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Mentoring at DU:

A Guide for Faculty & Staff

UNIVERSITY OF DENVER

Acknowledgements

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What Is a Mentor?

A key characteristic of graduate education and training today is its increasing diversity, with faculty and students engaged in graduate teaching, learning, and research from a wide range of backgrounds. These diverse groups of faculty and graduate students enrich the academic environment by bringing new perspectives and experiences, driving innovation in scholarship—including in the practice of mentoring.

Mentoring serves a vital role in graduate education and in the preparation of the next generation of intellectual leaders. However, many mentors receive little formal preparation or training for this responsibility. Importantly, mentors do not need to fulfill every role for their mentees. Instead, mentees can benefit from a comprehensive network of mentors, each offering unique guidance and support.

Consider this multi-faceted definition of mentors as individuals who (Alvarez et al., 2009; Paglis et al., 2006; and Anderson and Shannon, 1988):

- teach, sponsor, encourage, counsel and guide a less skilled or less experienced person
- take an interest in developing another person's career and well-being
- advance academic and professional goals in directions most desired by the individual
- tailor mentoring styles and content to the individual, including adjustments due to differences in culture, ethnicity, gender, and differences in student experience

Some faculty view mentoring as simply an extension of their role as academic advisors. While assigned advisors can certainly serve as mentors, effective mentoring requires playing a more expansive role in the development of the mentee's professional and personal growth. While the role of advisor usually is limited to guiding academic progress, "the role of mentor is centered on a commitment to advancing the student's career through an engagement that facilitates sharing guidance, experience, and expertise" (University of Michigan).

The responsibility of the mentor is to assist in the development of the next generation of scholars, researchers, and practitioners. This requires a dynamic relationship that recognizes the changing needs of mentees as they transform from more or less dependent students into autonomous professionals with specialist knowledge in their disciplines.

Like any relationship, the one between mentor and mentee evolves over time, requiring ongoing adjustments. While new graduate students may express the desire for a mentor with whom they can personally identify, research suggest that their overall level of satisfaction with their mentors has little to do with this aspect of the relationship. This confirms that you can be a highly effective mentor even if you and your mentee do not share similar backgrounds (Ortiz-Walters and Gilson, 2005).

Of course, each mentoring relationship should consider each student's unique goals, needs, identity, and learning style, but the core principles of effective mentorship remain the same. What you and the student share—a commitment to the goals of the scholarly enterprise and a desire to succeed—is far more powerful and relevant than any difference between you.

Mentors and students bring unique skill sets and aptitudes to the relationship. Today, successful mentoring is built on evidence-based, student-centered practices. This guide explores proven strategies and approaches to support effective mentoring while allowing you to develop an approach that aligns with your strengths and mentoring style.

Attributes of a Good Mentor:

- Has a sincere desire and commitment to be a mentor.
- Uses active listening skills.
- Provides both critically positive and negative feedback (supportive and challenging).
- Is flexible and able to adapt to mentees' needs.
- Is available and engaged.
- Stays mindful of the needs of the mentee beyond formal mentor meetings.
- Is empathetic to the mentee's personal and professional needs.
- Engages in discussions about cultural background and personal history and their impact on the mentee's experiences.
- Is knowledgeable about how cultural background can impact the discipline (epistemological/methodological approaches).
- Locates and shares some common goals or background with the mentee.
- Serves as a role model.
- Finds benefit in the relationship with the mentee.
- Solves problems collaboratively.
- Provides career coaching.
- Is respected by peers and leadership.
- Celebrates the mentee's accomplishments.
- Helps expand the mentee's professional network.
- Is humble and self-reflective.
- Reflects on how their own cultural background and personal history influence their own journey and their mentoring relationships.

The first challenge that faculty face with incoming graduate students is helping them transition from the predictable, tightly structured, and short-term goal oriented environment of undergraduate education to the unfamiliar, loosely structured, and relatively open-ended world of lab, research, and dissertation. Mentors will sometimes need to support mentees by assigning concrete tasks and deadlines to help them maintain a short-term focus. However, the long-term agenda should focus on developing a mentees' autonomy and independence.

As graduate students become more proficient, effective mentors shift their attention from the basics to students' development as a researcher and professional. This includes acting as a consultant or sounding board for research progress and supporting mentees in developing key professional skills in their disciplines. The former means suggesting lines of inquiry and options for solving problems and discussing potential outcomes. The latter means encouraging the development of communication and networking skills by providing opportunities for teaching, writing, and presenting.

