**Tips for Successful Mentoring**

**School of Interdisciplinary and Graduate Studies**

**Beth A. Boehm, Dean and Vice Provost of Graduate Affairs**

What is mentoring? Good mentors transmit the knowledge, skills, and practices of a discipline in order that the discipline can continue; they know they are stewards of the discipline who must train the next generation of scientists or scholars. Mentors transmit knowledge by example, and at the same time, their mentees learn values that support the discipline’s work, values such as honesty and professional integrity, excellence, socially responsible research, and consideration for others. Mentors guide novices from dependence and inexperience to independence and proficiency.

What was your experience of being mentored? What kind of example was your mentor? What characteristics would you like to emulate? What did you learn by negative example?

Characteristics of Responsible Mentors

* They take the task of training students seriously: they explain, demonstrate, and give students the opportunity to learn by watching, listening, and doing. They are willing to repeat, repeat, repeat.
* They make time for their mentees.
* They know and follow the “rules” of the discipline, the university, and the particular program. They encourage students to meet deadlines and fulfill obligations in a timely way, and when a mentor can’t answer a question, he or she sends the student to someone who can.  Good mentors take the time to read the Graduate Catalog and program rules!
* They are good and honest communicators, demystify the discipline, explain clearly the requirements of doctoral study, and make explicit the student’s responsibilities to the mentor and the mentor’s responsibilities to the student. They try to make the milestones necessary to earning a doctorate transparent, and they illustrate that those milestones (coursework, comprehensive exams, thesis proposal defense, dissertation and defense) are learning opportunities, not artificial hoops for the student to jump through.
* They help students develop a timeline for the completion of tasks leading to the completion of the degree. They stick to the timeline as much as possible, and make it priority for the student to meet his or her goals.
* They help students learn how to initiate and schedule committee meetings, prepare an agenda, come prepared with questions and concerns, and become a fully engaged member of the committee.
* They give students opportunities for independent work, they model intellectual risk taking, and they know that we all learn as much from our mistakes as from our successes.
* They address problem behavior promptly and honestly, and they encourage students to share.
* They know themselves and help students to understand how to manage the mentor.
* Mentors help students develop the skills to negotiate with other faculty on their committees, but step in when the student needs help.
* They provide honest and explicit assessments of the student’s progress in writing at least annually (and less formal assessments regularly throughout the year).
* They set realistic standards for each student and remember that different students learn differently.
* They remember that students came to get a degree, and they help them succeed.
* They strive to do no harm

Reality Check: Stacking the deck in favor of success

* Seek and admit strong students; if you have to make exceptions to admit a student, you are likely to continue to have to make exceptions every step of the way.
* Know what you need from students, and make sure the relationship is a good fit; if it’s not a good fit, help the student find a solution or another mentor.
* Own the responsibility to help students finish. Remember that each semester that you postpone a student’s degree completion comes with a cost: tuition dollars, stipend amounts, and perhaps most importantly, the student is prevented from seeking higher-paying employment for another year.
* You don’t have to really like every mentee or like them equally; you just have to treat them all fairly.
* If a student is truly weak, seek help from the program director to advise the student to leave the program early rather than late. (Better for a student to invest one year in a program before leaving than three).

Resources

The School of Interdisciplinary and Graduate Studies “The Mentor Center” has resources such as “Mentor Connect” where you can ask questions of an advisory board of mentor award winners, sample contracts for mentors and mentees, and FAQs for mentors and mentees.

<http://louisville.edu/graduate/mentorcenter>

The University of Michigan’s Rackham Graduate School website has a document entitled “How to Get the Mentoring You Want” sharing suggestions for graduate students.

<http://www.rackham.umich.edu/downloads/publications/mentoring.pdf>

The University of Michigan’s Rackham Graduate School website has a page dedicated to good practices in mentoring and advising graduate students.

<http://www.rackham.umich.edu/faculty_staff/information_for_programs/academic_success/mentoring_advising/>

Funding resources

The School of Interdisciplinary and Graduate Studies has tuition match programs that may help you to fund your doctoral students when you apply for grants: <http://louisville.edu/graduate/sigs/financial-support.html>