



International Association for Society and Natural Resources

A mentor's varied roles

(adapted from the Office of Graduate Studies at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln)

Mentors play many roles in mentees' lives to help them succeed; these include "guide," "counselor," "advisor," "consultant," "tutor," "teacher," and "guru." A mentor's particular combination of professional expertise, personal style, and approach to facilitating learning influences the kind of mentoring he or she provides. A mentor will wear several "hats" over the course of his or her mentees' professional development, and might be comfortable wearing many hats at once, or only one or two at a time. Whatever the case, it is important to remember that effective mentoring, like wisdom itself, is multidimensional, and that mentors play three core roles that are essential to advancing the educational, professional, and personal growth of graduate mentees.

Three core roles

1. Disciplinary guide

When the mentee is a graduate student, sometimes a faculty member will be both a thesis/dissertation advisor and mentor; in other cases, the mentee benefits more by having different people carry out each role. Either way, the role of a disciplinary guide is to help mentees become contributing members of their disciplines. This is disciplinary guide is relevant outside of academic settings, when a similar approach to helping a mentee find his/her place in a professional discipline is possible.

This guidance goes well beyond helping them complete the requirements of their academic programs, as important as that assistance is. It is deeper and involves helping mentees understand how a discipline has evolved as a knowledge enterprise; recognize novel questions; identify innovative ways of engaging undergraduate mentees through teaching and collaborative research projects; and see the discipline, its questions and methodologies, in relation to other fields. Another important role of the disciplinary guide is to help mentees grasp the impact of the discipline on the world outside academe, and to assist them in pursuing the impact they desire to have with a graduate degree. For non-academic professionals, disciplinary guidance can focus on understanding the broader professional sector, careers within that professional discipline, and how the profession has evolved over time.

2. Skills development consultant

The pressures for specialization can make mentees temporarily lose sight of the array of skills they need to succeed both during and after graduate school, in part because of the relative intensity and isolation of research. As a skills consultant, a mentor's role is to help mentees develop the intellectual and professional skills they will need, beyond those related to research. Some of these are:

- **Oral and written communication skills.** These include clearly expressing the results of one's work; translating field-specific knowledge for application in varied contexts, such as teaching or interacting with the public; and persuading others, such as funders, policy makers, organizations, and conference audiences, of the value of one's work.
- **Team-oriented skills.** Some of the most innovative learning occurs in teams that problem solve collaboratively. Increasingly, complex problems require inter-disciplinary or multidisciplinary solutions. A mentor can help a mentee develop collaborative, problem-solving skills by organizing group exercises and projects.
- **Leadership skills.** Graduate mentees are prime candidates to become intellectual leaders in any number of settings. Mentors can help them build potential by inviting them to assume leadership roles throughout graduate study; e.g., in seminars, graduate mentee government, disciplinary societies, outreach to the community, and on departmental or university committees. These activities will help build people skills — listening to others, shaping ideas, and expressing priorities — which are indispensable for advancement in any career.
- **Technical skills.** Mentees may seek guidance and training on specific technical skills from mentors. Mentors can help them by providing that training directly or by connecting mentees with known resources for skill development.

3. Career consultant

In recent years, the mentor's role as career consultant has taken on increased importance. As a result, many mentees are choosing challenging positions in a greater variety of educational settings and diverse sectors of the economy.

As a career consultant, a mentor can help a protégé develop an evolutionary view of his or her career, which requires planning, flexibility, and adaptation to change. Informed of the job market realities, an effective mentor finds ways to help mentees link aspects of their graduate work with other potential mentors — alumni or other professionals in colleges, universities, schools, community groups, the private sector, nonprofit organizations, government, and industrial laboratories.

Wider relationships can help mentees explore a multitude of career choices, and learn how to translate their graduate education into various kinds of professional opportunities. With a modest investment of time, mentors and protégés can stay abreast of postgraduate employment trends both inside and outside the academy.