

University of South Alabama
University Committee on Undergraduate
Research Program (UCUR)
Mentor Handbook
2013



University of South Alabama
Mobile, AL 36688-0002
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Welcome, Mentor!

Welcome and thank you for participating in the University Committee on Undergraduate Research (UCUR) Program at the University of South Alabama. The UCUR Program is designed to promote scholarly and creative activity in all disciplines, enhance critical thinking, develop problem-solving skills, and encourage creativity and written communication. We are excited about the program and your participation in it. Together, we will help prepare scholars for their future success.

Welcome!

Director: Dr. Anne Boettcher
Email: ucur@southalabama.edu
Phone number: (251)-460-7527

JOB DESCRIPTION

- Title:** University of South Alabama UCUR Mentor
- Job Summary:** Provide experience, guidance, and assistance to an UCUR scholar for the purpose of preparing them for future endeavors.
- Responsibilities:**
1. Provide direct supervision and weekly support for the UCUR scholar.
 2. Assist the scholar to establish realistic goals for their project, and meet the benchmarks and deadlines imposed by the UCUR program.
 3. Assist the scholar to understand topic formation and methodologies involved in investigating and reporting on a topic in their chosen field.
 4. Assist with UCUR summer workshops and discussion sessions.
 5. Directly supervise the research/scholarly activity, the development and submission of a research paper or portfolio, and the poster creation and presentation of your mentee.
 6. Use sign-off sheet to indicate when scholar's work is satisfactory and complete (see page 13 for a copy of the form that scholars will provide to you).
 7. If appropriate, assist the scholar in writing for publication and in submitting a proposal or abstract for presentation at a discipline-specific conference, an exhibition, or performance, and/or for journal publication in his/her chosen field.
 8. Attend the Fall UCUR Symposium.
 9. If appropriate, supervise and accompany the UCUR scholar to professional conferences and association meetings.

Why Mentoring?

The University of South Alabama UCUR Program considers mentoring to be an essential benefit to the scholars.

Mentoring is effective. Career achievement is often linked to the establishment of a strong mentoring relationship. Most successful people can point to a mentoring relationship with an accomplished individual early in their career as an inspirational force, motivating them to pursue and accomplish professional goals.

For example, studies of nontraditional students in graduate programs have found that the presence of a strong mentoring relationship, or the lack of one, is the primary factor in predicting the student's success in completing a Ph.D. program.

Roles of the Mentor

A mentor serves as a **role model** for the scholar in the process of defining and setting professional and personal goals.

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A mentor is a **resource**, providing information about opportunities, procedures, methodologies, customs, and expectations of the professional and academic world.

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A mentor is a **counselor** offering advice, encouragement, and feedback.

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A mentor is an **advocate** with an interest in furthering the scholar's academic and professional career.

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The mentoring relationship provides a **teacher**, a **sponsor**, a **guide**, an **advisor**, a **confidant**, and a **respected friend** to the scholar.

Building a Mentoring Relationship

Some Practical Suggestions for Research Mentors

- ❖ **Lay out expectations clearly and early.** Do so in a written work plan and in it set regular meeting times with your scholar. Do not expect the scholar to adhere to *unspoken* or *unwritten* rules even though they may seem like “common sense” to more experienced scholars. Common sense can only develop through familiarity. Note: As the project progresses the work plan may need to be revised.
- ❖ **Clarify expectations** about how much time and effort is necessary to complete the work. What do you expect the scholar to learn from the activity(ies)? Lay these out in the work plan.
- ❖ **Define and discuss ethical and professional aspects** associated with your discipline. Consider using examples of policies and practices from your field.
- ❖ **Meeting in person** is so much more beneficial; e-mailing is messaging, not mentoring!

