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The Chronicle of Mentoring and Coaching,
2025, Vol. 9, No. 3
doi.org/10.62935/s2405p

THE CHRONICLE
of MENTORING & COACHING

M.A. Student Mentorship: Structural Challenges, Student Wellbeing and the Value of a Generalist Approach

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While a significant body of scholarship has explored graduate mentorship in academic programs, the majority focuses on long-term relationships, particularly the mentorship of PhD students. In this paper, we explore key avenues for study and success in the under-explored context of short-term and assigned mentorship within one-year MA programs. As MA programs in the US expand, it is critical to understand the mentorship needs of MA students. Drawing on reflective practice based in 10+ years of experiential evidence in nine-to-twelve-month terminal master's programs, we locate our and our students' experiences in relation to existing understandings of graduate mentorship and associated challenges. After exploring the distinct needs of MA students and the structural conundrums they face, which differ from those of students in longer-term programs, we turn to strategies for MA mentorship accumulated throughout our own careers. Our recommendations center on the value of generalist mentorship, the need for a diverse community of mentors including peer mentors, and the necessary facilitation of "safe to fail" scenarios even for students in intensive and tightly-structured programs.

Keywords: Graduate mentorship, master's programs, scaffolded and generalist mentorship

Introduction

Considerable past research illuminates the challenges to successful graduate-level mentorship in academic programs and proposes useful strategies for successful mentorship in academic settings. Most past work in this vein centers on long-term relationships and on the experiences of PhD students, who are often presumed to be guided by tenured or tenure-line faculty. In this scenario, the mentoring relationship is mutually-agreed upon, mutually beneficial, and developed over time, with mentors in a position of relative power vis-a-vis mentees. Despite the steady decline of tenure density in the university system, doctoral mentorship also remains implicitly premised on the assumption that student mentees are on homologous paths and will seek research faculty positions (Wisdom, 2025).

In this paper, we turn our attention to the mentoring landscape of the nine-to-twelve-month MA program, in which advising responsibilities are largely assumed by contingent instructional faculty. This situation has attracted far less attention and yet represents a demographically more significant scenario than the mentoring dyad of PhD student and tenure-line research professor. As has been widely reported, the number of PhD students in the United States continues to shrink, while MA programs expand in number and size (Kwon, 2025; Kelchen and Barrett, 2024). As of 2023, master's programs account for 65% of all graduate enrollment in the US (Gardiner, 2024). Simultaneously, with only 32% of US faculty members holding tenured or tenure-line appointments, contingent, non-tenure-track faculty are increasingly assuming the graduate mentoring load (American Association of University Professors, 2024).

We contend that the distinct mentoring constraints of the terminal MA scenario merit greater attention given these realities, as do strategies for mentorship success in the MA student/contingent faculty dyad. This article centers our experiences as non-tenure-track instructional professors in terminal MA programs with 15-20 student advisees per year. We argue that assigned, non-specialist, short-term mentoring relationships can be highly valuable to mentees in master's programs, and we outline critical avenues for scholarly attention given the constraints and challenges posed by the MA model. The challenges we consider include the short duration of such relationships, their mandatory and assigned nature, and the predominance of student mentees pursuing careers outside academia after degree completion. We conclude by offering a proposal for mentoring success in such scenarios, drawing on reflective practice based in 10+ years of experiential evidence as well as from prior studies. Our recommendations center on the significance of informal and peer-mentoring networks, the benefits of a generalist mentorship approach, and the need for "safe to fail" scenarios for masters students. We intend for this inclusive approach to meet diverse student needs as an intellectual

but also practical provocation for faculty, staff and institutional administrators working in the underexplored field of MA student mentorship, and more broadly, in short-term, assigned mentoring contexts.Previous Scholarship on Academic Mentorship

Literature Review

Higher education scholars have long found that graduate students "regard their relationships with faculty as the single most important aspect determining the quality of their graduate experience" (Rose 2005, 56; see also Lovitts & Nelson, 2000; Luna & Cullen, 1998). Starting from the near-unanimous premise that positive mentoring relationships predict student success and that negative mentoring relationships contribute to professional problems, numerous studies have examined systemic barriers to positive mentoring relationships and the facilitation of successful and beneficial mentorship in academic settings.

