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ADVICE

# Why Don't We Teach Ph.D.s to Be Mentors?

Adding mentoring skills to doctoral training is a key to graduate-education reform.

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Since January, I've spent hours on Zoom fielding questions from doctoral students and postdocs about mentoring and mentors. They've been asking questions like:

- “Can you sever a relationship with a mentor without burning bridges?”
- “How important is ‘chemistry’ in a mentor-mentee relationship?”
- “What’s a ‘mentoring persona,’ anyway? Can I be a good mentor if I don’t have one?”

I never expected to teach a graduate course on mentoring, nor did I expect that, when I did, my students would be so captivated by the topic. But with a pandemic curtailing opportunities for in-person interactions, mentoring — or the lack thereof — has been on everyone’s minds.

So when I was asked to design a two-week, noncredit course at Duke University called “Best Practices in Mentoring,” I jumped at the opportunity. I’ve now taught it twice, via the [Duke Graduate Academy](#). What I’ve found: For many doctoral students, cultivating productive mentor relationships is a greater and more pressing concern than figuring out a sustainable postdoctoral career path.

That shouldn’t come as a surprise. Early in their studies, students often can’t even envision completing a doctorate, let alone doing something tangible with it afterward. Instead, they are preoccupied by the sort of professional relationships — with advisers, dissertation-committee members, and other prominent scholars — that are essential to their success. Yet few doctoral programs attempt to teach mentorship skills, beyond recommending a few books or articles on the subject.

I came to Duke in 2016 under the auspices of a federal grant on graduate-education reform in the humanities. The dire tenure-track job market had sparked a lot of talk about career diversity for Ph.D.s. In that debate, however, I couldn’t help noticing that the lion’s share of

attention went to students late in their training, at the “bridge” or “pivot” stage — that is, on the cusp of moving into a career. Often ignored or played down were the equally critical needs of doctoral students early in their training. And it’s at that point that students would most benefit from a better understanding of mentors and mentorship.

I set out to design a course that would help students identify and deal with their most pressing advising needs, while also empowering them to mentor others — their graduate-school peers or their future mentees and junior colleagues. But right off, I faced two challenges: (1) Thanks to Covid, the course had to be entirely online, and (2) the course would draw graduate students and postdocs from a wide mix of disciplines across the university.

The disciplinary mix, in particular, seemed like a potential problem: Would students from, say, neuroscience, history, biology, and Romance studies find much common ground when put together into a small breakout group? What could a course impart about mentoring that would be helpful and relevant to doctoral students at every stage and from any discipline?

As it turned out, quite a bit. The diversity of fields became a distinct advantage. Cross-disciplinary groups generated productive conversations about best practices in mentoring — and in the process, reminded all of us that some basic principles about mentoring cut across disciplines.

Of course, mentorship training grounded in a particular discipline is valuable and necessary. STEM students in my course, for example, had a lot of concerns related to mentoring in lab settings, and those questions are best answered by someone in their department. Similarly, the art of mentoring a humanities student on navigating an archive, or a social-sciences student on conducting field research, are best taught in a discipline-specific setting. But the constraints imposed by a two-week “generalist” course got us out of the weeds, and focused on the essentials.

**The texts.** When I started planning the course, I realized how easy it would be to get bogged

down in (and intimidated by) a lengthy bibliography of academic-mentoring resources (many compiled online for university projects and programs). In the end, I ignored most of them and settled on four core texts:

- The main texts were [\*The Mentor's Guide\*](#) and [\*The Mentee's Guide\*](#), written by Lois J. Zachary, who is not an academic but an internationally known consultant for leaders in corporate and nonprofit organizations. Her books provided structured exercises for students to reflect on their experiences with mentors, their needs, and their own aspirations for mentorship. We grounded ourselves in Zachary's definition of mentoring as a process of facilitating the learning and growth of another person. The necessity and challenge of placing this "other" at the core of the relationship fueled all of our subsequent conversations.
- I paired her books with *The Elements of Mentoring* — [written by](#) two psychology professors, W. Brad Johnson and Charles R. Ridley. They summarize academic research on mentoring in a highly accessible, practical style.
- The final text was actually a brief essay by Kerry Ann Rocquemore, "[Be a Coach, Not a Guru](#)." Although written to highlight ineffective faculty mentoring practices, some of my students immediately saw their own past (and sometimes current) mentors in this essay's caricature of the all-knowing (and sometimes overbearing) guru mentor.

**The course structure.** In Week 1, the exercises, readings, and activities invited students to reflect on their experiences as "mentees." As you might expect, references to "guru" mentors showed up in some of those reflections. If no one encourages doctoral students to be intentional about effective mentorship, they will fall back on what they know and how they were mentored. One of my aims in the course was to help students shape their own mentorship philosophy and practices.

In Week 2, we focused on skill development — challenging the myth of the "born mentor." We discussed how to deliver feedback professionally and constructively (a skill too often lacking in academe). We talked about the challenges of mentoring inclusively: providing

equal access to resources; building trust and rapport across racial, ethnic, political, religious, or socioeconomic differences; understanding and acknowledging mentee needs that we ourselves might never have encountered.

