

A Best Practices Guide to
**FACULTY-STUDENT
MENTORSHIP AT
YALE LAW SCHOOL**

*A Complement to Yale Law Women's
Speak Up! Series*



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Purpose & Methodology

Yale Law Women (YLW) presents this Guide as a follow-up to the Yale Law School (YLS) 2016 Report on Diversity and Inclusion.¹ Motivated by this report, as well as by previous research on mentorship disparities at YLS, Yale Law Women organized a Mentorship Committee in the fall of 2016 to conduct further research and create a best practices guide for students, faculty, and administrators.²

We looked to five sources of evidence to guide this report and its recommendations. First, to contextualize mentorship at YLS with mentorship in the legal profession at large, we reviewed academic scholarship on the topic. Second, we conducted surveys of 1L and 3L students to understand mentorship from both a new and graduating student perspective. We then conducted in-depth interviews of faculty to learn about the most satisfying, and least satisfying, aspects of mentorship. Fourth, we conducted a series of interviews with women's organizations comparable to Yale Law Women at three peer institutions to learn how mentorship works at other top law schools, and to see how Yale can be a leader in this field. Finally, we reviewed the in-depth research and findings of previous *Speak Up!* reports,³ upon which the findings in this Guide are largely based, to inform our recommendations.

While the Committee's full report and findings will be released at the beginning of the Fall 2017 semester, we offer this condensed Guide—specifically our recommendations—to provide students with concrete advice as they enter into the summer clerkship process and prepare for the next academic year. We hope that releasing these recommendations now will also inspire faculty and administrators to take action towards improving mentorship at YLS over the summer months.

Our Recommendations

Our recommendations reflect that while students and faculty see mentorship as one of the most exciting and rewarding aspects of life at Yale Law School, both parties define mentorship in different ways and identify different areas for improvement.

For students, we hope these recommendations address the disconnect between what students *think they need* from professors to pursue their career goals and what *they actually need* to

¹See James Forman, Jr. et al., *Report of the Committee on Diversity and Inclusion* (Mar. 2016), 8 (“One of our main proposals is to work with the Dean of Students Office, YLW, and affinity groups to develop a “Best Mentoring Practices” guide akin to YLW’s best teaching practices guide.”), https://www.law.yale.edu/system/files/documents/pdf/Deans_Office/appendix_recommendations_3_23_2016.pdf.

² Students of all genders and class years were invited to join the Committee via several emails to the Wall and additional follow-up emails to affinity groups.

³ Yale Law Women has released three reports on gender at Yale Law School. In 2002, we released *Yale Law School Faculty and Students Speak Up About Gender: A Report on Faculty-Student Relations at Yale Law School*. In 2012, we published *Yale Law School Faculty & Students Speak Up About Gender: Ten Years Later*. Most recently, we published *Speak Up! Now What?* in 2015.

succeed. Often, when students say they are looking for mentors, what they really seek is help or advocacy related to achieving specific goals, which we will refer to as “sponsorship.” Such sponsorship may include providing a reference for a 1L summer job or writing a clerkship recommendation letter. For the purpose of this Guide, mentorship instead encompasses more general, long-term career advice. When students express a desire for such mentorship—a need distinct from specific sponsorship tasks—they often unnecessarily limit themselves to a small segment of tenured academic professors, viewed as more desirable by the student body, when in reality a host of clinical or junior professors may also provide excellent advice. Our Guide seeks to help students identify what they want from mentorship and empower them to make more informed, concrete choices in choosing mentors or sponsors.

For faculty, we hope these recommendations will help them determine whether they are best equipped to be a mentor or a sponsor for students, as well as how to manage these roles with their other responsibilities. This Guide also seeks to provide advice for professors who may not know how best to reach out to students as a potential mentor, but nevertheless have valuable advice and wisdom to impart. We hope that by empowering these professors to work closely with students, we can lessen the workload of those faculty members who already bear a disproportionate amount of mentorship responsibility.

