Mentor and Graduate Student Strategies for Success

University of Louisville
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INTRODUCTION

Mentor (men´ter -tar) [L<Gr. Mentor, lit., advisor] Gr. Myth. the loyal friend and advisor of Odysseus, and teacher of his son, Telemachus-

Protégé (prot' e zha’, prot´ e zha’) n. [Fr., pp. of protéger<L. Protegere, PROTECT] a person guided and helped, esp. in the furtherance of his or her career, by another, more influential, person.

Odyssey Mentor was Telemachus's surrogate father and counselor during Odysseus's absence. Mentor guided, educated, and protected Telemachus; introduced him to other leaders; and prepared him to assume his adult responsibilities. When the goddess Athena wanted to advise Telemachus, she took the form of Mentor, thereby imbuing Mentor with godlike qualities.

It is, perhaps, an overstatement to say that faculty mentors must be imbued with godlike qualities. However, it is not an exaggeration to state that the role of the mentor is among the most demanding tasks taken on by the faculty. Mentoring transforms the student into a colleague by recognizing that graduate education includes socialization to the values, norms, and practices of the discipline. In a 1990 address to the Western Association of Graduate Schools, Morris Zeldich summed up the multiple roles of mentors: "Mentors are advisors, people with career experience willing to share their knowledge; supporters, people who give emotional and moral encouragement; tutors, people who give specific feedback on one's performance; masters, in the sense of employers to whom one is apprenticed; sponsors, sources of information about and aid in obtaining opportunities; models, of identity, of the kind of person one should be to be an academic."

The Graduate School expects that students will select or be assigned a mentor very early in their graduate programs. The mentor is expected to interact with the student on a regular basis, providing guidance and advice that will help the student complete his or her program. A student's mentor may change during his or her tenure as a graduate student and students may have multiple mentors at any given time. The student feels free to seek advice and counsel from faculty members who are not designated as his or her mentor.
Good mentoring is crucial to student retention and to the success of a student during and after graduate school. The Graduate School expects that each graduate degree-granting department or program will have an active mentoring program in place and will take steps to ensure its effectiveness. The quality of mentoring will be reviewed as part of the graduate program review process and will be assessed via exit interviews with students who earn graduate degrees at the University of Louisville.

Activities that are important components of a mentor-protégé relationship are discussed in the pages that follow. Not all of these activities will apply to every discipline or degree level. They are intended to be suggestions about what constitutes a good mentoring program. The activities are divided into three sections: Responsibilities of the Faculty and the Department, Responsibilities of the Student, and Academic Experiences That Are Relevant to Mentoring.

Faculty and students are also urged to review Research Student and Supervisor: An Approach to Good Supervisory Practice, published by the Council of Graduate Schools, and Adviser, Teacher, Role Model, Friend: on Being a Mentor to Students in Science and Engineering, published by the National Academy Press. The latter document, although it was written specifically for sciences and engineering, provides excellent guidance to mentors in all disciplines. It is available at http://www.nap.edu/readingroom/books/mentor/ on the World Wide Web.

RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE FACULTY MEMBER AND THE DEPARTMENT

Provide Clear Guidance. Graduate school is a new experience for every beginning student, and it is not likely that she or he will be familiar with the requirements for a degree. It is essential, therefore, that the mentor explain to the student at the outset what is expected of him or her. Written guidelines should be provided by each program, and the mentor should review with the student expectations outlined in the guidelines. At least three areas should be considered: (a) the degree requirements that the student must meet, including coursework, minors, examinations, language requirement, computer competency, and the thesis or dissertation; (b) the procedures for certifying to the department and the Graduate School that these requirements have been met; and (c) the time that is considered normal for the completion of each requirement. Based on the mentor's guidance and the written material provided by the department, the graduate student should be able to establish a reasonable notion of what is expected of him or her and what time course to expect.

