

HEY JANE ISSUE 5

The first edition of this Hey Jane! column was produced in 2004 by the Career Development Committee. More recently we include column authorship. In this revised edition, Mindy Fried and Laura Kramer collaborated to update the original posting.

I need advice and support! Would I benefit from a mentor? How can a mentor help me? What would I talk to a mentor about? How do I find a mentor?

JANE SAYS:

We all turn to people for advice throughout our lives, whether it be for personal or professional advice, and often those two are connected. When we're looking for help with work and career decisions or challenges, we want someone who is knowledgeable, has experience, can listen well, and is sensitive to the nuances of our situation. We want someone who has our best interests at heart. Mentors may help with specifics on teaching, research, writing, service, administration, and more generally, on our overall career path.

The mentoring relationship might involve regular, prearranged contact over a specified period of time. Alternatively, you may contact a mentoring colleague with specific questions every once in a while. If you're looking for a mentor, it's important to think about what you're looking for, both in terms of the kind of support and advice you seek, as well as nature of the mentoring relationship you'd like to have in terms of frequency and length.

What makes a “good” mentor?

Mentors can be anyone at any level in any organization who can offer candid advice, drawing from their experiences. As you're thinking about who you'd like to work with as a mentor, consider their areas of expertise, the stage they're at in their career, the positions they have held, and perhaps even how their career has evolved. Moreover, the kind of person who can help you depends on what you want from them. For example, if you're looking for advice on publishing, you'll want someone who knows the possible journals or presses that prioritize topics you work on. If you're thinking about a career move, you'll want someone who is a step (or steps) ahead of you, who can advise you on building your career. If you're looking for advice on dealing with difficult department dynamics, you'll want someone who has successfully dealt with challenging situations. If you need help networking, you'll want someone who is well-networked in your field. And if you're looking to make a career change – let's say you've been in academia and want to work in the applied sector – you'll want to find someone in the applied sector, and maybe even someone who has made that transition.

Finally, essential to a successful mentoring relationship is mutual respect and trust. If you're a feminist, a person of color, an LGBTQT person, a transgendered person, you don't necessarily need someone who is exactly like you, but you certainly want someone who “gets” you, respects you and wants to help you succeed.

What are some things I could discuss with a mentor?

Searches and hiring: How are hiring/admission decisions made at the school? How are faculty positions argued for? What are the components of a successful job visit? How can I prepare for my job talk? What mistakes do candidates make when they visit and how can I avoid them? What impressed you most about candidates you remember? When a job is offered, how do I

negotiate my salary, standing up for myself without jeopardizing the offer?

Managing a career: What is it like to work in an institution where you may be the only faculty member who works on a particular topic? What is it like to work in a department where you might be the only person of color, woman, transgendered person, or member of some other marginalized group or a combination of the above? What are the challenges I might encounter in transitioning from being a graduate student to being a faculty member, or transitioning from one position to another, whether it be in academia or in an applied setting? How can I better understand and negotiate the administrative structure at my institution? How do I negotiate more time and/or resources? How can I find out about work-family policies in my organization? How can I negotiate family leave without jeopardizing my career trajectory? How do I find local allies? How do I approach a joint appointment? How do I figure out if administrative work is something I would enjoy and do well? How do I deal with colleagues' assumptions about me based on my age, my family status, my previous jobs or the institutions where I earned my degrees? How might I approach retirement, and how might I negotiate a change in status while remaining professionally engaged?

Colleagues: What are some exciting ways I can collaborate with colleagues, and how can I initiate a collaboration? What if my department doesn't encourage collaboration? What are some ways to deal with departmental dynamics? What are some creative ways to deal with a non-supportive chair and/or colleagues? What roles can colleagues play in one's intellectual life? Who do you speak with to get emotional/substantive/methodological support on articles, etc.? If there are serious infractions in my department (e.g., unfair treatment, discrimination), how do I develop an effective strategy to deal with them?

Teaching: How do I deal with the teaching workload and maintain my research agenda? What are some creative instructional strategies I can use in the classroom, and how might I customize them based on student experience level as well as class size? in; in How might I more effectively manage difficult students? Handle difficult material? Use media in the classroom and/or assign its use outside of the classroom? Incorporate experiential components in the classroom as well as outside (e.g., field research components)?

Autobiography as it pertains to your job: Your mentor has a personal history which may hold important lessons that can only be learned through a kind of personal narrative. You may want to ask: How did you come to teach at this campus or work at this agency or organization? How did you make the decision to become a sociologist? What were the constraints on you when you were up for review/tenure/defending a dissertation? What challenges did you face and how did you overcome them?

Topics to avoid:

Gossip about other people (e.g., faculty members, students, staff).

Complaints about how hard you have it in comparison to others.

Personal questions (e.g., Why did you decide not to have children? Why did you only have one child?). If it is relevant and they think you could learn something from this, they'll offer the topic up for discussion themselves.

How do I find a mentor?

- Choose mentors who will have both the time and energy to help with whatever task(s) you need assistance with. It is a very different request to ask someone to read an article you're working on, than to ask someone to read your entire dissertation or book manuscript.
- Know how to appropriately approach a potential mentor. Some organized mentoring programs (like the SWS Professional Needs Mentoring Program, as well as some university-based mentoring programs) make the initial match, based on information that mentees provide about what they need, drawing from a pool of available mentors. But if you're finding your own mentor, be clear with the potential mentors you contact about what kind of advice/support you want. Recognize that potential mentors are probably very busy, and while they want to be helpful, they will likely have time constraints. Be sensitive to this, and ask them what works for them, in terms of how much time they have to advise you/talk with you. Don't push for more. As with any relationship, you're building a mentoring relationship from the ground up. Communicate clearly with the possible mentor, letting them know your needs, but equally importantly, asking them what works for them, time-wise and content-wise.
- Consider finding a mentor in your own department or in your organization or institution. Having someone "local" helps you feel more grounded, and builds critical relationships. That said, it may make sense to work with someone outside of your department or institution because you don't want folks to know what you're working through, or you have some prickly issues that involve your department and you need outside advice.
- Do people work with more than one mentor? The answer is "yes". We often benefit from having multiple mentors. One mentor may not be able to meet all your needs, over time. You may find that a particular mentor is really helpful in some arenas, but less experienced in others. You might work with various people sequentially, or they might all be people you turn to from time to time.
- Don't overlook the valuable mentoring that can come from others at your career stage. Some of the best mentors during grad school, for example, are other grad students. And you may also find useful mentors who are in earlier career stages; for example, many senior faculty are now turning to students to learn about making use of social media in teaching.
- Mentors can be found in your own department, in other departments at your university, in the SWS membership (winter meetings are great for meeting fellow SWSers), at regional associations, in an ASA section, at ASA sessions – anywhere that you have contact with other people in your profession. Don't discount anyone since you never know who might have a brilliant answer to your question!
- SWS has three programs available! The Professional-Needs Mentoring Program matches members with a more experienced member on a specific project the mentee needs help with. The Sister-to-Sister Program collaborates with the Professional Needs Mentoring Program to match members with scholars of color, and also provides programing at SWS meetings).The Hand Program supports members who are going to professional meetings for the first time by connecting them to more experienced members).

CAVEAT to all professional advice: Always check with your departmental colleagues, chair, dean, etc. to find out what the norms and expectations are in your institution. If you have sensitive questions, find an

ally who you trust who can answer your questions.

I hope this helps!

-- Jane