as well as more immediate ones, and provide perspective on the ramifications for current decisions,
- Asks questions with sincere interest
- Makes oneself available
- Initiates interaction regularly
- Provides perspective
- Guides the mentee
- Refers to literature that might help mentee
- Reads about the topics they will mentor on to have knowledge of the subject
- Checks in frequently, asks questions, respects the mentee's goals (as opposed to what the mentor thinks the mentee's goals should be), tells the mentee about opportunities mentee might not be aware of, encourages the mentee to do things that will benefit the mentee (but isn't so cocky as to assume he or she always knows what will help the mentee), listens, makes interaction with the mentee a priority, never uses the uneven relationship for personal benefit, honors the privacy of the mentee
- Keeps you on track for graduating
- Supports career development
- Opens research channels
- Supports
- Advocates
- Protects
- Gives constructive feedback
- Helps a student publish
- Gives good advice
- Fosters independence
- Points mentee to resources
- Gives positive reinforcement

### **Five Graduate Student Perspectives on Faculty Mentoring**

#### **Student #1**

##### What graduate students want in a faculty mentor

- Someone who makes him/herself *consistently available* to meet and/or discuss work-related matters, professional development, etc.

- Someone who responds to his/her student's emails and provides *timely feedback* on written work
- Someone who *pushes students* to meet milestones and accomplish tasks that are, first and foremost, *relevant* for the *student's* professional development (not the mentor's)

#### Qualities and activities of an effective faculty mentor

- Encouraging, yet pushes students to produce work at a pace and in a style that will accelerate their professional development and attractiveness on the job market. This is especially important early on in the program.
- Responds to emails and provides feedback on student work in a timely and consistent manner
- Honest with student mentees and helpful in guiding them to correct weaknesses.
- Willing to collaborate with students, but also takes the lead in openly communicating about allocation of work, authorship questions, etc. at the beginning stages of a project
- Professionalism. Avoids gossip or negative comments about faculty colleagues and/or other graduate students in the presence of mentee. It is uncomfortable and unprofessional, and it is difficult for students to feel empowered enough to speak up when it occurs
- Makes a real effort to understand (and respect) the aspirations of their students and then makes a real effort to help them achieve their goals (e.g., introductions to colleagues, feedback on student work, etc.)

#### **Student #2**

##### 1. Early years of Ph.D. program up to qualifying exams

- A good mentor will set clear expectations for when certain milestones should be met, including being clear about the stepping stones that come before those milestones.
- Help the student to demystify the process of grad school and to think ahead. It's always helpful if the mentor can help the student to understand the next step.
- Meet with the student regularly to discuss research ideas and to help the student to begin to think of topics for the MA (if applicable) in the first year.
- Help the student to understand the process for securing an outside member of the committee for purposes of the QE. This may mean making an introduction outside of the department or making suggestions for how to find and approach potential outside committee members.
- Advise student about choices for coursework in terms of how different courses might influence research trajectory.
- Help student to understand the purpose of QEs and their connection to the dissertation and to choose appropriate fields for the QE.
- Be upfront and clear about the expectations for the student's performance before and during the QE.

##### 2. Writing the dissertation

- Create opportunities for students to share work with each other, this may be through a topical working group or a group where a particular faculty member's students meet together on a regular basis. It gives students a chance to test out different ideas for their dissertations (and often prospectus before the dissertation) and to have practice runs with papers they may later present at conferences or submit for publication.
- Check in regularly with students. One of my committee members has started setting up special office hours at the beginning of the academic year for her students. This is a great structured opportunity to check in about progress.
- Be willing to read drafts and make written comments on chapter drafts; don't just discuss drafts in office hours.
- Help students to choose a dissertation topic that will enhance their chances on the job market later on. Clearly communicate to them about how the dissertation topic and specialty areas are important on the job market and in academic careers.