Good mentors help students gradually understand how their goals and learning objectives fit into their graduate degree program, departmental life, and career options. As the mentoring relationship evolves, mentors should expect and encourage their students to accept increasingly complex responsibilities and challenges. It is essential to keep in mind that the doctoral program is the beginning, not the culmination of the student's career. The mentor's "end game" requires assisting the student in successfully launching their career.

If the relationship is indeed, lifelong, then opportunities to provide such assistance do not end with the completion of the degree. While some students seek jobs in the academy, others will pursue positions in industry, government, business, consulting, or other sectors. In working with them, the mentor's role extends beyond the promotion of their mentee's academic success or a sole focus on the tenure-track route. Rather, the mentor must take an open-minded approach about students' career interests and paths, and help them to explore options outside academia if that is their interest.

The influence that research supervisors wield over their students is enormous; they are truly the gatekeepers of the student's professional future. An effective mentor serves as an advocate and guide, empowering students to transition from novice researchers to confident professionals.

Ethical Expectations of Mentors

While a mentoring relationship is reciprocal, the mentor serves as the more experienced sponsor, role model, and guide for the mentee, who is often a less experienced or early-career professional. The mentor provides counsel, advice, support, information, and resources to the mentee as they become a more independent and well-rounded member of their field. As such, mentors have an obligation to their mentees to conduct themselves in a manner which is not only effective, but also ethical (Forehand, 2008; Johnson, 2003 cited in Johnson, 2017).

Nine Ethical Principles for Mentors

Beneficence
Mentors strive to facilitate the professional, academic, and/or personal growth of their mentee(s), acting to understand their unique needs and demonstrating diligence in providing wisdom, support, and feedback.

Nonmaleficence
Mentors intentionally work to avoid harming, exploiting, neglecting, or otherwise disrespecting their mentee(s).

Autonomy
Mentors endeavor to bolster mentees' knowledge, independence, self-sufficiency, and maturity, facilitating the autonomy, agency, and creativity of their mentees.

Fidelity
Mentors keep promises and remain loyal to those they mentor in terms of attention, support, and honest evaluation. If the relationship requires renegotiation on the mentor's part, the mentor will initiate that conversation.

Justice
Mentors treat all mentees (and potential mentees) equitably regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, age, or other identities.

Transparency
Mentors provide mentees the information necessary to make an informed decision about entering into a mentoring relationship and encourage good communication about mutual expectations moving forward.

Boundaries and Multiple Relationships
Mentors honor the professional boundaries of the mentoring relationship and seek to protect the integrity of this bond.

Privacy
Mentors keep private information shared in confidence by the mentee(s); however, there are circumstances where the mentor is mandated to report information shared with them. Although mentoring relationships are not under privileged legal protection, mentors should get consent prior to sharing sensitive information. Some mentors on campus have found that they can better support students when they can share complete information more freely.

Competence
Mentors work to evaluate and expand their competence in the mentor role, participating in activities such as professional development, formal educational opportunities, and consultation with colleagues. If the mentor is experiencing problems of competence, then the mentoring relationship is renegotiated or terminated.

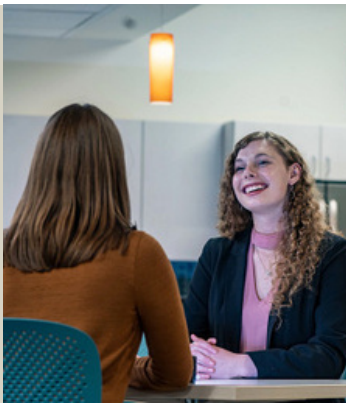
Ethics require the use of reasoned moral judgments to examine one's responsibility in any given situation. As role models, mentors have an obligation to teach mentees about the responsible conduct of research (if applicable), as well as the ethical issues associated with being an educator, clinician, or practitioner. Both mentors and mentees have the responsibility of behaving ethically in their relationship.

Elements associated with appropriate ethical behavior in the mentee-mentor relationship:

- Promoting mutual respect and trust.
- Maintaining confidentiality.
- Being diligent in providing knowledge, wisdom, and developmental support.
- Maintaining awareness of the mentee-mentor relationship dynamics. The power differential increases the mentor's obligation to be cognizant of the mentee's feelings and rights.
- Acknowledging skills and experiences that each bring to the mentee-mentor relationship.
- Framing advice and feedback with care.
- Serving as a role model.

