Mentoring – What’s it All About?

A Guide for Participants in Research Mentoring Programs

Office for Research
Victoria University
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Section A. What is mentoring?

'It is a relationship, not just a procedure or activity, where one person professionally assists the career development of another, outside the normal manager/subordinate relationship.'

Mentoring is a workplace relationship that provides an opportunity to reflect on practice, share professional and personal skills and experiences, and grow professional and personal capabilities. It is an exchange of views and ideas that are based upon encouragement, openness, mutual trust, respect and a willingness to learn and share.

Mentoring can be achieved using a variety of methods such as face-to-face meetings, email or telephone conversations. It may involve shadowing, coaching, role-playing or practicing, giving constructive feedback, guiding and advising. The mentor may be a motivator, a sounding board, a coach, guide or teacher. The key feature of mentoring is that it is driven by the needs of the mentee.

The Benefits of Mentoring

Mentoring is a two-way relationship that is supportive, constructive and focussed on the development needs of the mentee. It is based on mutual respect, shared values and benefits both parties through the act of sharing.

For Mentees

Mentees are the drivers of the mentoring relationship. Benefits can include:

- improved confidence and morale
- insights and expertise from an experienced colleague
- a supportive sounding board for ideas, problems and goals
- new strategies and ways of thinking about, approaching and managing work related activities
- career direction
- enhanced listening skills
- improved understanding of the organisation, its structures and culture
- defining and achieving realistic professional goals
- advice, coaching and feedback on performance and career development
- the possibility of new and/or extended professional networks and opportunities

For Mentors

While mentoring is focussed on the professional needs of the mentee it can also provide significant benefits to mentors including:

- an opportunity to practice personal skills and share valuable tacit knowledge
- satisfaction in seeing the mentee develop, reflect on and clarify roles
- insight into areas outside the mentor’s discipline or specific expertise
- a chance to stimulate and support the development of less experienced colleagues
- cross-intellectual exchange and debate
- enriched collegial relationships
- contribution to the direction of the next generation of researchers in a discipline or field of study

2 Adapted from Grossman, M (2007) So you want to find a research mentor… VUECR Seminar, 24 April 2007
For the Field of Study/Discipline
Mentoring can assist in the development of better informed researchers who have the confidence and knowledge to contribute meaningfully to the field. Those participating in mentoring can share the knowledge and resources gained from a mentor with other colleagues in the field and in the institution. Mentoring can also facilitate collaboration within and across disciplines and can inform teaching and practice through learning and exchange.

For Victoria University
Enhanced dialogue and cooperative relationships, the establishment of support mechanisms to assist research performance and productivity and meeting institutional commitment to training and development needs of early career researchers are all benefits the organisation can gain from mentoring. Mentoring will also facilitate more confident and competitively well-equipped researchers who are better able to meet the challenges of a rapidly shifting research climate in a volatile higher education sector.
Section B. How Does Mentoring Work?

Mentoring Types
Mentoring can be formal or informal and may take a variety of forms. While most mentoring occurs as a one-on-one and face-to-face relationship, some other types of mentoring include:

- Mentoring More than One Mentee
A mentor has more than one mentee and meets with them separately or, where appropriate, as a group. This type of mentoring can allow mentees to benefit from one another’s experience and opinions, as well as from those of the mentor.

- Group Mentoring
Group mentoring involves a small group of mentees (usually between four and six) working with an experienced mentor. The group identify issues and receive guidance and feedback from the mentor as a group. Group mentoring can foster joint learning across the whole organisation and provides the opportunity to network and learn from other colleagues.

The mentor acts as the facilitator, guide and catalyst for sharing personal experiences and insights and to create a forum for discussion and learning.

- Peer Mentoring
Colleagues mentoring one another is referred to as Peer Mentoring. This may be appropriate in small and isolated work locations where available mentors are scarce. The emphasis of peer mentoring is on mutual support and cooperation.

- On-line Mentoring
On-line mentoring uses technology such as email, on-line discussion groups and phone conversations as the method for conversation and discussion. On-line mentoring usually works best where the mentee and mentor know each other or have had at least one intensive face-to-face meeting. It is generally agreed that this method of mentoring should be supplemented by face-to-face contact wherever possible to facilitate motivation and clear communication.

- Shadowing
Shadowing provides an opportunity for the mentee to challenge and extend their understanding in a ‘real-time’ setting. Shadowing may involve the mentee attending meetings with their mentor or being with them during their typical work day. Observation and interaction ‘at close range’ is a means of experiential learning that enables mentees to assimilate and understand the organisational culture, increase their understanding of the differences and similarities in people’s practices and styles, and challenge their own assumptions.

