

Department of Environmental Horticulture

Mentoring and Training Graduate Students

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Effective mentoring of graduate students by faculty members is the one most important key to a successful graduate program. Supervising a graduate student one-on-one is a unique and demanding experience, but perhaps one of the most rewarding in all of academia. Each graduate student mentor should be cognizant that mentoring takes work, experience, and patience. Mentoring extends well beyond advising because of the personal nature of the relationship between the mentor and the mentee.

A mentor develops a relationship with her or his mentee on several levels. A mentor is a trusted guide, and should be a source of support in difficult times. A mentor relates on a personal level and may socialize her or his mentee. A good mentor must be a good listener (key to good communication), be a good problem-solver, and be a good observer (able to spot "problems"). In essence, a mentor is:

1. A mentor should have as the highest priority the professional interests and welfare of their graduate student mentees.
2. An advisor, who has career interests similar to the student and shares their knowledge with the student informally or in the classroom.
3. A supporter, who gives the necessary level of emotional and moral encouragement, as for example, prior to the final oral examination.
4. A sponsor, who provides sources of information about research, grant, internship, employment, or other professional opportunities.
5. A tutor, who gives specific, timely, and constructive feedback on performance.

6. A model, who is a professional with integrity, thereby serving as a good role model.

7. In the Department of Environmental Horticulture a faculty mentor will not use their position and authority to exploit graduate student mentees. Faculty members should not engage in training graduate students for the sole reason of using students for self-serving purposes of promotion or career advancement.

Good mentoring can make the difference between not only recruiting good students, but also retaining students and helping students to be marketable upon graduation. Good mentoring will help to insure students will be well prepared to enter his or her profession not only with the requisite disciplinary knowledge and skills, but with the understanding of the pathways to success. Good mentoring will help to insure that students gain the self-reliance to embark upon opportunities with confidence.

Good mentoring does not happen overnight. Learning how to be a good mentor may take some time. Mentoring is dynamic and the mentoring role will change, depending on the needs and stage of professional development of the student. Mentoring first-year Masters students will likely differ from that of a doctoral student. With time, each faculty member will develop his or her own set of good mentoring practices.

Faculty in the Department of Environmental Horticulture should begin by considering some of the following recommendations that can serve to help faculty members be more than an advisor and, instead, become an effective mentor.

A good mentor works closely with the student to help him or her:

1. Understand the scope and role of the discipline as it relates to their graduate program.

2. Become acquainted with the discipline via sharing books and journals in the discipline and by providing support for attendance to professional meetings.

3. Optimize the graduate experience by routing important information or using "senior" students as mentors for "junior" students.

4. Find a supportive group of graduate peers.
5. Obtain sufficient financial assistance.
6. Select a committee that not only balances out the necessary expertise, but includes faculty members who also can play a supportive mentoring role.
7. Clearly understand the mentor's expectations, e.g., with regard to research or authorship on manuscripts.
8. Understand the importance of knowing the contents of the program's graduate handbook or Web site, i.e., it is ultimately the responsibility of the student to meet programmatic and Graduate School deadlines.
9. Receive timely feedback on her or his progress on research, obtain necessary direction in selecting coursework, and solicit advice from the student's committee.
10. Obtain the opportunity to network and present research findings to peers and professionals at regional and national meetings.
11. Submit a dissertation/thesis in its "final" form with regard to content, style, etc., before it goes to the student's committee, prior to the final oral examination.

Becoming a mentor is like making a wise investment; it can be costly at first, but the long-term returns are surprisingly large. Being a mentor can be a personally fulfilling experience, one in which the mentor benefits at least as much as the mentee. The rewards continue long after one's student becomes one's colleague, oftentimes for a lifetime.