Mentoring Undergraduates in Scholarly Activity

Rebecca M. Jones, Ph.D.
Assistant Director, OSCAR, George Mason University, rjones22@gmu.edu and oscar.gmu.edu
OSCAR is the Office of Student Scholarship Creative Activities and Research, home of the Student as Scholars initiative.

Inspiriting • Visionary

"Mentors are pivotal in ensuring the success of the student experience. ... Through excellent mentoring, students are invited into the community of researchers and scholars as colleagues."

Dr. Shannon Davis
Department of Sociology & Anthropology
"I believe that students learn about research by performing research, but only if they really care about the research question."

"Mentoring an undergraduate is an intense experience, as the student is developing their self-confidence and intellectual voice under your guidance."

Dr. Dan Cox
School of Systems Biology, Krasnow Institute for Advanced Study
"Undergraduate students are a fully integrated component of our research program and they have had amazing success in their efforts."

"My greatest reward as a mentor is the ability to watch these students grow as individuals, to see their hunger and drive, and to provide the opportunities and guidance to enable them to achieve their goals."

Dr. Adam Winsler
Department of Psychology
"Mentoring undergraduate students and bringing them into the culture of scholarship is one of the great joys of my job."

"I create a culture of scholarship in my research lab by having weekly lab group meetings (with all level of students) working together and helping each other, sharing and presenting their ideas and getting feedback, engaging jointly in scholarly discussion, and critically reading and reviewing studies."

Connecting with Mason Students
- Talk about your scholarly interests in your classes
- Advertise a position on HireMason
- Ask graduate assistants to recommend undergrads in your area
- Undergraduates may be less prepared for independent work, but often can be taught quickly.
- Be listed on OSCAR's website as a contact for students.

Email OSCAR to be added to the list:
oscar@gmu.edu

Beginning a Relationship
- Develop a project timeline
  - When will the student be working?
  - What will the project involve?
  - With whom will they interact?
- Determine frequency and method for advising meetings
  - Be flexible about your student's time
- Details should be verbally negotiated, ideally summarized in a syllabus
  - See OSCAR website for syllabus template that can be used for any Independent Study or Individualized Scholarly Experience.
- oscar.gmu.edu >> Faculty & Staff >> Teach a Course
- Establish expectations for a grade
- Develop a plan for disseminating the work
- Model the problem solving and critical thinking skills required to be successful

In the trench...
- Connect regularly (at least weekly) with your mentee.
  - Face-to-face, email, blogs, wiki… by whatever means is easiest, keep in touch with your undergraduate.
- Provide direct guidance for the ongoing research.
- Research and scholarly activity can seem daunting and redundant to an undergraduate
  - Speak encouraging words OFTEN.
  - Help your student see the big picture
- Be honest about your expectations and encourage an open professional dialogue with your mentee about the work.
- Adjust goals and discuss progress regularly.
  - Don’t be surprised if your project shifts focus a few times.
- Offer guidance in planning professional progress and achieving necessary milestones.

Reaching an endpoint.
- Help your student disseminate their work
- Be a reference required for professional opportunities.
- Recognize when your student needs to move on, help them connect with new mentors in their field.
- Seek counsel from OSCAR or a peer if a mentoring relationship is not working out.
  - "Ending a collaboration does not imply personal rejection. Some people just don’t work well together because of differences in style, values, or intellectual interests."
- Reap the benefits
  - Gratification that you are training a new generation of scholars and practitioners.
  - An open exchange of ideas with intelligent and motivated students and collaboration of minds on a project
  - Renewed passion for your own scholarship
  - Possibly, an enduring friendship with a new peer.

Practical • Resourceful

A student’s perspective

Claire Collins
"Over-expression of Thymosin beta-4, Neuroscience"

"Research was a great opportunity for me to interact with a professor (Dr. Geraldine Grant) and have a one-on-one relationship that was more personal. My mentor was down to earth, helpful, and caring towards her students and we were in constant communication with one another throughout the project by text messages, phone calls, and meetings. Working on this project helped shape my career path. I know that the bond I share with my mentor won’t end here."

Enduring qualities

- Mentors are practical.
- Mentors educate.
- Mentors provide insight.
- Mentors are accessible.
- Mentors criticize constructively.
- Mentors are supportive.
- Mentors are specific.
- Mentors care.
- Mentors succeed.
- Mentors are admirable.
- Mentors guide
- Mentors listen.

[In the image, the text is accompanied by images of people and documents, illustrating the themes discussed in the text.]