

Guiding Principles for Effective Student/Faculty Mentoring and Advising Relationships

Lehigh University

Lehigh faculty and staff have the responsibility to provide mentoring to our students. Having good mentoring is both mutually rewarding to both mentor and mentee and critical to academic success. In this document we look first at how one establishes a mentoring relationship and then we explore the principles for how to make that relationship most effective.

Establishing a Mentoring Relationship

An effective mentor typically learns what potential student mentees what they seek. Once mentors know what a student seeks, can they determine whether they are suited to providing the necessary mentoring. A match is not guaranteed; however, if the student and the faculty member discover that needs and interests align, that the faculty member has the necessary expertise to guide the student, that the student has the foundational preparation, and that they have compatible work styles and temperaments, then a productive mentoring relationship can be established. Ultimately, a mentoring relationship is a relationship in which both parties are committed to growth and development.

Although faculty are typically assigned advisees in the academic world, an assigned advisee is not automatically a student mentee, nor does the adviser need to be the sole mentor. That is, an adviser is responsible for helping an advisee complete his/her program of study, but that student might not seek mentoring beyond such academic guidance, nor might that adviser have the skill set and disposition to make a good mentor for that student. Doctoral students typically work very closely with their doctoral supervisors over multiple years, and the supervisor inevitably carries a substantial portion of the mentoring responsibility. Like their students, mentors must recognize that such a relationship must be bi-directional.

One mentor is seldom enough; student mentees should seek multiple mentors with different abilities, experiences and viewpoints. Peer mentoring, where students at approximately the same point in their studies act as a support group for one another, can be very empowering. And Lehigh need not be students' only source of mentoring: members of professional organizations, previous contacts, even the folks one went to school with elsewhere or used to work with, might be potential mentors. (See Appendix A, the Mentoring Map.)

Principles for More Effective Mentoring Relationships

PRINCIPLE 1: Effective mentoring enables mentees to see opportunities they might not otherwise recognize, and to scaffold experiences so that student mentees view themselves with increasing confidence.

Helping mentees recognize opportunities involves knowing what a student mentee wishes to achieve. Given this fact, one of the first steps in mentoring might be to ask new mentees a series of questions designed to help clarify what they seek and why. Those questions might explore not only why some future goal appeals to them, but also might ask mentees to talk about which

aspects of their current graduate experience (or previous work) have proved satisfying or unsatisfying.

Helping student mentees recognize opportunities often involves helping them formulate new visions of who they are and what they can do. Student mentees often underestimate their skills and potential, and an effective mentor helps mentees make *growth choices* rather than *safety choices*. A growth choice is one where you are uncertain if you can do what the choice requires, and accomplishing it would represent personal growth and development. In contrast, a safety choice is one where you are fully confident you can achieve what the choice requires, and accomplishing it would require little growth and almost no development of your skills. Research on choice selection suggests growth choices lead to increased self-confidence, more willingness to take risks and a greater likelihood of making growth choices in future. In contrast, safety choices tend to reduce self-confidence, make us feel less empowered and less capable, and reduce the likelihood that we will make growth choices in future. Effective mentors encourage student mentees to think of themselves as capable and developing individuals, and to make growth choices when given the chance.

Opportunities can take many forms. They may be scholarly opportunities, such as conducting a workshop/seminar or contributing to a journal or book, or serving as a reviewer for a journal. Or they may be service opportunities, such as serving on a task force or committee, or taking on leadership of some kind here at Lehigh or in a professional organization. Or they may be teaching/mentoring opportunities, such as helping redesign an existing curriculum or generating a new one, or working with student groups or serving as a peer mentor to other students.

There can be barriers to seizing opportunities and we need to be aware that these can limit what students are able to do. For instance, certain disciplines, especially those in sciences, may require students to spend large amounts of time in the lab, preventing them from engaging in other opportunities. Mentors in these fields have the challenge of balancing the needs of the lab with the full development of the student. Both the mentor and mentee need to seek creative ways to make these opportunities possible, whether they are tied to the research context or elsewhere.

Mentors and mentees need to be sensitive to, and respectful of, cultural, ethnic, and gender differences and not allow these differences to limit opportunities. Regardless of the culture in which mentor and mentees were raised, they need to avoid allowing their cultural values to become barriers to the growth and development of the mentees. Instead, they should recognize that their differences might serve as the foundation for new and creative discovery.