Conditions of a Successful Mentoring Relationship
In order for a mentoring relationship to work successfully both mentee and mentor require good communication, interpersonal and problem-solving skills and must be committed and motivated to make the most of the mentoring experience.

In addition mentors need:
- a sound knowledge base;
- competence in their field;
- an established network; and
- a willingnessness to share information, skills and wisdom.

Mentees need:
- initiative and drive to set the direction of the relationship and implement actions; and
- the capacity for self-direction.
Roles and Responsibilities
There are six key areas in which both mentees and mentors have a role and responsibilities:

1. Listening actively
2. Build trust
3. Determine goals
4. Encourage
5. Learn quickly
6. Manage the relationship

The table below provides some examples of how these roles can be fulfilled. In some cases the responsibility is the same for both mentee and mentor. In others each party will fulfill the role in a different way.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>ROLE</th>
<th>RESPONSIBILITY</th>
<th>Mentee</th>
<th>Mentor</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Listen Actively</td>
<td>• Show interest in what your mentee/mentor is saying and reflect back important aspects to show you have understood&lt;br&gt;• Use body language that shows you are paying attention&lt;br&gt;• If you are talking by phone, reduce background noise, and limit interruptions</td>
<td>• Be open to alternative ideas&lt;br&gt;• Follow through with commitments and suggestions&lt;br&gt;• Illustrate a genuine commitment to learn</td>
<td>• Provide a safe environment for disclosure&lt;br&gt;• Be a role model&lt;br&gt;• Be available, visible and non-threatening&lt;br&gt;• Listen and take your mentee’s experience seriously</td>
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<td>2. Build Trust</td>
<td>• Keep conversations and other communications confidential&lt;br&gt;• Honour scheduled meetings and calls&lt;br&gt;• Consistently show interest in the relationship&lt;br&gt;• Be open, honest and explicit about your own needs and limits&lt;br&gt;• Be receptive, tolerant and understanding&lt;br&gt;• Respect your mentee/mentor’s time and other commitments as much as your own&lt;br&gt;• Recognise and work through conflict(s)</td>
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<td>3. Determine Goals</td>
<td>• Know what your goals and priorities are&lt;br&gt;• Reflect on your career, personal vision, and goals and share these with your mentor&lt;br&gt;• Understand your strengths, weaknesses, success and challenges&lt;br&gt;• Help your mentor understand your responsibilities and the context in which you work&lt;br&gt;• Discuss actions that you’ve taken in your career,</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Assist the mentee to set clear, realistic and measurable goals&lt;br&gt;• Seek clarity&lt;br&gt;• Use your own experience to provide feedback</td>
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### 4. Encourage

- Express appreciation
- Let your mentor know how you’ve benefited from the mentoring relationship
- Point out concrete examples of how you’ve used his/her guidance and input

- Be honest and constructive
- Be positive and supportive
- Build self-confidence
- Be empathetic and patient
- Provide useful feedback and advice
- Maintain a focus on the mentee’s goals
- Help the mentee arrive at their own conclusion or decision
- Inspire creativity and independence

### 5. Learn Quickly

- Spend time preparing for meetings
- Ask appropriate questions to clarify what your mentor is teaching or suggesting
- Consider all of the advice and suggestions you receive
- Ask for comments and feedback
- Apply the information and strategies and report back
- Pursue useful learning opportunities and resources on your own

- Ask appropriate questions to clarify what your mentee is saying
- Challenge and provide constructive feedback
- Facilitate self knowledge and learning for the mentee
- Illuminate the big picture and broader context
- Show what is possible and how it might be done
- Help mentees understand their environment and culture
- Ask probing, open-ended and ‘what if’ questions
- Provide useful learning opportunities and resources

### 6. Manage the Relationship

- Take the lead
- Schedule meetings well in advance and propose an agenda before each one

- Encourage your mentee to take the lead
- Follow through on commitments

- Check on satisfaction with the pacing, focus and content of your relationship as well as any relationship issues you should address
Section C. The Mentoring Experience

Stage 1. Initiation, Exploration and Goal Setting

The first stage of mentoring begins at the point at which you decide to seek out a mentor. At this time you will have identified a need for mentoring and may have established some specific goals you would like to achieve.

The First Meeting
Once you have met your mentor (whether this be an informal or formal mentoring arrangement) you will need to get to know each other and begin to establish trust (see the section on roles and responsibilities for ideas on how to establish trust).

