PRINCIPLES FROM AND FOR GRADUATE STUDENT MENTEES
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MENTORING AT UCHICAGO

Many graduate students believe in the importance of mentoring in their training. Mentors are key to helping people do good research, communicate it clearly, and pursue meaningful careers. While mentors have long encouraged and enabled numerous careers for UChicago graduate students, the Report of the University of Chicago Committee on Graduate Education (2019) highlighted how mentoring can be strengthened by improving timeliness in students’ receiving feedback on research, increasing mentorship in teaching, and focusing more on career advising.

At the same time, graduate students also have a role in creating and maintaining productive mentorship experiences. This toolkit offers principles, practices, and resources that graduate students have found helpful in creating and sustaining healthy mentoring relationships with their mentors and graduate student peers.

This toolkit is a supplement to the Mentoring Graduate Students Toolkit for UChicago educators. It aims to complement resources developed within departments and divisions while specifically addressing the UChicago context. It also includes recommendations for virtual mentoring. Despite the inherent power dynamics between advisor/mentor and mentee, graduate students themselves can still influence how the relationship can be a productive and flourishing one.
ADVISING AND MENTORING

Although the terms “advisor” and “mentor” may often refer to the same person, for graduate students, it does not necessarily need to be this way. Advising refers to practices that help students progress in academic tasks: degree requirements, thesis/research, and professional development. Thus, an advisor has a primary responsibility to help guide and support students in the graduate program. Some programs have preceptors that at times function like advisors who help with course selection, writing, and professional development.

Mentoring is more broadly conceived as a task by academics, professionals, or peers who contribute to the development of graduate students. These mentors can support students’ career and professional development, along with their psychosocial development. Mentor support may come in the form of professional exposure, coaching, feedback, and challenging assignments (career focus), or in terms of role modeling, counseling, respect, and friendship (psychosocial focus).

In the mentoring relationship, responsibilities do not only fall with the mentor. Students also have responsibilities in fostering a beneficial mentorship experience. Just as a mentor must make an effort to coach and support students, the students/mentees must make an effort to advocate for themselves and their needs, develop the skills necessary for their discipline, communicate clearly, and work diligently and efficiently.

Seek More than One Mentor
Students should seek various mentors to support their growth and build trusting relationships. They need people to help them understand disciplinary concepts, guide their research, work through research challenges, find funding, give writing and proposal feedback, write letters of recommendation, and provide advice about teaching, leadership opportunities, career moves, and—possibly—what it means to be an underrepresented person in academia. A single person cannot address all of these and other needs, so mentees should consider reaching out to different kinds of mentors, including the following:

• A departmental mentor who can advise the topic of research and will most likely become a dissertation advisor. This person is usually a professor. Departmental colleagues also can serve as mentors to give some feedback on ideas as they develop and change.

• A methods mentor who can help refine research methods and overcome challenges when projects go off track. This might be a professor, an advanced student, or a staff member, such as a lab manager.

• People who understand university culture, inequalities, competition, and overwork. These mentors may or may not be within the same department or university and will help strategize and give frank feedback on students’ strengths and weaknesses.

• Various feedback mentors to provide substantive and effective comments on writing. These people could be writing group peers, other graduate students, professional editors, writing center guides, or professors.

• A networking mentor who knows the field, is aware of open positions, and can introduce mentees to friends. This person is usually a tenured professor who can help students begin to build their own networks.

• Listeners, who are not quite mentors but can provide space to work through challenges within a graduate program. Various people including graduate students within one’s cohort, partners, family, friends, community members, or therapists can play this important role.

• Professional development mentors who can guide skill development. Resources at UChicagoGRAD, UChicago Student Wellness, and the Chicago Center for Teaching support networking, well-being and teaching development. The National Center for Faculty Development and Diversity provides time management and writing development support.

Students can use a mentoring map to identify potential mentors.
BEST PRACTICES FOR SUCCESSFUL MENTORING RELATIONSHIPS

Align Expectations
At the start of one’s graduate education, students should discuss expectations for themselves and also for their mentors, and they should revisit these expectations as they gain independence. Some questions students can consider regarding their own expectations include:

• **Research and career goals:** Why do you want to do research or scholarship? What are your career goals? How will your training, research experience, and the relationship with your mentor help you achieve your goals?

• **Indicators of success:** What does success in research and graduate training look like for you? What would you like to achieve after one year, after three years, and at the completion of your degree?

