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Mentoring Guidelines Development Guide

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Guide for Developing Mentoring Guidelines

A Guide to the Guide

These recommendations are intended to aid in the development of mentoring guidelines relative to PhD students and their advisors.

Your program's guidelines will function as a tool to help students and their advisors have better, stronger mentoring relationships by setting the standard for good, even great mentorship, as well as for the roles that a student will play in their time within your program. This frame of comparison will be helpful to students and advisors alike in clarifying what is expected of each member of a mentoring partnership (or team!) and in helping them to identify places for improvement and to problem solve where necessary. It further helps define these roles for future students and mentors, paving a path forward to a more productive and positive experience for all.

Ideally, these mentoring guidelines should not manifest as simply a list of rules, but as an accessible, nuanced document which takes the needs and responsibilities of all parties into account, and can evolve over time to reflect changing expectations. Rather than to directly instruct, the hope is that these mentoring guidelines can lead by example and encourage students and advisors to make their partnership the best that it can be.

Below is a step-by-step guide, which focuses on the purpose of each section and the questions each section should answer and provides further details for how this may manifest in your final document. This is a companion piece to our sample guidelines, which are written to correspond directly to the layout of this document.

INTRODUCTION

Just as this guide introduces our purpose, your introduction should make *your* purpose clear to your audience. Use this space to illustrate your commitment to the success of your students and faculty and your commitment to ensuring that advisors and their students are cultivating effective, positive mentoring relationships. This is also a great place to talk more about diversity, equity, and inclusion, as building clarity of expectations and responsibilities supports every student's ability to engage meaningfully and succeed during their PhD program.

You should seek to answer questions such as:

Why is having mentoring guidelines important?

What values do these guidelines speak to?

What is the goal in implementing them?

This sets the stage for the information to follow and shows your reader how they can use this information to benefit their particular circumstances, whether they are a current (or prospective) student, an advisor, or an unofficial mentor.

Note: You may also choose to use your Introduction to present any relevant vocabulary or key concepts related to mentoring that you plan to reference in your guidelines. This additional background is an opportunity for education on these topics that can give your audience further insight into your program's values and priorities.

COMMUNICATION

One of the most important sections of your guidelines is that which discusses communication. This section should seek to define what healthy communication looks like in a mentoring relationship: general timelines for communication frequency and overall availability, what healthy communication should achieve, and how to define good boundaries and recognize unhealthy communication that may need to be addressed.

This is also a good place to make plain the important, non-research conversations that should be occurring in a mentoring partnership, such as those about a student's future plans, work-life balance, and the individual needs and expectations of each person.

You should seek to answer questions such as:

What constitutes good communication in a mentoring relationship?

What kinds of non-research-focused discussions are important in a mentoring relationship?

How do we define good boundaries in the mentoring relationship?

What timeframes that should be adhered to in communication, especially as it pertains to receiving feedback on manuscripts/dissertation chapters/research proposals, etc.?

What constitutes harassment or mistreatment?

How should approach differences of identity, background, and perspectives in the mentoring relationship?

A reader should be able to leave this section with a clear picture of what defines healthy communication between a student and their advisor(s) and what that communication should achieve and should do for each person.

MUTUAL AND PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITIES

This section makes clear what each member of a mentoring partnership or team is responsible for doing, achieving, and pursuing. Use this space to discuss concrete responsibilities, such as fulfilling degree requirements and other "minimum" standards, but also

to discuss elements of earning a PhD (or advising one) that are less obvious. This may manifest as reminding students that they are responsible for asking for help when they need it or as stating that an advisor has a responsibility to actively advocate for their student's success. Defining not only the clear cut "to-do list" items, but those that make a partnership strong and complete, will do all parties the most good.

This is also a good place to remind students and advisors alike of their responsibility to identify opportunities for improvement within themselves and to use available tools and trainings to address them. Both students and advisors have access to resources to aid in personal and professional development, and have a duty to themselves, and one another, to pursue such opportunities (more on this in *Reflection and Growth*).