Your first meeting should preferably be face-to-face. During this meeting you should:

a) Discuss your background, experiences and interests
   Be open and honest and provide information that is relevant to your research career and mentoring goals.

b) Outline your expectations of mentoring and of your mentor
   Be clear about what you hope to achieve and what you hope your mentor will provide, both in terms of advice and assistance, and in terms of the way they approach the mentoring relationship (eg. mode of communication). Make sure you know what the expectations of your mentor are also. What do they expect of you and of the experience?

   Being clear at this stage will make it more likely that you will meet your expectations and minimise conflict due to different or unrealistic expectations.

c) Explore and define your goals and objectives
   It is essential that you set clear, realistic, measurable and achievable goals for the mentoring relationship. Seek your mentors assistance in defining these goals and explore how you may go about achieving them.

   Your goals and objectives should be the focus of your mentoring experience. Continually reflect on your goals and, if necessary, adjust or amend them to ensure they continue to be relevant.

d) Establish boundaries and strategies for trouble shooting
   Boundaries are essentially borders for the relationship. They will help to define the scope of the relationship and areas that are not included. Questions to help define boundaries may include:
   - When and how do you agree to communicate with one another?
   - What are the topics that are relevant?
   - What is off-limits, in terms of your mentoring relationship?

   Most relationships run into stumbling blocks at some stage. By being very clear about your expectations and ensuring an open and honest relationship you can help to minimise difficulties. However, it is useful to discuss how problems can be addressed if they should arise.
e) Set out the ground rules

Ground rules are the rules, responsibilities and protocols for the relationship. Issues to be discussed and clarified might include:

- What do each of you agree to do?
- How will you work together to hold each other accountable for making time to do what you plan?
- How will you communicate between meetings, if at all?
- What do you agree to in terms of protecting confidential information?

f) Meeting schedule and method (i.e. face-to-face, phone, email)

It is important to set down at this stage a schedule for how often you will meet, making clear and taking into consideration any period in which you or your mentor will be unavailable. Dates, times and places should be set down. This is true even if meetings will be held by phone or via email.

The Agreement

Once you have explored and established the areas above set them out in a written agreement to ensure that they are documented for future reference and absolute clarity. The agreement should include:

a) Goals, strategies and measures
b) Proposed meeting schedule
c) Commitment to confidentiality

Stage 2. Establish the Relationship and Develop the Plan

Following the first meeting the focus should be on establishing the mentoring relationship and setting down a more detailed plan about how the goals will be achieved. Explore questions such as:

- How will the achievement of your goals benefit you/your organisation/the community?
- What are the potential barriers to success?
- What resources/supports are needed to achieve the goal?
- How will progress be measured?

The goals may be broken down into more detailed objectives and strategies into specific tasks. Set out the tasks to be achieved by the next meeting and confirm the meeting date.

Stage 3. Action and Review

Action

From here on the focus is on implementing the actions required to achieve the goals. Work towards the achievement of your goals may include conversations, written materials provided by your mentor, trying various learning and development activities, and perhaps connecting with other resources or people your mentor introduces you to.

Stage 3 should be marked by openness and trust, meaningful discussion, application of new insights and approaches, and ongoing support.
At each meeting present the results of the agreed actions and discuss progress, outcomes and obstacles met. Seek feedback, advice and guidance for future actions. During each meeting review your goals, the set tasks and what is to be achieved by the next meeting.

**Review**

At some point during the relationship it is important to reflect on how it is going for both you and for your mentor. It may be useful to explore questions such as:

- What are the benefits of the relationship up to this point?
- How is your mentor helping you achieve your goals?
- What changes do you see in yourself and the way you approach your work as a result of the mentoring relationship?
- What kinds of adjustments or changes, if any, are needed in your goals or in the relationship?

**Stage 4. Winding Down**

At the conclusion of the formal mentoring program, or at the point at which you have agreed to end the relationship it is important to reflect on the experience including accomplishments, challenges and progress towards your goals. Explore what kinds of support you may need after the conclusion of the relationship including people, resources and information. It may be appropriate to discuss if the relationship will continue informally and the ground rules you will abide by to make it work.