• **Time and other commitments:** How much time do you plan to spend in graduate school? What are your expectations in terms of time needed for your studies, research, and other commitments?

• **Skills:** What technical, pedagogical, and research skills do you expect to learn as a graduate student?

• **Psychosocial support and encouragement:** Given the stressful and demanding graduate school environment, how do you expect to be supported by peers, mentors, family, and friends?

• **Remote communication:** How can you communicate remotely with your mentor? What strategies will work best with communicating with each other?

When students clarify their own expectations, they can determine what expectations they have of their mentors and be better prepared to discuss:

• **Mentoring approach:** How do you learn best (written communication, verbal instruction, active experimentation, etc.)? What can your mentor do to help you learn the skills and expertise needed to be successful in your research and teaching? What role do you hope your mentor plays: more direct and detailed or attending to larger questions and issues? Given this, how often would you like to meet?

• **Mentorship and independence:** What are your research and collaboration expectations when beginning your relationship with your mentor? What are your expectations in terms of transitioning to more independent work?

• **Feedback:** What are your expectations with how feedback is given (in terms of time, channel, and reminders)?

• **Drafts, publication, presentation:** How do you expect your mentor to help you through the writing of drafts, submission for publications, and attendance at conferences?

It is best that these expectations are clarified between students and mentors at the start of the mentoring relationship. It is also advisable for students and mentors to be flexible and practice open communication with one another. This checklist may help keep track of areas in need of alignment. Although some aspects of the checklist would be best addressed during the beginning of the mentoring relationship, it is also good to create rapport and establish a relationship with one’s mentor first before going into the other topics. The goal is for both mentor and mentee to share their expectations and to feel that both are invested in these expectations.
Receive Feedback and Track Progress

In graduate training, assessments are important for gaining a sense of how one has improved and what can be improved further. However, given the independent work that many people do and the absence of set periodic feedback mechanisms, the responsibility for getting feedback rests on the graduate student who will seek it from their mentors and peers. Feedback may be received in relation to:

- Progress in graduate studies
- Academic or course performance
- Teaching and instruction improvement
- Writing and publication
- Conference presentation

When requesting feedback, it may be good for students to reflect upon and share their accomplishments, achievements, and areas of improvement with their mentors. This self-reflection period is also an opportunity for students to track their progress and the changes that have taken place throughout their graduate training. A self-assessment or an individual development plan could be very useful to review.

When receiving feedback from mentors, students should be open and also reflect on questions that can help with receiving feedback:

- How do you ensure that you understand the feedback your mentor intended to send?
- How might your interpretation differ if you and your mentor’s communication styles do not align?
- How do student/academic roles factor into how you and your mentor communicate with one another?
- How do you deal with feedback that makes you feel stressed or less confident in your abilities as a researcher?

Gain Independence

Although the role and support of the mentor is a crucial one throughout one’s graduate school and professional life, it is not beneficial for graduate students to always depend on the professional and personal support of their mentors. Students should also be mindful of the need for their relationship with their mentors to change and transition to greater independence and an integration of one’s professional and personal life.

Independence can sometimes be paradoxical in that graduate students are expected to form their professional identities as scholars in disciplines while simultaneously learning how and when to ask for help from mentors. Gaining independence is a constant balancing act for graduate students and can be supported by discussions with students’ mentors or peers. Speaking with professors and advanced graduate students can provide examples for how gaining independence can be achieved.

Integration of personal and professional lives refers to one’s increased self-efficacy and ability to cope with, adapt to, and thrive under different situations. Understanding and having a repertoire of different coping mechanisms can help. In particular, problem-focused coping helps students assess their modifiable situations (e.g., time management issues), create strategies to improve their response, and implement these strategies.
Value Diversity and Support Other Graduate Students

Given how stressful graduate studies may be, other students can also be resources for psychosocial and professional support. A diverse graduate student cohort provides an advantage as students can provide each other with different perspectives in their research, personal lives, and professional growth.

Interacting with people who are different from oneself also can lead to greater empathy for others as well as the ability to lead and participate in diverse teams. In many departments, more advanced graduate students serve as peer mentors to younger cohorts. Such a practice can promote rich perspectives for both senior and junior graduate students.