You should seek to answer questions such as:

*What mutual responsibilities do a student and an advisor have to one another?
What responsibilities does an advisor specifically have to their student? To themselves?*

What responsibilities does a student specifically have to their advisor? To themselves?

Are the standards for work that is sufficient for the awarding of a PhD consistent for all within your program, or are such standards set by individual advisors?

If PhD award standards are program-wide, what are they? If they are advisor specific, what roles should student and advisor play in clarifying them?

What defines "best effort" on behalf of a mentor? Of a student/mentee?

What falls outside of the responsibilities of a student to their advisor? Of an advisor to their student?

In what ways is a mentor responsible for improving themselves as a mentor?

In what ways is a student responsible for self-improvement?

What outside-of research activities are important for a student? For an advisor?

BUILDING ACADEMIC COMMUNITY

This section should include – but is not necessarily limited to – the roles and responsibilities of committee members and informal mentors, as well as the steps that those within a mentoring partnership should take to support the building of a supportive academic community. You may use this section to encourage students to take part in departmental seminars or attend conferences, or to encourage the development of "mentorship teams" where those outside of the primary advising relationship aid in meeting the needs of a particular student. This section is important in defining the role that a mentoring relationship should play in the context of a student's greater community, and how that community can best be built and maintained for the good of all involved.

You should seek to answer questions such as:

*What are the traits of an excellent committee member?
What are the specific, concrete responsibilities of a committee member?
What activities or actions should a student take to help build their academic community? What role should an advisor play for their student in this process?
How should a mentorship partnership/team facilitate collaboration with other individuals to help meet student needs?*

For students and for advisors, defining the role of the committee and its members, as well as learning and practicing building community, helps to make a student's course through their PhD program more efficient, and helps an advisor to hone these skills even further.

REFLECTION AND GROWTH

A critical part of any student's journey during their time here is the opportunity to learn, grow and develop, and this is just as true for advisors and mentors. This section should address issues of how to recognize if a student or advisor's expectations are not being met by the other (i.e. "red flags"), how to recognize opportunities for improvement in oneself, and how to identify instances where a student's needs aren't being met. Further, it should provide a plan for what to do if it is identified that there is room for improvement, to keep all parties accountable to one another and to themselves.

You should seek to answer questions such as:

*In what ways should a student seek feedback from their advisor on their progress and performance?
In what ways should an advisor seek feedback from their student on how they can better meet their needs?
How can a student or advisor recognize that the other is not meeting these standards? How can they work to remedy this?
How can a student or advisor recognize that they are not meeting these standards, themselves? How can they work to remedy this?
What systems or plans are in place to help keep individuals accountable?*

PROBLEM SOLVING

This section should be a direct bridge from the section that precedes it, to aid in the mediation of challenges ranging from minor conflicts to changes in advising circumstances. It should include details on how to recognize potential or mounting conflicts, how to manage interpersonal difficulties, how to reach out for greater help (and who to reach out to) and the process for determining that a change of advisor is needed and how to do this. This should serve as a resource for students and advisors to help address – or even prevent – small and larger issues alike. It should also include the link to the reporting tool designed by Kirsten Overdahl

[<https://projects.gradschool.duke.edu/reporting/>] in the event that an individual is coming to the document with a concern that may need to be addressed at a higher level.

You should seek to answer questions such as:

How should common mentoring issues be addressed, specifically disagreements and personal disputes?

When should a student reach out to an Ombudsperson, their DGS, or their Chair?

When should an advisor reach out for help?

How can you determine if a student would be better suited to a different advisor?

What is the process of changing your advising circumstances?

Giving members of a mentoring relationship the tools to problem-solve effectively saves both time and energy, and has the power to significantly improve the circumstances of those within the mentoring relationship. It also has the potential to reduce the frequency with which conflicts are handled at a higher administrative level, further saving time and stress for program leadership.

Epilogue

These guidelines are designed to be inherently comprehensive, and this guide has been developed after thorough review of similar guidelines developed by departments within Duke's Arts and Sciences Graduate School. This guide is a companion piece to the Sample Guidelines, which give an example of the kind of document that this guide could inspire.

