

# Better Mentorship, Better Student Experience: Tips for Mentors<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

In this second publication of the *Better Mentorship, Better Student Experience* series, the focus will be on the mentor. This article is intended to serve as a resource for mentors who are seeking tips and support as they work with mentees in academia and beyond. Mentors may be faculty, senior employees, or even more experienced students. Mentors may be formal, assigned through an established mentoring program, or they may be informal, entering mentor-mentee relationships more organically (Eby & Allen, 2008; Erickson et al., 2009). This publication describes the role of the mentor and provides practical tips that can be applied in any setting. This publication also provides an overview of the *Better Mentorship, Better Student Experience* series in Appendix A.

## The Role of the Mentor

When you imagine your role as a mentor, it is helpful to think about your own experiences with a great mentor, whether they are a current mentor or someone who helped you on your path in years past. What made them come to mind? What are some of their characteristics that made them effective in their role? Excellent mentors may have a variety of personal and professional characteristics, but excellent mentoring will only occur if mentor-mentee

relationships are dynamic and involve critical reflection and participation by both the mentor and the mentee. Mentors should provide a space where the mentee is comfortable asking questions and able to share both their strengths and areas where they hope to grow. The recognized functions of a mentor include career and psychosocial aspects. Mentors serve as teachers, coaches, and models for their mentees. As a teacher and coach, mentors may provide task-specific coaching and skills development, sponsorship, exposure and visibility, protection, and challenging opportunities in terms of career support (Kram, 1983). In the area of psychosocial support, they provide role-modeling, acceptance, confirmation, counseling, and friendship. Motivating students to develop their skills and experiences is key.

## Why mentor?

Mentoring helps to increase mentees' overall satisfaction with their undergraduate or graduate studies and productivity, and it also enhances the career of the mentor (Liu et al., 2022; Paglis et al., 2006; Quinn, 2012). For women who are being mentored in particular, mentoring has been shown to help increase confidence that bolstered progression in their careers (Quinn, 2012). Mentees experience higher rates of promotion, increased productivity, and time management skills. Mentors can have feelings of overall career rejuvenation that increase their own self-confidence

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(Quinn, 2012). Mentorship increases a mentee's self-efficacy and also helps them reach higher levels of research productivity (Paglis et al., 2006). Mentoring brings mutual benefits to both sides of a mentoring relationship.

## Establishing Expectations and Understanding Needs

It is important to establish the needs and expectations for both the mentor and the mentee. As a mentor, check in with yourself about your expectations for the relationship before meeting with mentees. Questions you might ask yourself include:

- What do I hope for my mentee to get out of the relationship?
- What would I like to get out of the mentoring relationship?

Next, as you meet with your mentee for the first time, be sure to establish expectations. Questions you might talk through with your mentee include:

- How often will we meet?
- Will we meet in-person or virtually?
- Who will organize these meetings?
- What would these tentative sessions look like?
- Are there expectations for what we will bring or be prepared to discuss at these meetings?
- What are your philosophies on honoring time, confidentiality, and work-life balance?

These are all examples of questions to consider before beginning your mentoring relationships.

## Engaging with Students

Undergraduate students may explore undergraduate research opportunities. These may include work that directly connects to a faculty member's research, or other research interests where the faculty mentor advises the student in the process. Undergraduate research is one of the high-impact practices recognized by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), and it benefits students by immersing them in classrooms or other applied learning settings (Brown, 2022). When working with graduate students, it is important to think about experiences that will engage students not only in research, but also in other high-impact experiences such as conference participation, networking opportunities, and collaborative efforts that can help students build important skills.

- Talk to students about their interests and goals. Ask them what they hope to achieve.
- Does the student want to have an undergraduate experience that will help them prepare and strengthen their skill set for future graduate research opportunities?
- Is there a conference they want to attend, or that you could recommend they attend?
- Is the student actively engaged in student organizations? Can you help them get involved?
- Is there a research project or research team that they could join?

## Helping to Build Their Network

Students can benefit by expanding their mentoring network beyond a single mentor. One mentor may not be able to meet all the needs of the mentee. Having another mentor who may be better suited for certain areas, such as teaching, feedback, grant writing, or academic goal setting, can help mentees to build their skill levels and grow professionally and personally. Mentors can help to support graduate students who are looking for an appropriate teaching strategy, research method, or another possible mentor who has the ability to meet mentee needs and provides additional support, such as affirmations or introductions to other professionals. Below are a few questions to consider.

- Is there a faculty member who could enhance a particular skill that the student hopes to develop?
- Is there a project or experience you could recommend to the student? Could you recommend the student to one of your peers?
- If you are not confident in a particular research methodology, could you direct the student to a colleague who could support this student in building their knowledge and experience?

Serving as a mentor can enhance your own experiences while helping young professionals develop their own skill sets. Your role should be well-defined and should also include an understanding of your own and the mentee's expectations. Be sure to consult "Better Mentorship, Better Student Experience: Tips for Mentees," the third and final Ask IFAS article in this series.

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## Appendix A: Better Mentorship, Better Student Experience Series

### Better Mentorship, Better Student Experience: An Introduction to Mentorship

This publication is an overview that provides both faculty and students with a basic understanding of the benefits of mentoring and creating a support system.

### Better Mentorship, Better Student Experience: Tips for Mentors

This publication serves as a resource for mentors who are seeking tips and support as they work with their mentees in academia and beyond.

### Better Mentorship, Better Student Experience: Tips for Mentees

This publication is designed to help mentees, particularly those in academia, so they can utilize their mentoring relationships to their full potential.