GRADUATE ENRICHMENT
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COLLEGE OF GRADUATE STUDIES

Graduate Students Mentoring Guide:
A Guide for Graduate Students

Contents

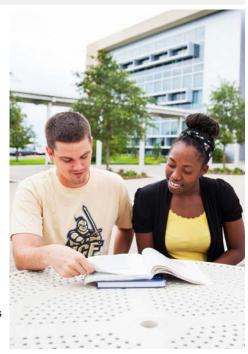**Graduate Students Mentoring Guide:**
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Introduction

Graduate school marks a significant transition from undergraduate studies, where graduate students shift from consuming knowledge to producing new knowledge. Mentorship is a crucial aspect of graduate education, shaping academic success, professional development, and overall well-being. This guide is designed to help students navigate these relationships effectively by outlining the key roles of faculty mentors, offering strategies for building a supportive mentoring network, and providing solutions for overcoming challenges that may arise throughout their academic journey.

Understanding Faculty Roles and Duties

Faculty members may serve in multiple roles, including:

- **Academic Advisor:** Assists with degree requirements, policies, and program milestones.

- **Research Supervisor:** Guides research projects, providing technical and professional expertise.

- **Thesis/Dissertation Chair:** Oversees thesis/dissertation progress and approves the final thesis/dissertation.

- **Mentor:** Offers holistic support, career advice, and personal development. To understand the contributions of a mentor, we can consider the multifaceted definition of mentors as individuals who (Alvarez et al., 2009; Paglis et al., 2006):

  ◦ take an interest in developing another person's career and well-being;

  ◦ advance academic and professional goals in directions most desired by the individual;

  ◦ tailor mentoring styles and content to the individual, including adjustments due to differences in culture, ethnicity, gender, and differences in student experience.

While faculty advisors, supervisors, and dissertation chairs can certainly be mentors, effective mentoring requires going beyond guidance on academic progress or singular research projects. The role of a mentor is centered on a holistic commitment to advancing your scholarly and personal development. Mentoring is important to you as a graduate student, not only because of the knowledge and skills that are shared, but also because of the many other aspects of professional socialization and personal support that are needed to facilitate success in graduate school and beyond. Ballantine and Jolly-Ballantine (2015) outline three important aspects of mentorship that we discuss in detail in this guide: psychosocial, instrumental/task, and networking support. Mentors can benefit you in each of these areas. In addition to these areas of support, mentors can help navigate common challenges that graduate students face during their time in graduate school. For example, many students experience feelings of isolation, impostorism, and stress during graduate school, as well as challenges balancing work demands with personal commitments, and/or navigating career development.

At the same time, it is important to understand the broader context in which faculty operate to set reasonable expectations for your mentoring relationship. Faculty members balance a wide range of responsibilities, including teaching undergraduate and graduate courses, advising students, serving on theses and dissertation committees, conducting research, writing grant proposals and publications, participating in departmental and university committees, and fulfilling duties for professional organizations. Junior faculty face the added pressure of preparing for tenure, while senior faculty often experience increased demands due to their national or international prominence. Like graduate students, faculty also have personal commitments outside of work. Recognizing these responsibilities can help you set realistic expectations, foster mutual respect, and build more effective mentoring relationships.

Building a Strong Mentoring Network

No single mentor can provide all the support a graduate student needs. A well-rounded mentoring team includes:

- **Faculty Mentors:** Within and outside your department, providing disciplinary expertise.

- **Peer Mentors:** Fellow graduate students / postdocs who offer guidance on navigating graduate school.

- **Professional Mentors:** Individuals in industry or academia who provide career insights.

- **Advisors in Student Support Services:** Campus resources like career services, counseling, and writing support.

How to Assemble Your Mentoring Network

It is important to be proactive in assembling your team of mentors. Start the selection process by undertaking a reflective self-appraisal of your goals and motivations. To do this, you must understand your unique needs as a graduate student before you can recognize who might meet those needs. Ask yourself:

- What were / are my objectives in entering graduate school?

- What type of training do I desire?

- What are my strengths?

- What skills do I need to develop?

- What kinds of research or creative projects will engage me?

- What types of careers might I want to pursue?

Graduate students bring a variety of academic, professional, and personal experiences. It is helpful for you to reflect on your past experiences and what you have found useful. For example, some students prefer greater autonomy, while others value more structure and regular feedback. The more you understand their needs, the better you can advocate for them.

Prioritize what you need from your mentors. Examples of high-quality mentoring practices include providing critical expert feedback, setting high expectations, and building the mentee's competence (Chavous, 2019). The framework by Ballantine and Jolly-Ballantine (2015) outlines *psychosocial, instrumental/task,* and networking competencies as key areas for potential mentoring support. As a graduate student, you should weigh the importance of these various competencies differently depending on your needs when selecting a member of your mentoring team.

To build your mentoring team, consider the following questions:

- What are my academic and career goals?

- What kind of guidance do I need to achieve these goals?

- Who are the faculty members, peers, or professionals that align with my interests?