Whether you choose to adopt the sample guidelines, to edit our guidelines as you see fit, or to use this guide to generate a unique set of mentoring guidelines for your program, we hope that all versions maintain the spirit of the original vision for this project: to guide students and advisors alike to take the initiative to grow their mentoring relationship into the best version of itself; to lead without simply instructing; to speak with the compassion and clarity that all members of Duke's community deserve.

We thank you for making use of this guide and welcome any feedback on how it may be improved – please direct any such correspondence to chainey.boroski@duke.edu.

Sample Mentoring Guidelines

Introduction

The relationship between a PhD student and their advisor is incredibly valuable and important, with the potential to define a student's path after graduation, to change an advisor's approach to mentoring future students (or to their own research), and to be the experience that shapes a student's approach to mentoring others in their future careers.

In all working relationships, clarity of expectations, defined approaches to problem solving and conflict resolution, and an understanding of how to navigate the personal and logistical complexities of the relationship do a great deal to strengthen and improve it. Further, with the privilege that is pursuing higher education, and the privilege of guiding a student through this process, comes a significant amount of responsibility that should be concretely defined for all parties involved.

Prior knowledge of the historically unspoken expectations of the PhD process is an advantage that not all are afforded; this has the potential to create exclusionary barriers within our community, barriers that we have a responsibility to dismantle. Sharing this knowledge broadly and doing the work to optimize existing systems and practices speaks to our commitment to advocate for and meet the needs of all students, faculty members, and staff, and makes our School a better place to learn and to grow.

We've developed these Mentoring Guidelines, in the hopes that they will be a tool for students and mentors alike to better define the roles they play – as it relates to their own needs and goals, their relationship to one another, and in their position as members of the Nicholas School community. We do this in the hope that it materially improves mentoring relationships within the Nicholas School, especially as a part of our commitment to make diversity, equity, and inclusion integral qualities of our School.

We know that the success of our students and the well being of our community hinges upon building and maintaining inclusive spaces where all feel supported, safe, heard, and encouraged to be their best. We want to take all efforts to ensure that the Nicholas School is a place where the pursuit of one's aspirations is a functional, healthy, and enriching experience. We hope that these guidelines can play a meaningful part in cultivating these spaces; it is our overarching goal that they help give our community more of what it needs to be at its best, and that they help provide students with access to the Duke experience that they deserve.

Before we Begin: A Note on Personal and Cultural Differences in Advising

Inevitably, a student and their advisor(s) will differ from one another, just as they will have some traits and identities in common. Navigating both the differences and the similarities – be they gender, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic background, personality, etc. – requires sensitivity and a willingness to listen and engage with one another as multi-faceted, *true individuals*. All in a mentorship team should seek to understand how each other's backgrounds and identities inform their approaches, as well as how their individual traits and values shape how they interact and function in their lives and work. Both should commit themselves to communicating their

personal needs and boundaries and honoring the needs and boundaries of one another. Differences, large and small, can provide opportunities to learn from and grow with one another – with patience, time, openness, and concerted effort, we can make the most of each of these opportunities.

Communication

Healthy communication is a cornerstone of a successful mentoring relationship, from managing projects to seeking feedback to mitigating conflicts. Healthy communication between advisor and student is mutually respectful, constructively honest, and supportive of the goals of each person, regardless of what is occurring in the mentoring relationship at any given time.

Both should practice active listening when they engage with one another, seeking to stay present, to ask questions that allow them to learn more about the other's point of view, and to focus energy on fully understanding each other – and making each other *feel* understood. Deliberately focusing on these principles can help advisor and student reduce miscommunications and prevent conflicts that arise from not seeing/empathizing with one another's perspective.

An advisor and student should talk early and often about the needs and expectations of both relative to their working relationship. An advisor should know a student's future plans, how the student is working toward their goals, and of any particular academic or professional concerns or challenges that the student is facing or expecting to face. It is important to continue such conversations throughout the working relationship, as these may grow and develop over a student's time at Duke.

