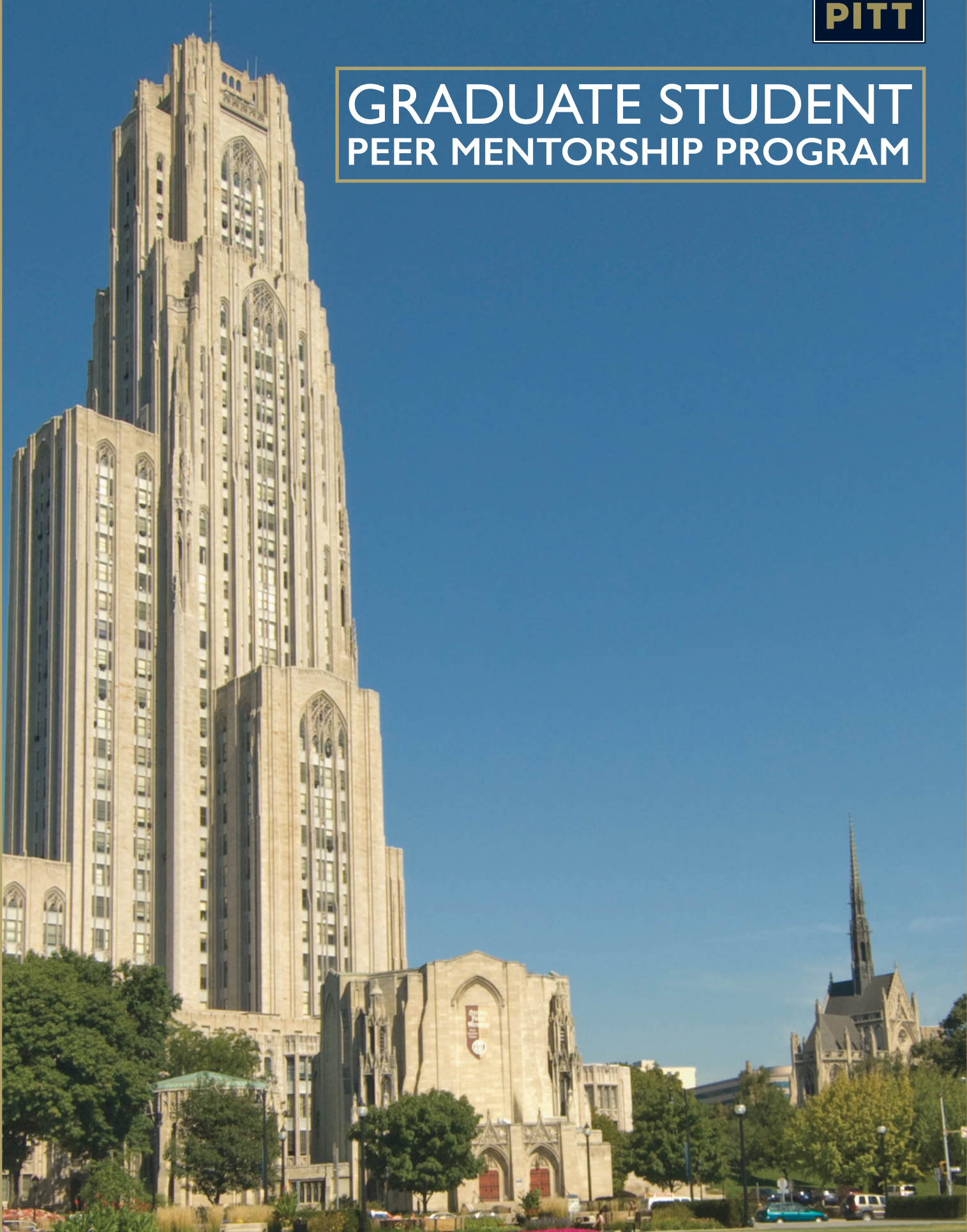


**PITT**

# GRADUATE STUDENT PEER MENTORSHIP PROGRAM



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The Dietrich School Graduate Council encourages each department to create a graduate student peer mentorship program. Peer mentors can be important resources for incoming students and can facilitate and strengthen a supportive community among graduate students.