Peer mentors can also be part of your mentoring team. Note that peers cannot fill in for faculty in key functions, such as writing letters of recommendation, research supervision, etc. That said, peer mentors can show you the ropes, help you navigate department policies, share unwritten department expectations and norms, provide socio-emotional support, give first-round feedback on research or writing, form academic support or writing accountability groups with you, and point you to useful resources. Peers will be your future disciplinary colleagues and should be considered an integral part of your mentoring team. Carefully selecting a team of mentors suited to your personal and professional needs increases the likelihood that you will receive the guidance and support you seek.

Developing Effective Mentoring Relationships

Setting Clear Expectations

Establishing mutual expectations is essential for a successful mentoring relationship. Discuss:

- Meeting frequency and preferred communication methods.

- Research expectations, project timelines, and authorship agreements.

- Career development support, such as networking and conference attendance.

Seeking and Receiving Feedback

Mentors provide critical feedback on research, writing, and professional development. To maximize its benefits:

- Request specific, actionable feedback.

- Allow sufficient time for mentors to review materials.

- Follow up on suggestions and seek clarification if needed.

Navigating Challenges in a Relationship with your Advisor, Supervisor, or Thesis/Dissertation Chair

Conflicts occasionally arise between graduate students and the faculty they work with, including their academic advisor, research supervisor, or dissertation chair.

Common Challenges

- Communication Issues: Misaligned expectations regarding response times and feedback.

- Lack of Availability: Faculty members have multiple commitments. Other demands on the faculty may hinder their ability to meet with you or provide prompt feedback on your work. This can lead to inadequate advising or supervision.

Unfortunately, research (Braxton et al., 2011) also shows that faculty do, in some cases, engage in inappropriate behaviors, including disrespect toward student efforts, misappropriation of student work, sexual misconduct, harassment, whistle-blowing suppression, or directed research malfeasance.

Steps to Tackle Conflicts

1. **Communicate Clearly:** If challenges arise, address them directly and professionally with the faculty members. It is important to address any differences directly and early. Aim to have these conversations in person as soon as problems arise.

2. **Seek Advice:** You may find that, despite discussing the challenges, you need to develop a strategy that keeps your work on schedule while also maintaining the working relationship. Other members of your mentoring team can help you develop a strategy to address challenges. This may include other graduate students who work with the faculty member or your additional faculty mentors. If you are unable to resolve the issue or if the faculty member is behaving inappropriately, speak with your graduate coordinator or department chair.

3. **Utilize University Resources:** UCF offers various support services, including counseling and conflict resolution resources. CAPS is a safe, private space to discuss ideas, strategies, and options for resolving conflicts or addressing inappropriate behaviors.

Changing Advisors and/or Thesis/Dissertation Chair

If you find that an advisor or mentor is not the right fit for you, either due to evolving research interests or other factors, a change may be necessary. It is advised that you try the steps to tackle the challenges discussed in Section 5 first. Regardless of your reason for wanting the change, do not panic. Do enter the process of changing your advisor/dissertation chair with professionalism, following your graduate program's policies and practices. Here are some basic guidelines:

- **Consulting a trusted faculty member or department chair** to assess the need for a change.

- **Identifying a new advisor** before formally discontinuing the current relationship. Avoid saying anything negative about your past advisor/dissertation chair and explain your desire to change only in professional terms.

- **Communicating the decision diplomatically and respectfully** to maintain professional relationships. If you owe them any work, be sure to discuss this and arrange a schedule for completing all outstanding obligations.

- **Completing any required paperwork** and ensuring a smooth transition.

Mental Health and Well-being

Graduate students often face significant mental health challenges during their academic careers (Evans et al., 2018). Please refer to Appendix A for guidelines on common mental health challenges in graduate school, along with suggested strategies and resources to support your mental health and well-being.

Additional Resources at UCF

- UCF College of Graduate Studies provides leadership, opportunities, and services to foster high-quality learning and training environments for graduate students and postdoctoral scholars. https://graduate.ucf.edu/

- UCF Office of Graduate Student Life provides a variety of services to support graduate students throughout their time at UCF and help prepare them after graduation. https://graduate.ucf.edu/graduatestudentlife/

- UCF Graduate Enrichment Mentoring Initiative (GEMiNi) https://graduate.ucf.edu/gemini

- UCF Writing Center provides members of the UCF community free individual and group peer consultations at any stage of the writing process. https://cah.ucf.edu/uwc/

- UCF Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) offers a wide range of free mental health services to students. https://caps.sswb.ucf.edu/

- Recreation and Wellness Center (RWC) offers programs, such as Fitness, Aquatics, Intramural Sports, Sport Clubs, and Outdoor Adventures. https://rwc.sswb.ucf.edu/

- UCF Career Services supports career planning, networking, and internships. https://career.ucf.edu/

- UCF Center for Entrepreneurial Leadership: Provides students with access to exclusive resources such as expert speakers, confidential coaching meetings, innovation resources, and startup competitions. https://cel.ucf.edu/

Conclusion

Mentorship plays a crucial role in graduate student success. By proactively seeking mentorship, setting clear expectations, and addressing challenges constructively, students can maximize the benefits of their graduate education. This guide serves as a roadmap to help students navigate their mentoring relationships effectively, ensuring academic and professional growth throughout their graduate journey at UCF.

Acknowledgment

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Appendix A

Thriving as a Graduate Student: A Guide to Mental Health and Well-being