An advisor should communicate to the student about potential restrictions on their schedule and about any professional plans or obligations which may affect the student or their progress. Student and advisor alike should be able to rely on one another to communicate in a way that is respectful of each other's time constraints and outside obligations, and the two should explicitly discuss their expectations in regard to timelines for answering correspondence, providing feedback, etc., to be sure that they are reasonable and that they are on the same page.

Good boundaries are also crucial to a professional relationship – the two should come to a mutual understanding of proper times of day for communication, if certain discussion topics are particularly sensitive for one party or the other, and what roles a student or advisor is not willing to or should not be expected to fulfill for the other. A student and advisor also should feel comfortable raising potential issues with one another, soliciting feedback on their personal performance in their role, and expressing when a need is not being met or when an expectation is not being satisfied – early communication is the first line of defense against conflict.

While the advisor is a figure of authority, it should be understood that this inherent power dynamic should never be exploited. Further, harassment, mistreatment, or unethical behavior, at any time, for any reason, or from either party is unacceptable. Both members of a mentoring partnership should always feel safe and respected, and that they are able to be honest and forthcoming in their working relationship.

If you find yourself feeling consistently frustrated, leaving conversations feeling physically or emotionally drained, feeling as if you are not being heard, or as if conflicts have become excessively common or severe, this is something to be remedied immediately. See *Problem Solving* for more details on what to do in these instances.

Mutual and Personal Responsibilities

In order for the working relationship of an advisor and advisee to be functional, both need to maintain certain responsibilities, to one another and to themselves. While these responsibilities are detailed below, these lists are not necessarily comprehensive, and a student and advisor should also strive for candid and productive conversations about their personal expectations as an addendum to this list.

The Student, to their Advisor

- Communicate often and honestly about your personal progress, challenges, and goals.
- Strive to work efficiently and to be a consistently reliable member of your lab.
- Strive to listen, learn, and grow as a result of your advisor's feedback.

The Student, to Themselves

- Be knowledgeable and aware of degree milestones, deadlines, etc., so that you can stay on top of your responsibilities relative to your program. While your advisor, DGS, and DGSA should be a resource in this respect, it is your responsibility to stay informed.
- Keep careful records of your work, especially writings, and take care to safeguard all materials or data you produce or acquire as a student.
- Be an advocate for yourself – your professional goals, your needs, and your mental health and well-being – be willing to ask for help when you need it and be willing to speak up if you need help meeting needs that the resources available to you are not sufficient to address.

The Advisor, to their Student

- Make consistent efforts to inform the student of opportunities that will aid in the pursuit of their future goals.
- Provide a clear and consistent set of expectations about what is necessary to successfully defend a PhD dissertation.
- Be honest with your student about what they will need to do to meet their goals or to fulfill the requirements of their program.
- Be willing to be a resource for your student as they navigate the research, dissertation, and publication processes – especially when your student is still learning these processes. If you find that the student may benefit from expanding their network to meet their needs, help to facilitate such connections.
- Be an advocate for your student – support their aspirations, help them to grow, and be willing to be a branch between them and the opportunities and connections to which you may have access.

- When provided the opportunity, be willing to speak to your student’s strengths, abilities, and accomplishments via letters of recommendation, professional introductions (when appropriate), and the like. *If you fear you are unable to do this, see the last section of Problem Solving.*

The Advisor, to Themselves

- Be honest with yourself about the resources you have to offer each of your students – your time, energy, and effort are a critical part of their (and your) success and knowing your limitations can prevent you from overcommitting.
- Reflect on your past experiences as an advisor – are there things you would have done differently, or sought to do better? If so, find ways to make each mentoring experience better than the last, for their sake and your own.

Both Student and Advisor, to One Another

- Communicate often and honestly with one another, seeking to always listen actively.
- Be respectful of one another’s time and energy.
- Be open to constructive feedback from one another, and willing to grow from it. Listen to one another’s concerns and make an effort to address them wherever you are capable of doing so.
- Be sure expectations of one another are both reasonable and clearly stated, and that these expectations are actively fulfilled.

