

Key Factors in Successful Student Mentoring

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Mentoring is one of the many aspects of faculty positions that are not generally taught, even though it is crucial in higher education. Faculty members are expected to advise undergraduates, graduate students and colleagues, although rarely with any support or [recognition](#) for this work. As a result, faculty members often mentor as a response to how they were mentored: a cold and distant adviser may serve as a cautionary tale or a role model.

Just as pedagogy has increasingly become part of the curriculum, mentoring should become part of it, as well. Indeed, organizations like the [National Research Mentoring Network](#) provide valuable training programs for faculty members.

[No one mentor can provide everything a student needs](#), but good mentorship requires certain key skills. In this column, we reflect on some of the important aspects of mentoring students that can make a positive difference in the academy. (In a later column, we will discuss faculty-to-faculty mentoring.) We recommend mentoring practices that institutions and departments can adopt, as well as those that individual faculty mentors can develop.

Recognition and resources. Students, whether undergraduate or graduate, need both money and time to complete their education. Many work long hours outside school and face debt in order to cover educational costs and food, housing and other [necessary expenses](#). Students often come from diverse backgrounds, varying by class, race/ethnicity, gender and gender identity, nationality, sexuality, and other factors. Institutions must create programs that help alleviate financial stress and reflect the specific identities and needs of their various students.

Financial aid packages should recognize the full costs of attending university, rather than leave students in impossibly precarious situations. While graduate students may have access to stipends, for example, those stipends may not cover the costs of housing, food and other necessities. Good institutional mentoring recognizes the resources necessary for students to succeed and thrive, and adjusts programs and expectations to fit the profile of its students.

Mentorship that recognizes differences -- and helps students feel that they belong in their institution and their program -- also matters. For example, [students who are in college full-time](#) are more likely to graduate, in part because they are more likely to benefit from advising and amenable course schedules. Providing strong mentoring supports to both full-time and part-time students can help close the gap. [Spending on student services and instructional services](#) pays off, as well.

Individual faculty mentors also should recognize the backgrounds, resources and needs of their students, rather than assuming that students are all the same and have all of the resources they need. Students benefit from faculty mentors who see them as whole people. By recognizing *who* a student is beyond their role as a student, faculty members can develop trusting relationships with them.

Students also need to play a role, as Pallavi Eswara [notes](#), in admitting to mentors how their work is progressing and what roadblocks they face. Faculty members are then in a better place to help students to craft creative approaches that address these issues, as well as to locate needed resources, such as funding to attend a conference. Faculty mentors can also use their clout to reshape programs and institutional supports to more effectively meet student needs.

Clarity. Academe is an institution shrouded in mystery, with many unwritten rules. [Programs for first-generation undergraduate students](#), for example, can help clarify those rules. Graduate students also often suffer from a hazy understanding of the expectations in their programs, which is exacerbated by the fact that every adviser and committee may have slightly different expectations. But many components of the work can and should be clarified,

such as which courses must be completed or the format for most theses in the student's program.

Clear instructions about expectations help create success. Some students ask about expectations; others are lucky enough to find or be paired with a mentor who knows to lay out expectations. But many other students feel caught in an uncertain world; students and faculty who are first generation, international or from underrepresented racial or ethnic groups may be least likely to learn what is expected. Institutional supports such as a weekly newsletter to undergraduates or emails targeted to doctoral students in different stages of the program provide a safety net for students who might otherwise get lost.

Faculty advisers and mentors should provide clear advice about the way forward, without giving either too little or too much detail: a road map that is not [Steven Wright's](#) "a map of the United States, actual size." Each section of the map may require further study when you get to that juncture, but the bird's-eye view that a mentor provides will allow students to keep motoring along without fear of missing a turnoff. As Wendy M. Christensen [notes](#), this sort of advising is a form of activism and can make an enormous difference to the student.

Consistent feedback. Work almost always improves with comments and advice, and consistent feedback helps students stay on track. Yet feedback is time-consuming to generate, and many students (and faculty members) actively avoid it. It is also important that mentors provide *constructive* feedback. Broad comments such as "not good enough" or excessively critical feedback leave students uncertain how to move forward.

Grades on assignments and in courses provide fairly immediate feedback. Yet feedback should allow the student opportunities to adjust and improve, rather than simply evaluate a final product. For students who are writing theses or other creative or research products, consistent meetings, regular reviews and discussion can help strengthen their writing significantly. Regular reviews of graduate students' progress by faculty, and mechanisms to give students clear advice based on those reviews, may also generate success.

To stimulate [clear communication](#), mentors should use active listening techniques and work to make sure that students hear their feedback and know how to act on it. Individual mentors should meet regularly with students, as this helps provide accountability for both the students and the faculty member. It can be difficult to find time to meet with students individually; lab meetings or writing groups of students at different stages can be time efficient and have the added benefit of stimulating peer mentoring. By giving students consistent feedback, faculty members can ensure that their intellectual work is proceeding effectively.

Professional development. Good mentoring also requires providing opportunities for students to develop their professional skills. Professional development is not the same as intellectual development, but it plays a crucial role in the lives of students. Teaching students how to communicate clearly, work with others and develop the skills they will need in their chosen careers is vital to their success. These skills help students find jobs in their chosen fields and also keep them motivated.

Institutional supports around professional development can include course credits for internships, opportunities to develop résumés or vitae and letters of application, writing groups, and courses focused on teaching skills, writing skills or job placement. Graduate programs with [mock interviews](#) and [practice job talks](#), as well as support for developing application materials, can help students immeasurably.

As individual mentors, faculty members should discuss career goals with students and recommend the types of professional development activities that will help lead them to these goals -- such as enrolling in workshops, meeting with career development counselors or attending relevant conferences. Faculty members can also support professional development by helping students create job market materials.

While mentoring takes many different shapes and forms, a number of key factors lead to successful mentoring. These approaches operate both at the level of institutions (including universities, colleges or departments) and of individual faculty mentors. When the mentoring process recognizes students and the resources they need to

complete their education, provides clarity about expectations for their program, gives consistent constructive feedback, and identifies supports for professional development, students receive what they need to move forward with both their work and their lives.