



International Association for Society and Natural Resources

How to mentor

(adapted from The Graduate School at the University of Washington)

Conduct initial meetings with mentees' interests in mind

Encourage mentees to assess their needs and consider the types of people who might best help them. Use the following questions as “talking points” to guide your first meetings with mentees.

Goals for graduate school and beyond

- Ask about the mentee's educational and professional experiences and how he or she connects these to graduate study. What does the mentee hope to accomplish with an advanced degree?
- Discuss your own research or creative projects and how they complement or diverge from the mentee's interests.
- Offer suggestions about courses, other training and work experiences that would aid the mentee in reaching his or her goals.
- Refer the mentee to colleagues who could serve as additional mentors. If you know someone well, offer to send a letter of introduction on the mentee's behalf.
- Recognize that mentees may want to use their career to contribute positively to the community, either during or after graduate training. Refer mentees to colleagues who have bridged professional and community goals.
- Realize that the mentee's career goals will likely change, especially as he or she learns about the labor market within a particular discipline. A mentee may seek to become a faculty member in a research institution, to have an academic career in other educational institutions or to pursue a career outside academia.
- Become aware of how mentees' identities shape the graduate experience and how the graduate experience shapes mentees' identities. Well-formed identities are springboards to greater self-confidence and connectedness to wider communities of experience.

Strengths and weaknesses

- Ask the mentee to describe broadly the skills he or she brings to their career (e.g., creative, analytical, statistical, and organizational).
- Share your impressions about strengths and areas for improvement if you know the mentee well.
- Suggest courses or experiences the mentee needs to improve skill sets or gain broader exposure.

Work style

- Discuss what type of guidance the mentee needs to learn most effectively (e.g., independent vs. one-on-one work).
- Discuss your own work style and how you interact with mentees (e.g., Do you hold informal meetings? Do you invite mentees to collaborate on teaching and research projects, and papers and presentations?).
- Ask the mentee to describe previous mentors and what they did to help him or her achieve his or her goals.

Clarify expectations

One of the strongest themes that mentees express is the desire for greater clarity on expectations, roles and responsibilities. Not all mentors and mentees establish a formal contract. Some find it useful; while others prefer to work from informal agreements ([see Sample Agreement](#)). To prevent misunderstandings, discuss frequently the expectations you and your mentee have of each other and how they may change over time.

Have realistic expectations

Be realistic about what you can do for your mentees and help them understand what they can expect from you. Assist your mentees in their search for multiple mentors. Analyze what your mentees need and help them develop a balance between seeking your help and taking on more responsibility as they develop professionally ([see Mentee Expectations worksheet](#)). Your mentees will differ in their needs and willingness to seek your help, and some may not have a firm grasp of their goals or needs. While you should establish standards of excellence and professionalism for all your mentees, adjust your approach depending on the developmental stage of each mentee.

Clarify roles and responsibilities

No matter how formal or informal your mentoring agreements may be, you can revise your understandings together as your mentees progress. Some responsibilities to address early, especially if you are also the mentee's adviser or thesis/dissertation committee chair, include:

Goals and work plans

Ask your mentees to develop and share with you a work plan, including short- and long-term goals and timelines ([see Professional Development Goals worksheet](#)). Make sure these plans are feasible and meet professional requirements. Ask mentees to update you at least once a quarter via a meeting, memo or e-mail on their progress and obstacles they have encountered. Discuss additional training and experiences mentees need. If adjusting timelines becomes necessary, create new plans together.

Meetings

Talk with your mentees about how often you can meet. Be explicit if you have a heavy travel schedule, are about to take a sabbatical or are assuming an

administrative position. If you are unable to meet often enough to satisfy mentees' needs, discuss alternative means of communication such as e-mail and live chats and help mentees think of others to consult. Discuss what issues require a face-to-face meeting and those that can be dealt with in other ways. Let mentees know if they may contact you at home, and under what circumstances calls are appropriate. Also, ask them whether you can contact them at home.

Some mentors prefer mentees to take responsibility for arranging and leading meetings while others prefer to share the responsibility. Communicate your preference to your mentees.

Feedback

Discuss how often you will give feedback and what type of feedback they can expect. Explain to mentees how you intend your feedback to help their intellectual and professional growth.

Confidentiality

Mentors and mentees sometimes discuss confidential issues. Be clear about the level of confidentiality you expect from your mentee, and offer strict confidentiality to your mentee.

Recommendation letters

Let mentees know how much time you need to write letters on their behalf. Ask them to give you their curriculum vitae and information about the fellowship, grant or program to which they are applying, along with details about their experience they would like emphasized. In your letters, address multiple facets of mentees' work. Some mentors visit classes or labs taught by their graduate mentees so they can address teaching abilities in recommendation letters.