What is a mentor?

A mentor is a “trusted friend and counselor” and even a role model, or a person likely to be a source of inspiration about a particular career. This person could be a teacher in a course, someone you know in the community, or an alumnus. The term mentor derives from Homer’s epic, The Odyssey. Mentor was the name under which Athena, the goddess of wisdom, undertook the education and care of Telemachus, the young son of Odysseus, when Odysseus set off on his travels and adventures.

Why is a mentor important?

A mentor helps you to

- Discover more about yourself and your potential
- Develop personal skills and habits
- Increase your self esteem and confidence
- Expand your horizons and explore your intellectual and artistic passions
- Develop the courage to take intellectual risks
- Learn to critically evaluate your own work and accept constructive criticism
- Work through academic, career and personal issues

Your mentor may also:

- Share career-related knowledge and experiences that help you plan the steps necessary to get from “here to there”
- Become a role model in developing your own attitudes, values and goals
- Contribute to your professional and intellectual development
- Provide insights into graduate school and professional opportunities
- Provide encouragement as you seek both an appropriate focus for intensive study and the intellectual breadth
- Provide opportunities to explore careers through research and scholarly activity
- Help you develop a professional network through introductions to colleagues and important people in the field
- Provide guidance in setting long range personal and professional goals
- Provide a realistic assessment of role expectations in a given career

What do students expect from a mentor?

Here are some of the responses from a recent study of what students expect from their mentors:

- Be familiar with me; get to know me.
- Be interested in me as an individual person--my goals, my problems.
• Establish rapport.
• Encourage the maximum use of my abilities.
• Help me gain an understanding of my potential, my interests, purposes, and values.
• Help me analyze and interpret my interests and abilities in terms of present day needs and opportunities.
• Help me recognize my responsibility for exploring my goals and needs.
• Encourage me to consider issues more deeply, to explore more fully and frankly my own position.
• Respond sensitively and imaginatively to my feelings.
• Help me to develop self-awareness.
• Assist me in making adequate and satisfying adjustments to the college world, its responsibilities and opportunities.

Limitations on mentoring responsibilities

• Mentors do not replace your academic advisors.
• A mentor cannot make decisions for you, but can be a sympathetic listener and offer various alternatives to consider.
• A mentor cannot increase your abilities or maturity, but can encourage you to use your abilities and maturity.
• A mentor should not attempt to handle cases of emotional disturbance and distress, which fall outside the reasonable crises most students encounter. When complex problems arise concerning mental or physical health, or personal or social counseling, mentors should refer students to the Campus Health Service (621-6490).

How can I find a mentor?

Choosing a mentor is in some ways similar to choosing a life partner with all its complexity. The most successful mentoring relationships grow out of shared interests and compatible characteristics. Thinking about what you want from a mentor may help you develop a strategy to find a mentor. Here are some strategies to identify shared interests:

• Talk with faculty after class or in their office hours about course material, readings, or ideas that you find engaging or inspirational.
• Follow-up with speakers (faculty, staff, alumni, community members) that you hear in clubs, colloquia, classes, and other events.
• Talk to your supervisor about her or his career. Arrange to spend time socializing with her or him outside of the office, studio or research lab.
• Ask your advisor or department head if they know of alumni who are interested
in talking with students about careers.

- Search the UA Faculty Research and Scholarship database to identify faculty with similar academic interests or expertise you would like to develop: http://rso.web.arizona.edu/frs/
- Ask your advisor if your department or college has a process for identifying or assigning faculty mentors.
- Contact the Honors College for assistance in finding a mentor (honors@honors.arizona.edu).