What Is a Mentor and How Do I Find One?

Our advising model at CWRU aims to balance generalist and field-specific advising, shifting the balance as students progress through their undergraduate careers. At the beginning, your First Seminar instructor provided generalist advising until you declared a major. At the same time, representatives from each major and minor were available to provide field-specific advice as you decided on an area of focus. Once you declared (or soon declare) a major, our emphasis shifts to major-focused advising with an advisor assigned in that field to guide you in the construction of a sensible academic plan and to monitor your progress in pursuit of that plan. All along the way, the deans in Undergraduate Studies are available for generalist advising to address concerns that fall outside of the pursuit of a specific major.

There is surely much that we can do to improve advising at CWRU to ensure that students can access reliable academic advice easily and promptly. One part of improving advising will be to clarify what you can and cannot expect from an assigned advisor. Accurate information is essential, but the advice received from one person may differ from what another person advises, each advisor trying to see the world through your eyes, but approaching the issue from his or her own perspective. A good advisor will help you sort through what may seem like inconsistent advice to determine the best plan for you. This begins to move us from what one can expect in terms of advising to the mentoring that students are often seeking.

Mentoring takes on a long-term perspective and often goes beyond the transactional elements of getting from here to a CWRU degree. A mentoring relationship grows organically, based on a bigger picture of what a student seeks to accomplish both professionally and personally after college. I recently found a definition of mentoring in Associate Justice of the United States Supreme Court Sonia Sotomayor’s memoir, My Beloved World (Alfred A. Knopf, 2013), that resonates with me. Justice Sotomayor writes that it was at law school where

... I met the first person I can describe as a true mentor. I had long known the good of seeking out the guidance of teachers .... And I had an even older understanding of how much friends and classmates could teach me. But I had not yet discovered the benefit of sustained dialogue with someone who epitomized the kind of achievement I aspired to, and much beyond that. It was not the comfort of handholding; rather, it was a style of learning by means of engaging a living example. [...] For me the most agreeable and effective instruction has come from observing the nuances and complexity of live action, the complete package of knowledge, experience, and judgment that is another human being. [Chapter 19; I read the book on my iPad, so there is no exact page number.]

“Sustained dialogue with someone who epitomized the kind of achievement I aspired to.” A mentor may be the person assigned as your formal advisor, but it may also be another faculty member in a course in or outside your major, or another professional on campus, or someone you encounter through community engagement or meet as part of a professional program offered by the Career Center. While we can assign advisors to handle transactional matters, students must identify mentors based on their own long-term goals. Some formal advising relationships develop into mentoring relationships, but our community provides many other ways in which mentoring relationships may develop.
So how to go about finding a mentor? As I wrote, these relationships develop organically, so there is no clear prescription. One good way to start is to follow the advice Richard J. Light offers in his book *Making the Most of College: Students Speak Their Minds* (Harvard University Press, 2001): Make it your job “to get to know one faculty member reasonably well this semester, and also to have that faculty member get to know you reasonably well” (p. 86). This will set the stage for meaningful connections to CWRU and help you to develop a set of professional relationships and to think broadly about plans for the future from a variety of perspectives.

*Let me know what you think. You can write to me at jeffrey.wolcowitz@case.edu.*