

UAPB Graduate Student Guide to Getting the Most Out of Your Mentors

Introduction

Graduate students at the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff should expect quality mentoring from the graduate faculty as a critically important part of their graduate student experience. But mentoring is not something one person does to another. Rather, mentoring is a two-way relationship. What you get from your mentoring relationships depends a great deal on what you put in to them. Here you will find some recommendations for how to be a good protégé and get the most out of your mentoring experience.

What is mentoring?

The terms coaching, mentoring and advising are often used interchangeably, however they are not the same. Advising describes the basic exchange of information that guides a student through the mechanical/administrative processes of a graduate program. Advising typically revolves around course selection, registration processes, and meeting deadlines for proposals, comprehensive examinations and defenses, to name a few. Coaching refers to working with someone to improve on specific strengths or weaknesses, public speaking or writing, for example. Mentoring describes a relationship. The [International Mentoring Association](#) defines mentoring as:

Mentoring is Three Things at Once

- It is a series of tasks that effective mentors must do to promote the professional development of others.
- It is the intense, trusting, supportive, positive, confidential, low-risk relationship within which the partners can try new ways of working and relating, make mistakes, gain feed back, accept challenges, and learn in front of each other.
- It is the complex, developmental process that mentors use to support and guide their protégé through the necessary career transitions that are a part of learning how to be an effective, reflective professional, and a career-long learner.

Note that mentoring is a relationship in which both members learn from one another and in the presence of one another. At the graduate level, students are in the process of becoming colleagues and equals. Part of that transition is the mutual respect that develops in the mentoring relationship.

How do I find mentors?

Notice that the heading of this section is plural, mentors, not singular, mentor. That is because when you consider all of the tasks good mentors do, you will realize that no one person is likely to be able to do all of them. Having more than one mentor gives you different perspectives and can provide you with different services. For example, junior faculty may better remember what it is like to be a graduate student and be able to provide you with coping skills that worked for them. Senior faculty often have more resources, broader networks and the ability to help you with administrative problems. As you progress through graduate school, you will grow and change. Some of your mentors will no longer be necessary for your continued growth, and others may become necessary for your next steps toward your goals.

You must be proactive in finding mentors. It is very unlikely that a faculty member will simply approach you and ask if you want him/her to mentor you. Instead, you will have to identify those faculty members who will best meet your mentoring needs. You begin by completing a thorough self-assessment. You will need to understand your own strengths, weaknesses, goals and potential barriers to achieving your goals. A self-assessment website ([TypeFocus](#)) you can use is provided through the UAPB Career Center. You may also ask yourself the following questions excerpted from [“A Mentee Guidebook for Students: how graduate students can become respected professionals and trusted colleagues” by the Case Western Reserve University Graduate Student Senate \(2008-2009\)](#):

1. What are my objectives in doing graduate level studies?
2. What type of training do I want and/or need?
3. What are my strengths?
4. What are my weaknesses?
5. What skills do I need to develop?
6. What kinds of research or creative projects do I want to explore?
7. How much independent versus guided work do I want to do?
8. What type of career do I want to pursue?

Once you understand your interests, needs and personal style, you will be prepared to look for mentors. The best mentors have similar interests, typically in relation to your research and career interests, and personal styles to your own. Take the time to become familiar with faculty interests and personalities by reading about their work in the literature and talking to others in the department. Start by choosing the ones with whom you believe you will best fit. Many students want a mentor who looks like them, and in some cases that is not available within the department. You should not be discouraged if this is your case. You can always look for mentors outside your department, and many students have still found valuable mentoring relationships with mentors unlike them.

What can I expect from my mentors?

Graduate students new to mentoring relationships may not know what to expect from a mentor or may not understand the value of a mentor to their graduate career or job search afterwards. The following points, adapted from the [Brown University Graduate School Task Force on Doctoral Advising, Fall 2017](#), can give you some idea about what graduate faculty mentors do with their protégés.

1. Thoughtful, individualized advising and a sincere effort to understand your experiences and interests as they affect your graduate education.
2. Clear and frequent communication with you about expectations for your work and your responsibilities. Honest, constructive and timely feedback on your progress, strategies for addressing your weaknesses and substantive engagement with the intellectual dimensions of your work.
3. Help you develop a timeline for completing academic requirements and meeting professional goals.
4. Meet regularly with you to review progress, goals, challenges and future plans, including through the summer. It is incumbent on *both* you and your mentor to maintain active communication.
5. Encourage openness about any challenges or difficulties that impact your graduate student experience and work with you to resolve any challenges and/or identify resources for support.