As previous studies have shown, relationships with advisors or mentors can be a major source of stress and dysfunction for graduate students (Noy and Ray, 2012; Wisdom, 2025), who already experience higher rates of stress, anxiety and depression than the general population (Evans et al., 2018; Oddone et al., 2021). Most research has thus focused on the experiences of mentees, and the desires, tactics, and attributes from both sides that might be fostered to facilitate positive and successful mentorship.

Past study, for example, clearly illuminates the complex roles of race and gender in mentoring relations, finding patterns that indicate the hierarchical nature of academic mentoring (in a context in which faculty are historically male and white), negatively impacts the graduate experiences of women and academics of color (Cobb-Roberts et al., 2017; Davidson and Foster-Johnson, 2001); McGuire and Reger, 2003; Rose, 2005; Williams et al., 2018) Research suggests that graduate students of color have more tenuous advising relationships with predominantly white advisors (Brunsma et al., 2017; Noy and Ray, 2012) and that graduate students of color and female graduate students are more often isolated or mentor-less (Davidson & Foster-Johnson, 2001; Smith & Davidson, 1992; Thomas et al., 2007). Scholars have found that male graduate students tend to receive more career benefits from advisors and mentors (Fried et al., 1996), even while female advisors typically invest more time in offering affective and psychosocial support than their male colleagues (Collins, 1983; Gilbert, 1985; Rose, 2005).

Still other researchers have explored the unique challenges of international graduate students (Lee et al., 2023; Tenenbaum et al., 2001). Scholars have tracked the difficulties of mentees from "collectivist" cultures in adapting to Western mentoring norms, wherein friendship and trust are downplayed in favor of boundary-maintenance (Davidson & Foster-Johnson, 2001). Other studies center on the challenges that students from regions that prioritize respect for authority face in asserting themselves in academic settings (Davidson & Foster-Johnson, 2001; Rose, 2005;). Despite these special pressures, academic mentors were found to nevertheless presume homologous experiences for all students, and to avoid talking about racial or ethnic identity and structural inequities (Foster-Johnson, 2001; Prunuske et al., 2013).

The conundrums presented by this research have elicited a variety of applied studies investigating strategies for successful mentorship. Relevantly, these include the elucidation of successful mentoring techniques across academic scenarios (Wisdom, 2025; Brunsma et al., 2017; Wright-Harp et al., 2008), the promotion of awareness and training in sensitivity to gender, race and cultural communication styles (Williams et al., 2018; Brunsma et al., 2017; Cobb-Roberts et al., 2017; Thomas et al., 2007; Davidson and Foster-Johnson, 2001), the suggestion that mentorship should play a larger role in promotion criteria (Thomas et al., 2007), and the finding that programs should facilitate networks of formal and informal mentors, including horizontal or peer-mentor relations (Wisdom, 2025; Oddone et al., 2021; Snowden & Hardy, 2010).

Program

The Unique Challenges of Mentorship in One-Year MA Programs

Our experiences mentoring MA students lead us to concur with many of these findings, including the risk of isolation for minoritized students, the need for mentor-training in gender, race and cultural sensitivity, the need for informal mentoring networks or communities, and the critical role of horizontal peer networks. However, the terminal MA scenario also poses its own structural constraints, which merit attention given the demographic realties of expanding MA programs, shrinking PhD cohorts and the intensifying casualization of academic labor.