Graduate students benefit from peer mentors in a variety of areas, from career planning to work/life balance. Peer mentors can encourage graduate students to be proactive in addressing personal and professional difficulties. Peer mentors may be especially valuable for international students and students in small programs who need a broader network to identify relevant university and community resources and provide support. A peer mentorship program also benefits the mentors by contributing to their professional growth.

We describe a typical peer mentoring program. Departments are encouraged to design programs that are tailored to their unique situations. Successful mentoring programs can be organized by the Department, the senior graduate students in a department, or a combination of both.

## Overview

In a peer mentorship program, incoming student mentees are assigned to an advanced student mentor who meets with them on a regular basis throughout the academic year. Graduate students at all stages may benefit from peer mentoring, but it is most beneficial to incoming students who may face difficulty adjusting to a new location and new expectations.

- For incoming students, peer mentors may provide advice on such topics as:
- Adjusting to a new environment/city
- Establishing a social network
- Initiating and maintaining a strong professional relationship with his/her research advisor
- Balancing teaching, research, and coursework responsibilities

Peer mentors should be trained to 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. 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-GuideI.pdf>.

## Duties of a Peer Mentor

**Professional Development.** Peer mentors can provide advice on moving through the graduate program, networking with faculty, and collaborating on research. They can supplement the work of TA mentors by sharing teaching resources and providing suggestions on how to handle classroom/teaching challenges without compromising one’s own graduate work. They can use their experience to help mentees handle conflicts with advisors, faculty, or other students in an effective way that prevents escalation. Some peer mentors may be able to provide information about career development opportunities, internships, or practica.

**Personal Development.** Peer mentors can help with work/life balance and personal development. This may be particularly helpful for students who feel isolated or have difficulties adjusting to graduate student life. Peer mentors may be particularly positioned to detect problems at an early stage and refer students to appropriate faculty or other resources.

## Department-Specific Considerations

Peer mentorship programs should fit each department's needs. Below are some factors to keep in mind in implementing a program.

**The Pairing Process.** Pairing mentees with advanced peer mentors could be done by student representatives, administrative staff, or designated faculty. Departments should establish criteria for choosing mentors and making pairings. Mentors might be chosen based on academic standing, or pairings can be based on common research interests. Departments should consider how many mentees each mentor will be assigned. A 1:1 ratio allows for a meaningful association, but some departments may be able to assign more mentees without burdening peer mentors. In assigning students to mentorship roles, departments 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.

**Length of Mentorship.** Incoming students should be assigned to peer mentors for a fixed duration, generally 1 or 2 years, with guidelines on how often each mentor-mentee should meet per term. Although the focus of the program is helping new students adjust to graduate study, more advanced students might benefit from peer mentors who can introduce them to professional networks.

**Mentor-Mentee Confidentiality.** Peer mentors should know when they should inform designated faculty about serious issues that arise in their mentoring relationship. Peer mentors need to be trained 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.

**Fostering a Sense of Community.** Departments should carefully introduce the peer mentoring program to incoming and current students as part of their efforts to create a supportive community among graduate students. Departments could support this effort by hosting a program to introduce mentors and mentees, as well as programs and social events that provide information on mentoring and encourage interaction among mentors, mentees, and the larger body of graduate students.

## Parallel Faculty Mentoring

Peer mentorship functions best when combined with faculty mentoring. Assigning students both a graduate student and a faculty mentor in their 1<sup>st</sup> year will ensure that the 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 University of Pittsburgh.

*The authors of this proposal surveyed graduate representatives in departments with an existing peer mentorship program to provide existing models of this program (Appendix A). The results of a recent survey to assess the demand for a peer mentorship program administered to the Graduate Student Organization (GSO) representatives are provided in Appendix B.*

