

Episode 2: Selecting a Mentor

Welcome to Grad-Post! I'm your host, Brian S. Mitchell, and we're here to talk about life before, during, and after graduate school, and whether an advanced degree is right for you.

Perhaps the most fulfilling part of an advanced degree is the relationships – both professional and personal – that you can build with people. None of those relationships are more important than with your academic mentor. That relationship can last a lifetime and see you through situations from the triumphant to the tragic. But like any other relationship, a mentoring relationship can have its ups and downs, and even turn divisive. So, it's important to surround yourself with people who will support you in your career. After all, you do have a choice in who you pick for a mentor, even if that means declining a single option.

Before we get too far, let's clarify what I mean by mentor. I'm talking about that person who is primarily responsible for your growth as a scholar in your discipline. This position goes by various names like mentor or advisor. One of my former students even called me “boss” though I could never really break him of that habit because I didn't think of our relationship as one of employer-employee. There are different types of advisors, as well. There are academic advisors who see you through your coursework and help you check the boxes on the way to your degree. There are also personal mentors who help you navigate the difficulties of graduate school. But today we're discussing the research advisor. And by “research”, I mean the activity that is the basis of your advanced degree. It could be any kind of scholarship or artistic endeavor that incorporates advanced skills or some higher level of critical analysis. In this way, a PhD in Theatre and Dance is as much a research degree as a PhD in neuroscience. Master's degrees can be considered research degrees as well, like many of the master's of fine arts. These degrees typically involve some kind of mentor-mentee scholarly or artistic relationship that is akin to an apprenticeship.

These relationships need not be one-on-one, either. There are many different mentoring models, including team mentoring, cascade mentoring, and even peer mentoring. Sometimes you have two or even three research advisors, on top of other kinds of mentors. And assessing how a research mentor performs is different than selecting one. There's an interesting body of knowledge on all of these topics, but we're not going to parse through those variations today. We'll focus on the traditional mentor-mentee research relationship and look at some key questions you should ask yourself when entering into this type of arrangement.

When and how you select a research advisor varies by discipline and institution. It can even change from year to year within a program as faculty re-evaluate how well the process is working (or not). In some instances, you will come into a program having pre-selected an advisor. Perhaps your offer of admission was contingent upon working with a specific individual. In other instances, you may go through the advisor selection process at the end of your first year in graduate school. Some programs may even require that you complete the master's degree before entering their PhD program and focusing on a particular research topic. Either way, it's simply a matter of **when** you ask these questions of potential advisors. If you've been paired with a potential advisor before entering graduate school, contact them and talk with them - even if you were the one that reached out initially. If they refuse to talk to you or give you the runaround, turn around and walk away. Better yet, run. How people treat you when they don't know you is a pretty good indicator of how they will treat you when they do.

Think of the selection process as an interview. You are interviewing prospective mentors. This approach might make you feel uncomfortable and even be very difficult for you depending upon your cultural norms. Why would I presume to interview a Pulitzer or Nobel prize winner to be my mentor? Well, because you are making a choice. Most of the mentoring relationships I have seen go wrong started out with a simple mismatch that could have been avoided. It's not enough to be trained by a famous person – a so-called academic “star.” By and large, stars are great people. They achieved this status not just for what they have accomplished, but for the supportive relationships they have built along the way. But we've all heard stories about the prima donna advisor who let success go to their heads. Luckily, these people self-identify if you ask them a few simple questions. So, don't be bashful. They're just people.

I have a set of ten questions I adapted many years ago from colleagues in the graduate school at the University of Southern California. I thank them again because I think they're still relevant today. Let me run through them quickly, then

spend some time focusing on what I think are maybe the top three questions you should be asking. We'll close with a list of attributes the ideal mentor and the ideal mentee might have. Here we go. Pet your dog and grab that second cup of coffee.

1. What are your professional interests in research, teaching, industry, and service?
2. Given my goals and interests, what courses, projects, or organizations should I become involved with?
3. What other people or experiences does the university offer to help me develop professionally?
4. What are your other commitments, and how much time do you normally give to your advisees?
5. What do you consider to be a typical workload and how much time do you expect me to devote to research and teaching?
6. What strengths, skills, and interests are you looking for in your advisees?
7. How often would you like to meet one-on-one with advisees?
8. Can I develop a dissertation or thesis topic from the research I may do with you?
9. How many other advisees do you have? How many advisees have you graduated and how long did it take those advisees to graduate? (Those are all one related question.)
10. Will you be at the university for the entire year? If not, can we maintain regular communication?

That's ten. Of course, these need to be adapted for your discipline and specific programmatic requirements. And some require a little bit of explanation. But in a typical research-based degree program with a single mentor, these questions are good starting points. Let's focus on three of them.

The first is what I consider the most important:

"What strengths, skills, and interests are you looking for in your advisees?"

You can tell immediately if there is a personality match as the person answers this question. If you aren't picturing yourself as they describe the strengths, skills, and interests they deem important, then a red flag should go up. It is certainly true that you may not possess some of these attributes **right now** and that you actually aspire to be what they are describing. That's fine, too. But if you can't envision your happy self as that person, then you won't want to change. So, either you have those attributes or you want to attain them. Listen carefully to the response and ask follow-up questions like "That's a long list! Which are the most important?"

