

Student Notebook: 7 Tips for Being an Effective Graduate Student Mentor

August 30, 2022



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Graduate students are familiar with being on the receiving end of mentoring relationships. We know these relationships are crucial to our professional success—and can even influence our personal success—as we embark on our journeys as graduate students and beyond. Thus, when applying to graduate school, much thought and consideration goes into identifying faculty members as potential mentors.

But what about mentoring others? There is a high likelihood that all of us will serve as mentors at some point in our careers, whether in academia, industry, research, or clinical practice. Despite our ample experience being mentored in graduate school, we typically don't receive explicit training on how to *be* mentors. We are more likely to *supervise* undergraduate students or research assistants, meaning we oversee their work, teach specific skills, and ensure that tasks get completed.

The role of mentor goes above and beyond that of a supervisor. Mentors aren't solely focused on teaching a particular skill or monitoring work output. Their role is more nuanced and extensive. They provide guidance on overall professional development, such as networking, research development, and even confidence-building, with the ultimate goal of helping mentees feel equipped to transition to the next stage in their careers. Studies show that effective mentorship leads to a wide range of positive outcomes for mentees, including increased confidence, research output, and opportunity seeking (Pfund et al., 2016). However, the benefits of mentoring don't apply only to the mentees: Mentors also report experiencing greater self-awareness, research productivity, and collaboration (Dolan & Johnson, 2009).

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As graduate students, we're more likely to mentor students on projects than careers. Even though this type of mentoring may be task-specific, there are still opportunities to provide broader guidance, such as sharing advice on applying to graduate school or for postbaccalaureate positions. Given the significance of mentoring and the lack of structured training on it, I have compiled a list of seven mentoring tips specifically geared toward graduate students.

1. Seek out mentorship opportunities.

Get started mentoring as early as you can. Mentoring is a skill, and you will get better with practice. Although many graduate school programs might not have explicit mentor training, it is worth investigating whether your department offers any mentorship fellowships or summer programs. Otherwise, speak with your own mentor about opportunities to mentor an undergraduate student or research assistant within your lab or program.

2. Learn about your mentee.

This may sound obvious, but ask your mentee questions about themselves. A mentorship is an interpersonal relationship like any other, and it's important to learn about your mentee professionally as well as personally in order to establish a foundation for a meaningful relationship. What are their career goals? What do they like to do outside of school and studying? Are there specific skills they would like to learn? What do they hope to get out of this mentorship?

3. Schedule regular, structured check-ins.

Once you've learned a bit about your mentee, your next step should be to schedule regular meetings or check-ins with them. These can be at whatever frequency works for you both and either virtual or in person. Regular meetings will help both you and your mentee stay on track and keep lines of communication open.

4. Set actionable goals and clear expectations.

As you learn about your mentee's goals, think about how those fit in with your own goals as their mentor. These may be narrow or broad, but one of a mentor's roles is breaking down larger tasks into smaller, tangible goals. For example, if your mentee wants to present a research poster at a conference, break the process down into smaller steps that are more easily attainable. Additionally, set clear expectations for your mentee. Let them know how quickly you anticipate responding to their emails and when you expect responses from them. When assigning tasks, be sure that they understand exactly what is being asked of them. Do not expect them to guess what you mean or read your mind.

5. Know your limits.

This important tip is particularly relevant to graduate students. We are at the outset of our careers, and though we know a fair bit, there is a lot we have yet to learn. Recognize what you do not know as a

graduate student mentor and what you are not equipped to teach or handle. Mentoring at this stage in your career is also a learning experience for you, so treat it that way. Seek guidance when needed from your own mentor, advisor, or supervisor.

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6. Provide positive affirmations.

One role of a mentor is being a cheerleader. Whenever possible, provide positive affirmations to your mentees. Did they complete a task efficiently? Identify an issue in a data set that you missed? Find a relevant paper you haven't read? Tell them! Help them build up their confidence.

7. Be mindful of boundaries.

As a graduate student mentor, you are not the boss, but you are also not a peer. You must enforce boundaries in a mindful way that protects the authenticity of the relationship but does not cross any lines. Early in our careers, we may identify with other students. This can engage our empathy, but it also makes us more susceptible to feeling competitive or jealous of our mentees (Eby & McManus, 2004). Thus, it is important to monitor your thoughts and behaviors and be wary of abusing any power you hold as a mentor. It can also be tempting to want to be your mentee's friend. You want to establish a caring, authentic relationship, but monitor that fine line between appropriate and inappropriate behavior as a mentor.

By finding opportunities to mentor, you stand to benefit from personal and professional growth. I'm hopeful that these tips will serve as a jumping-off point for helping you become an effective mentor as a graduate student. However, this list is by no means exhaustive, and I encourage you to read books and articles on mentoring and speak with others about their mentoring experiences.

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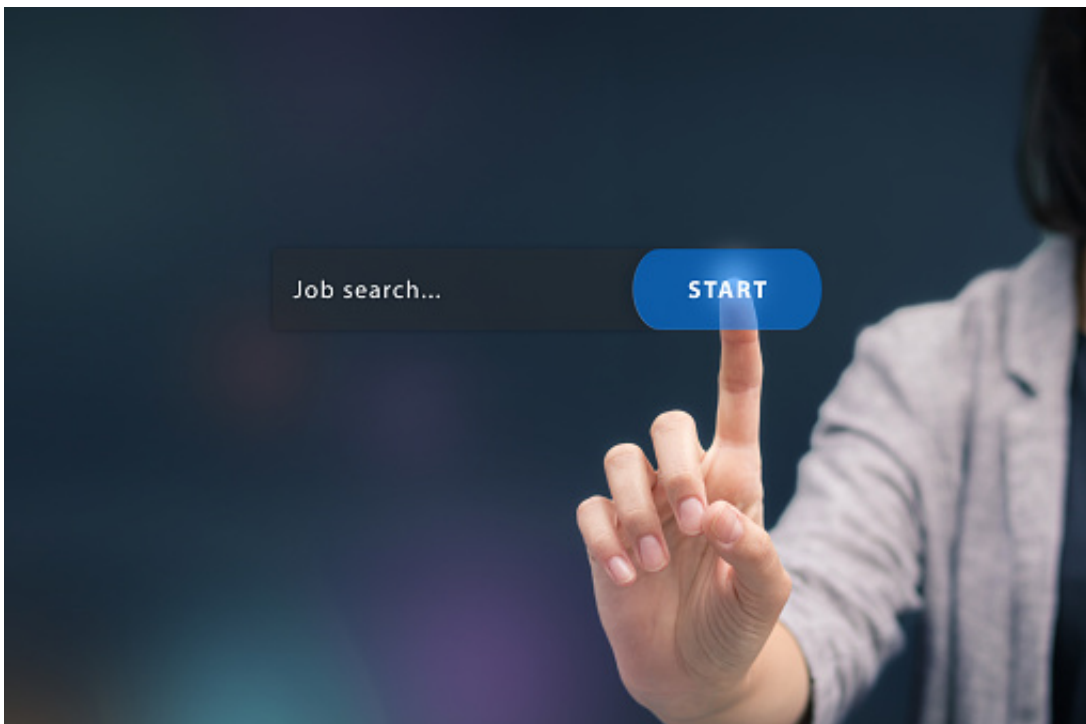
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