



College of Nursing

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## **Finding a Match and a Mentor in Doctoral Study**

*by*

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One of the more critical decisions you must make as you pursue doctoral study is **finding the right match**. The right match means that you have found a faculty person who has research and scholarship interests that are similar and compatible with yours, and who is willing and interested in working with you. The right match may make the difference between whether or not you should apply to a particular doctoral program. If there is no match between you and faculty at a particular University, then you should consider another program where the match is right.

You may be wondering what the **difference is between a match and a mentor**. Both terms are used in doctoral education. Match generally refers to similarity in research interests whereas the mentor role is much broader. The task of a mentor is multifaceted. Mentors are *advisors* with career experience willing to share their knowledge, *supporters* who give emotional and moral encouragement, *tutors* who give specific feedback on one's performance, *masters* to whom one is apprenticed, *sponsors* who are sources of information and aid, and *models* of the kind of person one should be to be an academic (Zelditch, 1990). These characteristics of mentor combine to provide a broad-based nurturing of the professional and personal development of the graduate student. Ideally, one faculty will serve as both a match and a mentor. Thus, in finding the right match you will also find that mentor so essential to your career development.

You may be wondering how you go about **finding a match**. First, begin by looking at the literature in your chosen subject. Determine who is publishing. Conduct a literature search on those names and find out which universities employ those scientists. Second, examine the web pages of the various universities you are considering. Look at faculty profiles, read about faculty's programs of research, and familiarize yourself with their publications. This information will give you an idea about **potential faculty matches and mentors**. You may also want to examine the website of the National Institute of Nursing to determine who is currently funded or has been funded in the past. Evaluate the faculty as you would a potential employer because you will be spending the next years working closely together during your doctoral program.

After you have gathered all this information, you are ready to proceed to the next step---**contacting faculty** to inquire about the match between your interests and theirs. You may have found that no faculty has exactly the same research interests as yours or that you are still unclear about a specific research question, but you have a general research idea. If so, then it is essential that you dialogue with faculty to help you clarify and shape your ideas. You cannot determine fit until you are fairly clear about your research direction. Faculty members also have ideas about potential research directions that build upon their own research and may offer these ideas to you to help shape your research program. Consider these ideas carefully, although do not agree to an idea unless you can embrace the proposed research as your own.

Let me give you some examples of **the right way to find a match**. Recently a student contacted me via email to inquire about my program of research and the match between our interests. This student contacted me because of publications she had read and because of a referral from a faculty member at another university. Although we don't have exactly the right match, we have begun a dialogue to develop her ideas. I have also suggested several other faculty, including one at another university, to contact about her research ideas. The goal of all these discussions is to enable the student to clearly articulate her research agenda to match with the faculty. Another student met me at a conference two years ago and began to discuss doctoral study. Since then we have emailed each other and met several times at various events to discuss her research program. She is going to build upon my program of research with African-American women. In these examples, both students did their homework, and have given themselves plenty of time to clearly articulate their ideas prior to applying to our program in about six months. By opening this dialogue, both students have set the stage for a productive collaboration during their doctoral program.

**In summary**, finding a match is an important decision in pursuing doctoral education and one that can have major implications both for applying to doctoral programs and for being selected by the program you wish to attend. You need to give yourself adequate time to do your homework and to dialogue with faculty. To paraphrase *Fiddler on the Roof*, you need to act as your own matchmaker and “make you a match, find you a mentor, catch you a catch” that meets your doctoral educational goals.

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Zelditch, M. (1990). *Mentor Roles*, Proceedings of the 32nd Annual Meeting of the Western Association of Graduate Schools. Cited in Powell, R.C. & Pivo, G. (2001). *Mentoring: The Faculty-Graduate Student Relationship*. Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona.