

Hey Jane!

Advice for Graduate Students Seeking Mentors

Welcome to Column 38 of *Hey Jane!* This is a project of the SWS Career Development Committee. Questions are generated by the committee and SWS members.

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The *Hey Jane!* series editor is Christin Munsch.

Hey Jane! I recently enrolled in a PhD program and am thinking about how to get the most out of my mentoring relationships. Do you have any advice about what to look for in a mentor? What kinds of things do you wish someone had told you about mentoring when you started graduate school?

It's great that you're thinking about mentoring from day one. I strongly believe students must be proactive in creating mentoring relationships. We can't expect others to do it for us or that others will always know how to mentor us in appropriate ways. Sadly, academia doesn't systematically train PhD-level scholars as mentors. [Some universities](#) offer resources to faculty members in an effort to help them think about their role as mentors, and [other programs](#) exist to help early career faculty seek mentorship through the tenure and promotion process. However, few resources exist for PhD students to learn mentoring skills and none of these efforts, if they do exist, are required. This means that most academics have learned how to mentor through their own experiences, good or bad, and apply those to their own students.

Below I outline advice that I've pulled together from personal reflection and long conversations with colleagues. I hope these will help you think about the mentor/mentee relationship and help you take the power back in your own mentoring relationships so that you can get the most out of your PhD program.

- Choose your mentors, don't wait for them to choose you. Ask questions of other mentees or students who have worked with people you are considering working with. Consider potential mentors' strengths and weaknesses and how these might compliment or add to your own skills and abilities. A good mentor will help you hone your unique contribution to the literature by helping you to think strategically about your area of research.
- One mentor is never enough. Your advisor will, most likely, be an important mentor, but do not rely on your advisor alone. Think about other mentors who might have specific skills you'd like to gain or access to networks that would be especially helpful to you.
- Seek out mentors who can cultivate not just your academic side but also those who can speak to your humanity. Many professional academics have erected barriers between themselves and their students in the name of professionalism but sometimes this can distance them from the human experiences (e.g., stresses, anxieties, mental health needs)

of their students. Be sure to clearly communicate your needs to your mentor(s) and seek out mentors who are willing to talk about issues that extend beyond academic subjects.

- Be sure to ask your mentor(s) for help in opening doors for you professionally. For example, they could invite you to collaborate on a project, invite you to submit something to a special issue, or nominate you for a professional position or award. The problem is, mentors are busy people, often with many students to think about. If there is an opportunity you are interested in, *ask* them to advocate for you.
- Consider working with mentors who can appreciate the ways in which your multiple identities (e.g., race, class, gender, sexuality) influence your academic trajectory. Identify and reach out to mentors who will understand these complexities. This doesn't mean looking specifically for someone with your same demographic make-up, but it does mean looking for people who will acknowledge—not gloss over—the ways in which your identity intersects with your work, your experiences as a student, and your search for jobs.
- Finally, note that most graduate schools have resources and an ombudsman who can help investigate serious issues with discrimination or abuse in mentor/mentee relationships if you should ever have a serious problem with a mentor that requires institutional intervention.

Good luck with your PhD! I offer this advice to you with the hope that you can help shape a new mentoring culture that will better serve you and future students.