



A Professional Development Program  
for Graduate Students and Postdoctoral Fellows  
Offered by the Teaching Resource Center

## Selecting a Program Advisor

Just as advisors from your department offer specific advice related to a course of study (which courses to select, how to shape your research plan, etc.) or a large project (your thesis or dissertation), so can your program advisor offer professional advice, provide feedback on the materials you complete for your TPT Dossier, share information, and help you develop a plan to reach your future career goals.

Although many people use the terms advisor and mentor interchangeably, these two differ in their level of commitment to the advising relationship. In some, but not all cases, your program advisor will become a mentor.

A mentor is much more than an advisor. Though advisors provide beneficial information, mentors can also help you navigate the written and unwritten standards of professional behavior and performance in your field, while actively promoting your growth and development as a professional. In addition to serving as a career guide or information source, a mentor can be a trusted ally not only to help you survive but also to thrive in graduate school and beyond. Research shows that faculty members with mentors “demonstrated greater productivity as leaders in professional associations, received more competitive grants and published more books and articles than did those faculty without mentors” (Luna 29).

Key to finding a program advisor is finding someone who is not only a respected and productive faculty member, but also someone who is available and empathetic to your work and career goals. Your program advisor can be, and sometimes should be, someone other than your dissertation/thesis advisor, and can even be someone in a different department as long as he or she can advise you knowledgeably about professional standards in your chosen field. When you approach a faculty member to be your program advisor, be sure to explain why you’ve chosen him or her and what serving as a program advisor entails by giving them a copy of the Advisor Information form. Also, be prepared to give the faculty member a graceful “out” if he or she is too busy or overcommitted. If you are honest about why you think this individual would be a good advisor and about your expectations, this conversation could open the door to future assistance or collaborations, even if the person can’t become your advisor. If your first choice fails to come through, have a back-up choice in mind.

The following pages will provide useful information for you as you select and work with your program advisor, with an eye toward selecting an advisor who will also be a good mentor. If any problems arise when working with the program advisor you’ve selected, please contact one of the TPT Program Coordinators.

### Works Cited:

Luna, Gaye and Deborah L. Cullen *Empowering the Faculty: Mentoring Redirected and Reviewed*. ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report Three. Washington DC: George Washington University, 1995.