BUILDING AN ONGOING MENTORSHIP AND SUPPORT NETWORK

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“… academics should not reject the very idea of networking out of hand, but embrace it as a valuable strategy for surrounding yourself with happy people who are happy to help you.”  (Streeter 2014)
DOING A PHD

- At some point, you become the only person who is the most knowledgeable in your topic/project than anyone else (in the lab, in your program, and in your entire field!)
- Doing a PhD is an amazing journey.
- …but can be a lonely one
- It’s important to surround yourself with mentors and friends who will provide support along the way.
HOW YOUR MENTOR(S)/SUPPORT NETWORK CAN HELP YOU

- research
- long-term professional (career) goals
- well-being
YOUR SUPPORT NETWORK IN ACADEMIA

● primary faculty mentor(s)

● core support network
  ○ committee
  ○ cohort
  ○ labmates
  ○ postdocs
  ○ collaborators

● extended support network
  ○ people you meet at conferences & events
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FINDING THE RIGHT FACULTY ADVISOR/LAB

- An advisor is choosing you (admissions) – but you’re also choosing your advisor!
- But how do you choose the right mentor?
Marriage vs. The Ph.D.

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<th>Marriage</th>
<th>Ph.D.</th>
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WHAT CAN YOU EXPECT FROM A FACULTY MENTOR?

• career guidance *
• establishing lab culture and expectations
• discussing science and ideally sharing the joy of doing/learning about science with you!
• helping you learn to:
  • design experiments
  • interpret and analyze data
  • create research products (posters, journal articles, grants, patents)
  • give good academic talks
• facilitating networking and collaboration; promoting your career
• (some degree of) personal support / accommodations to major life events
WHAT FACTORS ARE YOU PERSONALLY CONSIDERING AS YOU CHOOSE A MENTOR OR MENTORS?
SOME THINGS YOU MIGHT CONSIDER…

- research interests
- mentorship style
- publication & placement records
- work-life balance
- issues for underrepresented students
- location
- … and more!
I. RESEARCH INTERESTS

- Do the **main research goals** of the lab align with your scientific interests?

- Keep an **open mind**!
  - Specific research projects, tools, techniques, etc. come and go.
  - Your interests **can (and most likely will!)** change and develop throughout your academic career.

- Ask yourself: Would you **intrinsically value** the work that you would do?
2. MENTORSHIP STYLE

- **hands-on vs. hands-off**
  - direction, efficiency, and support // micromanagement
  - independence/freedom // absence of mentorship

- **feedback style** – critic vs. cheerleader

- **How much one-on-one time?**

- **lab culture**
  - close knit vs independent
  - small vs. big
  - can change over time (students & postdocs come and go)
3. PUBLICATION & PLACEMENT RECORDS

- What’s their publication record like?

- Where are the alumni now?
  - How many are postdocs/faculty at reputable schools or have excellent industry placements?
4. WELL-BEING

- Does your mentor encourage a healthy **work-life balance**?
- What are their expectations for **time spent in the lab**?
- Is your mentor oriented to helping you with **aspects of belonging to an underrepresented group**?
5. PROGRAM/SCHOOL

- location
  - Can I be happy there for 5-6 years?
- $$ / teaching load
- flexibility in switching labs/advisors
- number of potential advisors (if admissions is department-level, e.g. Linguistics)
INTERVIEW/VISIT WEEK: WHAT DO YOU ASK AND WHO?

Questions to ask the prospective mentor:
- How hands on are they?
- What’s their mentoring philosophy?
- What are their expectations for time spent in the lab?
- Is it ok if you reach out to current grad student(s) by email?

Questions to ask lab members / grad students in program outside the lab
- Any history of abusive behavior or harassment? – feel out for that, but can frame as, what’s your impression of them? What do you think their approach is like as a mentor? Are their students happy?
- Be aware of and try to get more clarity on potential red flags

Any other advice/suggestions for information gathering?

Anecdotes / stories / mistakes from those that have gone through this?
BE REALISTIC

- Be **realistic** about what any single mentor can do – **No mentor/lab is perfect!**
  - You don’t have to treat your PI as your one source of support; it can be beneficial to seek support from people other than your primary faculty mentor.

- Consider your preferences.

- A mentor who works great for one student might not work out for another student.
  - A student’s goals, personality, and training trajectory are **unique**, which means that **finding the ‘right’ mentor is also individual**.
MENTOR-MENTEE RELATIONSHIPS GO BOTH WAYS.

● Maintain these relationships in a professional manner.

● Show that you are a responsible junior colleague.

● Develop and demonstrate your abilities to be an independent researcher.
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LAB MATES – 
A CRITICAL LIFELINE!

Different labs have different cultures / expectations, but no matter the lab, forging friendships with your labmates is a good idea.

Labmates may help you:

- learn techniques
- deal w/ statistical / technical problems
HOW TO MAKE FRIENDSHIPS ACROSS LABS

Attend another lab’s lab meetings

Attend social events (departmental or informal mixers)
  - Don’t just talk to people you already know!
  - Regular repeating social events can help build meaningful/lasting connections (weekly or monthly get-together/party)

Attend or help plan events with regular meetings
  - journal or book club
  - technical workshop series / internal conference
  - student government

Other suggestions?
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BUILDING YOUR EXTENDED SUPPORT NETWORK

- Make the most out of conferences.
  - Don’t just talk to people you already know!
  - Your advisor/labmates may introduce you to some people.
  - Ask good questions and send follow up emails to people whose work interests you (posters, talks)

- Make connections with fellow PhD students (especially those at other institutions)
  - Networking isn’t just about talking to ‘big names’!

- Go to invited talks / guest lectures.
  - Lunches, dinners, individual meetings, …

- Academic Twitter

- Maintain your connections. Embrace the concept of giving and taking!
GOOD LUCK!

WHEN YOU FINALLY FIND THE PERFECT MENTOR