

Being an Effective Mentor: What it is, Why its Important, and How to do it

What is a Mentor?

Broadly, a mentor is someone who will...

- take an interest in developing another person's career and well-being,
- often have an interpersonal as well as a professional relationship with their mentee,
- advance the person's academic and professional goals in directions most desired by their individual mentee,
- tailor mentoring styles and content to the individual, including adjustments due to differences in culture, ethnicity, gender and so on.

- From the U Michigan Guide to Mentoring

Why is Mentoring So Important?

The purpose of academic mentoring is to support the professional development of academics in their careers and to promote excellence in the mentees teaching and learning, research and academic leadership. Developing a good mentoring relationship can be extremely rewarding not only for the mentee, but for the mentor as well. A mentor can provide insight to experiences, and can help to expand the mentee's awareness and perspective.

In philosophy, the mentoring of white women, men and women of color, and other underrepresented or marginalized groups in particular is extremely important. These groups are underrepresented in the profession of philosophy, and many explanations have been offered for this fact. While there are many causes of this imbalance, good mentoring has been found as an effective way to help keep white women, men and women of color, and other underrepresented and marginalized groups in the discipline. For any academic, mentoring has been found to be a key to success in the academy. Again, mentoring is particularly important for white women, men and women of color, and other underrepresented groups, as they do not receive as much mentoring as others often do.

How to be an Effective Mentor

Mentoring incoming MA and PhD students will, for many of us, be our first time serving in the mentor role. Below are 10 things to think about as you mentor. Everyone needs a different type of mentoring experience; hopefully this will help guide your mentor/mentee relationship to be the most fruitful it can for both of you

1. Be Open and Accessible
 - Your mentee will struggle with problems at unique times. As a mentor, it can be important to make yourself available.
2. Take a Genuine Interest in the Person
 - Take an active interest in your mentee's professional development and their research, but also in them as a person.
3. Develop Trust, and Maintain Confidentiality
 - Developing a trusting relationship will help ensure that your mentee will talk to you when they encounter a problem. When they do share a concern or worry with you, its important for you to keep it confidential.
4. Ask Open Ended Questions

- Open questions are a great way to gather information, and gives the room to share as much, or as little as they feel comfortable. Keep in mind that if their answers are brief, or they resist answering, it may be a subject they do not want to explore, or is too personal.
- 5. Primarily Serve as an Active Listener
 - Allow them to explore their ideas openly with you, giving them the chance to think through their problems and gain insights through discussion. A great mentor will listen both to what is being said, and *how* it is being said.
- 6. Give Advice When *Asked*
 - A lot of people think being a mentor is just about giving good advice. While it is important for a mentor to give advice, do not give it before a mentee has actually asked for it. Again, serving as a sounding board for them to think through a situation themselves can be more beneficial, and empowering. Try to have your mentee think through a situation and draw out consequences of various actions. Help your mentee to solve their own problem, rather than telling them what to do.
- 7. Provide *Constructive* Feedback
 - We all know the standard spiel about providing constructive feedback. Additionally, focus on your mentee's development and achieving what they see as their "end goal", rather than the end goal you would want for yourself, in the feedback you provide.
- 8. Be Encouraging, Help Build Confidence, and Highlight Achievements
 - Encourage your mentee to step outside their comfort zone, and take up opportunities, even if they may not feel ready. Be sure to celebrate their achievements, no matter how small. It's always a confidence boost to know someone is rooting for you, and excited when you achieve something. Additionally, self-promotion is challenging for some. If your mentee seems to avoid it, ask if you can highlight their achievement for them.
- 9. Talk about [Imposter Syndrome](#), [Implicit Bias](#), and [Stereotype Threat](#)
 - Many incoming graduate students may not be aware of the existence of these phenomena, and it can be comforting for some to learn about it. Everyone should be made aware on the dangers of these three, regardless of if one negatively affects you. If your mentee brings a concern or complaint to you, *do not* ignore it. Take seriously every concern they have, no matter how small it may seem. Be sure you help them address with their concern, and follow up.
- 10. Inform your Mentee about Resources and Opportunities
 - Make sure your mentee knows about different resources (blogs, databases, etc) that can help them stay up to date on research and events in their area of interest. Additionally, make sure your mentee know about opportunities in the department, and in their area's field that may be of interest to them. If you are able to help your mentee to create an opportunity, even better!

Additional Resources

- [How to Mentor Graduate Students: A Guide for Faculty](#), from the University of Michigan
- [Mentoring Memos](#), from the University of Washington on a variety of topics
- Western's own guide to [Mentorship in Academia](#)