- ❖ Please, be an active advisor. Talk about your graduate school, career and scholarly experiences because this can open lines of communication between you and your mentee.
- ❖ Be aware of resources for referrals, and know how and when to make them.
- ❖ **Suggest and discuss readings** you think will be of interest to the scholar. Review writing styles and formats as examples for how your mentee should format their writing.
- ❖ In your conversations with your colleagues and through contacts with potential graduate schools and former colleagues tell them about your mentee.
- ❖ Make a formal or informal recommendation for the scholar to faculty at other institutions (see pages 5-9 for suggestions).
- ❖ Assist your mentee in defining and articulating goals in preparation for writing the personal statement for graduate school or job applications. Refer the mentee to the USA Career Services office for a range of workshops and advising.
- ❖ Without sacrificing research/scholarly standards, show some flexibility in dealing with special problems that your student may have in carrying out the research.

Some Practical Suggestions for Scholars

- ❖ **Keep your appointments** with your mentor. If you cannot make it call or e-mail and reschedule, do so in advance if possible or at least leave a message BEFORE the appointment.
- ❖ Keep a journal/portfolio that has copies of all your papers and add to it by making notes, drafting working copies of your paper and going over your writing style with your mentor.
- ❖ Ask your mentor about career opportunities in his/her field (i.e., internships, assistantships, grants, fellowships). Make an appointment with USA Career Services for additional assistance.
- ❖ **Ask your mentor about graduate school.** Where to apply? What will be expected of you? What should you be doing *now* to ensure admission in to graduate-level education?
- ❖ Seek advice on how to approach potential graduate schools and job opportunities, how to find out about research being done, and what questions to ask. Make an appointment with USA Career Services for additional assistance.
- ❖ Encourage your mentor to relate personal experiences from his/her educational history.
- ❖ Talk to your mentor about your professional goals.
- ❖ **Exhibit interest, creativity, and curiosity!** These qualities are absolutely essential to achieving a genuine mentoring relationship.
- ❖ **Be a hard worker.** Accept routine and arduous tasks. Your attitude should confirm the fact that you are there to learn. Be willing to go the extra mile.

- ❖ **Be knowledgeable about the university and professional codes of ethical practice** and any related standards to the field you are interested in. Ask your mentor for help with this.
- ❖ **Communicate!** Avoid misunderstandings by letting your research mentor know what you are doing and by asking for information when you are uncertain about procedures. Make regular appointments with your mentor. Do not communicate solely by email or messages; these are not good ways to talk through questions or challenges.
- ❖ **Look, listen and learn!** Observe those around you. Seek out people with skills and experience you want to obtain and ask them questions. Learn and observe protocols. Follow procedures for the use and maintenance of equipment and data with precision.
- ❖ **Build relationships** with your fellow UCUR scholars. The research milieu offers a chance for you to expand your knowledge base. Discuss career and advanced study opportunities with them.
- ❖ **Be constructive about your work and accept constructive criticism** and resolve to act on it. Training a researcher is a difficult job that becomes almost impossible when the trainee takes criticism personally.
- ❖ **Organize your schedule so that excuses are not necessary.** Absence, tardiness, failure to complete assigned tasks, and excuses, no matter how valid, are not professional behavior.

Writing Good Letters of Recommendation: What to do and how to do it

From: A Workshop for PERA Faculty, Wini Wood, Writing Program 24 January 2008, www.wellesley.edu

Some tips for letter form, content, and style

- 1) Length: Most letters should be about one page long, 12 pt. font, single-spaced, block paragraphs.
Serious letters (for graduate school or for heavy-duty fellowships—when you know the student well) can be longer—1 ½ to 2 pp.
Three pages is too long for any letter.
Very short letters—just one paragraph—can seem insulting to the student and are not helpful to the employer/graduate school.

- 2) Form: Follow this rule of thumb:

First paragraph: name the student and the position she is applying for, explain your relationship to the student, and conclude with a clear statement of recommendation (how strongly you are recommending her and the basis for your recommendation).

Second paragraph: discuss the student’s performance in the context in which you worked with her (on a team, in a class). Use details, one or two examples, comparative statements (with other students you have taught or with the class average) to do so.

Third paragraph: discuss student’s personal qualities, emphasizing those that equip her for this particular position.

Conclude with another statement of recommendation, this one drawing on qualities you have mentioned in the letter for support. If you want, you can invite readers to contact you if they have further questions.