PhD mentor relationships unfold over several years, a feature that past scholarship has significantly assumed in developing schemas and recommendations for graduate mentorship and socialization (e.g. Williams et al., 2018; Gardner, 2010). While academic mentors in MA programs may remain in contact with students for years, reviewing PhD application materials and serving as references, the official mentoring timelines in our programs are just nine-to-twelve-months, at the end of which we are assigned a new cohort of mentees. In programs like ours, faculty mentors are non-tenure-track, instructional professors with PhDs, and mentor-mentee pairs are assigned prior to the start of programs, rather than fully self-selected. While disciplinary fit is taken into consideration in mentor-mentee pairings, the field-specific expertise of mentors may or may not bear

on the learning and professional goals of mentees.

Given the challenges and constraints of a fast-paced, intensive one-year MA, these relationships are also essentially non-negotiable: neither party is generally at liberty to decline the relationship or to exchange mentors. Most students in our programs will select another faculty reader for their MA thesis three-to-four months into the degree, who is then listed as their primary thesis advisor. This scenario can then reflect what scholars identify as the problem of "ghost" mentorship (Wisdom, 2025), in which the party that performs the bulk of the advising labor, including regular thesis feedback, receives less institutional credit.

Concomitantly, the experiences and the needs of MA students differ markedly from those of PhD students. Simply put, our students tend to have a much wider range of educational and professional backgrounds than their peers in doctoral programs. Many have not had access to the elite trajectories common to PhD students at top research institutions; some are older students pursuing an MA to make career pivots; 25-55% are international students with varying degrees of English proficiency and thus uniquely vulnerable to both social and educational struggles in graduate programs (see Kelley et al., 2023; Heng, 2016).

Our students matriculate with varying levels of interest in a PhD: while up to 70% express interest in doctoral study upon embarking on an MA, only about 20% will ultimately apply. Of those students who do ultimately enter PhD programs, shrinkingly few will ever obtain full-time, tenure-track jobs within the academy.

In this context, it makes little sense to shape mentorship initiatives or relationships towards reproducing the career trajectories promised by tenure, or even extrapolating from our own careers as full-time, contingent faculty. Many of our students go on to work in government, industry, museums and other cultural institutions, publishing and translation, university administration, professional writing, and teaching, among other possibilities. Some will later pursue an alternative graduate track such as law, public policy, or an MFA program. This kind of cohort diversity tends towards a dynamic, vibrant academic culture but also poses challenges for students, who must determine their own trajectories and desired outcomes, and mentors, who must tailor their advising approach to each student's unique educational objectives.

Despite the goal and trajectory flexibility of our students, the quick time to degree means all have far less runway to explore than PhD students. They must swiftly curate a transcript that best serves their developing professional aspirations; and they have less room to "fail" than PhD students given that a single "incomplete" course can quickly throw their degree into question. Most are writing a professional, article-length research paper that serves as their MA thesis while also enrolled in a full graduate courseload. Given the reduced fellowship support available to MA students, many will even hold part-time jobs while pursuing this course of intensive full-time study.

The significant financial burden assumed by students and their families compounds the stakes of graduating. This, coupled with the intensity of the workload, can significantly exacerbate student mental health challenges. Stresses can be particularly acute for students from traditionally underrepresented or minoritized groups and for international students, particularly in a climate of visa-uncertainty.

Mentors must be highly attentive to these issues even as they work to rapidly educate MA students about the formal expectations of graduate education and the "hidden curricula" underwriting the implicit assumptions, values, and customs of disciplinary culture. Highly varying levels of exposure to and investment in the academic standards of R1 (research intensive) graduate education on the part of students can make this difficult for mentors and mentees alike.

Recommendations: Scaffolded Mentorship, the Generalist Approach, and "Safe to Fail" Pedagogy

As a result of these various pressures and challenges, we have found through experience that MA academic advisors must be ready to deliver a wide range of mentorship services to students quickly and consistently over the course of their study. These include institutional and departmental familiarization, research and writing skills, career planning, thesis production, and pastoral care. We apply what we term a "scaffolded" approach to mentoring, understanding our roles as central advisors who help students develop mentorship networks (including with peers, other thesis advisors, and course instructors) and navigate the range of campus resources.

While encouraging mentees to think of us as a kind of "hub" that connects them to other sources of academic, professional, or personal guidance, we also individually offer our students a wide range of formal and informal mentorship. Our core functions, from course advising to building research and writing skills, to providing thesis feedback, most often reflect a formal mentorship scenario, one that is mandatory for both parties and involves a set schedule of interactions with clearly designated roles (Mullen, 2021). However, we also provide ongoing informal support, helping students navigate interpersonal issues with faculty and peers, celebrating student successes, and navigating crisis management. To acknowledge and serve the diverse experiences and needs of our mentees, we encourage them to discuss and troubleshoot their experiences with navigating educational and institutional processes without fear of judgment or retribution.

Results

In general, our accumulated experience in MA advising has taught us the value for building student confidence and independence, by encouraging our mentees to openly share dissatisfactions and critiques of institutional processes and culture—even while a substantial part of our role is to acclimate students to just this culture. In so doing, we provide them with strategies not only for replicating academic norms but also for deciphering how they operate and whom they privilege. This empowers students to understand and successfully navigate (or even avoid) dynamics that they are likely to encounter throughout their graduate career and in professional life; and it allows us to pedagogically intervene where useful. Because this less-formal mentoring accommodates customization, time-sensitive advice, affective flexibility, and various kinds of role-play or practice, it can encourage trust, exploration, and creative improvisation. It also enables students to relate to us as coaches invested in their success, as they define it, rather than as disciplinary gatekeepers.

Given the diversity of MA students' backgrounds, goals, and needs, we practice and recommend to other educators a form of holistic mentoring that emphasizes not only success in academic programs but also the cultivation of tailored future aspirations and overall wellbeing. While our formal roles as teacher and student mean that the mentor-mentee relationship is unavoidably hierarchical, we strive to build the capacity of our students to make their own decisions wisely. Our model of mentoring isincorporates both structured aspects, as well as developmental ones in the sense that we prioritize the complex educational and professional trajectories of our mentees, alongside their multidimensional welfare, over questions of institutional benefit or the training of future faculty (see Hutson, 2018; Brown et al., 2009).

Our experience playing roles as formal and informal mentors has shown us that there are deep advantages to generalist mentoring in MA programs, wherein considerations of academic or professional "fit" are non-essential to the health and thriving of the mentor-mentee dyad. This kind of mentorship does not rely on pre-existing similarities between a mentor and mentee in terms of disciplinary background, research interest, or career trajectory. In our roles, we clarify at the outset that we are not necessarily experts in our students' selected academic (sub)fields but engage their work as informed, generalist academic readers with advanced training in scholarly methods and conventions. We then help connect students to faculty mentors who specialize in their specific content areas and who can offer more targeted disciplinarily-focused advice.

The generalist academic mentoring approach conveys significant advantages for mentees that often go unnoticed. Firstly, it encourages students to think across often stultifying or artificial disciplinary boundaries and to engage in the necessary process of communicating their interests to a broader academic audience. (The latter is beneficial should they remain in the academy, and it is vital should they be departing.) Secondly, as generalist mentors, we are in a better position to see students as "whole persons" instead of presuming they will share elements of our career trajectories, thus enhancing our efficacy in developmental mentorship. This is essential, since, as previously mentioned, many of our students use their year to transition beyond academia. In creating a space of critical distance in the mentor-mentee dyad, generalist mentorship puts MA advisors in a better position to explore the motivations of their mentees beyond academic background and ambitions, forming relationships that can generate, rather than foreclose, options. It allows MA mentors to provide open-minded, flexible, and creative support, exploring the broader interests and priorities of mentees.