Elements associated with appropriate ethical behavior as academic professionals:

- Agreeing on and abiding by rules of authorship.
- Supporting and appreciating accomplishments.
- Avoiding abuses of power (including exploitation and assuming credit for another's work).
- Being alert to ethical issues and challenges.
- Avoiding conflicts of interest (e.g. political and personal biases).



Elements associated with the responsible conduct of research:

- Maintaining a commitment to intellectual honesty.
- Representing an individual's contribution to research with accuracy.
- Following governmental and institutional rules, regulations, and policies.
- Avoiding conflicts of interest (e.g. financial and other influences).

Why Be a Mentor?

Effective mentoring benefits both the faculty member and the student by ensuring they are successful in creating and transmitting knowledge in their disciplines. Mentoring is not merely a task fit in when time allows, but an opportunity to deeply engage with the next generation of researchers and scholars.

Mentoring benefits students in multiple ways (Paglis et al., 2006):

- Supports student advancement in research activity, conference presentations, publication, pedagogical skills, and grant-writing.
- Helps students navigate stressful or difficult periods in their graduate careers.
- Expands students' networks, improving their prospects of securing professional placement.
- Lowers students' stress levels and builds their confidence, since they know that their mentor is committed to their progress, can give them solid advice, and be their advocate.

Mentorship rewards mentors in an abundance of ways:

- Helps keep mentors abreast of new knowledge and techniques, apprising them of promising avenues for research.
- Enhances the mentor's reputation, as sending successful new scholars into the field increases the mentor's professional stature.
- Enriches the mentor's networks. Helping students make the professional and personal connections they need to succeed will extend the mentor's circle of colleagues.
- Attracts more good students to the mentor. Word gets around about who the best mentors are, so they are usually the most likely to recruit —and retain— outstanding students.
- Builds personal and professional job satisfaction. Seeing students succeed can be as rewarding as a major publication or significant grant.

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Effective mentoring advances the discipline because students often begin making significant contributions long before they complete their graduate degrees. Those who receive strong mentorship are more likely to have productive and distinguished careers that not only enrich their discipline of study but also reflect positively on their mentors. By supporting the next generation of scholars, effective mentoring helps to ensure the quality of research, scholarship, and teaching well into the future.

Mentoring in a Diverse Community

Graduate education is continually evolving: content and practices have changed over the decades and so have the students.

Today's graduate population is heterogeneous in gender, race, ethnicity, nationality, family status, language, ability, neurodivergence, and age. This growing diversity requires a critical reassessment of traditional mentoring practices to determine which should be preserved and passed on, and which, rooted in assumptions about homogeneity should be modified, adapted, or discarded. Consider how the following might pertain to your mentoring of current and future students.

Need for Role Models

Students from historically underrepresented or marginalized groups have a harder time finding faculty role models with similar experiences. If the faculty and graduate students in your department are ostensibly homogenous, become more involved in efforts to identify and recruit new faculty and graduate students who represent diverse backgrounds. At the same time, never forget that you can provide excellent mentoring to students whose backgrounds are different from your own. Additional resources can be found in the appendix.

Feelings of Isolation

Students from historically underrepresented groups and international students may feel isolated or alienated from other students in their departments, especially if the composition of the current program is homogenous. Be aware of students who appear to struggle with taking active roles in academic or social settings and take the proactive steps to include them. Start by asking them about their research interests, hobbies, and activities outside of their program to help build connections. Introduce them to other students and faculty with complementary interests. Additionally, encourage them to explore the many organizations within or outside the university that might provide a sense of community, some of which can be found in the appendix of this document.

Expanding Research Areas

Students from underrepresented or marginalized groups, particularly in the social sciences and humanities, sometimes find that their research interests do not fit into the established academic canons. Some fear that focusing on research questions such as race, gender, or sexual orientation may lead faculty to deem their work irrelevant or assume they will be confined to these subjects for the rest of their professional careers. More commonly, they find that their perspectives and lived experiences are missing from existing theory and research. As a mentor, be open to hearing students' experiences and perspectives. Ask where a student's research interests lie and how they came to them, rather than making assumptions about their interests based on the student's personal characteristics or past work. Additionally, help connect students with the many interdisciplinary programs and research centers across campus that may provide a broader community of scholars whose interests intersect with their own.

Burden of Being a Spokesperson

Students from underrepresented groups often invest significant time and energy speaking up when issues related to their group membership arise—or are overlooked. These students' perspectives are wanted and valued, yet they should be offered freely, and should be viewed as that individual's perspective. Avoid calling on, for example, male or female, black or white, old or young graduate students to be spokespersons for their gender or race or age group.

