

Best Practices for Mentors and Mentees in Academic Settings

from Michigan State University Faculty Mentoring

The “best” faculty mentoring happens when mentors and mentees are prepared and strong relationships develop. Although there are many formal mentoring models, they all share the goal of facilitating the professional development of mentees. Although there are many purposes for mentoring, there is general agreement in the literature that the following practices contribute to successful mentoring.

Identify your strengths, weaknesses, and biases

Mentors and mentees experience mentoring relationships through their own personal lenses which include facets of identity such as disability, race, gender, class and sexual orientation; particularly when they are related to marginalization and privilege within a broader society. Before engaging in a mentor/mentee relationship, identify your strengths, weaknesses, and biases. Mentors need to be sensitive to the mentee’s perspective. Mentees need to be clear about their needs and goals and be active participants in the relationship. Consider the assumptions you have about mentoring, how it should work, and whether or not these assumptions best serve the mentee’s needs. Think of mentors you have had - Why were/are they great or troublesome? How can you address your weaknesses/biases and be the best mentor or mentee possible?

Assess and build your communication and listening skills

A major skill that cuts across all mentor relationships is the ability to communicate and listen. This is required in order to build trust and a productive relationship. Good communication skills involve the following at minimum:

- The ability to give full attention when communicating.
- Engaging in good listening skills.
- Mentors should give constructive feedback that includes both criticism and praise.
- Mentees should ask for feedback early in the relationship.
- Clarifying mutual expectations for the relationship.
- Be complete yet succinct in comments and explanations.

Build productive mentor-mentee relationships

Every mentoring relationship is unique and should be grounded in the mentor’s strengths and the mentee’s needs. No one mentor can meet all of a mentee’s needs. The following steps are therefore recommended:

- Clarify the mentee's expectations for the mentor/mentee relationship and his/her needs related to career development.
- Establish clear, shared expectations for the relationship including time commitment, meeting schedule, and ground rules.
- Discuss confidentiality and the extent to which confidentiality can and will be secured.
- Negotiate and document short-term & long-term goals and outcomes.
- Mentors should refer mentees to colleagues for expertise outside their purview. Recommend and facilitate ways in which to build on the mentor/mentee relationship with other career development resources. This requires knowing what resources exist or how to find out and developing a "mindset" or awareness of opportunities for the mentee. Develop a mentoring plan that includes multiple "mentors". Follow-up regularly to help mentee keep on track.
- Both mentor and mentee should provide feedback and modify the relationship, expectations, and strategies as needed.

For mentors: Assess and address concerns about mentoring

Common mentor concerns include not having enough time for good mentoring; uncertainty about how to be a good mentor; how to work with "difficult" mentees; and lack of compensation or rewards. Many concerns can be addressed through mentor orientations, workshops and networking. Opportunities for mentors to meet and exchange challenges and ideas are valuable. The following time-saver tips can help make mentoring manageable and therefore less stressful, more productive and more rewarding.

- Set specific goals and timelines with benchmarks/dates.
- Schedule regular time together – even if brief, over coffee, a walk around the building, and during a recreational activity.
- Have agenda items in mind - clear to both in advance
- Use email for news of events, grant opportunities; deadline reminders; sending articles; encouragement and e-mentoring.
- Attend events together - workshops, lectures, and conferences.
- Share the load: refer mentee to other colleagues, peer groups, and networks.

For mentors: Fostering mentee career advancement

Promoting career advancement includes advising the mentee on ways in which to manage and excel at academic job responsibilities such as teaching, research, service, and administrative requirements. This can be achieved through the following activities:

- Advise on tenure and promotion requirements and processes.
- Advise on time allocation for research, teaching and service.

- Advise on committee choices and load.
- Advise on University and College policies and practices.
- Advise on strategies for effective teaching.
- Observe classroom instruction and provide constructive feedback.
- Review draft proposals and manuscripts and encourage submissions.
- Provide targeted expertise on methodology or theory.
- Direct mentee to relevant funding opportunities and appropriate journals.
- Learn about resources and opportunities and communicate these to mentee.

It also involves nurturing the mentee's career through assisting him/her in identifying and choosing career development opportunities and linking to colleagues and professional networks. The following are examples of ways in which to do this:

- Collaborate on research projects, manuscripts, and presentations.
- Advise on key relationships to cultivate and facilitate introductions.
- Invite mentee to present at workshops or conferences.
- Include mentee in organized sessions.
- Advise about key conferences your mentee should consider attending.
- Assist mentee in developing a career trajectory.

For mentees: Fostering own career advancement

- Be proactive in developing your own professional career.
- See the mentor/mentee relationship as an important resource for career development and establishing a life-long colleague.
- Be open to mentor suggestions and actively practice what you learn.
- Recognize that one mentor can't meet all needs. Mentees should take responsibility for identifying gaps and building a network of multiple mentors with needed strengths.
- Provide honest, constructive feedback during evaluation process.

For more information, visit: <http://www.adapp-advance.msu.edu/Faculty-Mentoring-Toolkit-Resources%20for%20Mentors%20and%20Mentees#threeeleven>