Co-mentors and Unofficial Mentors: Meeting Advisors and Collaborators Outside of Your Lab

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You may be lucky to have attentive, supportive mentors who provide you with opportunities to grow and develop as a junior scholar. Even among those who are in this opportune position, there are many reasons to form relationships with mentors outside of your lab. Here are three main benefits of outside mentors:

• Build A More Diverse Committee
• As a graduate student, you will need to find individuals to serve on your committees and provide feedback on some of the most important documents of your graduate student career. Researchers and faculty from diverse disciplines who have a knowledge of theories and perspectives beyond those in your lab or department can help you design and execute research that is creative, interdisciplinary, and cutting-edge.
• Expand Your Resources, Expand Your Network
• Meeting potential mentors from around your department or beyond can give you access to datasets you are hoping to work with or help you develop a new skill (e.g. data analysis, physio measures). Multiple mentors help you expand your network beyond who your primary mentor knows. These mentors can introduce you to collaborators and potential employers.

• Open Up New Possibilities
• It is good to keep your options open. Mentors go on sabbatical, take new positions, or may no longer have grant funding to employ you as a research assistant. Already-established relationships with co-mentors and unofficial mentors can help you navigate these speed bumps and provide you with advice and even employment.

Ways to Meet Advisors and Collaborates Outside of Your Lab

1. Attend Campus-wide Events
   Attend colloquiums and brown bags in your department and across campus. These events will provide opportunities to hear about what other research is being conducted around campus, what type of data faculty are working with, etc. Typically after these events there is an opportunity to meet the speakers, but also others in the room who are interested in the same topic. Faculty may even advertise if they are looking for collaborators at these events.

1. Go to Departmental Events
   There are many official and unofficial department events including welcome back potlucks, dissertation defenses and celebrations, and goodbye parties. Go to each. These parties provide the opportunity to network, present your skills, and talk about research with potential mentors in a relaxed, low-pressure environment.

1. Ask Your Primary Mentor
   Many mentors understand the benefits associated with having co-mentors. Your mentor may be able to introduce you to potential mentors at conferences, or set up a meeting with someone who you are interested in asking to have on your committee who is across campus or at another University and difficult to get in touch with.

1. Ask Your Friends
   Some of your student colleagues may have connections with faculty from institutions they attended as undergraduates or as Masters students. As you develop relationships with other graduate students at conferences through national and international organizations, most would be happy to introduce you to their mentor and other faculty in their departments. Visit their posters and presentations, where their mentors are likely to be present, and don’t be shy in asking for an introduction.
Next Steps: What to Do Once You’ve Met A Potential Co-Mentor

Once you meet a potential co-mentor, let them know what you have to offer. You may have particular skills that could be helpful to a project, such as knowledge of approaches for dealing with missing data. You may come with a set of skills looking to gain additional ones, such as practice collecting physiological data. In many cases, you can begin by asking to volunteer on a project. You can be up front about the amount of time you can commit. Few faculty would turn down free labor, and most are excited to learn that graduate students are interested in their work. This initial volunteer work can introduce you to new faculty and peers outside your lab, let you know if you want to pursue this new research area, and set the stage for future, more in-depth collaborations.

It is important to be open and honest with your primary and other mentors about the commitments you would like to make to other supervisors. As a graduate student, your time is precious, and it is important that you spend it in ways that will best prepare you for your career. However, it is also important to maintain good relationships with your multiple mentors and collaborators. It goes without saying how important it is to follow through on your promises and not to overcommit. Especially in the beginning of a new relationship with an unofficial mentor, it is important that you make the time spent training you worthwhile to your new mentor. Help their projects be successful, and it will be easy for them to introduce you to their network and help you, too.

Leaving the comfortable confines of your lab or department can seem like a big step, but once you make the leap, you will see that potential co-mentors and unofficial mentors are excited to work with you as well. It never hurts to ask!