

Synopsis from *The Deliberate Mentor: Performing the Role(s) with Thought and Purpose* (a mentoring workshop for faculty)

Held on Tuesday, January 10, 2012 and sponsored by the Graduate College at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

The Multifaceted Roles of the Graduate Mentor

Rebecca Bryant (Graduate College)

Being a graduate mentor is challenging and it includes many different roles. For the purposes of discussion at this workshop, we will be emphasizing only four specific roles essential to quality mentoring:



Roles and Role Models

*Moderator and panelist: Andrea Golato (Germanic Languages & Literatures)
Panelists: Janice Bahr (Animal Sciences), Jim Slauch (Microbiology), Linda Smith (Library and Information Science)*

ADVOCATE

Advisers often find themselves in the role of the student’s advocate. What advice do you have on how to take on this role?

The panelists emphasized the importance of adaptability within the advocate role. Each graduate student is a unique individual with distinct professional and personal needs. It’s not possible to mentor each student the same way, and you have to adapt the training to each person.

Additional advice:

- Even as you have to adapt your mentoring style to each individual, treat the people in your group equitably.
- Be knowledgeable about the opportunities for professional development available for your students
- Introduce students to the field, prepare them for conferences. Introduce them to scientists/scholars in the field.
- Ask students what they need—they often know and can help guide you.

RESEARCH GUIDE

One of the roles of an adviser is that of the research guide. How do you help students become independent researchers and how do you motivate them to do their best work –or do any work at all when times get tough?

Jim Slauch stated that it’s important to try to involve students in all lab activities, including the preparation of grants and papers. Their involvement in the back and forth process of knowledge creation is essential to their development as independent researchers. Dr. Slauch also recommended maintaining student motivation by:

- Sharing your own enthusiasm about research.
- Encouraging students to come see you when things go poorly with their research, instead of just “banging their head against the wall”.

The panelists suggested ways to provide structure and set expectations:

- Have a letter that sets out expectations in writing (for new students)
- Provide some structure to what may be an unclear process to them. Help provide an initial roadmap to the PhD and keep refining it each semester as the student gets closer to the goal
- Ask students to develop their own timeline and share it with you.



Andrea Golato described how she helps teach students in the humanities to identify research topics. During graduate classes and seminars, she asks them to start identifying potential ideas for further research—papers, articles, and dissertation topics. She provides feedback to them about the ideas with the greatest potential, helping them develop skills and confidence.

Linda Smith encouraged faculty attendees to stay in touch with students who may leave campus before completing their degree requirements and to treat every encounter as a mentoring opportunity: be approachable, accessible, and attentive.

EVALUATOR

In addition to all the other roles, you are also the evaluator, the one who needs to uphold professional and academic standards and research quality. At times, this role can be conflicting with the other roles. How do you manage this role?

- Explicitly communicate expectations. Start with your very first meeting
- When providing feedback, first mention the positive things, then talk about the areas that need improvement
- Demonstrate that writing is a process—no one gets it right on the first draft. Sometimes it can help students to accept criticism and multiple drafts by showing them some of your own work in progress and reviewer feedback.
- Attend presentations (both mock and real) by your student. Follow up with a private meeting to discuss and provide feedback for improvement.
- Know when to have a frank conversation with a student not making progress
- Review the academic progress of your students annually (note: effective in academic year 2012-13, this will become a Graduate College requirement)
- Address potential weaknesses early, allowing opportunity to develop new skills and break self-defeating habits

PROFESSIONAL COACH

Similar to the role of an advocate is that of the professional coach. Can you speak to how you train or socialize your students into the professional world of academia and/or the private sector?

- Talk with your students about where/how to present and publish
- Listen to your students' presentations and review drafts of their writing. Provide quality feedback in a timely fashion.
- Help to secure support for your students to participate in professional development opportunities like conferences
- Share your experiences as a faculty member (such as the paper review process) so that your students can start to get a realistic idea of what a faculty career looks like
- Talk with your students about the job market and career preparation very early in their studies
- Help students network with others in their chosen career path



- Explicitly tell your students that you will support them in their career path, regardless of what that choice is

AUDIENCE QUESTIONS

How do you help your students develop as teachers and educators?

- Ensure that your students have the opportunity to teach
- Sit in their classroom and provide feedback
- Pair departmental needs with students' needs for teaching—this can even give students experience with different modes of teaching (online, face-to-face, etc.)
- Encourage your students to participate in workshops and certificate programs available through the Center for Teaching Excellence (CTE)
- Refer students to teaching resources available through your professional society or at conferences

How do you mentor international students? How do you address cultural differences such as poor eye contact?

- Open communication is key. In particular, graduate students may find it difficult to express their own intellectual opinion or challenge yours. Train your students to participate in conversations and be comfortable in open disagreement and debate with you. In order to be successful, they must learn that this type of exchange is essential in academe, regardless of discipline.
- Understand that the implicit “rules” of graduate study are probably unknown to most international students. Take extra time to make the implicit explicit.
- Help international students understand the types of behaviors that are expected (and unexpected) in the United States

How do you work with students who don't have the “blind arrogance” or “natural obsession” so essential for success in academia, particularly in the sciences?

- Learn and accept that most graduate students you will work with are probably not as talented or driven as you were, although they are still very bright and able and still deserving of the best quality mentoring. Understanding this can help us provide a better education to all our students. Be honest and train them as broadly as possible.