6. Thoughtful guidance, clarity and support for you, providing you with opportunities to develop skills, training and experiences to achieve your goals.
7. Knowledgeable about departmental and Graduate School policies so you progress smoothly through administrative processes.
8. Awareness of institutional resources that can provide you with support in times of academic, professional and personal challenges.
9. Prepare you to be competitive for future careers, academic or otherwise.

What are my responsibilities as a protégé?

Any relationship involves a give and take among the parties. As a student, you have been the primary beneficiary of your teachers' knowledge for many years, with few responsibilities to your teachers. Your graduate education is a transitional period from student to peer and colleague in which you will begin to learn, and ultimately take on the responsibilities of a skilled professional or expert. In so doing, your responsibilities as a protégé toward your mentors will grow. What follows has been adapted from the [Mentee Guidebook developed by the Case Western Reserve University Graduate Student Senate \(2008-2009\)](#).

Good protégés are also the ones who get the most out of their mentoring relationships. So how does one become a good protégé? First, be respectful of your faculty mentors' time. Good faculty are extremely busy. They write grants, teach classes, write research publications and books, serve on university committees, go to meetings, grade assignments, advise students and more. They are also real human beings with families and lives outside of their jobs. If you make an appointment with a mentor, be on time and prepared for the meeting. Keep your meetings short and to the point. Take the time you need, but if a meeting starts to go long, make sure your mentor has the time to continue or schedule another appointment.

Keep your mentors informed. As you make progress or encounter new stumbling blocks, let your mentors know how their suggestions have helped. A short email or phone call to say thank you goes a long way to strengthen your relationships with your mentors. Everyone wants to know their input was valuable.

Show commitment to your academic responsibilities. As a graduate student, you need to stop thinking about yourself as a student. Instead, think of yourself as a trainee or apprentice with a desire to master your discipline. Take advantage of every opportunity to learn. Go to seminars or research presentations. Stay up to date with the latest scientific results. If you have a chance to go to a professional meeting, go! Be sure to take full advantage of the opportunity by presenting your own work if possible, going to presentations related to your research or profession, and networking with other graduate students and their mentors.

Take ownership of your projects and your degree. A basic expectation of graduate study is that you will become independent. Remember, your project thesis or dissertation results depend on your diligence. Your results may also be critical to the work of another student or your mentor. It is your responsibility to carry out the project and meet your deadlines. You should also be aware of the requirements of your degree program and the deadlines you must meet. All of them can be found in the [Graduate Catalog](#).

Communicate, communicate, communicate! Students are often intimidated by faculty and it can be difficult to break the hesitancy to speak. However, once you do initiate the conversation, you will find that many faculty are passionate about the success of their students and they truly want to help you. Keep your mentors informed about your progress or lack of progress. If you are struggling, your mentors can point you in the right direction to break through your obstacle. They may not give you a direct answer, because part of graduate study is learning how to find or create the answers you need, but they will guide you. If you do not let them know you are struggling, they may become frustrated with you when your struggles delay the progress of the whole group. If you are going through a difficult time and need support or additional time, communicate with your mentors. They often know about resources available through the university or the community that can provide you the support you need. They may be able to reprioritize projects to give you the time you need to deal with a personal issue. For long-term, time-intensive personal issues, the university has a [Leave of Absence policy](#) for graduate students.

Writing your project, thesis or dissertation

Writing your project, thesis or dissertation will be a major undertaking, and your mentors will be intimately involved in its completion. Authorship is based upon intellectual contribution to the manuscript or project, and should be discussed before you begin writing. In most cases, you will be the lead author on manuscripts related directly to your projects. Be respectful of your mentors' time and efforts. Before you ever submit a draft of your manuscript, use the [Viralene J. Coleman Computerized Writing Center](#) to ensure your basic grammar, spelling and usage are correct. Ask other graduate students to read and comment on your manuscript. Once your mentor has the manuscript, be patient. Your mentor has many other responsibilities and may not be able to review your work immediately. If you do not hear back by the end of a week, you may need to remind your mentor that you are waiting for corrections. When you receive your mentor's comments on your manuscript, be sure to follow your mentor's advice and suggestions. Many times, students refuse to do so, and a series of increasingly frustrating rounds of editing follows. If you have questions about your mentor's advice, ask for clarification. Remember that your mentor's criticism is intended to show you where you can improve. Learn from these critiques and don't make the same mistakes in the future. If you disagree with a criticism, take a few days to think about the critique before responding. Then, if you still disagree, discuss your thoughts on the matter respectfully with your mentor.

