

Making the Most of Mentoring



1. What is a mentor?

In the story of *Mentor*, from Homer's *The Odyssey*, Mentor, the close, trusted friend of Odysseus, agrees to protect and guide Odysseus's son, Telemachus, while Odysseus is away on his journey. This is the foundation of all mentor relationships – mentors serve as teachers and guides, providing information, advice, and experiences as you develop academically, professionally, and personally.

2. How can I benefit from a mentoring relationship?

Mentors can help you explore your options and achieve your goals. For example, they can share their own experiences with you, introduce you to colleagues, suggest supportive personal and professional activities during your academic years, and give advice to help you face challenges and advance in your career. But you need to do a little preparation to make the most of the experience.

3. What 2 things can I do to prepare for a meeting with a potential mentor?

1. **Determine Why:** Summarize why you want a mentor in the first place. Be specific about your goals! Maybe you would like to explore career options, and want a mentor who has pursued a particular career path to ask them advice about how to succeed in that path. Perhaps you want advice about how to succeed in graduate or professional school, and would like insight about how to navigate your first year, or how to cope with feeling like an outsider. Perhaps there is someone who has a particular skill you admire, such as the ability to balance family and work demands effectively, and want to know how they developed that skill. Identify your reasons and be prepared to share them with your mentor.

When you can articulate your current academic, personal or professional goals, your mentor can offer specific guidance. Your relationship then develops as you pursue your stated goals, which could end when you achieve them. Your relationship could also continue, reinvigorated as you develop new professional goals, where your mentor offers valuable guidance.

2. **Determine How:** Envision your definition of what successful mentor/mentee relationship would look like. How often would you communicate? What types of issues would you discuss? How would you communicate – in person, or phone/email? It helps to be clear about your conscious and unconscious expectations. If you wish for someone to mentor you, it helps for you to have reflected on what exactly you are asking for.

Now, you're ready to seek out and meet your future mentors!

4. How long does a mentor/mentee relationship last?

The life span of a mentoring relationship can last for just a few hours, many years, or a lifetime. Just because it is brief, doesn't mean it's not successful! The focus of the relationship should not be on length, but on purpose. For example, if your goal is to learn more about the life of an academic or a clinician, a one hour discussion might provide you with the information you need, particularly if you realize you are not interested in pursuing that path. During the Mentor Lunch, you will have an hour to meet with a mentor. That might be the extent of your connection, or you might decide to reach out to them again, by asking if they have time to speak with you further about a specific goal you might have. You might connect again in the future in unexpected ways; for example you might take their class in the future, or work in their lab, or on a committee together.

5. How do I approach a potential mentor? What might a successful beginning look like?

A mentorship relationship evolves over time over common interests or goals, or a similar background. Consider our sample student, Diego Rivera. Diego might realize that one of his professional goals is to successfully transition to UCSF and succeed in his first year. Realizing he'd appreciate advice during the Brown Bag lunch, he summarizes his goal with information about himself, and requests advice. For example:

“First of all, thank you for taking the time to share your experience with us. My name is Diego Rivera, and like a lot of first gen students, I experienced a bit of a culture shock transitioning to UCSF - everything from where my classmates come from to how I should study is different. Can you talk about our own experience transitioning to graduate/professional school, and what advice you would give students to succeed in their first year. From study tips to resources we should access – anything is helpful!”

Thank your mentor for whatever advice they share, regardless of how valuable you find it in the moment – the point is that they made a sincere effort to help. Focus on only asking for advice on 1-2 issues, as not to overwhelm a person during an initial interaction. Follow whatever advice you found useful, **and let them know you did so**. For example, say they suggest that you visit Student Financial Services and schedule an appointment to talk with the financial educator, to figure out how to keep your loans as low as possible – do it! And afterwards, let the mentor know. Tell them both what you did, but why it was personally valuable to you. By email:

Subject line: Thank You

Dear Dr. Jones:

My name is Diego Rivera, and I met you at (fill in the blank). You suggested that all students visit the Financial Educator, and I just wanted to thank you for that advice. I met with them last month, and found out about the possibility of emergency loans, which was very helpful this quarter. Thank you again for taking the time.

Regards, Diego

Or say Diego sees the mentor at another event, or in the hall? He can approach them, and say:

“Dr. Jones? Diego Rivera. I met with you at (fill in the blank). I just wanted to thank you for your advice about joining a study group during first year. It has made all the difference in managing the volume of information covered on tests. I also plan to take your advice to take advantage of all the great, inexpensive restaurants in SF. Is there one you recommend?”

Many people fail to realize that a **“mentorship relationship” is established not when you meet a mentor, but when you take their first piece of advice, and report back to them why you found it valuable in achieving your own goals**. This is important, because that first exchange establishes the relationship, and proves to the person that time with you is well spent. This trust builds the relationship and develops into a mentoring relationship. Sometimes people imagine that mentorship relationships are entirely directed by the mentor – that they will first show an interest in you, and ask you thought-provoking questions. There is more to a successful mentorship relationship – it is that you show an interest in them, and their advice, and value it to applying it to your own challenges.

