



UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH : WHAT IS A MENTOR?

The notion of mentoring is ancient. The original Mentor was described by Homer as the “wise and trusted counselor” whom Odysseus left in charge of his household during his travels. Athena, in the guise of Mentor, became the guardian and teacher of Odysseus’ son Telemachus.

In modern times, the concept of mentoring has found application in virtually every forum of learning. In academics, *mentor* is often used synonymously with *faculty adviser*. A fundamental difference between mentoring and advising is that mentoring is more than advising; mentoring is a personal, as well as, professional relationship. An adviser might or might not be a mentor, depending on the quality of the relationship. A mentoring relationship develops over an extended period, during which a student’s needs and the nature of the relationship tend to change. A mentor will try to be aware of these changes and vary the degree and type of attention, help, advice, information, and encouragement that they provide.

In the broad sense intended here, a mentor is someone who takes a special interest in helping another person develop into a successful professional. Some students, particularly those working in large laboratories and institutions, find it difficult to develop a close relationship with their faculty adviser or laboratory director. They might have to find their mentor elsewhere — perhaps a fellow student, another faculty member, a wise friend, or another person with experience who offers continuing guidance and support.

In the realm of science and engineering, we might say that a good mentor seeks to help a student optimize an educational experience, to assist the student’s socialization into a disciplinary culture, and to help the student find suitable employment. These obligations can extend well beyond formal schooling and continue into or through the student’s career.

In general, an effective mentoring relationship is characterized by mutual respect, trust, understanding, and empathy. Good mentors are able to share life experiences and wisdom, as well as technical expertise. They are *good listeners*, *good observers*, and *good problem-solvers*. They make an effort to know, accept, and respect the goals and interests of a student. In the end, they establish an environment in which the student’s accomplishment is listed only by the extent of his or her talent.

Adapted from “Entering Mentoring: A Seminar to Train a New Generation of Scientists”, by Handlesman, Pfund, Lauffer, Pribbenow

FINDING A MENTOR

Finding a mentor at ECU does not have to be an arduous process. The easiest way to begin searching for a mentor is to figure out what topics you’re interested in researching. Many ECU undergraduate students find mentors in the university’s college, school, or department that they are interested in researching.

Next, visit your chosen ECU college, school, or department’s website and explore their faculty page. ECU faculty members often list the areas of research they are currently conducting or are interested in pursuing. Find a faculty member whose research interests closely align with yours.

Finally, contact your identified faculty member. Call or email your chosen faculty member to schedule an appointment. Even if your chosen faculty member may not be a good fit as your mentor, they may be able to introduce you to other possible mentor matches.

If all else fails, contact the Office of Undergraduate Research by email at ugresearch@ecu.edu for help finding an undergraduate research mentor.