Conflicts with your mentor

There may come a time when you find yourself in conflict with your mentor. Serious ethical breaches should be addressed immediately. Sexual harassment, threats and intimidation, discrimination, exploitation, and other ethical breaches like these are serious matters and there are policies and procedures for dealing with them and protecting you. The vast majority of the time, conflicts are much less serious and more easily managed. In most cases, a simple conversation between you and your mentor will be all that is necessary to find a solution to the conflict. Initiating the conversation can be difficult because of the inherent power differential between you and your mentor, but in many cases, your mentor may not even be aware there is a problem. Typically, your mentor will quickly and easily work with you to create a solution.

Sometimes talking with a different mentor or the [Graduate Coordinator](#) in your department about the problem can help ease your concerns about approaching the one with whom you are having difficulty.

S/he may go with you to discuss the problem with your mentor. If you are still not satisfied or the conflict has not been resolved, there are more formal steps you can take. These steps can be found in the [Graduate Catalog](#). You are always welcome to discuss your conflict and potential steps to resolve it with the [Dean of Graduate Studies and Continuing Education](#).

Changing graduate advisors

On very rare occasions, graduate students find it necessary to change their thesis or dissertation advisor. Reasons can vary from the advisor accepting a position at a different institution or retiring, the student developing a different research interest, or some of the conflicts noted above. No matter the reason, you should handle it as professionally as possible. Avoid negative comments to others and your advisor. Discuss your reasons with a trusted mentor and listen carefully to his/her advice. You are always welcome to discuss this or other issues with the [Dean of Graduate Studies and Continuing Education](#). Try to find a new advisor who will accept you before you make the change to a new advisor. You should never simply drop your advisor without having a new place to go. Think through the most respectful and professional way you can tell your current advisor you intend to change to a different advisor. Make an appointment to let your advisor know you are changing advisors as soon as you make the final decision. Your advisor should not hear about your impending move through the grapevine. Make arrangements to complete any work you owe your advisor and do your best to smooth out any differences you may have with each other. Finally, make sure you complete all of the paperwork necessary to change your advisor. Your [Graduate Coordinator](#) can help you with this process.

Letters of recommendation

One of the important services you can expect from your mentors is a letter of recommendation. Once again, you must keep in mind that your mentors have multiple duties claiming their attention. Writing a good letter of recommendation takes time. Your recommendation will be based upon your mentors' knowledge of you and your performance as a graduate student. In addition to the characteristics noted above, they will likely evaluate you on your persistence, dependability, collegiality/collaboration/cooperation, adaptability/flexibility, ability to work under stress, integrity, time management, professionalism, concern for others, knowledge of the discipline/profession, curiosity, creativity, and leadership. This is not a complete or exhaustive list. In order for them to do this well, they must know you well. If you have developed a good relationship with your mentors, they should have no trouble evaluating you on these and other characteristics, but they will need a little time for reflection. You should give your mentors at least a week, and preferably two weeks before your deadline to write a letter for you. Better yet, ask your mentors how much lead time they will require to write your letter.

You can improve the likelihood of receiving a great recommendation by listening carefully to your mentors' feedback as they discuss the characteristics listed above with you during your time studying at UAPB. Be open to constructive criticism and make improvements in these areas as needed. Take advantage of professional development opportunities offered by [Career Services](#) to improve your leadership and workplace skills. If a mentor says s/he cannot write a letter for you, that typically means you have some important shortcomings you have not addressed. While the end of your graduate studies at UAPB may not be the best time to discuss where you need improvement, when you hear a mentor say s/he cannot recommend you, you should still discuss the areas wherein you need improvement so you can have them in mind either in your next graduate program or your new job.

References and Resources

Brown University Graduate School Task Force on Doctoral Advising, Fall 2017
https://www.brown.edu/academics/gradschool/sites/brown.edu/academics/gradschool/files/uploads/2017%20Best%20Practices%20in%20Advising%20and%20Mentoring%20BrownGrad_0.pdf Accessed 11/20/2020

Case Western Reserve University Graduate Student Senate. 2008-2009. A Mentee Guidebook for Students: how graduate students can become respected professionals and trusted colleagues.
https://case.edu/ucite/sites/case.edu/ucite/files/2018-02/Mentee_Students_Guidebook.pdf Accessed 8/12/2020

Duke University Graduate School Mentoring Resources webpage.
<https://gradschool.duke.edu/professional-development/mentoring/mentoring-resources> Accessed 2-4-2021

University of Michigan. Rackham Graduate School. Graduate Student Mentoring Guide: A Guide for Students. 2020. <https://rackham.umich.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/mentoring.pdf> Accessed 2/2.2021

University of Washington Graduate School. How to Obtain the Mentoring You Need: A Guide for Graduate Students. <https://grad.uw.edu/for-students-and-post-docs/core-programs/mentoring/mentoring-guides-for-students/> accessed 2/4/2021