Managing Discussions or Group Dynamics

Certain conditions may present greater obstacles for some students than for others. Be mindful of the tone of conversations and intervene if discussions become overly critical or exclusionary. Set clear ground rules with your students for participation in group discussions, whether in courses or labs, and explain how these expectations support students' learning goals and engagement. Explore strategies to ensure balanced participation, preventing a few students from dominating the conversation while encouraging all voices to be heard.

Stereotype Threat

Research shows that when students encounter negative stereotypes associated with their identity, their academic performance can suffer (Steele, 2010). Be aware of situations that could trigger stereotype threat, such as when a female graduate student presents in front of an all-male faculty committee. To mitigate these effects, help students build supportive connections that reduce isolation, which is known for amplifying the impact of stereotype threat. Another effective approach is to frame academic challenges (e.g. passing an exam or writing a paper) as opportunities for growth rather than tests of inherent ability. Express confidence in their capacity to succeed, reinforcing a growth mindset focused on skill development rather than potential failure (Alter, A. et. al., 2010).

Identity Relevant Mentoring

Diversity of experience, culture, and perspectives within our campus community and beyond enriches the academic, cultural, and social spheres at the University of Denver. However, diversity alone is not enough. Equity and inclusion must also be placed at the forefront of all personal and professional efforts, including mentoring.

The first step toward more inclusive mentoring practices is recognizing and reflecting on your own potential biases. The second is actively working to reduce them through open, active, and consistent dialogue, study, listening, advocacy, and reflection.

This could be done through a communication style assessment, an example of which can be found in the appendix. Building trust, connection and a sense of belonging with your mentee is essential to fostering well-being and motivation. Several intersectional factors, including gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, disabilities, age, socioeconomic background, and national origin, may shape how a mentee approaches a mentoring relationship. However, no two individuals have identical lived experiences. Engaging in meaningful conversations with your mentee, rather than making assumptions, will allow you to truly learn about their experiences and thoughts, leading to a deeper, more personal mentoring relationship.

Guidelines for Mentors

Clarity is foundational for mentor-mentee relationships. Be transparent about your expectations for the relationship and pay particular attention to boundaries, both personal and professional. Respect the mentees' boundaries just as you expect them to respect your own. Within mutually agreeable limits, mentors have an open door. Give students your full attention when they are talking with you, and the time and encouragement to share. Try to minimize interruptions.

Use concrete language when commenting on students' work. What the mentor communicates with the students must be timely, clear, and constructive. Critical feedback is essential, but it is more likely to be effective when tempered with praise (Cohen et. al., 1999). Remind students that you hold them to high expectations and reassure them that they have the ability to meat and even exceed those expectations.

Mentors keep track of their students' progress and achievements, set milestones, and acknowledge accomplishments. Mentoring plans can serve this function. Let your students know from the start that you want them to succeed and create opportunities for them to demonstrate their competencies. When you feel a student is prepared, suggest or nominate them for fellowships, projects, and teaching opportunities.

Encourage students to try new techniques, expand their skills, and discuss their ideas, even those they fear might seem naive or unworkable. Let students know that mistakes are productive because we learn from our failures. These practices nurture self-sufficiency. Provide support in times of discouragement as well as success and be mindful of students' well-being. Do not assume that the only students who need help are those who ask for it. If a student is falling behind in their work, resist concluding that this shows a lack of commitment.

The number one characteristic that leads to toxic research lab environments is a PI who avoids conflict. Perhaps the student is exhausted, or unclear about what to do next, or is uncomfortable with some aspect of the project or research team. Ultimately, it is important to keep in regular contact with your students. Do not hesitate to initiate contact and let them know they are welcome to talk with you.

Being open and approachable is particularly important. Many new students doubt their ability to succeed in graduate school and academics, so it is important to reassure them of their skills. The enthusiasm and optimism you show can be inspirational. Make sure that students understand both the personal impact of their commitment to their work and its value to the professional community.

Share your scholarly expertise with students and let them know what you learn from them. Identify professional workshops and networking opportunities for students. Involve them in editing, pedagogical planning, journal activities, conference presentations, and grant writing.

Of course, it is not necessary to embody all of these attributes in order to be a successful mentor, as it is common for students to have multiple mentors. Individuals have relative strengths in their capacity for mentoring, and mentors should be clear about what they can and cannot offer. Part of effective mentoring is knowing when to refer someone to another resource that might be more helpful.

