

Virginia Sea Grant Graduate Research Fellowship

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 requires 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;
- 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 VASG Graduate Research Fellows, advancing a fellow's understanding of how their science may make a difference in coastal and marine resource management. We encourage 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.

EXPECTATIONS

Fellows are expected to actively work with their mentors to develop an outreach plan, and participate in concrete, hands-on outreach 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. At a minimum, mentors are expected to meet periodically 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 results. Fellows could attend events or meetings at the mentor's organization; shadow a mentor, co-author material, or other activities that are mutually beneficial and value-added. Mentors will be invited to participate in VASG activities such as the fellowship orientation meeting and Graduate Symposium.

In Collaboration With



IMPORTANT CONSIDERATIONS

Professional mentors should be individuals whose work requires the application of scientific information, particularly the information, data, and findings that will result from the student's research project. 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 outreach activities should complement the proposed research and student's interests; the quality of the outreach plan and mentor relationship will be an important part of the evaluation criteria – see *Review and Selection Process* section in the fellowship announcement.

Students are encouraged to consider the following recommendations based on past VASG fellow and mentor experiences:

- Students should identify a potential mentor early in the application process. Students are strongly encouraged to work closely with their mentor to ensure that the proposed research and outreach is relevant to end-users, and represents a true collaboration between the student and mentor.
- Students should carefully consider their possible outreach audiences and products for their research, and select a mentor and outreach activities that best fits their research and career goal interests. There should be a clear rationale for why the student selected a particular mentor and outreach project, and the plan should 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). Stronger applications will consider short- and long-term outcomes, such as changes in regulation or improved understanding of a targeted audience as a result of activities and products.
- 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 research project may not be ready for outreach activities during the fellowship period. Outreach and engagement with end-users is an ongoing process, and students should develop a plan that fosters continuous dialogue and engagement throughout 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 (<https://vaseagrant.org>) to see examples of past fellow-mentor projects, and to learn about our extension partners. VASG encourages applicants to reach out to potential mentors early in the application process, to develop a rapport, discuss your mutual goals, and identify emerging opportunities for collaborative research and outreach.

VASG can provide assistance to applicants in identifying potential mentors, and discussing the mentor's roles and responsibilities. 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 VASG outreach program staff will have ideas and connections to potential mentors.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

If you have questions regarding VASG's goals for fellows-mentor relationships or would like to discuss ideas for potential mentors, please contact Sam Lake, VASG Fellowship and Research Program Coordinator (804-684-7436 or slake@vims.edu).