Finally, for the Administration, we provide recommendations to spur specific actions and improvements to facilitate more and better mentorship relationships. The recommendations are specifically directed to help institutionalize mentorship programming from year to year so that student groups, if they so choose, can focus their funding and time on other efforts within the Law School.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations for Faculty

1. As a professor, you wield an enormous amount of power during students' time at the law school and throughout their careers. *All* faculty members should see themselves as potential mentors, sponsors and advocates for students, particularly those whose background has not given them access to informal networks in the legal profession.
2. Before the school year begins, establish your norms and what type of mentorship role you're comfortable offering to your students. Examples of those roles may include writing and other academic guidance; clerkship advice and recommendations; general career guidance; or a combination of all three roles.
3. Be explicit about these mentorship preferences when introducing yourself to new students and when posting about office hours. Consider clearly writing your mentorship and sponsorship norms on syllabi at the beginning of the semester. This can be a clear and helpful way to communicate your norms, as well as to communicate your openness to mentoring or sponsoring students.
4. If you're teaching a 1L fall course, consider using pre-class surveys to get to know your students, as well as their goals and concerns, before it begins. Doing so will allow you to learn what students in your class are wondering about, and therefore make you a better, more communicative mentor and/or sponsor.
5. Consider students with accomplishments and interests in different areas when creating mentorship relationships. Instead of rewarding only a stellar exam or impressive credentials, try to recognize thoughtful class participation or a willingness to engage in intellectual discussion during office hours. Similarly, think broadly about mentoring students both "on track" for conventional standards of law school success, such as clerking, and "off track," with more outside-the-box ambitions.
6. Consider managing your time and responsibilities by inviting students into projects and issue areas you care about and are working on. Matched interests and skillsets can help facilitate strong, mutually beneficial mentorship relationships.
7. YLW strongly recommends using the online office hours tool. This helps signal to students that you hold office hours and that you invite them to meet with you. It also provides students with a logistically easy way to sign up. If you prefer not to use the online tool, we recommend that you post alternative instructions on the Inside site so that students know how to sign up.
8. Place a clear door-knocking policy outside of your door. Many students reported having embarrassing encounters with new professors when they were scolded for either not knocking *or* knocking at their scheduled office hour time—placing a clear sign is a small but simple way to indicate your desire to interact with students.

9. If you are a 1L fall professor, consider offering to serve as a reference for 1L summer jobs, for all your students. Doing so can significantly reduce students' anxiety during the stressful period of choosing spring courses, applying for summer jobs, and studying for fall exams. Furthermore, it can also reduce the amount of office hour appointments scheduled solely for this request, therefore making more time available for students with substantive course questions or concerns.
10. Serve as a 1L small group professor! 1Ls and 3Ls surveyed by the Committee reported that their small group professor often played a pivotal role in shaping their law school experience and future professional career. Volunteering just one semester of your time provides you an opportunity to have a meaningful impact on students' experiences at YLS and beyond.
11. Regularly evaluate your professional and personal responsibilities. Do you have the bandwidth to mentor a few students, or even one? If so, consider adopting any of the recommendations listed here, or reaching out to the Law School Administration to indicate you want to help. Remember that increasing your mentorship footprint is a valuable service not only to students, but also to those of your colleagues who "punch above their weight" in the mentorship arena, especially women and junior faculty.⁴

Recommendations for Administrators

1. Incorporate mentorship into an annual pedagogical workshop for faculty. While sharing these best practices with new or visiting faculty is important, it is equally important to share them with veteran faculty members; successful mentorship is a skill that takes years, not weeks, to develop.
2. Consider using the CDO to match students and professors with relevant interests into mentorship pairs, especially those faculty who wish to mentor students but are unsure of how to begin doing so. Multiple professors expressed that academically inclined students are often not aware of potentially outstanding faculty mentors.⁵
3. Introduce CDO programming and coaching to create more transparency in how students can establish a mentorship relationship. Many students surveyed wanted advice on how to ask a professor for advice or a recommendation without it seeming "contrived" or overly "transactional."