Most importantly, your students will remember how you treated them. The example you set as a person will have a profound effect on how they conduct themselves as professionals.

Developing Shared Expectations and a Professional Relationship

You were mentored in some fashion as a graduate student, so you may find it a useful starting point to think about those days and how you felt about your mentoring. Consider these questions:

- What kind of mentoring did you have?
- What did you like and dislike about the mentoring you received?
- How well did your mentor(s) help you progress through your graduate program?
- How well did your mentor(s) prepare you for your academic career?
- What did you not receive that would have been helpful?

These points can help develop a vision for the kind of mentor you want to be, and the most effective ways you can mentor students inside and outside your discipline.

Below are some topics that might work well as agenda items for your first mentee meeting.

- Find out about the student's previous educational experiences, mentoring style preferences and needs, and why they decided to go to graduate school. What does the student hope to achieve in pursuing a graduate degree?
- Discuss your research projects and how they complement or diverge from the student's interests.
- Offer suggestions about courses the student should take, research opportunities that are available, and discuss other training experiences they might want to seek.
- Refer the student to other people inside or outside the university whom they should meet in order to begin developing professional networks.
- Remind the student that the graduate school experience can be stressful and mention well-being and mental health resources that are available to students.

You and your student need to communicate clearly from the start about your respective roles and responsibilities. DU faculty and students find it helpful to put such arrangements in writing, such as in the form of a mentoring plan. We recognize that circumstances and needs can change over time, so it is recommended to revisit and revise the mentoring plan at least annually. Here are sample areas to discuss.

Communication and Meetings

Tell students how frequently and regularly you plan to meet with them, and with what modality. Let them know about your travel schedule, your sabbatical leave, or your administrative roles, and whether you have an open-door policy. Clarify when text or cell phone communication is appropriate.

Milestones

Ask students to develop a work plan that includes short-term and long-term goals that are specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and a timeframe for reaching those goals (SMART Goals). Ensure the student's work plan meets the program's requirements and is feasible.

Feedback

Discuss how often you will assess their general progress and let them know what type of feedback they can expect from you. Tell them how long it generally takes you to provide a response to their work, and how they can best remind you if they do not hear from you within the specified time. Also discuss your expectations of what first drafts should look like before they are submitted to you. If you do not want students to hand in rough drafts, suggest they share their work first with a trusted peer or writing group.