### 3. Preparing for future academic or non-academic positions

- Encourage publishing and demystify the process.
- Encourage students to attend academic conferences early and often.
- Tell students about the importance of academic networking and help them to network. Introducing students to other scholars in the field is very helpful.
- Find out what kind of academic or non-academic position the student is interested in and cater your advice to the type of career they want. If you aren't sure about the type of career they are interested in, help them to find other mentors that may be helpful to them if possible.

### 4. For all stages of the program:

- Be clear about expectations
- Be willing to read and comment on written work and be clear about when, and in what form, written work should be received
- Offer constructive criticism, but be as encouraging as possible
- Work well with other mentors that the student is working with

### **Student #3**

First - I am lucky that I have multiple faculty members and others on campus whom I consider my mentors, so my mentors aren't "one-stop shops," they usually fulfill particular roles and no-one individual meets all criteria for being a good mentor. This also then entails recognizing in yourself (as a graduate student or faculty member) and in the other person (faculty mentor/grad student) how your personalities and skill sets will match up for particular areas of mentoring. For research advice I seek out 2 of my dissertation committee mentors, for strategic planning for the job market I ask a couple other faculty members including my main adviser, for thinking about work/life balance I want to connect not only with faculty but other PhDs who have chosen to pursue career paths that are not strictly tenure-track faculty positions. I think its important for both grad students and mentors to realize their strengths and weaknesses and also realize when

certain relationships will be productive for both parties and times when its not (and then to alter those relationships in a professional way that doesn't burn bridges).

In terms of mentoring graduate students for the first couple/few years of graduate school leading up to qualifying exams: I think that meeting regularly with your faculty mentor early on during this point of your graduate career is incredibly important and both parties need to make an effort to connect at least a few times over the year to meet in person (I think a few is the absolute minimum). Often its easy (especially that first year) to become wrapped up in course work as a graduate student and for the faculty adviser to not check in with the student, but this is where the foundation of a good mentoring relationship begins. Encouraging graduate students early on to begin thinking about and planning for things like teaching, applying for grants, working towards publications, getting into good writing habits, etc is something that faculty mentors can begin from day one. Making plans (together) that set out goals to accomplish before finishing the PhD (other than just getting the dissertation research and writing done) could be a constructive way for both the grad student and faculty mentor to articulate some of the important benchmarks or achievements that graduate students could be/should be working towards. Open communication is of course critical for both people and this is something that comes with trust, which usually means putting in some time to get to know each other so that you can see what the graduate student needs (often is the case that he/she isn't even aware of what he/she needs at that time!)

For preparing for future academic positions - this is an area where faculty members can excel in mentoring their students. Given the current academic job market many grad students are worried about their prospects upon completing the PhD and what types of jobs may be available. Faculty can be very helpful in advising graduate students about how to take advantage of the various opportunities that grad school offers to create the strongest case for why a student should be hired for that one tenure-track job that hundreds of recent PhDs are applying for. This may mean mentoring in research, encouraging writing towards publication (including collaborating with grad students to give them opportunities), help with networking, encouraging presentations at conferences, or strategically teaching undergraduate courses (ex: should I GSI for the same class two or three times or should I be branching out into other teaching areas? should I apply to teach my own class before I graduate?) Another important point is that in many fields a significant portion of PhDs don't join academia, but most faculty seem as though despite knowing that fact they don't actually understand how that translates to preparing their own graduate students for private sector employment. As the academic climate changes on campuses across the country we need to prepare graduating PhD students to be competitive, not only in the ivory tower, but teach grad students how to translate our vast skill sets to other types of career paths.

I am just beginning the writing process this semester so I haven't had much experience in this aspect of mentoring yet. I imagine that every student needs different types of mentoring when it comes to finally seeing the dissertation through to completion, some students need a more hands-off approach while others require micro-managing in order to meet goals. I think setting deadlines for reviewing outlines, data, writing sections, etc can

be very helpful especially if it means highlighting areas where the grad student is struggling/avoiding. Even if deadlines come and the piece isn't completed or even drafted, a face-to-face meeting between the mentor and grad student can help get things back on track or be an opportunity for encouragement and support.