- 3) Content: *Letters should be as substantive as possible.*

Substance should *focus on the student* and on the position she is applying for—NOT on you!

Acquaint yourself with the position the student has applied for. Read materials she provides you, including links to the site advertising the position, any instruction to the referee, and the student’s own résumé and personal statement. If possible, talk to the student and ask her to explain her interest in this position to you.

Project what you know about the student into the position she is applying for; emphasize those traits that best suit her for the position. *Imagine and describe what she will bring to that position.*

Discuss performance and qualities equally. Try to remember one or two instances that characterize the student’s performance; specific examples are always useful and interesting to readers of these letters. As for qualities: name those qualities that the student has demonstrated to you, and try to show how she has demonstrated them.

I think it's OK to use hyperbole to describe students you feel strongly about. In certain letters, informal words like "terrific" are just fine. Some occasions require strict formality, though. (Fulbright applications, e.g.). But use hyperbole only when you genuinely mean it.

Offering criticism: some people believe that a balanced letter—one in which you discuss the student's strengths and weaknesses—is most honest and effective. But be careful in discussing weaknesses; discuss them honestly and helpfully; save them for later in the letter; don't let weaknesses outweigh strengths. Be clear and direct (not indirect and ambiguous) in describing weaknesses. When you can, use them as a springboard for discussing the student's growth, or show how apparent weaknesses are also strengths (e.g., apparent stubbornness turned out to be a sign of leadership and original thinking).

4) Style: A simple, clear, straightforward, honest style is best. Trim out excess words.

Be honest. Don't be afraid to use "I" to indicate your personal knowledge and assessment of the student.

Write truthfully and credibly.

Write with respect, both for the student and for the audience.

Be sure grammar and punctuation are correct.

Proofread!

Openings, closings, boilerplate text, and code words:

• The **salutation** can be one of the following:

- Dear Ms. Pilates: (if you know the name of the recipient)
- To Whom It May Concern (most formal and impersonal, but always OK)
- To the Rhodes Fellowship Selection Committee:

or simply an underlined or italicized heading:

Letter of Support for Hillary Clinton's Rhodes Fellowship Application

Letter of Recommendation for Diane Sawyer

- The **closing** should almost always be “Sincerely” or “Sincerely yours”.

Leave three spaces for your signature, then type your name, and type your title and department on a separate line:

Sincerely,

Winifred J. Wood
Senior Lecture and Director of the Writing Program

- **Boilerplate text**—phrases that you pull out and use routinely, and write almost exactly the same way in every letter—can be quite timesaving and useful if used properly.

The place for boilerplate text is at the beginnings and ends of letters. There’s no reason to waste time searching for an original way to open or conclude a letter of recommendation. The place for originality is in the *body* of the letter, where you try to describe this student uniquely. Beginning a letter conventionally is also a timesaver for the reader. No surprises, just read on....

However, although boilerplate templates, letters, etc. are useful, be careful when using them and especially when sending letters to the same employer/graduate school over time. Make sure you have appropriately edited the Mr., Ms., he, she and most importantly all the names for all involved. Do not refer to the student as he when she is appropriate, do not talk about Mary when you have a Sally, and most importantly make the information relevant to the actual employer/graduate school/etc..

Here are some good standard ways to begin a letter:

I am happy to recommend Mary Fleetfoot for a 2008 Marshall Fellowship.

I write with enthusiasm on behalf of Mary Fleetfoot, who is applying for a position as Director of Investments at Fidelity.

Mary Fleetfoot has asked me to write in support of her application to medical school. I have known Mary as both student and athlete since 2003, her first year at Wellesley College.

It is a pleasure to recommend Mary Fleetfoot for an American Cities Internship.

Here are some standard ways to conclude a letter of recommendation. Consider these closing phrases. Which is most enthusiastic? Which is most reserved? The choice of words you use here, while standard, does tend to signal particular and special shades of meaning to readers, who are looking for codes and clues to the actual level of support you are offering:

I recommend her with confidence.

I recommend her with pleasure.

I recommend her strongly.

