

THE MENTORING RELATIONSHIP

Definition of a Mentor

- “Someone who teaches or gives help and advice to a less experienced and often younger person; a trusted counselor or guide” (*Merriam-Webster Dictionary*)
 - The mentoring relationship is developed over time—it is not the same as visiting a professor a couple of times during office hours
 - It is a professional relationship with elements that may feel personal
 - You may spend a lot of time with this person
 - You may talk about his or her background and your own
 - You may talk about your mentor’s personal struggles with education or with juggling different aspects of career and family life
 - While it may feel personal, remember that these discussions are how you get introduced to the realities of work in your chosen field
- What a mentor is not
 - Your new BFF
 - On call
 - An automatic reference for graduate school

The Mentor in Graduate School

- There usually is no *formal* mentor at the Bachelor’s or Master’s level; it is part of the doctoral program because that is the level at which you do *your own* original research (rather than work on someone else’s)
- Your mentor is the primary professor you will work with in your *specialty* within your major; some programs call them “directors” or “chairs”
 - Depending on your field, you may work in a lab for your mentor and be paid by him or her
 - You will conduct original research in order to earn a PhD; your mentor is in charge of your dissertation (sometimes called a thesis) and directs that research; your research will probably be an offshoot of his or her research
 - You will write a dissertation about your original research, and your mentor (as the head of your dissertation committee) will approve the dissertation and send it to the university for your degree

The Mentor in the McNair Program

- Having an academic mentor at the undergraduate level, as you are about to do, is a rare privilege
- For those of you who already work for a professor in a lab, be aware that the mentoring relationship goes deeper than the employer/employee relationship
- The McNair Program admits scholars from many different fields; therefore, our approach is a generalist one. We guide you in developing your *general* academic and professional skills to the graduate level: writing, conducting research, public speaking, networking, interpersonal communication, standardized testing, etc.
- Your mentor, on the other hand, is your *field specific* guide to developing those same skills. As generalists, the McNair staff defers to the mentor’s field specific expectations.

- Your research mentor will guide you in the *field specific* expectations for the following assignments under the *general* auspices of the McNair staff:
 - Selecting a summer research project
 - Writing the research proposal for that project
 - Directing your summer research
 - Writing and formatting your two public presentations at the spring and fall research symposia
 - Writing and formatting your poster

How to Choose a Mentor

- Look at the publication records of potential mentors and skim some of their articles
- Visit their labs, if relevant
- Talk to their current graduate students
- Ask whether they are available on campus in the summer
- Ask whether they have ongoing research that you could be slotted into
- **Ask whether they have time to meet with you face-to-face once a week beginning in January and ending in October** (that is, they won't be on sabbatical or study abroad or otherwise off-campus or have some other crushing time commitment)
 - Particularly during spring semester *this meeting is in addition* to any lab time
- Ask whether they are aware that in the summer you will have other McNair obligations in addition to conducting research with them (GRE prep; Boot Camp, etc.)
- Think about any special concerns you have and try to find a match: do you prefer to work with a professor who was a first-generation student? A more experienced scholar vs. younger scholar? A person who attended your dream grad school?
- Communicate with Lynn! She has a wealth of experience working with mentors and a very good faculty network. *You don't have to do this blindly!*

How to be a Good Mentee

- Be accountable
- Be reliable
- Be organized
- Be present; don't disappear. If you are overwhelmed at some point, say so, and work it out
- Be positive: this doesn't mean you will never have a problem or that we can't talk about problems; it means that we approach problems as solvable
- Communicate
 - McNair values being professional, collegial, succinct, timely, and positive
- Listen, and then follow up
- Don't waste your mentor's time:
 - Don't submit work just because you want to prove you were busy
 - Don't show up with incomplete, shoddy, or unpolished work
- Be open to not understanding something and to asking questions
- Understand what the demands of your mentor's job are, and act accordingly