Discussion

Our holistic, scaffolded approach leads us to foster a diverse mentorship landscape that includes not only faculty and university staff, but also a robust network of peer-mentor relationships. MA advisors can encourage formal peer mentoring in the context of thesis writing workshops, where members submit drafts for discussion and where mentors model and moderate feedback. Spontaneous and even momentary peer mentoring can take place in informal study groups or social receptions, during which students often feel most comfortable sharing challenges or strategies for success. As MA advisors to a group of 15-20 mentees, we are uniquely positioned to facilitate and generally encourage such peer mentoring networks. Some of our respective MA program faculty members lead our students in forming writing groups early in the year and encourage these to continue meeting through the completion of theses. Others meet with students weekly for informal social gatherings after seminars.

Student peer mentors help fill informal mentoring needs and provide students with low-stakes sounding boards for making decisions towards future goals, navigating tensions with institutional protocols and norms, and managing personal or academic pain points. At the same time, when properly supported, peer mentors also gain experience and confidence in problem-solving, advising, and communication. Since access to timely and spontaneous informal mentorship is key to student success, we strive to model this relationship for students where possible, finding low-stress avenues to provide advice, constructive feedback, and an invested ear, whether in the classroom, office hours, during informal social gatherings, or chance meetings. While we intentionally cultivate the conditions for relationships of peer mentorship to thrive, we think it is important for these dynamics to develop organically so there is no structural or normative

fixity to who is the peer mentor or mentee in any given interaction.

This effort to provide our MA students with "mentorship on the go" represents one component of our attempts to cultivate "safe to fail" pedagogical scenarios, something that considerable recent pedagogical research suggests is key to student learning, self-confidence, and retention (e.g. Eyler, 2024; Nilson et al., 2023). As discussed previously, the short-term and intensive nature of the MA programs in which we work make the provision of such scenarios quite challenging. Nevertheless, we contend that MA programs (and mentors) must work to establish lower-stakes feedback scenarios in guiding our master's students towards productive, non-traumatic relationship with their own thinking and writing. Crafting classroom experiences wherein students engage in low-risk brainstorming, free writing, and experimentation in early stages of project development and write-up is critical for student wellbeing and success. The facilitation of peer mentorship along the structured lines we have suggested above can be a key component in this, as can thesis workshops, where students submit drafts and are led in discussions of each other's work. We also suggest that MA programs might build additional "safe to fail" pedagogical experiences into their curriculum by, for example, offering pass-fail pre-courses in the summer before a program begins, wherein students can encounter and practice the reading and writing skills they will need once the year begins. Of course, the kinds of robust and multifaceted mentorship we have described in this article is only possible given adequate academic staffing with institutional guidelines that mandate manageably small advising loads for MA program faculty, such that mentors have time to carefully read multiple drafts of a student's MA theses, and facilitate extra "safe to fail" experiences and peer-mentoring opportunities, as these are crucial to facilitating adaptive growth for students.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we suggest that a short-term, assigned adviser can uniquely provide key mentorship for MA students in intensive programs. We argue, however, that the structural conditions of such programs and the unique challenges faced by MA students and by academic staff working in MA programs merits greater scholarly attention. The needs of MA students are not identical to those of PhD students, as their overall plans, backgrounds and academic experiences differ. Simultaneously, many academic staff in MA programs find themselves in distinct (non-tenure) situations that may facilitate unique perspectives on the graduate trajectory, and afford open-minded, holistic support for students with diverse future goals. We urge that support for MA students take a critical, generalist mentorship approach, foregrounding the diverse opportunities their students may explore in the future and recognizing the unique challenges they face in their graduate work. This model functions best in a kind of "village" scenario, in which diverse mentorship opportunities, including horizontal or peer mentorship, are not simply assumed to be available, but actively cultivated for students. Lastly, we recommend that MA faculty mentors find ways to foster "safe to fail" scenarios for their students to better facilitate learning, enthusiasm, and success. With various media platforms questioning whether "the master's is the new bachelor's" in desirable job markets today, it is critical to continue to examine the experiences and needs of MA students and the institutional practices that best support their development.

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