Provide a Positive Role Model. The personal and professional behaviors of faculty members should be the standard that the student will emulate. Students' attitudes towards the discipline and the academy are conditioned by examples provided by mentors in graduate school. These attitudes should include passion for the discipline, thirst for new knowledge, pride in the work product, respect for others, adherence to high ethical standards, and an ability to cope with change. Perhaps more than any other factor in the mentor/protégé relationship, the role model provided by the mentor has the most significant and lasting impact on the student. The mentor is often held up as the kind of person the student believes she or he should become.
Be Available for the Student. Good mentoring takes a great deal of time. Many aspects of mentoring require one-on-one instruction, especially when the student is working on his or her thesis or dissertation or enrolled in independent study. Both the faculty member and the department must ensure that sufficient time is allotted for effective mentoring. Taking on too many students can spread the faculty member's time too thinly and will result in ineffective guidance. The "proper" number of students will vary from discipline to discipline and each department should establish an acceptable mentor/protégé ratio and should be diligent in requiring adherence to that ratio in planning for new admissions.

Evaluate Student Progress and Performance. Departments must establish realistic expectations for student progress performance and communicate those expectations to students. These expectations should include targets for completion of each benchmark in the academic program. The expected consequences of failure to meet the established expectations should be communicated to students, and the process of appeal and/or grievance should be explained in detail. Departments should evaluate the students' progress at least once each year. A written evaluation should be provided to students and should include explicit means of overcoming any shortcomings that have been identified. Evaluations should also include a review of students' performance in their role as teaching assistants, research assistants, or service assistants. The objective of evaluation is to provide timely and beneficial feedback. The focus should be on improving the quality of performance.

Help the Student Develop Expertise in Professional Writing. Because professional writing is central to many aspects of job performance, it is an especially important dimension in most mentoring relationships. It takes time and practice to learn to write well, and many students come to graduate school with very little experience in the type of writing required in the discipline. The Graduate School encourages mentors to provide careful, detailed, and preferably encouraging comments on student papers. A wide variety of writing experiences should be provided to students during their graduate career. These might include classroom materials, abstracts, manuscripts, professional correspondence, reviews, and text for poster sessions. The student should be involved in writing throughout the educational process so that they are well prepared for the thesis or dissertation. Students should be given the opportunity to critique the writing of others, including fellow students, the mentor, and published scholars in the discipline. Students in all disciplines should be given practice in writing proposals for intramural and external funding.

Help the Student Develop Expertise in Oral Communication. Mentors or departments should provide opportunities for the student to develop competency in oral communication in a variety of contexts: classroom lectures, seminars, laboratory meetings, journal discussion groups, and professional conferences. The development of oral communication skills in teaching environments is especially important, and the Graduate School encourages departments to provide teaching opportunities for all graduate students. Whether or not the student accepts a position in academia, expertise in oral presentation in instructional settings is likely to have a significant impact on career advancement.

Engage the Student Beyond the Classroom, Laboratory, or Studio. Despite the enormous time demands of graduate study, it is important to encourage students to engage in activities
outside the formal educational process. Students should be encouraged to become involved in departmental, graduate school, or university committees; student government; and local, regional, and national professional organizations. The mentor should apprise the student of sources of funding for travel to professional meetings.

**Emphasize the Important Role of Teaching.** It is crucial that the mentor stress the important role of teaching in the academic enterprise. Students should be given opportunities to teach, develop course materials and evaluation procedures, prepare lectures, and reflect on the process of teaching. Students who express an interest in an academic career should be encouraged to take part in the Preparing Future Faculty program established by the Graduate School. The University places a significant emphasis on the importance of teaching, and mentors must convey this value to graduate students.

**Create and Foster a Spirit of Collegiality.** Graduate education is, in part, a process of socialization. Departments should create a sense of community and cooperation among students and between students and faculty. The mentor should take pains to ensure that the student understands the role of the department in the broader community of the university.

**Value Diversity.** Special attention must be paid to the mentoring of students from underrepresented groups. Departments and mentors should be sensitive to differences between students with respect to socialization and experience with research. Mentoring programs should take into account cultural, linguistic, and national differences among students.

**Provide Ethical Guidance.** The quality of graduate education depends upon the ethical conduct of all participants. Faculty and graduate students have a combined and complimentary responsibility for upholding academic standards and sustaining an academic environment which assures the integrity of scholarship. A creative and collegial environment is essential, but equally important is a heightened awareness of and conscious commitment to practices that must be followed as a matter of intellectual honesty.

