Schar School PhD Alumni-Student Mentor Program Toolkit

Dear Schar School PhD Mentor Program Participant:

Thank you again for taking part in the Schar School PhD alumni-student mentor program.

As you know, the program aims to connect doctoral students from underrepresented groups in higher education (including but not limited to first-generation students and students of color) with PhD alumni mentors. Through the mentorship program, graduates of the PhD program and current PhD students have an opportunity to establish meaningful, rewarding relationships that prepare students to succeed both during and after their studies. Students receive support navigating the challenges that come with balancing research, writing, career planning, professional responsibilities, and family commitments. At the same time, alumni mentors can stay connected to the Schar School as well as the next generation of professionals and scholars.

This toolkit contains guidance and activities to help mentors and mentees make the most of the program. You may find it helpful to use these tools to establish goals together and engage in effective discussions.

Our hope is that both Schar School alumni and current PhD student participants will have an experience as enjoyable as it is rewarding. If you have questions, concerns, or suggestions along the way, please don’t hesitate to reach out to us at PhD Student Services.

Wishing you the best of luck with your mentorship.

Warm Regards,

Shannon Williams
Director, Schar School PhD Student Services
Setting Clear and Measurable Goals for the Mentoring Relationship

A critical part of the mentoring process is establishing the right goals for the relationship. Setting goals involves collaboration between the mentor and mentee and should be determined by the mentee’s specific needs.

The following topics may help the mentee define goals for the relationship:

- Career tracks and career exploration
- Types of employers in a chosen field
- Current issues in the profession
- Job market trends
- Organizational culture
- Membership in professional and scholarly associations
- Quality of life in the profession
- Work/life balance
- Management issues
- Approaches to ethical or professional dilemmas
- Job search advice
- Resume, cover letter, and interview guidance
- Building a scholarly and professional network
- Navigating academic and professional conferences

While the mentee establishes a set of goals and considers ways in which the mentor can help the student achieve the goals, the mentor questions and explores to clarify the mentee’s goals and the motivations behind them. An understanding as to why the mentee has set these particular goals is critical for the mentor to coach the mentee appropriately. This understanding will help the mentor identify areas where involvement will be most valuable.

Goals have a tendency to change over time. Please revisit these discussions over the course of your relationship.
Guidance for Current PhD Student Mentees

A good mentee cultivates a successful mentoring relationship by establishing an environment of open communication and active listening. The relationship is more beneficial when mentees reflect on their professional and scholarly goals prior to meetings, and come into those meetings with a list of objectives and questions to discuss. The mentee puts in place a regular meeting schedule, the frequency and formality of which will depend on the mentor’s schedule and personal style. By staying in touch, showing up on time, and arriving at meetings prepared, the mentee shows respect for the mentor’s time and other commitments.

Suggested questions for mentees to ask mentors
- What does a day in your professional life look like?
- What skills from your time at Mason and your early career have served you the most? The least?
- What conferences, association involvement, professional service, and other activities have been most valuable in your career? Least?
- What trends do you see in your field, and what changes do you anticipate in the future?
- What skills do you and your employer wish more applicants possessed?
- What advice would you give yourself as a PhD student? As a recent graduate?

Ten Tips for Mentees
1. **Initiate.** In order to sustain the mentoring relationship, take the initiative to ask your mentor questions, let your mentor know your educational and professional interests and objectives, and learn about your mentor’s experiences.
2. **Prepare Yourself.** The relationship will be most fruitful if you take time to organize your thoughts before talking to your mentor.
3. **Honor Your Commitment.** Your mentor probably has a very demanding job and has volunteered to take on the added responsibility of mentoring. Be mindful of your mentor’s time by responding as soon as possible to your mentor’s questions and comments. If you are unable to respond at length right away, send a short message letting your mentor know you will be in touch when you have the opportunity.
4. **Help Your Mentor Help You.** Consider and share ideas about how your mentor can be most helpful to you. Come prepared to each meeting. Know what you want to ask and be aware of what you need.
5. **Expect Support, Not Miracles.** You can anticipate a certain level of support and advice, but your mentor can’t solve your problems for you. Perhaps the most valuable quality a mentor can offer is another point of view. A mentor can put a situation in perspective, offer feedback, serve as a sounding board, and identify others to seek out for guidance.
6. **Communicate Clearly.** Initiate contact with your mentor if you have questions or would like to discuss something. Identify your needs and communicate them as clearly as possible.
7. **Be Teachable.** Be willing to learn new things, gain another perspective, consider suggestions, and welcome constructive criticism.
8. **Follow Through.** When you decide to act on your mentor’s suggestions, act in a timely manner and report back. Send written thank-you notes to anyone to whom your mentor introduces you.
9. **Look Ahead At Your Calendar.** Are there times of the season or year that you know you’ll be offline or focused on critical projects? If so, let your mentor know well in advance.
10. **Correct Misunderstandings When They Happen.** Get in touch with your mentor before a concern becomes a problem.
Guidance for Alumni Mentors

A good mentor focuses on the mentee’s total development by helping the mentee develop proficiency in the professional and academic skills necessary for success. Mentors challenge their mentees to think critically about their academic and professional development. The mentor may also share resources and network contacts.

Suggested questions for mentors to ask mentees

- What are your long-term goals?
- Can you tell me more about what is motivating these goals?
- What are three of your short-term objectives, and what progress have you made?
- How do you envision combining your current research with your future career?
- What kind of network would you like to develop?
- Do you need help improving your networking skills?
- In what areas do you feel “stuck,” and what might help you gain traction in those areas?
- What skills (technical, interpersonal, professional) would you like to develop?
- What classes, conferences, publications, grants, fellowships, or other opportunities are you interested in pursuing?
- How might I help you think through the decisions you’re making?

Suggested activities

1. **Evaluate characteristics and abilities.** Identify both the mentee’s strengths and areas for improvement.
2. **Coach.** What specific skills and behaviors might the mentee need help improving? Point the student in the direction of appropriate resources.
3. **Be a sounding board.** Listen, probe, and help to clarify.
4. **Share personal work experiences.** Share highs, lows, successes, failures, and lessons learned at different stages of your career.
5. **Expand the field of vision.** Your mentee may have a limited or inaccurate impression of related fields and areas of employment. Help your mentee see and consider a wider range of scholarly opportunities and career directions.
6. **Bridge the present and the future.** Help your mentee link current interests to future professional and scholarly opportunities.
7. **Support.** Provide personal encouragement and reinforcement.

Staying in Touch

The mentor-mentee relationship is expected to last two years or until the student graduates. Alumni mentors commit to meeting with their mentee at least once a semester. Schar School PhD Student Services will collect written annual and final evaluations from the participants, and make adjustments as necessary.

Please contact Shannon Williams, PhD Student Services Director, at swilli32@gmu.edu or 703-993-4143 with any questions or concerns.