Graduate Student Mentoring

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Many graduate programs are reviewing how they mentor their students, taking note of the time to degree and low completion rates in their programs. Given the enormous time challenges that academics face and the complexities of effective mentoring, it can be difficult to change practice despite good will. We write about graduate student mentoring, drawing from research on graduate student careers and the role of mentorship, to make practical suggestions for cultivating an effective mentoring relationship.

The benefits of effective graduate student mentoring noted in the literature are numerous, with large national studies linking effective mentorship to degree completion, high research productivity, and student satisfaction. Notably, benefits also can be conferred to the mentor. Research shows that effective pedagogical mentors of graduate students save time on their teaching and improve their own undergraduate instruction.

Definitions of "mentors" are numerous, sometimes conflating the roles of dissertation advisor and mentor. Of course, formal advisers play a critical role by facilitating transitions to independent doctoral research, as Barbara Lovitts and Susan Gardner find in their studies about factors aiding in degree completion. However, Johnson and Huwe's excellent guide for graduate students describes many more important mentorship functions, spanning career development (e.g., sponsorship, coaching, protection) to psychosocial support (e.g., support, role modeling, counseling). Given the multiple functions of mentorship and the developmental stages of graduate students, it is wise for students to cultivate a variety of mentors, which may include other faculty, university administrators, and even senior peers.

Disciplinary Variations
Effective graduate student mentoring is discipline-specific, given the vastly dissimilar ways that research, teaching, and job searches are structured. While the laboratory sciences have a long tradition of collaborative research and co-authored publications, humanistic scholarly and teaching relationships traditionally have been characterized by independence. Mentors should realize that graduate students often are still learning disciplinary conventions. Therefore, an important function of research, teaching, and career mentorship is finding opportunities to explicitly communicate these norms.

Regarding research advisement, Lovitts notes that performance expectations for the dissertation are helpful, given the often-unstated nature of requirements for successful completion. Faculty mentors also must be clear about the rules of credit and authorship in their discipline and in their relationship with students. Iowa State faculty developed a documented process for planning authorship in conference presentations and publications to communicate such norms to its graduate students.

Teaching is also a part of many graduate students' careers, and again, instructional responsibilities and goals vary significantly by discipline and institution. Effective practices for faculty teaching mentors include regular meetings with mentees about course planning and pedagogical development. Awareness of the developmental stages in pedagogical competence can be helpful to mentors in selecting the most appropriate activity for mentees, ranging from a more structured and managed style of supervision to support for independent course responsibility or pedagogical research.

Career mentorship is one of the more complex and critical components of the mentoring process, but also can vary widely by discipline (e.g., norms for knowledge production), protégé goal (e.g., academic or nonacademic career), and role (e.g., dissertation chair, course instructor, recommender). Extensive research from projects such as the multi-year Carnegie Initiative on the Doctorate points to the need to prepare students for a range of faculty roles in academic careers, as well as non-academic options.

Identity and Mentoring
Research suggests that protégés seek mentors who have similar career interests and other salient identity characteristics, such as gender. However, evidence also suggests that mentorship relationships between those of

different backgrounds can be quite successful. For example, Thomas's research indicates that the most successful mentor-protégé relationships were between those that had the same preference for how to deal with the question of race, i.e., whether to deny or engage the role of racial differences in the relationship. Narrative accounts of cross-racial and cross-gender mentorship relationships affirm that these mentorships can be extremely fruitful.

Helping students with career development – writing letters of recommendation, introducing students at conferences, co-authorship – fits the traditional image of the academic mentoring process. However, Rose finds psychosocial support, e.g., role modeling and encouragement- to be as valued by protégés. Many personal narratives by graduate students argue that these forms of psychosocial support are particularly important for members of underrepresented groups who encounter unique challenges in graduate school.

Advice for Creating an Effective Mentorship Relationship
Johnson and Huwe (from the protégé perspective) and Detsky and Baerlocher (from the mentor viewpoint) offer a number of suggestions for productively managing the interactions needed in an effective mentoring relationship, namely:
- Identify expectations for the relationship.
- Express willingness to get feedback during the relationship and respond non-defensively when it is given.
- Indicate a respect for boundaries (e.g., time or personal space).
- Work with the mentee to identify career goals, but mentors need to be honest if their own agenda cannot further that path. Other resources can include academic administrators, online support networks (such as The Versatile Ph.D.), Preparing Future Faculty programs, and employees in government and industry.

The literature on mentoring relationships that cross the boundaries of race, gender, or culture also provides several useful suggestions for both faculty mentors and protégés. Particularly during the beginning of a relationship, mentors can explicitly and sensitively discuss with their protégés if and how identity differences will be managed in the relationship. Graduate student protégés can share their preferences with mentors for strategies to address potential problems stemming from identity differences. Multiple mentors and peers may serve the psychosocial functions that mentors from different social groups may not provide.

However, beyond the level of individual interactions, departments, universities and disciplinary associations should play a role in supporting mentor-protégé relationships. Very few people are "born mentors," and the following initiatives can offer a structural support to assist in mentoring endeavors. These include:

- Intentionally designed mentor-protégé pairings to identify similarities and bridge differences between faculty and peers
- Curricula to facilitate critical discussions of professional identity formation and the role of mentorship in academe
- Networks to establish mentoring programs for mentor-protégé relationships within institutional categories
- Staged orientations, for graduate students to receive developmentally appropriate information when they need it most.

An intentional approach to mentoring graduate students can foster positive outcomes for both the mentor and the protégé. Effective mentoring can help students be more successful, productive, and to make career decisions that best fit their ambitions and life goals. Departments and universities also benefit, as successful protégés contribute to the reputation of the mentors and programs that supported them.

Resources
<u>Advice for Protégés</u>
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<u>Career Preparation</u>
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