



Guide to the First Year at Harvard for Mentors

The following suggestions are intended to give you some ideas about important moments during your mentee's first year at Harvard, when to contact him or her, and possible discussion topics to raise.

First Contact

The First Generation Mentorship program makes mentor-mentee matches in August and informs both the mentor and the mentee of those matches. Please follow up quickly with your mentee with an email introducing yourself and offering to meet by phone, Skype, or in person. The goal of this initial contact is to make yourself seem accessible and to educate your mentee about how you can be of help to them. Remember, most mentees have never had a formal mentor before and may have little idea as to what to ask you or what to discuss with you). Among good question to ask are:

- Tell me about your family/hometown/high school?
- What are you excited about when you think about coming to Harvard?
- What are you anxious about?

Try to set some expectations about your ongoing communications during these early conversations. Establish the best ways of communicating (text/email/Facebook), how often you will talk or meet, and the like.

Fall Orientation Meeting

The Mentorship Program will host an in-person orientation on Saturday, September 10, 2016, at Harvard, which will include a lunch with all mentors and mentees. Please try to attend this program and encourage your mentee to come to lunch, even if you can't be there. The sense of community this meeting engenders has been cited by both mentors and mentees as very helpful in reducing the sense of isolation that can be common for First Gen students, many of whom may be the only person from their school or even their town or region to attend Harvard. You should also encourage your mentee to join the [First Generation Student Union](#) to connect with returning First Generation students who have a great deal of wisdom to share.

Early September

First year students have Freshman Week the week before Labor Day, so early September is a critical time, as they are choosing their first courses, selecting extracurricular activities, and settling into their rooming groups. Studies of First Gen students show that the first half of the first semester can be the most challenging time so stay in contact and offer yourself as a resource during this time. Here are some appropriate questions to ask:

- How is it going with your roommates?



- Are you connecting with the people you meet?
- What courses are you planning to take?
- What extracurricular activities are you interested in?
- How are things back home with your family and friends there?

This is a good time to alert them to the various forms of support Harvard offers, for example: proctors, Peer Advising Fellows, [Host Families](#), counseling at UHS, study support at the Bureau of Study Counsel. Encourage your mentee to take advantage of these resources. Many students come from places where such resources were not available and may not know how to utilize them or may feel embarrassed about needing or asking for help. Make sure they know this is not only OK but also an admirable and smart thing to do. You may want to spend some time on the websites of the [Freshman Dean's Office](#) and [Bureau of Study Counsel](#) to familiarize yourself with available resources.

Late September/early October

As students are settling in and approaching their first midterms, it's a good time to check in and see how your mentee is doing academically. Things you can ask include:

- How's the work-load for you?
- How are you preparing for midterms?
- Do you feel comfortable approaching TFs/professors with questions?

Late October/Parents Weekend

Parents Weekend takes place beginning November 4, 2016. This can be a difficult time for First Gen students as many have parents who cannot afford to travel to Cambridge. It would be ideal for you to offer to do something with them this weekend so they have a supportive adult around. Others may be excited to have their parents visit, but also anxious as they may not be sure their parents know how to navigate Harvard (an anxiety many parents may share). The First Generation Alumni and Student Union collaborate on a First Gen Parents Weekend event each year, so encourage your mentees to attend.

November

The Thanksgiving break can be a time of anxiety for First Gen students, as some may not have the funds to return home for the holiday. Others may be going home for the first time and feeling both excited and anxious about this. Once again, this is a good time for you to offer to see your mentee in person. Among things to ask:



- What are your plans for the Thanksgiving break?
- How do you feel about staying on campus/going home?

If you have not already done so, this is also a good time to discuss your mentee's plans for upcoming breaks, including the lengthy six-week break known as "J-Term" in January and the summer. Your mentee may need help thinking through appropriate things to do during this time. It may seem very far away, but some [summer funding](#) and program applications are due in mid-late January. Many are due by mid-February, so it is helpful to briefly mention that these deadlines will be approaching while focusing plans for J-Term. Some students may simply need to go home, reconnect with family and friends, and rest. Others may seek to do internships/shadowing or other activities. Harvard also offers a lot of programming during [Wintersession](#), the last week of J-Term, often for free or with subsidies. Helping them make an informed and conscious decision about how to best use these times is a good role for a mentor.

December

Finals! This is a great time to send a gesture of support (a card, box of cookies, anything) to say you are thinking of your mentee as she or he approaches their first finals. You should also check in to see if they feel prepared for them and to encourage them again to avail themselves of support from TFs, professors, the Bureau of Study Counsel, and other resources. Of course, after finals, the vast majority of students return home for the holidays, so it may be useful to discuss how they feel about this.

January

With finals now before the holidays (a major shift which occurred in 2009), January or ("J-Term") is now "time off" for students. Hopefully, you have helped your mentee make a good decision about how to use this time. Checking in during January to see how things are going is a good idea. For example, some students think that six weeks at home will be fun but find themselves bored stiff after two weeks. This is the time to discuss second term course selection as well as what your mentee plans to do this summer. Harvard offers a plethora of funded summer programs that First Gen students may not be aware of and for which you should encourage them to apply. Encourage them to use the resources of the Office of Career Services to help research options. Many deadlines for programs come up quickly at this time of year.

February

Students are now back on campus and also making rooming decisions for their sophomore year. With house selection now randomized, the big issue is who to "block" with. Now is a good time to make sure your mentee has some roommates they are excited about living with next year.

March

Once again midterms are upon students, and it is good to check in. It is also when they find out what House they will be in, on a fun and exciting event called Housing Day during the middle of March, right before the spring recess. Find out which House they got!



Just like the Thanksgiving break, the spring recess can be a time of anxiety for First Gen students, as some may not have the funds to return home for the holiday or to fund meals. Last year a pilot program provided lunch and dinner at two dining halls during the break, and hopefully that will be available to students this year (a major shift as dining halls had previously been closed for the break).

April

The Advising Programs Office will hold an [Advising Fortnight](#) at the beginning of the month to facilitate conversations about concentrations and secondary fields. If you have not already, this is a great time to start talking with your mentee about concentrations (which they have to choose at the end of sophomore year) and possible career paths these lead to. Many First Gen students find the world of work mystifying as they have few college-educated adults in their lives. They simply may not know what careers like "venture capital" and "consulting" even entail. Demystifying this for them can be very helpful. One way of doing so is to arrange informational interviews for them with folks you know who work in various fields or "shadowing" opportunities where they can follow someone around for a day who works in a field in which they are interested to better understand what this person actually does all day.

May

Finals are once again upon students as well as the end of their first year. It's a great time to reflect on their journey and what they have learned, as well as to talk with them about their summer plans and any feelings these evoke for them. The First Generation Student Union will have a special First Generation graduation event, which is a good thing to attend Commencement Week if they are in town.