#### **Student #4**

In the first three years of the PhD program up until the qualifying exams, making clear the expectations for each year helps enormously. I think one of the more important things that a good mentor does, is actively read their advisee's writing. It instills confidence in the mentor-mentee relationship as well as in the mentee him or herself. In short, developing the confidence and trust in those early years facilitates stronger research, writing, and thinking.

In the dissertation phase, I appreciate that my committee would check in on me, perhaps because they are used to having their students chase after them and I was content to squirrel away by myself for a while. So what I valued most about the writing process stage was feeling supported but not suffocated. A good mentor (of which I am lucky to have several) makes sure that the student can write without regurgitating their advisor's ideas. I appreciate this greatly.

Career development: Breaking the job market and academic life into palatable pieces for those of us who do not come from an academic background. This is all new for me. Knowing the differences in the variety of institutions is still something that I am learning. One of the biases is that my committee sees me destined for an R1 institution. I had to figure out if that was really what I wanted. Going into a non-academic job is like being excommunicated in my department. Knowing that is important not only for resolving to do what suits the student most, but also for thinking about when to articulate decisions that might not sit well with the department faculty. Helping students network - it is often intimidating to simply strike up a conversation at a conference with an intellectual big-shot. Having my advisors ask me before conferences if there is anyone that I would like to meet is incredibly kind and also invaluable in making the kinds of connections that count.

Overall, clear communication of expectations and consistency in meetings, deadlines, and support are all very important.

#### **Student #5**

##### 1. Early years of Ph.D. program up to qualifying exams

- I think it's helpful to meet once a semester and discuss ideas that have been put in writing. This gets students into the practice of memoing and it gives the discussion something concrete to revolve around. If the discussions can continue as this memo evolves, this is particularly exciting as it helps graduate students see how their thinking changes and hopefully, deepens!
- It's helpful to hear what is not working and exactly why it's not working, and then it's helpful to hear what's working and why it's working. My adviser often would

tell me something was too big and then I would go down a rabbit hole trying to find different ways to narrow. Being specific about why something works or doesn't work helps us to focus and see more clearly where we can improve.

- Encourage us to connect and develop relationships with other faculty. Perhaps make introductions or suggestions. This helps us down the line when we need letters and committee members. This also helps us realize that our adviser cannot and should not be everything to us.

## 2. Writing the dissertation

- Create a timeline with us in terms of drafts from us AND feedback to us. Set up a meeting to discuss feedback, areas of strength and prioritize next steps.
- Help us set up a timeline that has a chapter ready for when we go on the market.

## 3. Preparing for future academic or non-academic positions

- Transparency in terms of what's it like to be an assistant professor. Sometimes, if the adviser has been tenured for a while, she might not have a sense of what it's like for new professors. In that case, it would be helpful to be connected to a former student or a colleague who would be willing to help or be a mentor through that process.
- Introductions to colleagues at other institutions are particularly helpful.

## 4. Other:

- Encouragement is rare but when it is specific and genuine, even the most little piece of it can keep us going.
- For many who have been professionals previous to graduate school, the transition is difficult. Some have been in prestigious and powerful positions and are suddenly put into positions of "not knowing anything" as students. I think it's important to be aware of this career and positional shift.
- The relationship of adviser-advisee is new for many of us and we are trying to figure it out. We have our own ideas of what it should look like that may be far from actuality. Clarity in terms of time available (and NOT available), what's appropriate to bring to advisers, expectations of the relationship, etc. is helpful.
- Graduate students compare notes when it comes to advisers. This is even more pronounced when we share advisers. While we understand that treatment will be variable as a result of interest, background, and personality, we are acutely sensitive to difference.