Both Student and Advisor, to Themselves

- Seek out feedback on how you can better fulfill each role you play.
- Seek out opportunities for personal and professional development.
- Act always with academic and scholarly integrity.
- Take advantage of the resources afforded to you to be your best in the roles you play.
- Put your best effort into all work that you do, whether for yourself or others.

What is best effort? Your best effort is the best work you can reasonably do, relative to your personal capability and current circumstances. It is important to be honest with yourself about what your best effort looks like at a given time – it will surely differ in some ways from that of others, and of yourself under different circumstances. Be honest with one another during times when you feel you are not doing your best or feel unable to meet standards of “best effort” you may have set in the past.

For more information on how student and advisor alike should take responsibility for their growth and development in their roles, see *Reflection and Growth*.

Building Academic Community

The relationship between student and advisor is far from the only relationship that will impact either’s experience of a student’s journey through their PhD. Interactions with committee members, informal mentors, and other members of the academic community should shape your experience and hopefully leave a positive, lasting impression.

Building academic community is something that should be sought actively by student and advisor alike. This may be done by (among other things):

- identifying opportunities to engage with the broader scientific community through conferences and seminars
- purposefully seeking out informal mentors who may be helpful in the pursuit of goals or skills outside of an advisor's expertise
- creating a strong and effective committee

A student has the responsibility to be open to the ways in which expanding their academic community could be beneficial to them, and advisors have the responsibility to be an advocate for their student through this, supporting and encouraging their student's efforts in this respect. Both should work together to identify places where a student can expand their network or broaden their horizons in support of their current and future goals.

While not all relationships with members of one's academic community are clearly defined, a few are key elements of the PhD experience:

Committee Members: Committee members should be involved, reliable members of a student's academic community that meet all required standards as detailed in the PhD Handbook. Each should be able to provide clear perspective, scholarly support, and guidance for a student in the pursuit of their goals, in addition to the roles the committee members have in the preliminary exam and dissertation process. A committee member can also be a resource to a student by ensuring that their relationship with their primary advisor is remaining productive and healthy – this may be achieved through casual discussion with the student, or as a formalized part of committee meetings, but should be prioritized and taken seriously.

Each member should be sure they have time in their schedules to meet student needs, with the understanding that a student should have reasonable expectations in this respect – this should be discussed candidly during the committee member selection process. All members should seek to fulfill all responsibilities of their role to the best of their ability, dedicating themselves to be an advocate for a student's success.

Formal and Informal Mentors: Having multiple mentors (at least three) who bring unique skillsets to a mentoring team and whose styles complement one another and the student is an excellent way to help meet student needs and aid in a student's development. The decision to form such mentoring relationships may be led by a student, their advisor, or by mutual agreement, but should be encouraged!

Those who hold this role informally have fewer concrete responsibilities than formal mentors, such as co-advisors outside of a primary advisor, who often are required to play defined roles relative to a student. However, it is understood that students and all who mentor students – from primary advisors to informal mentors – apply the guidelines of this document to their mentoring relationships, to the extent that both have agreed it is appropriate and expected to do so. In any case, consistent, healthy communication is the key to successful working relationships of all kinds.

Reflection and Growth

The process of personal and professional growth is a continuous one – there is never a phase of your life or career where it will be behind you. With this said, it is your responsibility (whether you are a student or a mentor) to seek out the feedback, trainings, and guidance that will help you to grow in the roles you fill or hope to fill. This may manifest as:

- Seeking out and participating in seminars and trainings relative to your personal and professional development – [Duke OPTIONS](#) is an especially strong resource for these efforts.
- Starting dialogues with supervisors, colleagues, and mentees about what you can do better in your role relative to them, and making thoughtful effort to improve in those ways.
- Self-reflection – consider past conflicts and challenges, identifying roles you may have played, and seek to address them. This helps to reduce, or even prevent, these challenges from occurring in the future.
- Practicing mindfulness in your communications with colleagues, mentors, and mentees. How do you feel physically when you engage with those in your professional network, and what effect might that have on you? What emotions arise in challenging circumstances, and how do you manage them? Being present with our bodies and minds when engaging with others can help us to notice issues before they arise, to address internal and external stressors, and to make us more mindful members of our communities.

