



It's Not a Crapshoot: Constructing Mentoring Relationships Carole Srole

Although students at every level need mentoring, this column examines mentoring of Ph.D. students from my experiences as an "outside" advisor. It is based on a talk given at the WAWH conference at the University of Santa Clara in 2009.

Graduate students bemoan what their Ph.D. advisors should have done but failed to do. Others sheepishly boast about their mentors' help. Finding the golden mentor feels a lot like a crapshoot. I contend, however, that mentoring is not entirely the luck of the draw, but rather a constructed relationship, in which the mentee plays a crucial role in developing workable, useful, and enriching relationships.

To shape their mentoring relationships, Ph.D. students must first lower expectations. Faculty are overwhelmed by research, other graduate students, undergraduate and graduate courses, committee service, and other professional responsibilities. Don't presume that your advisor will get you a job, just that s/he will write a good letter and comment constructively on your dissertation. Don't assume s/he will read every paper that you present at a conference or edit your CV and cover letters. If s/he does and helps you apply for grants, you are lucky. Try to see these extras as bonuses, not as a right.

Once you've adjusted your expectations for your dissertation advisor, you can fill in the gaps by seeking multiple mentors. Lean on other faculty in your department, advanced Ph.D. students in your program, professors from your M.A. or B.A. institution(s), academics you met while doing research, or colleagues where you adjunct. When you have more than one advisor, you can obtain varied advice or have options when one isn't so helpful or is unavailable.

You can turn to diverse advisors for different types of guidance. Concentrate on each one's special skills, such as conceptualizing issues, locating primary sources, revising, making academic connections, or teaching. At distinct stages in your career, you should expect to rely on particular mentors. For example, when applying for in-house grants at your university, naturally you would consult with someone in your department. For national grants, you can still do the same, but also have the option of turning outward. For your dissertation, you can now expand to scholars you've met on research trips or at conferences. When applying for jobs, now seek the counsel of those at the appropriate institutions (i.e., research universities, liberal arts colleges, state colleges, community colleges), especially ones who have served on hiring committees. Ask for help with your cover letter, CV, and interview questions. (*cont. page 9*)

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It's Not a Crapshoot (cont.)

Carole Srole

When you do secure a job (and, let's be positive, eventually you will), choose a mentor or two who can help you negotiate the tenure system at your new school. You'll need to learn the rules of the game there, which may very likely differ from your graduate school. Along with in-house advisors in your new department, develop and maintain contacts with outside advisors to compare institutions. This is where other WAWH members can be especially useful.

Once you have your bevy of advisors, initiate and keep the relationships going. You can't expect your advisors to keep track of you. Contact and keep them informed through email or phone conversations, just let them know what you are doing. Try to get together once or twice a year, even more during your last year completing your dissertation.

In negotiating with mentors, develop real relationships. Find out what they are willing to do as mentors. Learn about their research projects. Figure out their styles. Would one rather talk in person (at school or for lunch) or on the phone? Does another prefer to read everything, even a one-page idea? Share your research insights, what you're learning along the way. Remember faculty are academics and like that kind of stuff. But, keep it short. Come prepared with lots of questions. Advisors also like students who have done their homework. And finally, don't wait until the last minute for requests, even letters that you think s/he's written already. Be alert to their constraints, like deadlines or final exams.

Ph.D. students don't have to wait for the ideal mentor, but can elicit good advice by taking the initiative and constructing multiple mentoring relationships.