## Appendix A. Examples of Successful Peer Mentorship Programs from Students of Various Departments

*“The secretary for graduate studies asks the graduate students whom she considers well-suited to mentoring the first-year students. She usually chooses friendly second or third-year students from each field who are then assigned ~4 mentees (note that the department receives ~25 incoming students each year) during their first year. Mentees are assigned to mentors based on common research interests. Mentors have lunch with their mentees twice a semester (e.g. late September/early October and early December, before the finals) to give them advice, see how they are doing, and more importantly, detect any problems with the core courses that they report to the faculty advisor/director of graduate studies/both. Also, mentors give a departmental orientation/tour to their mentees (offices, labs,...) at the beginning of the semester. Additionally, the first Friday evening in the fall semester, all mentors and mentees came together for an informal get-together which included pizza and other refreshments. The idea was to create an informal environment in which everyone could discuss topic of mutual interest: the city of Pittsburgh, teaching, etc. This activity was well-received. While in this program faculty advisors oversee the mentees’ academic performance, mentors are encouraged to tell the faculty advisor, without revealing confidential personal information, if their mentee is experiencing problems, especially with coursework. If a mentor believes that the student has issues that are personal s/he encourages the mentee to seek help at the Student Health Center.”*

*“We have about 8-12 students coming in each year. We have a pool of 20-25 (former) 1st, 2nd and 3rd year students to draw from to be mentors. Of course, we can also draw from older students if necessary. So there is no need to have more than one mentee per mentor. I should preface that our peer-mentor program is very fluid and is not regulated by the department. So there aren’t set-in-stone rules or regulations just a tradition. Our peer-mentor program is linked to our recruitment initiative which pairs graduate students to accepted students. We get a list of students that have been accepted into the program with a short bio and their contact information from the DGS. Our GSO (not the department) then tries to make assignments based on research interests. Once we know which students have accepted Pitt’s offer we go through a similar pairing process. It usually works out that you get the same pairs of students. I should say too that all of this is voluntary. The basic responsibility of mentors is to reach out to incoming students over the summer to welcome them and answer any questions they may have about courses and living in the city. We don’t really monitor or have established rules about how long the mentorship lasts beyond those initial emails. Anecdotally, it depends on the openness of the older student and the curiosity of the new student. Once, the semester begins, the new students meet each other and other older students with whom they may establish informal mentoring relationships. In short, the commitment is neither long nor at all demanding. Sometimes mentors and mentees become friends or at least friendly so it is hard to say when the benefits of the initial pairing end.”*

*“... we partner incoming graduate students with a more advanced graduate student in a kind of mentor/ supporting role. We also aim to make “families” formed from two mentor-mentee pairs, in the hope of facilitating further opportunities for integration into the department, and to foster multiple relationships between year groups.”*

*“We usually have 2-3 new PhD students and 2-3 new MA students each year. . . . [our department] doesn't have a formal peer mentoring program per se. By nature of the fact that we're a small department, I guess we offer what might be termed “informal” mentoring, aided by the fact that our graduate students (of all years) take classes together and work pretty closely with one another. For academic performance issues, I suspect our department functions like most at Pitt - students are encouraged to work with the course instructor first, then escalate things through the appropriate channels if necessary (their faculty advisor, the department chair, etc.).*

*“In [our department], our graduate student organization organizes peer mentoring. The entire graduate student body of our department, approximately 15 students, is represented by and part of this organization. Current graduate students volunteer to serve as mentors for incoming graduate students. While research interests are taken into account when matching mentors with new students, it is not always the case that mentors share research interests with their mentees. Mentors may be 2<sup>nd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> year PhD students, depending on the needs of the incoming class. There are no established rules for mentor relationships. Primarily mentors help new students become acclimated to Pittsburgh and the Department. They meet as little or as often as they wish. We have no set system for reporting problems to faculty. We might recommend mentees speak with their advisor or the Director of Graduate Studies, depending on the matter at hand. However, we are a very small department. Typically, mentors are in graduate courses with their mentees, which does help them share information. While officially mentorship lasts for the first year of a graduate student's career, relationships built with mentors are maintained beyond that, particularly because our department is quite small.”*

