

Guidance on Fellow-Mentor Relationships

In 2012, Virginia Sea Grant (VASG) added the requirement to partner with a professional mentor to the **Graduate Research Fellowship**, which required fellows to form a collaborative, professional growth-oriented relationship with an end-user of a student's research and findings. By 2015, the National Oceanic Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) had identified VASG's Graduate Research Fellowship and professional mentorship as a national "best management practice," since it better prepares future scientists, engineers, and other coastal and marine professionals to effectively solve complex societal challenges.

GOALS OF THE RELATIONSHIP

Objectives of the fellow-mentor relationships:

- Develop the professional skills of the fellow, including communication, collaboration, project management, and other critical skills for effective engagement between science and end-users; and
- Design effective outreach and engagement strategies, products and deliverables that can move science, technologies, and other pertinent knowledge from the fellow's research into the hands of a decision-maker and/or stakeholder who would benefit from that information.

Mentors provide a unique professional development opportunity for Graduate Research Fellows, advancing a student's understanding of how their science may make a difference in coastal and marine communities. VASG encourages creative approaches to the fellow-mentor activities that advance the fellow's professional growth and engagement with end-users. We encourage the drafting of an **individualized professional development plan** to promote the systematic consideration and attention to how experiences grow the fellow's professional competencies. Selected fellows will work with their mentors and VASG's Professional Development Coordinator to finalize the student's individualized professional development plan after the fellowship has been awarded.

EXPECTATIONS

Fellows are expected to actively work with their mentors to develop an outreach plan and participate in concrete, hands-on activities. These activities should help the fellow grow professionally and gain experience engaging with stakeholders and non-experts in their field. Fellows and mentors should work together on these activities and debrief the experience. Fellows could attend events or meetings at the mentor's organization, shadow their mentor, co-author materials, or other activities that are mutually beneficial and value-added.

At a minimum, mentors are expected to meet at a regular interval with the fellow to reflect upon the fellow's work, and provide guidance on issues associated with communicating the information to non-experts, advancing the information to managers or policy makers, promoting adoption of the innovation or technology, or other application of their graduate activities. Mentors will be invited to participate in VASG activities such as the fellowship orientation meeting and annual events.

IMPORTANT CONSIDERATIONS

Professional mentors should be individuals whose work requires the application of scientific information, research, or rigorous inquiry and evidence-based knowledge; particularly, the information, data, and/or findings that will result

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from the student's graduate activities. The type of outreach and role of the mentor will be determined and defined by the student, their faculty advisor(s), and the mentor. The activities should complement the proposed research and the student's interests. The quality of the plan and relationship will be an important part of the evaluation – see the Review and Selection Process section in the announcement.

Students should identify potential mentors early in the application process. Applicants are encouraged to consider the following recommendations based on past fellow-mentor experiences:

- Students are strongly encouraged to work with their mentor to ensure that the proposed activities are relevant to end-users, and represent a true collaboration between the student and mentor.
- Students should carefully consider their possible audiences and products for their research, and select a mentor and outreach activities that best fit their research and career goal interests. There should be a clear rationale for why the student selected a particular mentor and outreach project. Also, the plan should clearly benefit both the student and the mentor.
- Students should identify a clear set of activities and outputs (e.g., presentations to resource managers or the general public, outreach products, etc.). Stronger applications will consider short- and long-term outcomes, such as changes in regulation or improved understanding of a targeted audience.
- Students should set a clear plan for working with their mentors, including a schedule for meetings and a timeline for activities and products. The actual hourly commitment by a mentor will vary with the type of professional development and outreach activities planned.
- VASG recognizes that results of a project may not be ready for outreach activities during the fellowship period. Outreach and engagement with end-users are ongoing. Students should develop a plan that fosters continuous dialogue and engagement throughout the project, not just at the end.
- Applicants are strongly encouraged to select only one mentor. Those interested in working with more than one mentor should contact VASG first.

IDENTIFYING POTENTIAL MENTORS

A mentor can be from the public, private, or non-profit sector. Students are encouraged to review the [VASG website](#) to see examples of past fellow-mentor partnerships, and to learn about our extension partners. VASG encourages applicants to reach out to potential mentors early in the application process to discuss your mutual goals, develop a rapport, and identify emerging opportunities.

While mentors may be extension agents, educators, or communicators with Sea Grant or the Cooperative Extension program, they do not need to be. Many extension agents and other outreach program staff will have ideas and connections to potential mentors.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION AND CONTACT

For questions or inquiries, please contact VASG at vaseg@vaseagrant.org. Please reference "Graduate Research Fellowship" in your email subject line.

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