The next question is:

"What are your professional interests in research, teaching, industry, and service?"

Faculty **love** to talk about themselves. There's the old joke about the greybeard professor at a cocktail party – yes, the joke is as old as the professor. He introduces himself to a faculty candidate the department had invited for an interview earlier that day and proceeds to deliver a non-stop monologue about how great his latest project is and the accolades he expects to receive. After what seems like an eternity of self-aggrandization, he stops, turns to the colleague and says: "That's enough from me. What do you think of my research?" The point is, expect to have to cut this person off at some point. But how they talk about themselves is important. Do they use "we" or "I"? Do they give credit to others for their work or take credit for the work of others? Do they talk only about their professional selves or do they offer some personal details. Yes, we live in a world of TMI – I'm not talking about that. How people view their work-life balance is important. Did they include service activities in their answer? Not necessarily volunteerism, although that's important, too. I mean professional service. Do they serve on committees within or outside the university? Are they active in their professional societies or student organizations? These are all indications that the person is giving and recognizes themselves as part of a larger community.

Finally, let's consider the question:

"How often would you like to meet one on one with advisees?"

Research groups vary in size. In the sciences they can be quite large. There can be hierarchical structures where undergraduate researchers report to graduate students who report to postdoctoral scholars who report to the advisor. So,

the answer could be “never.” As long as you know that you will likely never see this person until the day of your dissertation defense, and you’re OK with it, that’s fine. I wouldn’t recommend that arrangement to anyone, but it can work in certain circumstances. But for most of us, we need human interaction, feedback, and supportive criticism. Even in large research groups with an army of graduate students and a battalion of postdocs, the advisor will want to interact with each advisee individually. That may not be **alone**, but it could be individually. For example, there may be a weekly or biweekly research group meeting with a formal presentation by one of the group members followed by a less formal question and answer or group contribution segment. Your contribution during that segment might be your individual meeting for the week. These meetings might even be virtual. But even in the large group scenario, you should expect to meet with your advisor at least a couple of times during the semester to talk about your progress. As you begin to work on and complete your dissertation, you should expect that interaction time to increase. There are related questions in the list about workload expectations and time to completion. Listen carefully to the answers, and again try to visualize yourself in the responses.

A related way to look at these questions and responses is to consider both what the ideal mentor and ideal mentee might look like. By ideal, I mean ideal for **you** and your mentor, not a list of attributes to which everyone must conform. That’s boring. But there are some commonalities, and what I will characterize as “better practices.” You will find a list of these attributes along with the ten questions above on my website, but a few of the characteristics of the ideal mentor show that they:

- read and return work promptly with constructive comments;
- clarify expectations and policies;
- facilitate networking;
- treat students respectfully as future colleagues; and
- acknowledge that students have responsibilities outside the academy.

Similarly, your advisor can expect that you:

- will be aware of your own strengths and weaknesses;
- submit work promptly and come to meetings prepared;
- respect your mentor’s time and reputation; and
- are pro-active in your own mentoring relationships.

These may sound like common sense, but you’d be surprised how often they are not met. Just as an example, you might think that you are fully aware of your own strengths and weaknesses. But there was an interesting study recently by David Feldon at Utah State University and his co-authors about the gap between graduate students’ self-assessment of research skills and that by their advisors. They don’t always align.

There are tools to help facilitate these better practices, both for the ideal mentor and the ideal mentee. There is mentor training at many universities – sometimes it’s mandatory for all new faculty. There are individual development plans that help you articulate your career goals and establish talking points for your professional development meetings with your advisor. We’ll devote an entire podcast to individual development plans, so stay tuned. But all of these are related to the ongoing mentor-mentee relationship, not selection of a mentor. So how do you make your final decision? There is a pragmatic component to the decision, as well. The person you want to work for may not have funding or is leaving the university. Maybe the ideal mentor in all respects just doesn’t do scholarly work in the areas of interest to you. I would encourage you to be open-minded about research topics, though. I once had a faculty member ask if I wanted to contribute to a small project while I was working on my doctorate. I said, “That doesn’t really fit with my dissertation topic.” He looked me squarely in the eyes and said “Are you going to be working on that same research topic the rest of your life?” The answer clearly was “no” which I can confirm now in hindsight. I propose that the advisor-advisee relationship is as important - **or more** important - to your professional career than the topic of your scholarly or artistic work. But, you decide.

Before you decide, though, ask around. Talk to the graduate students and postdocs in the group. Talk to former advisees. Share your thoughts with people you trust. In this way, you are performing a kind of 360° performance review on the person. As I always say, every degree counts.

Thank you for joining me today. All of the links referred to in this podcast are available on my website at grad-post.com. There you'll find additional podcasts and resources to help you plan your adventure for an advanced degree.

Links

- *Mentoring Relationships* in brochure format suitable for printing.
- Feldon, David F., et al. "Faculty mentors', graduate students', and performance-based assessments of students' research skill development." *Amer Ed Res J*, 52.2 (2015): 334-370, DOI: [10.3102/0002831214549449](https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831214549449)