*“It is my understanding that our. . . [overall] department accepts around 10-12 students per year, and in . . . [our particular program] we have between 2-5 students per year. Thus, every incoming student gets paired up with a mentor. The department reaches out to us and helps assign mentors based on subject interest; thus, advanced students ..[in one area] generally get paired with incoming students [from that area]. . . , and so forth. It isn't always perfect, but alas. In my experience, we have at least two formal meet-and-greet situations up front, and [our area] generally holds their own subsequent gatherings with respect to mentoring. It is officially a one-year deal, but it seems as though many people in our program (and in the [larger] Department) continue the dialogue in years subsequent. Once again, I can speak only from limited experience, but I would say that if any of our mentees were expressing mental problems, etc., then we would of course respect their privacy, try to help them, and perhaps see if we could refer them to support groups on campus. We do not have an official system for reporting these situations to an advisor, a faculty supervisor, etc. Lastly, likewise, we don't have a system in place for “reporting” poor academic performance to an arbiter of whatever sort.”*

## Appendix B. Results of the GSO survey (39 responses)

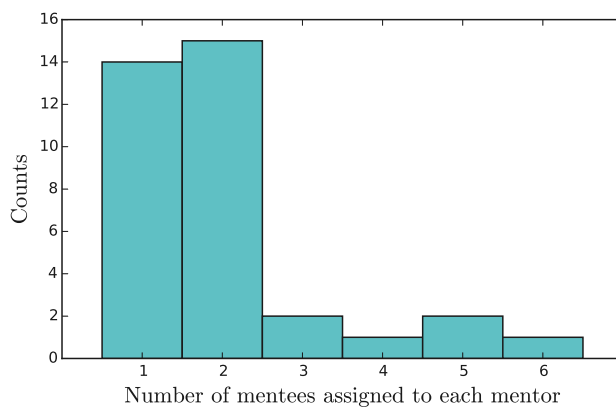
The student authors carried out a survey at the Graduate Student Organization's February 2017 meeting in order to have varied input from graduate students who belong to different departments from the Dietrich School of Arts and Sciences. The questions that were posed sought to help the Graduate Council elaborate a peer mentoring document with both general and department-specific considerations. The results of the survey are summarized by the authors of the proposal.

### Questions of interest:

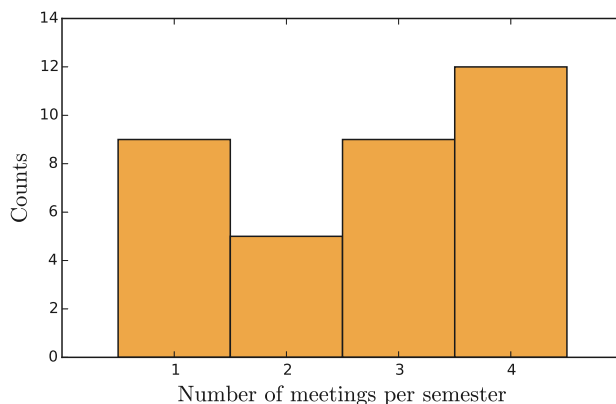
#### 1. What topics should be discussed between mentors and mentees?

Work-life balance, adjusting to graduate school expectations, university resources available to mentees, conflicts with advisor, and/or department, graduate and career development, choosing courses, networking, time management, funding opportunities, job opportunities, adjusting to Pittsburgh, paper authorship, mental health, navigating Pitt graduate administration, and the "imposter syndrome"

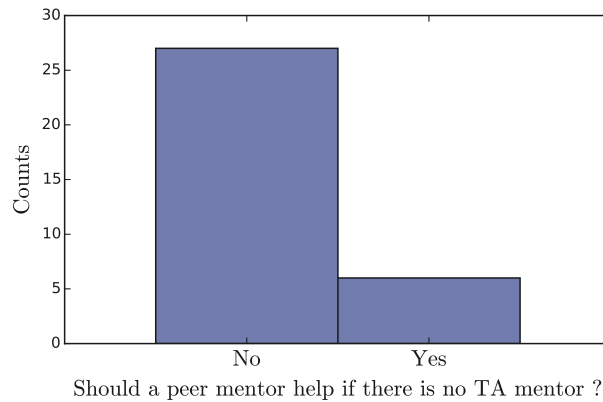
#### 2. How many mentees should each mentor be assigned?