6. What are professional questions you can ask someone you might want to be a FG2C mentor?

Once again, the questions should focus both on your interest in them, and an awareness of your own goals. Questions that exchange information about your background/professional life and thoughts on mentorship are perfect:

1. Tell me a little about yourself/your background as a first generation college student.
2. What helped you navigate your way through grad/prof school as a first generation college student?
3. What do you find most rewarding about your field? What are the common qualities of professionals who succeed in your area/specialty/work environment/etc.?
4. How did you learn about professionalism?
5. What do you think students don't realize about graduate study in the health sciences?
6. How did you balance your family and academic expectations? How was it different in undergraduate vs/ graduate school?
7. Why did you become involved in the mentorship program?
8. Have you mentored students in the past? What was that like?
9. What do you think are some of the assets of being a first generation to college student?
10. If you had it to do all over again, what would you do differently as a grad/prof student?

These questions can give you a sense of their professional history and how to build your mentor/mentee relationship. You'll find that some individuals have mentored for years, and have clear ideas about mentorship and preferences about how to communicate (via email or during short coffee meetings, etc). Others are new, and don't have fully formed ideas about the logistics yet but wish to share what they wish they had known during their academic years. The better your understanding about their experience and motivations to mentor, the better your relationship will be!

Before ending your first meeting, discuss next steps to continue your new relationship. For example, you can schedule another time to speak again, in person, via email, or by phone. You can also follow the person's advice, and then follow up with them, establishing more of a mentoring relationship.

7. How do I nurture the mentor/mentee relationship after first meeting someone I admire?

Remember that people often mentor as they were mentored. This is why it helps to ask them about how their mentorship relationships developed and why they valued them. Follow that template in approaching and maintaining the relationship. For some, that includes a quarterly lunch, while for others, contact is based on every time you have made progress in a particular area – for example, progress in a particular area of research. Work that they are familiar with. But here are some other options:

1. Keep them updated about your academic and professional development. For example, connect with your mentor at either the beginning or end of each quarter, and share your professional and academic activities, including attending conferences, volunteering in a clinical activity, conducting an informational interview with another professional, or just to say you had a great quarter. You can also drop them a card/note on major holidays.
2. Schedule a time to visit their place of work and shadow them for a day.
3. Tell them where your research/clinical experiences are. They might know other professionals at those locations, and connect you with them.
4. Ask your mentor for advice about how to make the most of a professional experience, like a conference.

8. How do I maintain a professional relationship with my mentor?

You maintain your relationship by contacting them regularly (for example, an email once a month or a quarter) and respecting their time, advice and assistance. If they encourage you to set up an informational interview with a colleague, and you agree to it, follow up in a timely manner. If they suggest you tweak your resume, send them a copy with the changes. If they ask you to communicate with them in a particular way, for example, via email, do it via email. If you ask for their advice but decide on another course, thank them for their perspective and share with them your thinking on your decision. Always thank them for their help, by email or with a hand written note.

9. How many mentors “should” I have in my life?

Ideally, a person would have 3-5 formal or informal mentors in your life simultaneously, serving as your team or advisory board, whom you can turn to for professional, academic and personal advice as you advance in your career. It could be anyone, from a fellow student farther along in his/her academic path, someone outside of UCSF who’s opinion you respect, including an academic advisor, staff person, to someone in an entirely different field whose opinion you respect. Everyone can share their valuable perspectives about your situation and options, while you make the final decision about your actions.

10. Does my mentor need to be my friend?

Mentors are not necessarily friends, and they don’t have to share your professional interests, personal beliefs or have a similar background to yours. Also, you don’t have to always agree with your mentor’s suggestions or take their advice. They should not expect you to do so. However, they do have to be individuals you professionally respect and personally trust. Without these two things, your relationship will not be positive.

If it initially seems like your relationship is not a good fit, give your relationship a chance with at least a couple of correspondence exchanges or in person interactions. If you aren’t well matched, identify why. For example, your mentor might expect you to **always** heed their suggestions, and balk when you don’t. It can be difficult to have a conversation about your concerns, but consider discussing your thoughts and perspective about your relationship. It can occur in the context of reviewing your goals and expectations in a mentorship relationship. Don’t just stop communicating with them or avoid them. Your field is small, and you should strive for positive professional relationships with those in your community.

11. When and how might our mentor/mentee relationship end?

Once again, your original goals for finding a mentor will shape your mentorship relationship. For example, you might be considering residency or a postdoc and your mentor might be a faculty member who gives you guidance about how to evaluate options and apply. In a year however, you might decide that a residency or postdoc is not in the cards. At this time, you might end your formal mentor relationship with the person, yet still remain a professional colleague, occasionally reconnecting with this person at professional events.

Some people have clearly defined goals and schedule meetings with their mentor, and the ‘mentorship’ part of the relationship ends when that checklist of goals is accomplished. They might then take their mentor out to dinner and thank them for their guidance. But many times, the end of the mentor/mentee relationship and the shift to ‘professional colleagues’ isn’t so clearly defined. In time you may just find yourself communicating less with your mentor (and perhaps find new ones). This is fine – just be sure to thank your mentor for all of their help each time it is offered, and you won’t have to worry about leaving something undone as your interaction decreases significantly or ends.

12. What if I’d like more support in finding a mentor, or maintaining a professional relationship?

Consider making an appointment with a career counselor in the Office of Career and Professional Development (OCPD). There you can discuss a wide range of career options and professional development topics such as professional networking and career exploration. Visit their website at career.ucsf.edu or schedule a phone appointment at 415.476.4986.