To reap the greatest value from socially diverse interactions, students should consider the following:

- Understanding that your experience is likely shaped by your race, gender, geography, language, education, and many other cultural experiences, what assumptions do you make about how the world works and about people who are different from you?
- Have you taken time to build relationships and get to know colleagues who have different life experiences?
- How comfortable are you acknowledging and respectfully discussing social issues and differences, especially with people who may disagree?
Maintain Communication
Given the background, generational, and experiential differences between mentors and mentees, it is best to be honest with one another and become familiar with one another's communication preferences. Some questions that may help in this regard are:

• **Communication channels:** What circumstances necessitate face-to-face meetings, video conferences, phone calls, or email correspondences?

• **Diversity of expectations and assumptions:** How can students clarify their position given their backgrounds, identities, and personalities? What are effective ways for students to integrate these different aspects of themselves when communicating with others, particularly with mentors?

• **Feedback and concern:** How do students want to receive feedback regarding coursework, research, etc.? What may facilitate or hinder this feedback?

• **Listening:** How can students listen effectively and non-judgmentally to mentors' suggestions, ideas, concerns, and feedback?

• **Nonverbal communication:** How can students demonstrate positive nonverbal communication (eye contact, open or relaxed posture, nodding or other forms of affirmation, and pleasant facial expressions)?

• **Communication and trust:** How can students' communication with their mentors foster and sustain trust and goodwill?

Demonstrate Professionalism and Timeliness
Given the demands on the time of mentors and mentees, it may be difficult to schedule meetings and be available to one another. Here are some peer recommendations for maintaining the mentee/mentor relationship:

• **Email and communication:** It is important to regularly check emails for class announcements, professional development opportunities, University-wide updates, and emails from staff and mentors.

• **Time expectations for replies:** Although differences abound in how people respond to email, it is best for students to reply promptly to emails requiring a response. Additionally, it is appropriate to send a follow-up email as a polite nudge if a mentor has not yet replied for some days.

• **Respecting deadlines:** Students should share work and progress updates with their mentor at the agreed-upon deadline. Academic mentors have many demands on their time, and meeting deadlines can help mentors block off time to focus on students’ work and research.

• **Setting high standards for work and ethics:** Among the most crucial aspects of graduate training is cultivating high ethical standards and work ethic. Students must uphold honesty, objectivity, integrity, respect of intellectual property, non-discrimination, human subject protection, animal care, and ethical decision-making. Having these standards will not only help with one's relationship with a mentor but also with one's long-term professional conduct.
Communicate Remotely
Communicating remotely presents additional challenges. Mentors and mentees have far fewer opportunities to casually connect, demonstrate attentive listening with body language, or learn about professional expectations and missteps through indirect observation. If remote access is the primary way to reach one’s mentor, mentees should consider:

- **Regular check-ins:** Make sure meetings are scheduled at regular intervals to maintain a connection.

- **Quiet, reliable space for conversations:** Try to meet in a private space, using video-supported tools to help you see and hear each other clearly.

- **A set of questions or an agenda:** While some previous meetings may have been loosely planned around shared experiences in the lab or with the department, remote interactions will need more structure. Consider sharing questions, ideas, or a piece of writing before you meet to make sure your on-screen time is fruitful.

Self-Assess
At the start of the mentoring relationship and at periodic intervals, students should take time to understand their strengths, goals, and areas of development. This practice will help mentees communicate their expectations and challenges. It can also help them determine and find mentors who can support different areas of their development. This tool can be useful for conducting a self-assessment. It asks students to consider the following areas:

- **Scholarly competencies:** Where are you on your trajectory for developing the skills of a scholar? Competencies include research, writing, and teaching skills.

- **Professional development competencies:** How well are you developing abilities related to working in scholarly settings? These skills include abilities to manage one’s time, present, acquire funding, lead diverse groups of people, manage conflict, and take care of one’s well-being.
TIPS FROM GRADUATE STUDENTS

Below are some practical tips suggested by graduate students for their peers:

• Think carefully about your own work and communication preferences, and how you want to be advised. It is helpful to recognize these preferences, and if necessary, inform your mentor about them.

• Here are some questions that you may ask your mentor or advanced peers:
  - What are the expectations and milestones in the program?
  - What do dissertation projects typically look like?
  - What is the typical timeline in the department?
  - What skills are expected to develop?
  - When are graduate students expected to pursue publications and conferences?
  - What form of communication would be best for the mentor?

• Reach out to fellow graduate students to consult when in doubt about how to address certain situations or talk to faculty.

