

## **Mentoring Advice for Doctoral Students**

### **What is Mentoring?**

Mentoring is a timeless concept with roots in ancient history. The word “mentor” comes from *The Odyssey* by the Greek poet Homer. When Odysseus, King of Ithaca, sailed off with his army to fight in the Trojan War, he entrusted his friend Mentor to care for and educate his son, Telemachus. The word “mentor” eventually came to mean a trusted advisor, counselor, and friend.

A mentoring relationship has been defined as a “nurturing process in which a more skilled or experienced person, serving as a role model, teaches, sponsors, encourages, counsels and befriends a less skilled or less experienced person” (Anderson & Shannon, 1988). Mentoring involves more than advising; it develops from an extended relationship in which both the mentor and student focus on the student’s academic, career, and personal growth. Many mentoring relationships extend well beyond graduate school and continue throughout the student’s career.

According to the National Council of Graduate Schools and the National Institutes of Health, **mentors** are:

- **Advisors**, who have career experience and are willing to share their knowledge,
- **Supporters**, who provide emotional and moral encouragement,
- **Tutors**, who give specific feedback on one’s performance,
- **Supervisors**, who monitor their students’ academic and professional progress,
- **Trainers**, who teach students about professional responsibility,
- **Sponsors**, who are sources of information about opportunities and assist students in obtaining them, and
- **Role models**, who exhibit the qualities and ethical values that academics should possess (The National Institutes of Health, 1999; Zelditch, 2001).

### **Multiple Mentors**

As a graduate student, you may not be able to identify one individual who can fulfill all these roles. In addition to your primary research mentor, you may need to seek out additional faculty members who can provide you with other elements of these relationships. Graduate educators agree that students benefit from having multiple mentors. For example, both senior and junior faculty may assist your academic development – senior faculty may be of greater help with teaching and career networking, while junior faculty may be more knowledgeable about new interdisciplinary research in your field. Although faculty members have many responsibilities, the majority want to mentor graduate students and personally benefit from these relationships.

### **How do I establish and maintain a mentoring relationship?**

There are many things to consider when selecting a mentor, including your own needs and preferred style of learning. Faculty mentors vary in terms of their availability, communication

styles, expectations for student productivity, involvement in coauthorship of publications/presentations/creative works with graduate students, and their own reputations within a discipline. A serious appraisal of the expertise and work styles of prospective mentors, as well as your own strengths and needs, can help you to select appropriate mentors and maintain rewarding mentoring relationships.

Below is a list of recommendations for selecting and working with mentors, gleaned from suggestions of our Graduate School and graduate faculty, as well as guidelines from other research universities. Some recommendations have greater relevance to specific disciplines, but most are applicable to all graduate programs. Although the list is not exhaustive, it addresses key elements of successful mentoring relationships.

### **Selection of Mentors**

- Enroll in the courses of prospective mentors, and ask your fellow students to describe mentoring experiences with these faculty members (e.g., availability, mentoring style).
- Participate in departmental academic and social activities, and observe how prospective mentors interact with graduate students and faculty colleagues.
- Select a mentor who has many (if not all) of the following characteristics:
  - Current interests that mesh with your own
  - Methodological expertise that will benefit your own research/scholarship/creative activity
  - Work published/presented in respected journals, books, meetings, and creative venues
  - Strong national reputation in the discipline
  - Extramural funding for research, scholarship, or creative activities
  - Demonstrated commitment to mentoring
- To ensure a good fit and avoid future problems, also consider the faculty member's:
  - Academic rank
  - Tenure status
  - Planned sabbatical leave
  - Projected retirement date
  - Current number of graduate students being mentored
  - Organization of his/her laboratory or research teams
  - Record of publishing and presenting with graduate students
  - Average time to degree of previous students
  - Academic and nonacademic placements of previous students
  - Connections with individuals holding the type of job you want after graduation
- Ask about a prospective mentor's ability to assist you in such areas as: intellectual support, research assistantships, financial support for research/scholarship/creative activity, office space, travel to meetings, access to professional networks, and career assistance.
- Determine whether the mentor has the time, funding (if needed), and enthusiasm to support your research, scholarship, or creative activity.
- Ask yourself if you would feel comfortable working with this faculty member and can adapt easily to his/her style of mentoring.

## **Communication**

- Inform a prospective mentor about how your own previous academic, professional, or personal experiences intersect with his/her interests.
- Be open and honest about your interests, needs, and career aspirations.
- After you identify a mentor, clarify your goals and expectations early on. Work with your mentor to create a realistic, mutually agreeable timeline for your thesis/dissertation and degree completion.
- Establish how often you will meet face to face and how you should contact your mentor with questions outside of meetings (e.g., email, phone).
- Communicate regularly with your mentor about your research progress; ask questions when they arise – remember that there are no dumb questions and that your mentor's role is to help.
- Share your academic and professional achievements with your mentor.
- When conflicts arise, communicate clearly, stating the perceived problem and requesting that you and the mentor work collaboratively toward a solution.
- Maintain contact with your mentor during periods of slow progress and problems; don't give the impression that you are avoiding your mentor.
- Respect your mentor's time; if you need time beyond your appointment, schedule another meeting.
- Be aware of faculty-student boundaries; although you may have a friendship with your mentor, be respectful of his/her other duties and need to be objective in evaluating your work.