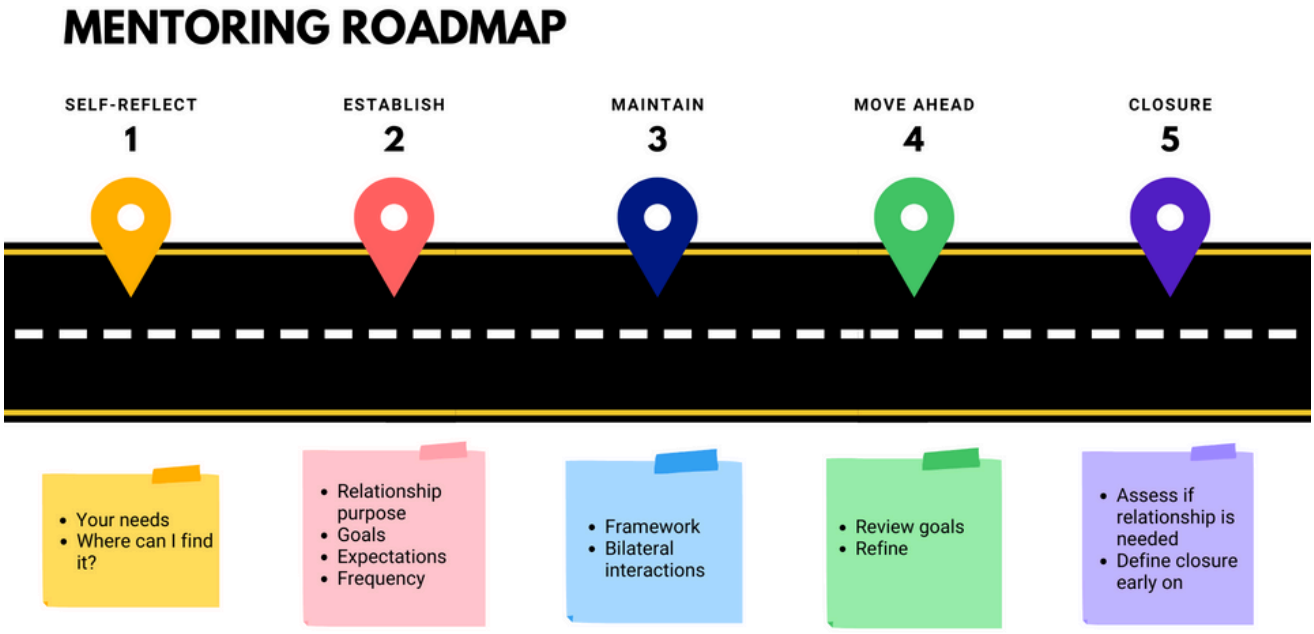
Authorship and Professional Meetings

Explain the standards and norms for authorship in your field, and the extent to which you can assist them with preparing work for submission to journals and conferences. Share your expectations and recommend when and where you would like to see the student give research presentations. The hallmark of a successful mentoring relationship is a shared understanding of expectations and responsibilities. These create the framework for the relationship, and they are largely established in the early meetings with a student. A relatively modest investment in those meetings can yield great dividends.

Best Practices for Mentors

Mentoring relationships are flexible and diverse by nature; no two relationships will be exactly the same. Throughout the relationship as a mentor, you will be fostering genuine dialogue with your mentee and assisting them as they grow towards their goals.

Below is a mentoring roadmap that can serve as a basis for your mentoring relationship as it progresses through its lifecycle. Consider this and the best practices on the following page as tools to help you navigate this mutual process.



(Knowles, 2024).

Best Practices for Mentors

Get To Know Your Mentee
At the beginning, speak with your mentee and establish a trusting, genuine rapport. Discuss their previous educational or career experience, what they hope to do in the future, and why they want to achieve their goals. Being open and approachable is important, though it is not necessary to share private details of your life with your mentees. However, some self-disclosure and inquiry about their life outside of the mentorship relationship may build rapport.

Establish Working Agreements
You and your mentee must communicate clearly from the beginning about your roles and responsibilities within the relationship. Agree on ground rules, form a basic structure for engagement, and revise these agreements as needed.

Develop Robust Learning Goals
Mentoring is meant to teach and guide the mentee. Assess whether you can assist the mentee in achieving their goals and aid them in creating, tracking, and accomplishing robust targets.

Balance Talking and Listening
When speaking with a mentee, give them your full attention and encourage them to discuss their ideas. Mentoring is more than providing advice, but offering a secure space for personal development and subject exploration. Listen to understand, and reflect using statements like, “Am I right that you’re saying you’d like to...” so that they know it’s important to you to understand them accurately.

Ask Questions Rather Than Give Answers
Nurture self-reflection within your mentee, take time to flesh-out their thinking, and ask questions that allow them to express individual insights. Ask open-ended questions. Open-ended questions usually start with “how/what/when/where/why” and encourages students to speak and share their experiences.

Engage In Meaningful and Authentic Conversation
Go beyond the surface. Share your own successes and failures, as well as what you are learning from your mentee and the relationship. Provide support in times of discouragement, as well as triumph.

Check Out Assumptions and Hunches
If you believe something is off-track, address the issue as soon as possible. Do not assume that only mentees who need help will ask for it. Do not hesitate to reach out to mentees who are becoming distant. Simply stating “I want to check out my assumption that ...” will open up a broader conversation to clarify obstacles.

Support And Challenge Your Mentee
After creating a solid relationship, encourage your mentee to build their skills or try a new technique. Remind them that mistakes or failures are a productive part of the learning process. Express your confidence that they can do it.

Set Expectations For Feedback
Set expectations for regular, candid feedback early on in your relationship. Model how to ask and receive constructive feedback by asking your mentee for specific evaluations on your contributions as a mentor. Balance clear, concrete feedback with deserved praise and compassion.

Check In Regularly To Stay On Track
Stay connected and create an accountability plan for regular engagement.

Above all else, know that your mentees will remember how they were treated. Conduct yourself in a manner which models and encourages mutual communication, honesty, and respect. As a role model, you will have a lasting impact on how your mentee operates as an academic or professional in the future.