Then, as a foil to the guru mentor, we talked about the “coach” model of mentoring. I gave students a crash course in professional coaching techniques — emphasizing active-listening skills and having students practice coaching with peer feedback. I introduced a model of coaching known as [GROW](#), which stands for goal (“What do you want?”), reality (“Where are you now?”), options (“What could you do?”), and will (“What will you do?”). At the end of the course, nearly every evaluation I received highlighted this coach training as significant.

I know from conversations with folks at other institutions that my university is not the only one exploring the idea of mentorship training. Yet despite this collective momentum, I’ve seen relatively little in-depth discussion of mentoring in forums on graduate-education reform. So in the interest of seeding more conversation and collaboration, I offer the following big-picture takeaways from my experiences teaching this course:

**Doctoral students are hungry for a safe space to discuss these relationships — without its coming back to haunt them.** For an ungraded, noncredit course, it was extraordinary to see the time and energy that students devoted to daily written reflections, exercises, and course discussions (even over Zoom). Much of the conversation took place in small, preassigned breakout groups. To make sure people could speak freely, I was careful to separate members of the same doctoral program into different groups. The course offered a confidential and neutral zone to discuss issues that they would not normally broach with their advisers or even with students in their program and cohort.

**Students assume that a “mentor” and a “Ph.D. program adviser” are one and the same.** I saw that tendency more among students in STEM departments, some of which use the words “mentor” and “adviser” interchangeably. Many graduate students were surprised to realize that:

- A mentor does not have to be a faculty member in your doctoral program or, indeed, even a faculty member at all.
- It's entirely possible for advising to take place without a whole lot of actual mentoring.

**Many students lack a comprehensive understanding of what mentoring actually is.** The power of certain mentoring myths and clichés was evident. Among the most common:

- Students initially equated good mentorship with omniscience: Good mentors were supposed to dispense advice and showcase their own significant accomplishments.
- Mentors were supposed to be accessible, so that you could find them when you worked up the courage to approach them.
- Mentors fostered independence and self-reliance by progressively abandoning their mentees.
- The best mentor relationships were lifelong, and fueled by some mysterious blend of deep mutual liking and *je ne sais quoi*.

**A lot of students have negative mentoring experiences.** It was a bit unsettling how often students mentioned advising and mentoring experiences that were disappointing, at best, and traumatic, at worst. How prevalent is subpar mentoring across higher education? Were the students in my course a representative sample? Or did the course topic draw people who were struggling with a mentor or had particular issues to sort out?

**Yet the current mentoring system works well for some students.** To be fair, other students seemed drawn to the course because they'd benefited from effective and committed mentorship. Afterward, some reported having a better understanding of what their mentors were doing well, and a new vocabulary for articulating why those relationships were so constructive.

**The course made some students angry.** I invited students to reflect on their attitudes and actions as mentees: How could they have handled a situation better? Yet there were constant

reminders of the limits of a doctoral student's control or power. Sometimes mentor-mentee relationships are derailed by personality differences. Students and faculty members work in a climate, common to all research universities, that is not always hospitable to good mentorship.

It simply hadn't occurred to many students that their advisers had received little or no formal mentorship training. Nor had they considered that research-oriented professors were not promoted or tenured — or paid more — to offer excellent mentorship. Almost no one had heard of "[ghost advising](#)," or the tendency of more junior, female, and/or underrepresented faculty members to shoulder part of the mentoring responsibilities of more senior and privileged colleagues.

Real reform requires more than just drawing attention to a problem and generating anger. So to what extent is teaching a graduate-level course on mentoring an act of reform? By now you may be asking yourself: "Wouldn't it make more sense to train professors to mentor better, and hold them accountable?" and "Why place the burden of good mentorship on Ph.D. students?"

There's no reason that mentorship training for doctoral students is incompatible with training faculty members. And in our case, the early success of our mentoring course demonstrated an effective "proof of concept." I'm now engaged in conversations with professors and senior administrators about adapting some of the modules for faculty workshops next year.

But for the purposes of making quick and relatively simple interventions, it may make sense to look first to doctoral students, who have the greatest stake in improving the norms and structures of advising. In fact, I've heard back from multiple students who, after taking the course, were able to reset the terms of their relationships with dissertation advisers and other key mentors. It's always more difficult to recalibrate after the norms and expectations of relationships have already been set. But that didn't stop students from trying — and some made impressive headway in getting more of their advising needs met. I doubt the same outcomes would have resulted had the faculty member simply attended mentorship training.



All the workshops, skills-assessment exercises, and even one-on-one counseling amount to nothing if students aren't reasonably confident about their abilities to identify appropriate potential mentors, and take the necessary steps to build those relationships.

Norms and practices in doctoral education are notoriously slow to change. But when I see the growth and change possible among individual doctoral students — just from a two-week immersion in mentorship training — I feel renewed hope for the future of academe and the new generation of young Ph.D.s.

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