• Ask your department if there is a progress tracker or timeline that graduate students usually follow.
VARIETY IN MENTORING EXPERIENCES

In the same way that diversity exists in student populations and among academic mentors, mentoring experiences will likewise bring diversity:

• **Disciplinary differences.** In science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) fields, research mentoring is less about one-on-one apprenticeship and more often a multilayered approach, particularly with teams of academics, postdoctoral fellows, graduate students, and undergraduate students interacting with each other.15

• **Underrepresented graduate students.** Although mentoring is very important for graduate students, it has been found to be even more crucial for students from groups historically and currently underrepresented in the academy “who often lack access to informal networks and information required to be successful in academic and professional environments in which they are underrepresented.”16 Students of color, women in STEM fields, and low-income and first-generation students often benefit from the help of good mentors.

• **International students.** Given the specific concerns that can arise from professional or social isolation and cultural challenges, international students gain a great deal from mentoring relationships with academics, staff, professionals, and peers.17

• **Masters and doctoral students.** Given the shorter amount of time students in masters programs are on campus, they need to make the most of their time with their mentors.

• **Early and later stages.** For doctoral students, mentoring will look different and mean different things depending on one’s stage in their program. At the start of the training, students may expect mentors to help advise on courses, short-term goals, and specific instructions. For more advanced students, one may expect the mentor to guide along the relatively loose structure of laboratory work, research, teaching, presentation development, and dissertation writing.18

• **Peer mentoring.** Graduate students also become mentors to newer students, which can be mutually beneficial for both mentors and mentees.19
UCHICAGO RESOURCES

In addition to seeking assistance from mentors, graduate students can connect with a number of campus resources designed to support students throughout their entire graduate studies career. Many offices on campus offer services directed to students’ individual needs.

Research, Writing, and Teaching

UChicagoGRAD

- Graduate writing consultants are available to meet with students about scholarly works in progress.
- Writing Workshops, Write-Ins, and GRAD Writing Rooms are held regularly to support graduate student work. Information about upcoming events is available in the GRAD Guide Weekly emails.
- Academic Exchange Programs allow doctoral students to take advantage of academics, classes, and research centers at 25 partner institutions.
- GRADTalk is a series of programs and resources designed to help graduate students and postdoctoral researchers increase the impact of their scholarship and build public speaking skills.
- Career development opportunities include career advisement, professional workshops, practice interviews, internship programs, job searches, and career fairs.

Chicago Center for Teaching

- Several orientations focus on topics such as teaching at UChicago, teaching in the Core, jumpstarting your teaching, and more.
- Seminars and workshops are offered on a number of topics, including:
  - Inclusive Teaching
  - Teaching Assistantships
  - Teaching Portfolios
  - Teaching Statement
  - Course Design
  - Pedagogy for Core Courses

National Center for Faculty Development & Diversity

- The Dissertation Success Curriculum provides guidance and tools for time management and effective writing.

Writing Program

- The Academic and Professional Writing Course, also called the Little Red Schoolhouse, prepares students to write at the level of dissertation or academic text.

Health and Wellness

- UChicago Student Wellness
- Athletics and Recreation
- Student Disability Services
- Financial wellness

Family and Community

- Family Resource Center

Additional Resources

- Office of International Affairs
- Center for Identity + Inclusion
- Center for Leadership and Involvement
- Spiritual Life
- Office of Sexual Misconduct Prevention and Support
- Office of the Student Ombudsperson
- Divisional/professional schools’ Dean of Students
REFERENCES


CIMER: Center for the Improvement of Mentored Experiences in Research. (2019). *Training Materials and Facilitator Instruction for “Messages Sent and Received.”*


Endnotes are below

1 Schlosser, Knox, Moskovitz, and Hill (2003).
2 Zelditch (1990)
3 Johnson and Huwe (2003)
4 McMahon in Pfund, et al. (2012)
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6 Ideas adapted from Branchaw, Pfund, & Rediske (2010)
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8 Gardner (2008)
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10 Chesney et al. (2006); Nelson et al. (2001)
11 Bert (2018); Mannix and Neal (2005)
12 Pfund, et al. (2012)
13 Weick (2018)
14 Resnik (2011)
15 Feldon, Maher, Hurst, and Timmerman (2015), p. 360
16 Thomas, Willis, and Davis (2007), p. 178. See also: Brunsma, Embrick, and Shin (2017); Brown, Davis, and McClendon (1999); Montgomery, Dodson, and Johnson (2014); Rudolph et al. (2015).
17 Rose (2005)
18 Ibid
19 Fugate, Jaramillo, and Preuhs (2001)