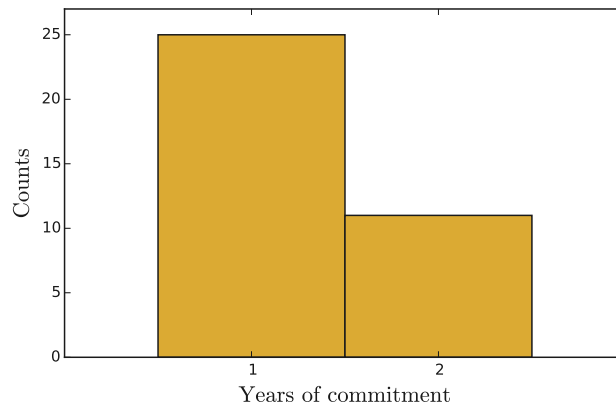
#### 3. How often should mentors and mentees be required to meet each semester?



**4. Should peer mentors be required to provide tangible help in specialized classes (e.g. lab class, computational class) in departments that do not have a TA mentor?**



**5. How long should the commitment between mentor and mentee remain (e.g. a year, two years, etc.)?**



**6. What warning signs should a peer mentor look for?**

Repetitive conflicts with advisor/department, expression of sustained unhappiness, depression, or apathy towards his/her work, or poor performance in courses/research may be signs of problems for which faculty assistance might be required or the mentee may need to be referred to counseling or other assistance.

**7. How can a mentee get the most of his/her mentor?**

Regular interactions through email or casual/lunch meetings, using mentor as resource for professional questions and maintaining work/life balance, being prepared at meetings with mentor, focusing primarily on professional issues, confidential discussions, being assigned to a mentor based on professional and personal match

**8. When should a mentor reach out to someone else for help? If so, who?**

Mentors should reach out when there are extreme conflicts between a mentee and their advisor, if mentor believes mentee needs significant help and/or is unequipped to provide help, if mentee asks for help, exclusively when the mentee asks for help. It should be noted that students mentioned that a mentor should be trained on how to handle emergency situations.

### 9. How can a mentor approach delicate subjects?

Mentor should ask for permission from mentee to discuss personal things, attend workshop training with counselor/social worker, be empathetic, maintain confidentiality, relate his/her own experiences,

### 10. What special help might be needed for international students?

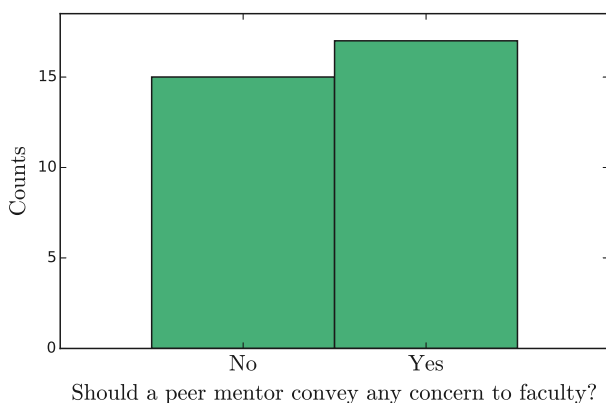
Acclimating to the American and graduate culture, help in identifying the correct offices and resources to assist with immigration-related matters, helping identify fellowship opportunities for non-citizens, addressing language barriers (should match with mentor of same culture if possible or assign 2 mentors – one from the US and one from the native culture), being invited to social outings, doing peer review of writing, conveying campus resources

### 11. What benefits might a peer mentor offer above and beyond that of a TA mentor or a departmental ombudsperson?

A peer colleague with whom to share research interests, relate with personally, discuss personal and professional challenges, seek emotional support, and share updated information regarding job prospects

### 12. Should peer mentors be required to convey any concerns about mentees to faculty? If so, in what manner? (e.g. participate in faculty meetings, have a mandatory meeting with faculty for this purpose periodically)

Some work-related problems may need to be discussed with the appropriate faculty. For personal-life problems mentees should be encouraged to seek help at the Student Health Center or through other resources listed in the Faculty & Staff Guide for Helping Distressed Students.



### 13. Is there anything else you would like us to consider while proposing a peer mentorship program?

Suggestions on how to tailor it to different departments, encourage participation and monitor progress to increase chance of success of program, “return compassion and support back to academia”, consider how to minimize burden on peer mentors, consider undergraduate mentorship (by other undergraduates or graduate students)