

# **Peer-Mentorship Program Intelligent Systems Program**

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# Introduction

In the peer mentorship program at Intelligent Systems Program (ISP), incoming graduate students (mentees) are assigned to an advanced ISP student (mentor). The mentor-mentees meet regularly throughout the academic year. Graduate students at all stages can benefit from peer mentoring, but it is most beneficial to incoming students who may face difficulty adjusting to a new environment. For incoming students, peer mentors may introduce the ISP policies and resources and provide advice on such topics as adjusting to the program, initiating and maintaining a strong professional relationship with a research advisor, balancing research and coursework responsibilities, etc.

All new ISP students are required to take the mandatory course INFSCI 3005: Introduction to Doctoral Studies, in the fall term. This course acts as a parallel mentoring program provided by the ISP. Additionally, the student's advisor acts as a mentor with regards to their research area.

## Duties of an ISP peer mentor

The mentors will get in touch with the mentees about 2 months before the start of their program. Mentors will be introduced to mentees at the new students' orientation session at ISP. Thereafter, they will meet regularly during each semester, after deciding among themselves.

Before the mentor takes on a mentee, they should review the information on all the student services provided by the university as summarized in the following 'Faculty and Staff Guide for Helping Distressed Students' guide:

<https://www.studentaffairs.pitt.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/WEB-Helping-Distressed-Students-Guide1.pdf>

The specific duties of ISP mentors include—

- Meet with mentees at least twice a semester according to a schedule determined by them at the beginning of the semester.
- Introduce mentees to other ISP students, faculties, and administrative staff.
- Explain the ISP degree requirements.
- Give a campus tour.
- Introduce university resources
- Provide advice on:
  - Housing options
  - Taking classes
  - Networking with faculty and finding research advisor
  - Relationship with research advisor

- Work/life balance
- Establishing a social network
- Direct their mentees to appropriate faculty, departmental, and university resources if they detect significant issues such as— performance problems, sustained dissatisfaction or conflicts, or significant personal, health, or mental health issues, according to the mentor-mentee confidentiality guidelines (see below).

## Pairing process

### Who chooses the mentor?

The program director, ISP administrator, or the GSO representatives from ISP designate mentors for each new incoming student for the year.

### When is a student designated a mentor?

Each new ISP student is designated a mentor about 2 months prior to their arrival (e.g., in July if the new student starts in Fall). The mentor is in touch with the mentee over email if they cannot meet in person.

### How is a mentor chosen?

The following criteria should be considered for choosing a mentor for a mentee—

#### 1. Academic standing/progress in the program

The mentor should be in good academic standing or should be willing to volunteer time for their mentees without affecting their work. ISP administration should be careful to factor this service into the graduate student's overall responsibilities with a goal of not overloading students who possess the strongest mentoring skills or are otherwise best suited to being mentors.

The student should ideally have completed their coursework and finished with at least the ISP preliminary exam.

#### 2. Research interests

The mentor should share research interests with the mentee. The mentor should be able to inform the mentee with faculties in the city that work on the domain and also provide with study resources. The mentor may assist the mentee choose an advisor.

### 3. Nationality

If the mentee is coming to the USA from abroad, the mentor should, if possible, be from the same or similar nationalities. Such a mentor would be able to assist the mentee with regards to immigration and help foster a community within the city.

### 4. Gender

Mentor-mentees would preferably be of the same gender in case of requiring help with sensitive issues. The mentors should be able to maintain confidentiality and provide help from university student help services.

### 5. Job/internship experience

It is recommended that the mentor have some job or internship experience to provide career advice to the mentee. The mentor would provide information on job networking events, job fairs, timing for internship applications, etc.

## Length of mentorship

Incoming students are assigned to peer mentors for 1 academic year. This duration can be extended upon the mentee's request or changes in the ISP policies.

## Number of mentors per student

Each incoming student will be assigned to 1 student mentor based on the criteria discussed earlier. The number of mentors can be increased or the mentors can be replaced upon the changes in the availability or status of the primary mentors. Parallel mentoring for ISP students is provided by the mandatory course INFSCI 3005: Introduction to Doctoral Studies. Mentoring will also be provided by the mentee's research advisor.

## Confidentiality

Peer mentors need to be trained by ISP program to follow the university's protocol for responding to distressed students as appropriate, and on the limits of confidentiality in their relationships with mentees under university policy and governing law. Peer mentors should be familiar with the resources outlined in the 'Faculty and Staff Guide for Helping Distressed Students' which is available through the office of student affairs at:

<https://www.studentaffairs.pitt.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/WEB-Helping-Distressed-Students-Guide1.pdf>.

## Role of ISP

- Introduce the peer mentorship program to current students, faculty, and administrative staff.
- Introduce mentors and mentees in the incoming students' orientation event.
- Encourage interaction among mentors, mentees, and the larger body of graduate students.
- Train mentors about the university's protocol for responding to distressed students, and the limits of confidentiality in their relationships with mentees under university policy and governing law. Peer mentors should be familiar with the resources outlined in the "Faculty and Staff Guide for Helping Distressed Students" which is available through the office of student affairs at:  
<https://www.studentaffairs.pitt.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/WEB-Helping-Distressed-Students-Guide1.pdf>.
- Assign faculty mentors to incoming students, so that first year students have multiple resources for information and advice. The goal is to provide a network of support that will ensure that students have the best chance to flourish and complete their graduate work at the ISP.
- Provide financial support if necessary for events dedicated to the mentorship program, including training and socializing occasions.