PRINCIPLE 2: In effective mentoring relationships, both parties show respect, are honest with one another and behave professionally.

Mentors are giving of their time; effective student mentees recognize this fact and treat their mentors with respect and understanding. So, too, effective mentors treat mentees respectfully, especially when they make mistakes, recognizing that effective mentoring is all about learning. Effective mentors care about the mentee's situation, growth and needs; they recognize mentees' personal lives can prevent them from moving toward desired goals. Mentors need not be cruel in conveying realistic assessments of a mentee's present capabilities. Effective mentors seek in all things to build their mentees up, not to tear them down.

Effective mentors model professionalism and strategic thinking; they focus on resolution strategies and assist students in negotiating difficulty and conflict in order to foster independence

and resilience. Effective mentors avoid taking on the role of “rescuer”; they recognize that inappropriate rescue is devaluing and a barrier to growth.

In the academic world, the mentor often has greater power than the mentee. Mentors may control funding and access, and mentors usually have evaluative responsibility for their mentees. As a result, student mentees may feel powerless. Mentors must not use the power differential to their own benefit. For example, inclusion on a paper or grant or on a publication or presentation should be based on contribution, not on one’s status as a mentor, and mentors should not end up credited for work done almost entirely by a student mentee.

Mentors need to be aware of how the power differential may affect communications; they need to make sure student mentees understand they can decline offers and requests, especially those not directly related to their academic work, research, or those which could hinder progress toward the degree, without unfavorable consequences.

Effective mentoring relationships are ones in which mentors and mentees establish and honor boundaries. Those boundaries can be as simple as knowing not to be overly insistent and not to behave rudely, and as complicated as understanding that one is prohibited from supervising anyone with whom one has a romantic or sexual relationship.

PRINCIPLE 3: Effective mentors recognize that the career paths they pursued represent possible paths and they do not limit their mentoring to advice only suited to the career path they chose.

Mentors and student mentees do not necessarily have identical needs and wants in terms of career paths. No mentor can know all of the possible paths student mentees may take, and this is another reason for students to have multiple mentors, based on their specific interests and needs. Effective mentors help their student mentees realize how many paths exist; they show their mentees how different paths intersect and diverge, helping them understand there may be other routes and destinations open to them. Mentors can connect mentees to others who may provide guidance on alternative paths and may encourage mentees to seek others who can guide them on their own.

PRINCIPLE 4: In an effective mentoring relationship, both parties are committed and reliable.

An effective mentoring relationship is bi-directional; each person takes responsibility for doing certain things and can be counted on to do those things. Clear expectations for performance in the relationship, coupled with periodic checks to confirm things are going as expected and to make appropriate adjustments, reduce the likelihood that either will disappoint the other. At the same time, both mentors and mentees can encounter pressures on their schedules. In an effective mentoring relationship, they discuss these pressures and adjust expectations accordingly.

Effective student mentees understand that, in order to grow and develop, they will be primarily responsible for their graduate education and professional growth. Effective mentees reflect on their wants, needs and strengths; investigate their options; and explore what is available, enabling them to make the best use of the mentor’s expertise and time. In effective mentoring relationships, both the mentor and mentee deliver on their promises, are reliable and trustworthy, and can be counted on not to disappear. Clear and direct communication about how to

communicate, and how often, including communication about such things as authoring expectations and funding matters, is critical to maintaining a positive and productive relationship.

Ending an Ineffective Mentoring Relationship

Not every mentoring relationship works out. Sometimes the problem is non-performance on the part of one or both parties; sometimes the problem is one of fit. Regardless, the logical first step is for the two to discuss the problem and see if they can resolve it. If so, the air may be cleared and both can move forward in hopes of increased effectiveness. If they cannot resolve the issue, or if agreements to change are not confirmed by subsequent behavior, it is time for the student mentee to find a new mentor and departments would do well to offer guidance in these instances. Insofar as this can be done without bitterness, things will be easier. If the former mentor is also an academic advisor or doctoral supervisor, perhaps he or she can simply revert to that role, focusing entirely on helping the student complete his or her program of study. If a student has multiple mentors, it may be useful here to seek guidance from those other mentors on the best way to end the problematic relationship. Regardless, the mentee and mentor owe it to each other to be honest.