First Meetings Checklist for Mentors

- [ ] Actively listen as your mentee explains their goals for meeting and what they hope to gain from the relationship.
- [ ] Discuss and record your mentee's short-term and long-term goals using the SMART goals framework. SMART goals are specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and timely (please see appendix).
- [ ] Review your mentee's current progress towards their SMART goals.
- [ ] Explore useful academic, professional, and/or personal developmental experiences in relation to your mentee's SMART goals.
- [ ] Discuss and record options for completing these SMART goals and target dates for completion.
- [ ] Amend the mentoring goals as needed to focus on your mentee's growth over time.
- [ ] Discuss and record with your mentee the boundaries of your relationship.
- [ ] Discuss and record any issues that may impact your mentoring relationship, such as time, lack of confidence, newness to the role, academic or professional deadlines, etc.
- [ ] Arrange a consistent meeting schedule for check-ins with your mentee and discuss preferred methods of communication outside of meetings (email, phone, text, etc.).
- [ ] Encourage your mentee to exchange feedback with you on a regular basis and determine a consistent schedule for these conversations.
- [ ] Record topics discussed and feedback given at each meeting.
- [ ] Request that all meeting records be kept private and in a safe place for future reference.

Practicing Giving and Receiving Feedback

Giving and receiving productive feedback are skills that you will need throughout your life.

This process will help you grow as you move through your own professional development journey as a mentor. When you make the conscious decision to give and receive useful feedback on a regular basis, you will be able to continue on your path in a more informed way and gain more from your mentoring relationship.

Effective feedback identifies and reinforces behaviors which contribute to your growth and to the mentoring relationship, while altering those which get in the way. Be prepared to work on yourself and help your mentee understand their role in the relationship better.

5 Rs Feedback Model

REQUEST	RECEIVE	REFLECT	RESPOND	RESOLVE
Giving: Be open and approachable. Receiving: Identify the areas you want feedback on and ask for it.	Giving: Deliver your feedback clearly and concisely. Receiving: Actively listen to feedback without interrupting.	Both: After giving or receiving feedback and before responding, it's crucial to take some time to reflect on it.	Giving: Be humble and open to feedback. Receiving: Respond constructively and communicate reflections and action plan.	Giving: Support recipients without being intrusive. Receiving: Outline the steps you plan to take for improvement and take action.

(Razzetti, 2023).

Giving Feedback

Check Your Motives

Feedback is meant to assist the recipient in their growth; avoid being harsh or offensive. You will likely find your approach to be more effective if it is positive and focused on what could be done to improve in the future. This does not mean that every comment needs to be positive, but the discussion should be fair and balanced. If you are unsure if your critique is too tough, err on the side of caution.

Tip: Before entering into your mentoring meeting, take a moment to think about the positive aspects of your mentoring relationship and what your mentee has done well so far. Going through a mini-SWOT analysis, can be helpful in organizing your thoughts with regards to perceived strengths and weaknesses.

Make It Regular

Setting regular, private meetings with your mentee to give and receive feedback will help keep communication open between you both. However, if the need for feedback is more urgent than your scheduled check-ins, do not hesitate to reach out and express that desire. By providing frequent feedback, you will ensure that it is timely and closely related to the events it refers to. Set a timeline with your mentee to exchange feedback; for example, dedicate part of a monthly meeting to this process.

Tip: Think about other major deadlines that may exist in your mentee's timeline. Are there any conference dates, submission times, or other relevant schedules to consider? Planning opportunities for feedback in relation to these other responsibilities will assist you in tracking areas where your mentee may require additional support.

Be Specific

Limit your feedback to one or two main action items per meeting. After sharing your point of view, ask your mentee what their perspective is on the situation. Asking questions like "What is your reaction to this?" and "Do you have any additional context or perspective you would like to share?" can help you both achieve clarity and address gaps in communication. You can use the SMART goals framework to help you both understand what exactly needs to be done to improve the situation and establish a timeframe for change.

Tip: It can be helpful to take a few minutes before meeting with your mentee to write down the main ideas behind the feedback you will be giving. This can help you determine your desired outcomes from the conversation, as well as good places to start the dialogue.

Be Sincere

Feedback should be a conversation, not a lecture, and all feedback should be sincere and honest. If positive feedback is forced, it will lose its value and undermine your credibility. If negative feedback is forced, it can seem nitpicky. Remember that this is meant to be a two-way dialogue which enriches both you and your mentee, so engage them in a conversation. Ask questions to make sure they understand your input and actively listen when it is your turn to receive feedback.

Tip: It is recommended that you give and receive feedback face-to-face, since tone and message can be easily misinterpreted over email and text communications.

Receiving Feedback

Be Specific

Start on a positive note by asking about what you are doing well so far, then ask about one or two action areas that your mentee feels need improvement. You will receive better feedback if you ask specific questions such as "What's one thing I could do to improve my communication style as your mentor?" and "Was the last round of critique I provided on your paper useful?"

