

Mentoring/Mentee Suggestions from Experience

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In academia, as in many other fields, a mentor can be a key source of information about how to develop your career and a crucial link to networks of relevant people and professional opportunities. Being a mentor is also a common service many of us will provide during our careers, whether we are advising students, junior colleagues, or others. I have had the good fortune of being both a mentor and a mentee, and in an effort to help others build the best mentoring relationships possible, I offer the following list of suggestions from my experiences on both sides of the aisle.

- **Define your terms**

Because there are many ‘right’ ways to mentor and/or be mentored in the academic world, it seems that all mentoring relationships should begin with a frank discussion of how each party defines mentoring. To me, a mentoring relationship is nurturing and supportive, driven by the notion that a person with more experience in a given field may be able to help guide someone with less experience toward a set of mutually agreed upon goals, which may or may not change over time and according to context. Each mentor and mentee, however, is likely to have a unique set of expectations, and many problems can be avoided by trying to start off ‘on the same page.’

- **Mutual respect**

It is critical that both mentor and mentee respect one another personally and professionally.

There is usually a power differential between the parties; ignoring it or pretending it isn’t relevant won’t make it go away. In some ways, the power difference is the point: a mentee is typically a junior scholar looking to a relatively senior scholar for advice and assistance, usually with the assumption that a) the senior has advice and assistance to give, and b) the junior will listen and take heed. No matter how positive the relationship, the mentee is in a relatively vulnerable position, and it is generally in his/her best interest for both parties to honor that reality.

Similarly, mentees must understand that mentors—even those who are professional ‘stars’—are human, with the requisite human flaws. Putting a mentor on a pedestal is as disrespectful as a mentor treating a mentee as an underling. A mentee can respect a mentor’s position and experience without being awe-struck or acting sycophantic; a mentor can offer guidance without denigrating a mentee or taking advantage of her/his more vulnerable position.

It is crucial for mentors to listen to mentees and take into account a mentee’s individual needs, interests, and capacity. Although mentors have more professional experience than mentees, the fact remains that there is no one way to be a historian and scholar. Mentors should aim to foster in mentees the ability to define a unique intellectual pathway, and they should provide

professional advice that supports the mentee's overall life goals. Professional success means little if it is at the expense of a person's general well being.

- **Generosity**

Mentors invest a great deal of time and energy in relationships with mentees, and it is tempting to measure the return on that investment by the degree to which the mentee follows the mentor's advice or mirrors the mentor's own career path. Good mentorship has little if anything to do with the end result: it should not be judged by dissertations finished, books published, jobs received, or fellowships won. Of course those things and more are likely to result; indeed, most of us go into mentoring relationships, on either side of the equation, in the hope that those kinds of positive, measurable results will follow. But mentoring is more about process than product. Life happens in the present as well as in future accomplishments; both mentors and mentees need to acknowledge and respect that while striving to achieve ambitious goals.

Good mentoring involves giving time and attention to a mentee with minimal strings attached, even amid an already busy schedule. If a prospective mentor does not actually have the time to commit, he or she should not promise to commit the time. A good mentor is someone a mentee can count on for the most time-consuming, labor-intensive academic service tasks. He or she can make a mentee feel as though there is always time for that person's work: manuscripts will always be read, letters always written, and advice always given. In short, a good mentor shows a mentee that he/she *matters*. In turn, a good mentee respects a mentor's time, recognizes the work it takes to be a mentor, and has realistic expectations about a mentor's capacity to offer assistance and advice.

Mentors can also offer strong support by taking the initiative and reaching out to mentees to help combat isolation, especially in writing phases (dissertation, article, or book) when a person may be spending less and less time with other people and more and more time cloistered in archives or behind a computer.

Involving mentees in professional networks at social gatherings, professional events, conferences, and so on is crucial. Mentors need to remember that networking is hard and that academic get-togethers can be intimidating, especially for mentees at the most junior level, such as new graduate students. A few carefully chosen introductions can go a long way, and are highly appreciated.

Similarly, it is extremely helpful, when possible, for mentors to pass opportunities on to mentees. Can't review the book you were just sent? Unable to accept an invitation to chair a conference panel? No time to sit on a service committee? Pass on the requests to your mentees: these can be ways 'in the door' that less advanced scholars are waiting for.

- **Patience and trust**

People need mentors because they don't already know everything about their chosen profession. Becoming a professional scholar is complicated, and figuring out the many unwritten and constantly changing rules of the game is a constant challenge. Mentees are bound to make some

mistakes as they navigate their way through a complex and not-always-transparent profession. When a mentee makes a professional gaffe—something everyone does at some point—it is helpful when a mentor can give the mentee the benefit of the doubt. It can help to build trust when the mentor assumes the mistake was innocent and does not castigate the mentee but takes time to explain the problem in a rational manner and strategize solutions and/or ways of preventing the mistake from happening again.

Conversely, even under difficult circumstances, mentees need to trust that mentors have their best interests at heart. When a mentor offers criticism, a mentee needs to be willing to absorb and apply it. Mentees can benefit immensely from the opportunity to make and then correct mistakes under a caring and experienced mentor's watchful eye, and it is rewarding for mentors to see mentees integrating their advice into their developing careers.

When a mentor and mentee build a trusting relationship, a mentor is then in an ideal position from which to really push and challenge, asking the mentee the hardest questions, demanding the highest-quality results, and encouraging productivity in a way that may be unique in the mentee's life.

- **Cultivate independence**

Mentors are there to offer support and guidance but not to define careers or lives. Ultimately, mentees must retain control over their own professional trajectory and take full responsibility for the outcomes of their actions. Although a very hands-on mentor can be helpful, it is counterproductive if hands-on help becomes overwhelming control.

My most rewarding experiences as a mentor have been when my mentees have listened to my advice and then moved in their own directions, where I can see shades of my influence but where it is clear that the mentees are thinking for themselves and making independent choices. Similarly, I'm grateful to the mentors I've had who have offered support without stifling my individuality or my wish to do things differently. They helped me build a strong foundation and then let me go, and I was able to take risks and go out on limbs precisely because I knew I had them in my corner, no matter what the end result of my choices and decisions.

- **Flexibility and communication**

Mentoring relationships, like other relationships, change over time as the mentor and mentee's respective positions and interests change and evolve. It helps to reassess the relationship on a regular basis, to ask what is working, what isn't, and how it might change.

Strong mentoring relationships can continue for many years. For mentees, there is nothing like the security of knowing that there is always someone there with more wisdom and experience, without unnecessary judgment and with genuine interest, who is ready and willing to listen and/or offer advice. For mentors, it is uniquely satisfying to know that a more junior person with similar professional interests has placed his/her trust in you, believes that you have wisdom to offer, and provides you with an opportunity to share the knowledge you've gained through your own processes of trial and error.

Each mentoring relationship is different, and there is no single correct way to mentor or be mentored. However, the potential for success is maximized in a relationship with clear, open lines of communication; where each party is encouraged to remain independent; and with the values of respect, generosity, patience, and trust at its core.

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