

College of the Environment
Graduate student professional development series:
“Negotiating the Most out of Your Mentoring Experience”

November 20, 2020

KEY TAKEAWAYS and Q&As

From the mentor perspective

- Follow the student’s lead – each student is different. Where do they want to be in 5 years? Help them reach their goal.
- Determine the structure the student requires. How often to hold meetings? Whom do they need an introduction to? How much time do they need to explore a problem/roadblock?
- Mentors play lots of roles: cheerleader, professional advocate/champion.
- The mentor’s goal is to get a student to the point where their skills and their creativity have launched experiments that match their predictions and they feel like they have their finger on the pulse of the universe.

From the mentee perspective

- Mentors are not subject experts. There are 1-2 people in the University who have the technical expertise to assist with your project. There are lots of people who can sustain and support you on a personal level.
- A mentor is person who advocates for you as a person, embraces your identities, and the career choices you make.
- An advisor is a person who makes sure you succeed, a mentor supports you.
- Mentors provide honest perspective in tough times. They let you know, “You passed your qualifying exam. It’s time to move on and not dwell on what did not go well.”

Q: How can you cultivate mentors outside of your discipline?

A: Take classes and seminars outside of your department – this sets you up to lean on them in the future. Use flattery. Write an email that says, “I saw published a new paper on [subject], I’d love to talk to you about it over Zoom.” Academics are busy. If they don’t respond, just send another email. Put people on your committee who are outside of academia (e.g., USFWS, USFS personnel). They have access to jobs, can write letters of recommendation and see your work from a public lens. Include international researchers on your committee – it is even easier to include them now.

Q: What is my advisor does not value the same things I value (e.g., teaching)?

A: If it is something important for you, be an advocate for yourself. Have a conversation with your advisor. Come up with a plan for how both your teaching (or mentoring, or public outreach skills, or...) and your research can move forward on an agreed upon timeline.

Q: Are there ways to reach out to new people other than cold-emailing?

A: Ask your advisor to make the connection for you – they can often be a better advocate for you than you are for yourself. You might get a response to your email that says “let’s talk” – that’s your in. When reaching out, be specific. Ask, “can you review my teaching statement?” Do some personal reflection to know exactly that you are looking for. Remember, faculty members both receive cold calls and still make cold calls. Be aware of existing mentorship frameworks, such as the [Research Exchange](#). Even before you identify a postdoc mentor you can start making connections.

Q: How did you set work/life boundaries?

A: Set boundaries for yourself! Talk with other students – see how they react to your research goals and timelines. Put a person on your committee that models good work/life balance and have them be your advocate. Bring up this conversation with your advisor or during a lab meeting – “What are everyone’s approaches? What do they think are the norms of the school/department? Are these norms changing?”