Tip: If you are unsure why your mentee is providing a specific type of feedback, then ask further questions such as "Can you please explain further?" It is important to clarify any confusion over feedback in the moment it is given so that you do not jump to any incorrect conclusions.

Make It Regular

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Tip: When receiving feedback, actively listen and take notes on what your mentee is saying. This will help you get the full measure of what they are saying so that you can respond effectively during your conversation and better prepare a plan towards improvement together.

Reflect on the Future

Asking for feedback can be intimidating at first, but you can overcome this hesitation by adjusting your mindset. Remember that no one is perfect and that everyone is still growing. After your meeting, take time to reflect on the feedback that you and your mentee exchanged, remembering that the critique is meant to help you further develop.

Tip: At the end of your meeting, thank your mentee for providing feedback. This will end the conversation on an upwards note and remind you that receiving feedback is a good thing.

Take Positive Action

Feedback is only helpful when you take the next step and make a change to address areas for improvement. If you were previously unaware of an issue your mentee is raising, do not get defensive. Instead, ask for an example of where you fell short and if they have ideas for how you could improve. As you move forward, you may find the SMART goals framework useful for incorporating the feedback you received.

Tip: During your next evaluation meeting, check in with your mentee to determine if the changes you have made are making a positive difference.

Closing the Mentoring Relationship

Closing the mentoring relationship may occur for several reasons.

They may include a pre-set mentoring timeline that has reached its natural ending, or because the relationship is no longer serving the best interests of the mentee or the mentor. The latter may occur because you need to take a step back from the mentoring relationship due to other responsibilities or because there is an unresolvable conflict in your relationship.

Pre-Set Timeline

Your mentoring relationship may be on a pre-set timeline through a formal mentoring program or because, as a pair, you decided your connection was only going to last a specific length of time. Whether your relationship lasted a few weeks or several years, focus your last meeting around recapping your mentoring relationship and the development you both have experienced as a result of your time together. Discuss the outcomes of your mentee's SMART goals, feedback you exchanged during your discussions, and other topics relevant to your mentoring relationship.

Thank your mentee for their investment in the relationship; although this specific chapter of your relationship may be ending, continue to reach out periodically to maintain the positive connection.

Taking A Step Back

You may need to take a step back from the mentoring relationship for a variety of reasons. These may include: new time constraints on your project, an increased academic load, family or health issues, the birth of a child, or other life changes. If you feel the need to pause your mentoring relationship, take the initiative, and contact your mentee as soon as you are able.

Discuss your changing context, provide them with the information you feel comfortable sharing, and discuss when/if you would like to continue the mentoring relationship. Be sure your new timeline is realistic with your new situation and keep your mentee updated as you feel more comfortable entering the mentoring relationship again. If you require additional assistance in closing out the mentoring relationship, or seeking out further campus support (counseling, emergency funds, etc.), please reference DU's Student Outreach & Support resources.

Unresolvable Conflict

Sometimes, despite your best efforts, the mentoring relationship is not what you had hoped it would be. You and your mentee may not be the best fit for a variety of reasons. Enter the process with professionalism and know there are several resources to assist you in this transition.

Before ending the mentoring relationship, make sure you have tried to work out your differences with your mentee. Additionally, seek out the advice of another trusted faculty member or peer in your department to determine whether it is actually in your best interests to end the relationship. This is especially true if the relationship has a long history.

The Ombuds (confidential office) and your Department Chair or Dean (non-confidential office) may be especially useful if you wish to speak to professional staff members. Their contact information, as well as additional resources, can be found in the appendix. These resources are best used before reaching unresolvable conflict.

If you decide to terminate the mentoring relationship, think about the most diplomatic, respectful way to express to your mentee why you need to make this change.

A transition like this is hard to do well. It is not to be taken lightly. Inform your mentee promptly about your decision, no matter how awkward this may be. During your conversation with your mentee, explain clearly, but politely, why you wish to end the mentoring relationship. If they owe you any work, be sure to discuss this and arrange a schedule to complete any outstanding obligations. Try to end the conversation on a positive note.

Additional resources on this topic can be found in the appendix.

Find the supporting information and resources for further insight or context as you forge your mentoring journey.

Appendix & Resources

Appendix & Resources

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Appendix & Resources

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UNIVERSITY OF DENVER

www.du.edu/orsp

(303) 871-2121

orspadmin@du.edu

Administrative Office Building
2601 E. Colorado Avenue
Denver, CO 80208