Thus, both graduate students and faculty mentors must be familiar with Sections 5 and 6 of the Code of Student Rights and Responsibilities as well as the Code of Faculty Responsibilities for the unit in which they study and teach.

In specific, graduate students should exercise high professional standards in all aspects of their work, maintaining absolute integrity in taking examinations and in collecting, analyzing and presenting research data.

Moreover, both students and faculty must learn and follow University policies on Intellectual Property, Human Studies, Environmental Health and Safety, Sexual Harassment and all other policies which affect the teaching and learning environment. Instructors or teaching assistants must acknowledge student contributions to research presented at conferences, in professional publications or in applications for copyrights and patents. Likewise, students must acknowledge contributions of the faculty mentor and other members of the faculty to the student's work in all publications, conference presentations and applications for copyrights and patents.
Both Faculty and students should acknowledge sources of financial support for research.

Graduate students are expected to maintain the confidentiality of the faculty mentor's and other faculty members' professional activities and research prior to presentation or publication, in accordance with existing practices and policies of the discipline.

Instructors or teaching assistants must excuse themselves from participating in decisions regarding any student with whom they have a relationship which could result in a conflict of interest.

Graduate students and faculty are expected to interact with staff, other faculty and students in a mature, professional and courteous manner.

**Consider Career Opportunities.** Each graduate program should provide continual exposure of the numerous applications of their graduate training to varied career options. The mentor should discuss and evaluate these options for each student in future job placement.

For the Master of Arts and/or Science graduate, numerous job options are available. Graduates may choose to follow their area of concentration to enhance their growth and development within their disciplines by entering their fields of interest in non-academic positions. Others may want to continue training in academia by expanding their education to include another discipline or to continue with doctoral studies in similar academic fields.

Doctoral graduates will typically continue training within their disciplines with postdoctoral positions that last from two to four years. These positions will better prepare the graduate for future positions in academia or non-academically-based positions in industry. Students enrolled in graduate programs might seek to create unique multi-disciplinary-based training to enhance the breadth of their academically directed programs of study or to adapt their training to new and unique applications.

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**A PARABLE ON MENTORING**

One sunny day a rabbit came out of her hole in the ground to enjoy the fine weather. The day was so nice that she became careless and a fox snuck up behind her and caught her.

"I am going to eat you for lunch," said the fox.

"Wait," replied the rabbit, "you should at least wait a few days."

"Oh yeah? Why should I wait?"

The wolf laughed so hard that it almost lost its grip on the rabbit. "Maybe I shouldn't eat you. You really are sick . . . in the head. You might give me something contagious."

"Come and read it for yourself. You can eat me afterward if you disagree with my conclusions."

So the wolf went down into the rabbit's hole . . . and never came out.
"Well, I am just finishing my thesis on 'The Superiority of Rabbits over Foxes and Wolves.'"

"Are you crazy? I should eat you right now! Everybody knows that a fox will always win over a rabbit."

"Not really, not according to my research. If you like, you can come into my hole and read it for yourself. If you are not convinced, you can go ahead and have me for lunch."

"You really are crazy!" But since the fox was curious and had nothing to lose, it went with the rabbit. The fox never came out.

A few days later the rabbit was again taking a break from writing and sure enough, a wolf came out of the bushes and was ready to set upon her.

"Wait," yelled the rabbit, "you can't eat me right now."

"And why might that be, my furry appetizer?"

"I am almost finished writing my thesis on 'The Superiority of Rabbits over Foxes and Wolves.'"

The rabbit finished her thesis and was out celebrating in the local lettuce patch. Another rabbit came along and asked, "What's up? You seem very happy."

"Yup, I just finished my thesis."

"Congratulations. What's it about?"

"'The Superiority of Rabbits over Foxes and Wolves.'"

"Are you sure? That doesn't sound right."

"Oh, yes. Come and read it for yourself."

So together they went down into the rabbit's hole. As they entered, the friend saw the typical graduate student abode, albeit a rather messy one after writing a thesis. The computer with the controversial work was in one corner. To the right there was a pile of fox bones, to the left a pile of wolf bones. And in the middle was a large, well-fed lion.

The moral of the story:
The title of your thesis doesn't matter.
The subject doesn't matter.
The research doesn't matter.
All that matters is who your mentor is.

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**RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE GRADUATE STUDENT**

Take Charge of Your Program. Graduate study differs substantially from undergraduate study in many ways. Perhaps the most significant difference is that graduate students are expected to be active participants in their education. Review the responsibilities of the mentor and department, but do not expect the mentor to provide weekly notices of your progress. Be aware of degree requirements and deadlines and take the initiative. Be sure to review both the Graduate Catalog (available on the Web at [http://www.graduate.louisville.edu/catalog](http://www.graduate.louisville.edu/catalog)) and the guidelines provided by your graduate program. Be aware that departments may require more, not less, of you than does the Graduate School. During the course of graduate study, students should become more
and more independent. The goal of graduate education is to prepare students to function as independent scholars or professionals.

**Keep in Touch with Your Mentor.** Students must keep the mentor fully informed of their progress through the program. Should problems arise, students should contact the mentor immediately. The mentor may be able to address the problem and, if not, should certainly be aware of resources that are available to the student.

**Contribute Knowledge.** Students tend to see themselves on the receiving end in the mentor-protégé relationship. However, remember that the graduate student should be in a position to contribute information to their peers and to the mentor. The process of learning on one's own and contributing to the knowledge of others is exciting and helps to build self-esteem and self-confidence. Good mentors know that their students will eventually surpass them in knowledge. They welcome the contributions of their protégés as evidence of their own skill as teachers.

**Seek Advice From Others.** It is unlikely that one faculty member can provide all the information a student needs. Students should seek out advice from whomever is best prepared to help meet students' needs. Senior graduate students and postdoctoral fellows are frequently a source of good mentoring, and students should not hesitate to call on these people for mentoring.

**Change the Relationship if Necessary.** For various reasons, not all mentoring relationships are successful. If students believe the relationship is not satisfactory, it may be appropriate to end the relationship and seek another primary mentor. There are perfectly good reasons for students not to spend their entire graduate education under the tutelage of one mentor. When a change seems appropriate the student should discuss it with the mentor and with whomever might assume the role as the new mentor. Students should be aware that changing mentors is very likely to mean a change in research emphasis. For this reason, such changes should be made early in the student's graduate education; before they have committed several years work on a thesis or dissertation.

**FORMAL ACADEMIC EXPERIENCES**

Various formal academic experiences fit well into the mentor-protégé relationship. A few are briefly discussed here as examples that mentors or departments might find useful in designing mentoring programs.

**Introduction to the Discipline.** An introduction to the discipline course, frequently called a proseminar, is useful to bring first-year graduate students together on a regular basis. Such courses may provide faculty the opportunity to discuss their own research interests, present students an opportunity for oral presentations followed by peer and/or mentor critiques, or introduce students to the major journals of the discipline in a "journal club" format.

**Independent Study or Tutorial.** Independent study courses provide students an opportunity for one-on-one interaction with a faculty member and foster good student-faculty relationships. Students may take several independent study courses prior to the preliminary examinations. Independent study may involve reading, oral presentation, laboratory work, library research, or other relevant activities.
**Presentation of Seminars or Colloquia.** All graduate students should have an opportunity to make oral presentations to their peers and faculty. Many graduate programs require that all students beyond their first year present at least one seminar each year. Such experiences are valuable training for professional presentations, teaching, and job interviewing. Student seminars also help to promote collegiality.

**Laboratory Rotation.** In many disciplines the laboratory rotation is a critical educational experience. Students ordinarily spend an extended period of time in each of several laboratories with a designated mentor. Laboratory rotations provide a breadth of experience with various laboratory techniques and provide insights that are invaluable in selecting a thesis or dissertation topic. Laboratory rotations also provide students with first-hand knowledge of the research interests and personal style of several faculty members within the department.

**Summary**

In summary, the mentor-graduate student relationship is one of true symbiosis, with the productivity being mutually beneficial and much greater than the sum of the individual accomplishments. This relationship is truly one of direction, communication and teamwork. The Graduate School sincerely hopes your graduate studies with mentor-based guidance will yield a very productive beginning to a successful career.