I recommend her with utmost pleasure.

I recommend her to you without reservation.

I recommend her with greatest enthusiasm.

I recommend her with great enthusiasm and absolutely without reservation.

You can't go wrong hiring Maggie; I can think of no student I've had in the last ten years whom I believe is better suited to become a physician.

Whichever degree of strength you choose, your letter should end with some such statement of recommendation, and there's no real need to try to stretch for unusual language here, though when you are really enthusiastic, you can use your own honest voice to express your enthusiasm.

TIMESAVERS

- Don't agonize over openings and closings. Use boilerplate text to help you get started, and conclude the letter.
- Decide what your personal rules are for writing letters of recommendation for students, and let students know what they are. You might, for example, require requests to come in no later than two weeks before the deadline. One person I know sits down on the 30th of each month and writes all of her letters at once; any request that comes in before that date gets honored. Requests that come in on the first of the month have to wait 30 days before the letter gets written.
- Require students to give you the following information in clear form, so you have it at your fingertips when you sit down to write: their resume and, if possible, personal statement; a list of schools/fellowships/jobs etc. for which they need recommendations; descriptive materials from each site to help you as you write, including especially information for recommenders; clear deadline dates; information about where and how each letter should be submitted (e.g., do you return it to the student, email it to the CWS, or mail it to the school?).
- These days, I prefer to send letters in departmental envelopes, so I now tell students that I don't need stamped self-addressed envelopes from them—but I do prefer to have the address handy in an email message, so I can cut and paste it into a letter, so I ask students to send me an email with address information and a deadline reminder.
- Learn to use the “envelope” function in Word and to insert envelopes into your printer. It's a quick and easy way to get envelopes addressed (on a Mac, select “Envelopes...” from the Tools menu).
- Try to sit down with students and talk about what they are applying for, why they think they are suited for that internship/job/etc., and above all, try to get them to talk about their reasons and interests in applying for this job. This will help you when you write the letter and give you an opportunity to tell the student what kinds of things you think you are (or are not) able to say on her behalf.
- Be organized. Keep a computer file for requests you receive electronically, and keep a manila folder for requests that come in on paper. Check it periodically to be sure you are up to date on your letter writing (it's easy to forget!). Keep letterhead stationery and envelopes near or in that folder. Make an appointment with yourself to spend a morning every few weeks writing your letters. If you want, email afterwards to let students know you have sent their letters.

SOURCE

Schall, Joe. *Writing Recommendation Letters: A Faculty Handbook*. 2d ed. Eden Prairie, PN: Outernet Publishing, 2005. Available by calling Phoenix Direct, 1-877-398-7485.
www.outernetpublishing.com.

Helpful Seasonal Checklists!

Mentoring undergraduate researchers is the most important aspect of research for the University of South Alabama UCUR scholars. To create a successful and intellectually stimulating experience for scholars and research mentors, we created four seasonal checklists.

Spring Checklist

- Once paired with a scholar, discuss ideas about his/her research/scholarly interests and your own ongoing projects.
- Be directive. Work closely with the scholar, initially meeting early in the spring term to formulate the material for the UCUR Application, guide the literature review, determine methodology and discuss the scholar's responsibilities. NOTE: Full applications, including letters of recommendation, transcripts, and mentor CVs should be submitted electronically to ucur@southalabama.edu. There are no deadlines for Volunteer UCUR Intern Applications, but these must also be submitted electronically in full (including a mentor letter of support) to ucur@southalabama.edu
- Schedule time for the orientation meeting with your scholar. Schedule time with your scholar to review your plans, research schedule, etc. Create a calendar that you can adapt over time as needed.
- Demonstrate sincere interest in the intellectual development of the scholar.
- Sign-up to help with UCUR workshops and discussion sessions.

