

To: John Rehr, Chair, Graduate Committee
From: Ad hoc Mentoring Committee
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Subject: Proposal to include mentor on Ph.D. Committees
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Proposal

As part of an overall effort to rejuvenate and extend the department's advising and mentoring program, we propose that one member of each student's Doctoral Committee be designated to have an official mentoring role. This would be a different member than the Chair of the Committee, who serves as the student's advisor. The designation would be internal to the physics Department, and made at the time of constituting the committee. We do not envisage this as necessarily increasing the size of the Committee, although it could do so in some cases.

Background and justification

We provide in the following a brief account of the motivation for this proposal, as well as a description of how it fits into the overall picture of advising and mentoring in the department. We also describe the suggested implementation.

Mentors vs. Advisors, and the need for the former

All students presently begin our program with an assigned Academic Advisor and then later choose a Research Advisor. Why, in addition to this, do we need a "formal" structure for mentoring? How, in fact, does mentoring differ from advising? Mentoring differs by being more broadly concerned with students' progress, contentedness, and future career prospects. In short, mentoring concerns the overall professional development of students. It is often best for students to have more than one mentor: although the Research Advisor usually provides significant mentoring, others can provide support from a perspective that is more distant from the thesis research. A variety of forms that mentoring can take are described in a useful publication of the UW Graduate School, "How to Mentor Graduate Students: A Faculty Guide," (2005), and also in the companion guide for students.¹

The need for mentoring is well expressed in these Guides. We quote from the introductory letter:

"An important part of the mission of The Graduate School is to improve the quality of the graduate student experience. To that end,

¹Available at <http://www.grad.washington.edu/mentoring/GradFacultyMentor.pdf> and <http://www.grad.washington.edu/mentoring/GradStudentMentor.pdf>. We have obtained sufficient copies of the Faculty Guide to hand out to all faculty members if this proposal is presented at a faculty meeting, and would use the guide as part of the background for a more extensive discussion of our vision of mentoring in the department.

we spend a considerable amount of time talking with students about their goals, concerns, and suggestions for improving their experience. Over the years, a common theme has emerged—*the desire for more effective mentoring.*”

Further, as noted in the Guides, research indicates that students are more likely to succeed if they have had a mentor.

We think that it is *prima facie* clear that good mentoring will improve the experience of our graduate students. In that regard, we note that the recent (Autumn 2008) survey of our own graduate students found substantial dissatisfaction with mentoring and a clear interest in its improvement. The PGSC (Physics Graduate Student Council) will include a discussion of the desire for more mentoring and proposals for how this be implemented in their upcoming report to the Faculty. We also note that the NSF has recently begun requiring a mentoring component in proposals for support of postdoctoral associates, indicating that the funding agencies are becoming more aware of the importance of mentoring.

Overall plan for mentoring in the department

Much successful mentoring is already going on in our department, but in an *ad hoc* way that is dependent largely on the efforts of individual students, faculty, postdocs and staff. Our overall aim is to facilitate the extension of mentoring to all students by including an “official” mentoring component at all stages of students’ graduate careers. We hope that this, along with increased discussion of mentoring in the department as a whole, will act as a seed that will encourage faculty (as well as senior students, postdocs and staff) to seek out mentees, and students to seek out mentors.

The specific proposal presented here is one aspect of our overall plan, and we summarize this plan here in order to provide context.

- **First year:** In addition to a faculty academic advisor, each student is assigned a more senior (usually second year) student-mentor. Each student-mentor has one or two mentees. Mentors are chosen from volunteers, and must agree to attend the mentoring functions during orientation, to meet with each mentee one-on-one at least twice per quarter, and attend “training” and “brainstorming” sessions.

We are implementing this for the first time in the present (2008-9) academic year (although with mentors chosen by the ad hoc committee in this first run-through).²

²There have been student-mentors since 2003-4, but the ratio of first-year students to mentors was higher, and the system was less organized and involved less follow-up. In particular,

We also envision academic advisors having an increased mentoring role. At present, this is facilitated by having “mentor group meetings” during orientation, with the advisor, advisees and their mentees having an informal meeting prior to individual advising. One simple thing that academic advisors can do once they have gotten to know their advisees’ interests is to suggest possible mentors among other students, postdocs or faculty.

- **Second year until Committee formation:** This is the least well-formed part of the plan at present. We imagine that students will continue mentoring relationships with their student-mentors and/or will have found other student mentors during their first year.

As at present, academic advisors will continue advising and mentoring students until they have found a research advisor.

In addition, we will encourage students to search out possible faculty mentors during their search for a research group (a search that will typically have begun in their first year). This will be specifically encouraged by the third part of the plan.

- **Committee formation until graduation (this is the present proposal):** One member of each student’s Doctoral Committee will be designated as a mentor. This should be someone other than the Committee Chair (i.e. the research advisor) but there would otherwise be no restrictions. It could be someone working in a similar research area, or someone in a different area with whom the student has formed a mentoring relationship. One could even imagine it being the GSR (graduate student representative from another department), although this would likely be a rare circumstance.

Our idea is that this faculty member would proactively seek out the student on an occasional (but regular) basis and discuss the student’s progress and needs. They would be available as a friendly and supportive sounding board, and offer constructive criticism. They would suggest contacts as needed, and help the student think about future career options. In sum, the faculty mentor would agree to take on some responsibility to look out for the student during their time doing research.

We think of this proposal as ensuring that each student obtains a “bare-bones” level of mentoring. We hope that students will seek out, as needed, a number of mentors from not only the faculty and other students but also from the other members of the department and University, including postdocs and staff.

mentors met as a group with mentees as well as one or two faculty advisors once per quarter, and less emphasis was placed on student-student mentoring.

Implementation of Proposal

From an administrative standpoint, this proposal will require little work to implement. Committees must be approved by the GPC, who checks that they conform to the Department's guidelines. We would only need to add that the student should note in the proposed committee which member is the designated mentor. If this proposal is implemented, we suggest that, for the first year or two, until the procedure is well established and the expectations well known, the GPC contact the designated faculty mentors, discuss their responsibilities, and make sure that the students and proposed mentors have discussed their expectations of the mentor-mentee relationship.³

Finally we note that, if it turns out that the mentoring relationship is not working, then the mentor designation could be moved to another, possibly newly added, member of the committee. Changes to committee composition are straightforward to implement.

³We note that in the above-mentioned guides there are helpful suggestions and worksheets for such mentor-mentee discussions. There are also periodic workshops offered by the graduate school.