⁴ One senior faculty member in particular noted that there is a "life cycle of mentorship" that should correspond with faculty members' familial obligations outside of the Law School. Within this framework, law professors who are "empty nesters," that is, with generally more free time than their younger colleagues, should dedicate more of their time to mentorship. This would allow professors with young children or caring obligations—disproportionately, but not solely, women faculty—to be parents *and* professors without mentoring disproportionately large portions of the student body. Interview with Ian Ayres, William K. Townsend Professor of Law, Yale Law School in New Haven, Conn. (2016).

⁵ For example, a 3L survey participant commented: "The more it is left up to informal opt-in methods, the more certain people benefit. The way to equalize access is not to promote events with affinity groups, which only perpetuates inequality of access in its own way."

4. Continue efforts to hire more faculty members who reflect the increasingly diverse YLS student body, with an emphasis on professors who prioritize mentorship as part of their job responsibilities. Consider broadening the student faculty hiring committee's influence and participation in hiring efforts.⁶
5. Continue to provide funding for faculty to take small groups of students to a meal or coffee in order to facilitate relationship-building outside the classroom.⁷ Encourage faculty to use these resources rather than relying on student groups to organize get-togethers.
6. Generate a list of faculty assistants and distribute it to students each fall. Faculty repeatedly report that they lose and forget about e-mails due to sheer volume, and that the best way to reach them is through their assistants. While students in a professor's class may know the assistant from a syllabus, students who wish to cold e-mail professors may not, and thus feel rejected when the faculty member does not respond to a request to meet.
7. Organize or fund cross small group activities to expose students to other professors earlier in the year. Many 1Ls articulated a desire to meet professors outside of their 1L fall line-up, particularly if they felt they had a small group professor with whom they did not "click."
8. Enforce mandatory office hours for all larger lecture courses. More than half of students surveyed supported such a policy. Even more so than the small group system, individual mentorship has been proven to have high rates of mentee success.⁸
9. Enforce a requirement for exclusively online office hour sign-ups. As articulated above, students found signing up for office hours via email potentially uncomfortable and uninviting, especially when professors do not respond.
10. Hire a student (or two) as a research assistant to track the amount of time professors spend on mentorship, and determine ways to compensate for this extra labor. Rewarding good mentorship in addition to scholarship will both create a more well-rounded faculty

⁶ Studies suggest, for example, that African American women mentors can provide African American women students with "special advice that might not be present in other relationships," as well as a general level of mutual understanding and respect. Lori D. Patton, *My Sister's Keeper: A Qualitative Examination of Mentoring Experiences Among African American Women in Graduate and Professional Schools*, 80 J. HIGHER EDUC. 510, 524 (2009). See also Ellen A. Ensher & Susan E. Murphy, *Effects of Race, Gender, Perceived Similarity, and Contact on Mentor Relationships*, 50 J. VOCATIONAL BEHAV. 460, 469-470, 472 (1997) (finding that interns assigned to mentors of the same race received more instrumental support and were more satisfied with their mentoring experience).

⁷ See *Speak Up About Gender: 10 Years Later* (2012) at 6.

⁸ Sandra Riley & David Wrench, *Mentoring Among Women Lawyers*, 15 J. APPLIED SOC. PSYCHOL. 374, 380-84 (finding that individually mentored protégées perceived higher levels of career success and satisfaction than group-mentored protégées, who in turn, had higher levels of perceived success and satisfaction than those without mentors).

and students that are better equipped to succeed academically and professionally. Specifically, consider tracking, by semester: 1) how many office hours each professor hosts; 2) how many student papers each professor supervises; 3) how many papers each faculty member co-authors with students; and 4) how many letters of recommendation each professor writes.

11. Consider sharing data about faculty-student mentorship with the faculty at large. Faculty members may be surprised to learn how much “extra” mentorship their peers are doing, and inspired to step up their own efforts.
12. Consider creating a working group, or using the student faculty hiring committee, to determine how best to incentivize volunteering to be a small group professor. Small group professors wield enormous influence on students’ law school experience. As such, we need a broad, diverse array of faculty to enthusiastically participate in this system.

