

RESEARCH MENTORSHIP FOR UNDERGRADUATE SCHOLARS

A Guide to Best Practices

Problems or shortcomings in the academic mentor/mentee relationship often come about because of misunderstandings about the expectations the parties have of one another—expectations about amount of contact, timelines and deadlines for work, what constitutes an adequate draft for submission, what qualifies as an acceptable honors thesis, and so on. Many misunderstandings can be avoided or overcome by following good academic mentoring practices like the ones outlined here.

I. Advice for Students:

Choosing a Mentor

- Begin by undertaking a critical self-appraisal and determine what you will need to thrive during the research and writing process: What are my strengths? What skills do I need to develop? How much independent versus hand-in-hand work do I want to do? What kind of scholarly expertise do I need for the guidance of my project?
- Identify faculty who share your intellectual interests. Ask faculty members (or graduate students) you already know in your department or field for names of faculty with whom you might consider working. You may also wish to consult the Undergraduate Research Program's Iliad faculty interests database (urp.stanford.edu).
- Schedule a meeting with the potential faculty mentor. Your goals at the meeting will be to assess whether the faculty member is a good fit for you, to make a positive impression, and to begin establish a working rapport. Areas into which you should attempt to gain insight include:
 - Availability: How often does the faculty member prefer to meet with honors students? What are the faculty member's other commitments? Will the faculty member be on leave during the coming year?
 - Communication: Are you able to understand the professor clearly? Do you feel comfortable communicating your ideas? Will you be able to accommodate her/his professional style?
 - Scholarly expertise: Does she/he have sufficient expertise in your area to provide you the guidance you seek? Can the professor point you to useful resources? Do you feel that you share intellectual interests?
- At the initial meeting the faculty member will likely want to know the following about:
 - Mutual interests: Share how your prior academic and personal experiences relate to the professor's interests. Read the professor's recent publications and be prepared to discuss how they relate to your interests.

- Motivation and Direction: State your goals and be prepared to talk about your timeline for progress on your project.
- Skills and Strengths: Let the faculty member know what qualities you bring to the relationship: research or language skills, creativity, analytical techniques, enthusiasm, and commitment.

Remember that the initial conversation is simply the first step. Don't approach early meetings as if you are asking someone to be your mentor. Mentoring relationships evolve over time, often arising out of a particular need. If, after the initial meeting, you feel that the faculty member will be able to provide you with the guidance you seek, schedule a follow-up meeting and begin to build working agreements (see below). If you determine that this faculty member is not the best fit for your needs, thank her or him for the time spent with you and ask for recommendations for other faculty members who might share your interests.

Establishing Positive Working Agreements

Organizing Meetings

- Take responsibility for running meetings with your advisor. You should come with an agenda of issues and questions you want to raise and should prioritize them so that you are asking the most important questions first.
- Keep track of time during the meeting to assure that your most important concerns are addressed. At the same time, respect your mentor's time by knowing how much time she has available and agreeing to schedule another meeting to discuss topics that remain at the end of the hour.
- At the conclusion of a meeting or through e-mail, summarize any agreements that have been reached. Restate what you will be doing and what your mentor has agreed to do for you. Ask your mentor to respond if she disagrees with anything you have stated.

Setting Expectations

- In one of your early meetings with your advisor, your meeting agenda should include developing a work plan with short-term and long-term goals and a timeframe for reaching your goals. If you need to modify your work plan later, inform your mentor and agree upon a new timeframe.
- Discuss how often you and your mentor will meet face to face and whether email is acceptable for certain issues or questions. Find out under what circumstances, if any, the faculty member feels it is appropriate to be called at home.
- Always read the books or articles your mentor suggests and let them know what you thought about those suggestions. Faculty want to know that the time they spend with you goes to good use.
- Rather than relying on one person--your thesis advisor--for all your guidance and support, try to build yourself a mentoring community. This might include other faculty members, graduate students, librarians, staff, and other undergraduates. These people probably won't see themselves as operating as a part of a mentoring group, but for you they will represent a means to getting more of your mentoring needs met without relying solely on the resources of one person.

Turning in Your Work

- Find out how rough or polished of a draft your mentor is willing to read. Some faculty are willing to read a draft that is a combination of polished prose and rough outlines of arguments; others will only read a well-polished and edited paper. In either case, you should always proofread meticulously for typographical errors.
- When you turn in a draft for your mentor to read, consider submitting a list of your questions or concerns along with it. In which areas or sections would you like detailed feedback? Do you have any methodological, argumentation or theoretical concerns you would like your mentor to address in detail?
- Ask your mentor what is the best way to remind her about getting your work back to you within an agreed upon timeframe. "When you are very busy, how should I remind you about a paper you have of mine? Should I email you, call you, or come by your office?" "How much in advance should I remind you; is one week enough or would you prefer two?"
- Find out how long it typically takes your mentor to return papers or drafts. Ask how much in advance they must receive a draft to read and comment upon it before a fixed deadline.

II. Advice for Mentors:

- Set up a work plan with both short and long-term goals and a timeframe for reaching them.
- Agree how often you will meet face-to-face, and discuss whether email is appropriate for certain situations.
- Encourage your students to plan meeting times in a way that best fits their needs. The students are there to pose questions and to raise issues; you are there to respond and make suggestions based on their concerns. At the end of the meeting, ask the student whether her goals have been met and her questions answered.
- Help students break up large tasks into smaller ones so that they are not overwhelmed by the research and thesis writing process. Help students to understand a linear flow or a series of stages within the process.
- Have a system for remembering previous conversations with students (a student log-book, a file in which all meeting notes are kept) and follow up on issues students have discussed previously.
- Encourage students to take an active role in the critical feedback process. Have them specify what kind of feedback they seek on a particular draft or paper: With which sections do they seek most help? Do they have particular theoretical or methodological concerns? Have them evaluate their own writing and bring their evaluations to your meetings.
- Temper criticisms with praise when it is deserved. Remind students that you are holding them to high standards because you believe they *can meet* those standards.

- If you see problems that make you think a student will encounter significant problems in completing his or her thesis, address these as soon as possible. If you put this issue aside, it may be more damaging to the student later on.

III. The Mutual Expectations of the Mentoring Relationship

How the advisor/mentor benefits students:

- Provides information and guidance about research methodologies, bibliographic sources, and the scope and direction of the thesis project
- Gives critical and constructive feedback on the student's performance
- Helps the student understand the various stages and the flow of thesis work; demystifies the thesis process; aids in setting realistic goals and expectations
- Provides moral encouragement and support throughout the research process
- Encourages the student to develop his own voice while keeping within disciplinary standards of clarity and rigor
- Refers the student to other faculty or graduate students who might bring new insight to the thesis project
- Advises the student on graduate programs and career choices

How the mentor benefits from the mentoring relationship:

- Gains collaborators for current or future projects, and gains interlocutors with a common area of interest
- Acquires research assistants whose work is critical to the completion of a research grant
- Gains increased professional stature by shaping future scholars
- Keeps abreast of new knowledge, resources and techniques
- Reaps personal joys and satisfactions inherent in the mentoring relationship

These guidelines were compiled by the Undergraduate Research Programs office, Stanford University, from conversations with Stanford faculty and students, the University of Michigan Ann Arbor's [How to Get the Mentoring You Want](http://www.rackham.umich.edu/StudentInfo/index.html) (<http://www.rackham.umich.edu/StudentInfo/index.html>), and from unpublished resources from Yale University's McDougal Center for Graduate Student Life.