Summer Term Checklist

- UCUR Summer Program Starts Monday **May 20**.
- Did you approve the working bibliography? It is due to UCUR Program office (scan and send the benchmark check sheet with the bibliography to ucur@southalabama.edu) by 3:00 PM **May 30**. The scholars have specific deadlines for the sections of their projects. It is recommended that documents are submitted electronically to ucur@southalabama.edu.
- Did you approve **Draft One**: *detailed outline of the paper, introduction, literature review, and bibliography OR outline of portfolio, draft of artists statement, and bibliography*? Is it in the format stated in the Scholars Handbook? It is due to UCUR Program office (scan and send the benchmark check sheet with the draft to ucur@southalabama.edu) by 3:00 PM **June 27**.
- Did you approve **Draft Two**: *introduction, literature review, methodology, discussion, conclusion, analysis and bibliography OR Preliminary portfolio, completed artists statement, and bibliography*? Is the document in the correct format? Did you approve of the photo of the student "conducting their project"? The photo will be used for the UCUR Symposium Abstract Book and for PR. These are due to UCUR Program office (scan and send the benchmark check sheet with the draft and photo to ucur@southalabama.edu) by 3:00 PM **July 11**.
- Did you approve the **Final Draft**? Did you review and edit/critique the scholar's paper/portfolio ensuring that it is in publishable form? It is due to UCUR Program office (scan and send the benchmark check sheet with the Final Draft to ucur@southalabama.edu) by 3:00 PM **July 22**. This version will be

reviewed by the UCUR Committee for selection of Symposium Oral presenters and the Best Paper Award. NOTE: The project may be a work in progress, but the paper needs to be completed by July 22 and may reflect the intermediate state of the project.

- Review and provide feedback on scholar's personal essay for graduate program and job applications.
- Track the scholar's work on the Time and Effort worksheet monthly and submit to UCUR Program Director. You will receive a monthly electronic prompt.

Fall Semester Checklist

- Did you approve the scholar's final abstract and poster draft for the UCUR Symposium Abstract Booklet? These are due to UCUR Program office (scan and send the benchmark check sheet with the final abstract and draft poster to ucur@southalabama.edu) by **September 5**.
- Did you approve the final version of the scholar's poster for the UCUR Symposium? If printing on the UCUR poster printer, student must schedule a time for printing. The final benchmark date is TBA and will be announced when the date for the Symposium is announced.
- Attend the UCUR Symposium. Tentatively set for October 2013.
- Encourage the student to present at regional or national meeting.

Please **do not hesitate** to contact the UCUR Director at 460-7527 if questions or concerns arise as you work with your scholar(s).

Desired Skills and Attributes of a Successful Student

When mentoring a UCUR scholar, refer to the quick examples listed below of several success skills that may be essential and desirable.

- ❖ An ability to recognize and solve linear relationships.
- ❖ An ability to creatively address obstacles.
- ❖ An ability to apply sequential logic when solving quantitative problems.
- ❖ An ability to engage in verbal/written analysis of information when presented in a problem-solving paradigm.
- ❖ An ability to engage in and benefit from consensus thinking.
- ❖ An ability to recognize issues/trends relative to scholar's field of study.
- ❖ An adherence to a set of professional ethics.
- ❖ A willingness to accept/incorporate written and verbal critiques of his/her work.
- ❖ An ability to adhere to benchmarks and deadlines.





University of South Alabama UCUR Program Deadlines and Benchmarks Sign-Off Sheet

At each stage of your project you must have your mentor’s approval indicated by her/his initials and date. Anticipate that your mentor will have substantial feedback for you prior to signing off – this means you need to work in advance of the deadlines. You will not receive your stipend allocation until you have your mentor’s approval for each document.

Benchmark	Due Date	Mentor Approval	Date
Working Bibliography	May 30		
Draft One Paper/Portfolio	June 27		
Draft Two Paper/Portfolio and Photo of Student	July 11		
Final Draft Paper/Portfolio	July 22		
Participation in Discussion and Workshop Sessions	July 22	Approval by UCUR Director	
Final Abstract and Draft of Poster for UCUR Symposium	September 5		
Final Version of Poster	Fall (TBA)*		

Note to Mentor: Your scholar has this form and will bring it to you for your signature. Your signature indicates that you have been actively involved in the scholar’s project and that you approve of the work being submitted to UCUR.