Recommendations for Students

1. Determine what you want from a mentorship relationship and adjust your expectations accordingly. Not every professor is equipped to connect you to a Supreme Court clerkship, just as not every professor can advise on the best path to a career in corporate law or public interest work. If you’re unsure whether a professor can help you with your question, don’t be afraid to ask.
2. Understand that a close, personal mentorship relationship is *not* a prerequisite for many types of sponsorship that faculty can and should provide. A professor who taught you in a seminar (including small group), supervised a paper you wrote, hired you as a Research Assistant, or gave you an H (or even a P!) in their lecture class may be willing to write you a clerkship letter, even if you do not know each other outside that limited academic context. Each faculty member has their own standards, but for the most part, they are not as high as many students fear.
3. Prepare for office hours. Be ready to clearly articulate what advice you’re seeking, rather than saying that you simply want a mentor. It also doesn’t hurt to do some homework on the professor and their research so you can speak genuinely to how your goals align with their background.
4. Never apologize for seeking out mentorship and advice; while it’s important to be respectful, avoid apologetic prefatory remarks when setting up a meeting or attending office hours for the first time. Professors are paid to be both scholars and teachers; it is their job to help you.
5. Don’t question your qualifications, even if you don’t have all H’s or background knowledge about the law before your 1L year. Professors interviewed for this guide stated that they particularly enjoy mentoring students to whom they can “provide value add,” meaning students who do not already have access to informal networks and who may be otherwise overlooked or unexpected.

6. Consider a broad array of potential mentors and types of faculty, especially clinical and non-tenured professors.⁹ Not every mentor has to share exactly your own background, opinions, or career interests, and broadening your search will expose you to new perspectives, ideas, and insights. Remember that you will also have opportunities to find mentors through your summer jobs.
7. Pace the time you take from your mentor. Chances are you sought out your mentor because they are successful, which likely means that they will be navigating many different professional responsibilities and challenges at once. Actively determine how and when your mentor likes to meet, as well as their preferred communication style, and do your best to stick to their preferences when seeking their advice.
8. Have the courage to pursue what you really want, regardless of conventional “gold stars” of legal success. As one woman faculty member emphasized, “This is the point where you finally trade your silver tickets in for something that you care about. No one said you’re going to get big ups for doing what’s right—you’re going to have to be willing to forego praise and acknowledge that maybe people won’t be super impressed.”¹⁰
9. Consider your strengths. If you’re shy or nervous about reaching out to a professor for a first appointment unsolicited, sign up to RA for them. Alternatively, one student noted, “I wouldn’t underestimate the power of doing well on a professor’s exam. It’s not a requirement, but some people might actually find it more straightforward/simpler than some of these other avenues of “getting close” to a professor.”¹¹
10. Allow yourself a generous margin of error. A professor you might have identified as the ideal mentor may not work out, and at the same time an unexpected professor may end up being one of your most influential supporters. Seeking out mentorship takes time and practice, and you can only fail by not trying.
11. If you are looking for a faculty mentor and can’t find one during your first year, relax. Unless you have an immediate job application or other sponsorship request, there is no need to acquire a mentor or sponsor for the sake of having one. You will likely naturally develop relationships with professors as you find your way to subjects and activities that ignite your interest.

⁹ In our survey, 68 percent of 3Ls established successful mentorship relationships through clinical opportunities.

¹⁰ Interview with Issa Kohler-Hausmann, Associate Professor of Law and Associate Professor of Sociology, Yale Law School, in New Haven, Conn. (2016).

¹¹ 3L student survey participant.

CONCLUSION

Mentorship is at its best a two-way duty between faculty and students, and the preceding recommendations provide concrete steps for both groups to take in improving their mentorship skills. We also include administrative recommendations with the goal of institutionalizing mentorship knowledge from year to year. We look forward to continuing this mentorship dialogue after releasing our full report and findings at the beginning of the Fall 2017 semester.