There are many ways in which each of us can grow: becoming more efficient and effective, becoming better communicators, becoming better advocates for ourselves and those we support. Consider creative ways to do this, and make them a priority in your everyday. The more we put time and effort into ourselves and into the roles we play within our communities, the stronger those communities, and all within them, will be.

Problem Solving

The long-term nature of the PhD mentoring relationship increases the likelihood that there will be conflict or challenges that will need to be managed – when managed thoughtfully, conflict can lead to a productive route forward, which strengthens relationships and increases mutual understanding. This said, it is essential that there are clear pathways for managing day-to-day challenges and managing more severe conflicts that may require outside intervention or a change in advising circumstances.

Managing Challenges One-on-One (minor conflicts or differences of opinions that are causing difficulty, “rough patches” in the advising relationship, etc.):

- Have frequent, honest discussions where potential difficulties can be talked through – the first line of defense against conflict is communication.
- Be willing to address difficulties as they arise. Set aside a designated time to talk, to listen, and to truly hear one another.

- Make a true effort, regardless of where “blame” is placed, to do your part to remedy the circumstances. Consider how you can contribute to the solution, and do so.
- In the case that honest discussion and planning ways to improve is not effective, consider involving a third party.

Managing Challenges with Outside Help:

If at all possible, it is helpful to make a thoughtful attempt to resolve conflicts one-on-one before involving a third party. However, if such efforts are unsuccessful, or either party does not feel comfortable resolving the conflict without outside help, involving a third party is a good step to take.

- Mutually agree to who the third party should be in advance of the discussion, considering the role, if any, the individual has in relation to the two of you or to the circumstance.
- Unless the third party has agreed to act as a mediator, speak directly to one another. If the third party *is* acting a mediator, take all efforts to maintain discourse that is respectful of everyone involved.
- Be honest, be open, and be solution-minded. Keep in mind that the goal of any interaction surrounding conflict should be resolution and growth.
- If the issue persists following this discussion, reflect, and determine what is the best step to take forward for the good of both/all parties.

In the case where either party feels unsafe or otherwise uncomfortable communicating without a third party present, see *Managing Severe Conflicts*.

Managing Severe Conflicts

- In the case that a challenge has arisen that makes either party feel threatened, unsafe, or as if a problem can not be meaningfully resolved without the intervention of greater authority, there are a few options:
 - If you’d like to privately discuss options before proceeding, speak with an Ombudsperson about the situation and how you may move forward.
 - If you want help from a greater authority, reach out to a DGS or division chair about the circumstance.
 - If you want to review all options privately, especially relative to reporting a behavior or concern, please make use of this tool, [Reporting Harassment, Discrimination, and Other Concerns: An Interactive Guide for Graduate School Students \(duke.edu\)](#) created by NSOE’s Kirsten Overdahl.

Changing Advising Circumstances

Under some circumstances, the best way to proceed through an advising challenge is to recognize that the relationship is not working and seek different arrangements. Some instances where this may be true are:

- The student is detached and disinterested in the work that they are doing and at least one member of the partnership feels the student would be better suited to a different advisor doing different work
- The advisor feels unwilling or unable to provide honest letters of recommendation or otherwise advocate for the student
- The student and advisor do not feel they are capable of having a functional working relationship
- The student and advisor feel they have an irreconcilable difference that would interfere with a student's progress toward their goals
- Something has occurred which necessitates the termination of the working relationship

The process of changing your advising circumstances is detailed below:

[This section should detail the specific process of changing one's advising circumstances within your program.]

Conclusion

We hope that the guidelines detailed in this document have been helpful to define and clarify the critical elements of the mentoring relationships you will have as a student or mentor. If this document is missing information on an important issue, or if any changes could benefit this document, please reach out to chainey.boroski@duke.edu.