

The Many Varieties of Mentors

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It is hard to express the importance of the mentor–mentee relationship in a brief article. In my experience, this relationship is one of the most valuable in a graduate student’s life. Students should forge this relationship early on and strengthen it throughout their graduate career and beyond. Graduate school is a time to grow both professionally and personally, and I hope that my advice will assist readers in capitalizing on a mentor’s ability to help with both.

There is no “standard” mentor–mentee relationship. During my graduate years, I have witnessed many different types of mentoring relationships, and each had pros and cons. Supporting my anecdotal experience is a research study by Clark, Harden, and Johnson (2000), who investigated mentor–protégé relationships. From a sample of 800 doctoral students, 91% evaluated the relationship with their mentor as positive. Students in this study identified being supportive, intelligent, and knowledgeable as the most common qualities that they perceive in a successful mentor. In line with these findings, I had a very strong, positive relationship with my research mentor.

Unfortunately, many students find that they are not well matched with their advisor. If you find yourself in this position, there are steps you can take. Start by talking to your mentor about the changes you would like to see in your relationship. If the situation does not improve, then you may need to speak to your department chair about switching to a different mentor or lab. Additional steps should not be necessary. However, if needed, the dean of graduate studies can help you transition to a new advisor. Be mindful that mentor–mentee relationships are not “one size fits all”; most students will experience both challenges and rewards while fostering this professional connection.

Type 1: “I am here if you need me, if I have time”

One positive aspect of this type of relationship is that you can seek your mentor out when needed for class and research help. This type of mentor will be there for you when you need to develop a thesis or dissertation plan or discuss your degree audit. Furthermore, this dynamic empowers you to take control of your education, which gives you a fair amount of creative freedom.

The negatives of this type of mentoring style, however, can be quite significant. I have heard from fellow graduate students that it can be difficult to schedule a meeting with mentors who work in this way. If you find yourself in this situation, you must remain vigilant and continue to reach out to your mentor. Faculty are busy; they have their own research, classes, and other students to manage. Keep trying, and you will get the face-to-face contact you need.

Type 2: “I will guide you every step of the way”

This type of mentor will be there to guide you from day one to graduation. Many graduate students cite this guidance as an important function of a mentor and expect direct training or instruction from their

advisor (Clark et al., 2000). Mentors who adopt this style will provide advice and direction in all aspects of graduate school. They often assist their students in scheduling courses, joining professional organizations, participating in departmental activities, and choosing research topics.

Even though this guidance may sound reassuring, there are some negative aspects of studying under this type of mentor. Graduate school is about figuring out what really makes you happy within the field, whether it is teaching, administration, or research. One downside to this type of mentor is that you may not have to exercise much creativity in graduate school, especially when designing a research trajectory. A hands-on mentor also may unintentionally discourage you from teaching more than the minimum amount, getting involved with university activities outside of your department, or collaborating with other professors. This style of mentorship tends to work well for students who are unsure of the career path they want to take. If you feel that your graduate school experience isn't offering enough creative freedom, then take some initiative and discuss it with your mentor.

Type 3: “I will help you grow as a professional and as a person”

In my opinion, this is the ideal type of mentor. I was lucky enough to experience this type of mentorship firsthand. The relationship that I had with my mentor has been the most rewarding and impactful one in my life. This type of mentor cares about you as a student and as a person. Empirical evidence has identified this combination as a critical feature of the mentor–mentee relationship, noting that many students expect mentors to serve as role models and friends (Clark et al., 2000).

This type of mentor will help you when you need it and will give you the structure and direction necessary to be successful in graduate school without imposing on your creative freedom. He or she will be there not only to talk about academic matters but also to discuss other topics in and outside of psychology. Mentors who take this approach may be open to expanding their research to include your ideas, even when it means incorporating areas of psychology outside their expertise. Through persistence and a well-articulated research design, you may persuade them to support projects they initially doubted. If research is not the sole focus of your graduate career, then your mentor may assist you with teaching and service opportunities.

Keep in mind that because of involvement with other students, teaching, and university service, it may be hard to have an extensive meeting with this type of advisor unless you schedule in advance. Additionally, a potential downside of the close personal connection you foster with this type of mentor is that it may become difficult for you to receive constructive criticism from him or her. Just remember that the criticism he or she gives you is for your own good, comes from a teaching perspective, and will most likely be easier to take than the criticism you will receive after graduate school.

Regardless of your mentor's style, make the most you can out of graduate school. Many of the professional relationships you develop there will last long after you finish your degree. Most importantly, just talk to your mentor whenever both of you have a free minute, however scarce those free minutes may be. œ

Reference

Clark, R. A., Harden, S. L., & Johnson, W. B. (2000). Mentor relationships in clinical psychology doctoral training: Results of a national survey. *Teaching of Psychology, 27*, 262–268.