## **Research, Scholarship, and Creative Activity**

- Arrange regular meetings about research, scholarship, and creative activity with your mentor; many students believe that scheduling a meeting at least once every other week keeps them motivated and making steady progress.
- Always prepare yourself for meetings with your mentor.
  - Arrive on time.
  - Bring a written, prioritized list of topics and questions for discussion.
  - Bring a summary of what you've accomplished since the last meeting.
  - Bring your notes from previous meetings.
  - Bring any relevant, upcoming deadlines (e.g., Graduate School deadlines, submission deadlines for professional meetings).
- Ask your mentor to:
  - Help you shape your research proposal or creative project.
  - Discuss historical trends, current research, and research methods in your discipline.
  - Guide and critique your research project or creative activity.
  - Help you think about the ethical implications of your research work.
  - Assist you in selecting members of your thesis/dissertation/project committee.
- After each meeting, email your advisor a brief summary of your new tasks and any commitments that your mentor has made to you. Ask your mentor to respond if anything appears incorrect. These summaries will help you avoid future misunderstandings and maintain a record of your research progress.

- Follow the advice of your mentor; read recommended publications and give your mentor feedback about the usefulness of his/her suggestions.
- Seek opportunities to work with your mentor on research, scholarly, and creative projects; professional meeting presentations; editorial reviews of publications and creative works; and grant proposals.
- Give appropriate credit to your mentor and fellow collaborators in publications, presentations, exhibitions, and creative activities.
- Actively participate in the activities of your laboratory or research/creative group.
- Strive to complete all research and academic tasks on time; notify your mentor in a timely manner when you cannot meet a deadline.
- Demonstrate an excellent work ethic.

### **Theses and Dissertations**

- Submit only carefully written, well-edited and proofread drafts of the thesis/dissertation to your mentor (unless otherwise instructed by your mentor).
- Determine how long your mentor expects to have your draft before returning a critique.
- Accept critiques of your draft in a professional manner; if you continue to disagree with your mentor about an issue, present a well-reasoned response at your next meeting.
- When resubmitting drafts of your thesis/dissertation, mark the new or edited sections so that your mentor will not always have to read the entire document.

### **Teaching**

- Seek out at least one excellent teacher to mentor you in developing your teaching skills (this person need not be your dissertation advisor).
- Develop a relationship with your teaching mentor, establishing expectations and regular meeting times.
- Work with your mentor to identify teaching opportunities in your department, including serving as a laboratory instructor, a discussion section leader, and/or an autonomous teacher.
- Share your teaching goals with your mentor, including the syllabi and assignments you wish to develop, the content you wish to cover, and the skills you hope to improve.
- Arrange for your mentor to observe your teaching on multiple occasions; then set up times when the two of you can meet to review your instruction, evaluate your progress, and set future teaching goals.
- Encourage your mentor to help you create an inclusive classroom environment, capitalize on the diverse backgrounds of your students, and recognize different learning styles.
- Take advantage of teaching-oriented opportunities offered by your department/college, the Center for Teaching Excellence, and the Graduate School; discuss what you have learned with your mentor.

### **Career and Professional Development**

- Ask your mentor to provide you with career information and guidance.

- Meet with your mentor to discuss your career aspirations and important issues in your professional development.
- Request that your mentor introduce you to colleagues, potential employers, and other professionals who might help to advance your career.
- Present your research and creative work in multiple forums (department, university, professional conferences/performances), and network with your mentor and his/her colleagues at these events.
- Encourage your mentor to nominate you for fellowships, awards, and service committees that will enhance your professional profile.
- Ask your mentor to help you develop interviewing skills, handle job offers, and negotiate a first contract.
- Maintain contact with your mentor after graduation; inform him/her of your successes and continue to seek professional advice when needed.

## Conclusion

As a graduate student, you should proactively seek mentors for research, creative activities, teaching, and career development to enrich your graduate study at UMCP. As President Mote asserts, "Every student should have a mentor. Mentoring is as important to student achievement as teaching." Choose mentors carefully to address your interests and needs, and work hard to build a trusting, comfortable, collegial relationship. Your mentors may not only provide you with knowledge and skills in graduate school, but may also offer support and guidance throughout your future career.

## References

Anderson, E., & Shannon, A. (1988). Toward a conceptualization of mentoring. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 39(1), 38-42.

Arizona State University Graduate Studies. Mentoring/Being Mentored. [Electronic version]. Retrieved April 25, 2006, from <http://www.asu.edu/graduate/current/mentor.html>

University of Washington. (2001). Mentoring. [Electronic version]. Retrieved April 25, 2006, from [http://depts.washington.edu/cidrweb/TLBulletins/4\(4\)Mentoring.html](http://depts.washington.edu/cidrweb/TLBulletins/4(4)Mentoring.html)

The National Institutes of Health. (1999). A Guide to Training and Mentoring in the Intramural Research Program at NIH [Electronic version]. Retrieved April 25, 2006 from <http://www1.od.nih.gov/oir/sourcebook/ethic-conduct/mentor-guide.htm>.

The Regents of the University of Michigan. (2005). How to Get the Mentoring You Want [Electronic version]. Retrieved April 25, 2006, from <http://www.rackham.umich.edu/StudentInfo/Publications/StudentMentoring/mentoring.pdf>.

Zelditch, M. (2001). Mentor roles. In Powell, R.C., & Pivo, G. (Eds). *Mentoring: The faculty-graduate school relationship*. Tucson, AZ: The University of Arizona.