Ensure that you schedule a final meeting which celebrates your mutual achievements and expresses your appreciation and thanks. Together reflect on questions such as:

- Were goals initially stated achieve?
- Were goals redefined and were they then met?
- What other outcomes were achieved
- What professional gains were made
- What personal gains were made
- What aspects did you find challenging

Where you are part of a formal mentoring program provide feedback to the program coordinator about your achievements, challenges and about what aspects of your relationship and/or the program worked well or you would change.
Section D. Stumbling Blocks and Troubleshooting

Tips for Avoiding Stumbling Blocks and Conflict

- Keep your mentee/mentor informed of any planned periods of absence, so that this can be considered in planning tasks and meetings.
- Respect confidentiality and understand that your mentee/mentor may not be able to disclose certain details.
- Seek permission/support from your supervisor to attend any mentoring-related activities during normal working hours.
- Establish a clear action plan in which goals are broken down into objectives and strategies into tasks.
- Be realistic and honest about your availability.
- View your mentor as a ‘learning facilitator’ rather than an expert on all things.
- Identify, explore and learn from your differences as well as your commonalities.

Dealing with Problems or Conflict

The following process can be used to help identify and address issues in the mentoring relationship:

a) Clarify in your own mind what the issue seems to be from your point of view.
b) See if you can think about the issue from the other point of view.
c) Taking both perspectives into account, think of possible solutions or alternative ways you might move the situation forward.
d) Introduce the topic of concern in your next meeting, or if appropriate before your next meeting. Outline your concerns and ask how they perceive the issue. Use the information from both points of view to find a way of working through the issue to an appropriate solution.  

Where an issue cannot be resolved, or where you feel it would be inappropriate to raise the issue with your mentee/mentor, for those involved in a formal mentoring program advice and assistance will be available from the program coordinator. In some cases in may be appropriate for another mentor to be sought for the mentee.

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Frequently Asked Questions - Mentees

Q: Can I have my supervisor or boss as a mentor?
A: You may decide that you would like to develop a mentoring relationship with someone in your work environment, for example a senior manager. It is worth thinking about whether you will feel comfortable discussing a career related issue with a person who may ultimately be in a position to determine your future. Mentoring programs generally encourage a match with a person other than your supervisor or ‘boss’ so that you can gain from a different experience and perspective and can discuss issues in confidence.

It is important, however, to discuss your participation in the mentoring program with your ‘boss’ to ensure they are aware of the purpose and intent of your mentoring relationship. You may like to include your ‘boss’ in the planning stage where you define your goals and objectives, and/or at other points of the mentoring program.

Q: Will my mentor expect me to be just like them?
A: Occasionally, mentoring relationships may be focussed on grooming a person to be exactly like their mentor. This is sometimes referred to as ‘cloning’ in mentoring literature. However, it is important that your mentoring experience give you the opportunity to develop your own skills and reach your own potential. If you feel that your mentor is working with you in this way return to your expectations and to the definitions of mentoring and learning types. Discuss how you prefer to learn. You may even wish to openly discuss your differences and how they work for both of you. Remember that the mentoring relationship should be driven by you in relation to your career goals. Seek advice and assistance from the Program Coordinator if needed.

Q: What happens if my mentor moves or leaves?
A: It is possible that some mentors will move position, campus or leave the University. If you are aware that this may happen you can prepare yourself by considering options you have for either changing or concluding the relationship. Discuss any periods of absence or any other possible interruptions early in your mentoring relationship. Be honest about your own commitments and expectations.

Remember that if your mentor does move there may still be ways that you can continue your relationship. For example by phone or email, or by meeting at a different location. Keep in mind, however, the difficulties your mentor may experience as they try to keep a commitment and interest in the relationship during a period of change in their personal and professional circumstances.

If you are not able to continue to the relationship keep in mind that there will be a natural sense of loss or abandonment if you have developed a good and useful relationship with your mentor. Make sure you take any opportunity to formally conclude the relationship and review your achievements against your stated goals. As soon as you are aware of your mentor’s move speak with your Program Coordinator for advice and support and to discuss the possibility of an alternative match.
Frequently Asked Questions - Mentors

Q: What happens if my mentee moves or leaves?
A: It is possible that some mentees will move position, campus or leave the University. If you are aware that this may happen you can prepare by considering options you have for either changing or concluding the relationship. Discuss any periods of absence or any other possible interruptions early in your mentoring relationship. Be honest about your own commitments and expectations.

Remember that if your mentee does move there may still be ways that you can continue your relationship. For example by phone or email, or by meeting at a different location. Keep in mind, however, the difficulties your mentee may experience as they try to keep a commitment and interest in the relationship during a period of change in their personal and professional circumstances.

If you are not able to continue to the relationship keep in mind that there will be a natural sense of loss or abandonment for the mentee and perhaps for yourself, if you have developed a good and useful relationship. Make sure you take any opportunity to formally conclude the relationship and review the mentee’s achievements against their stated goals. As soon as they are aware of their move your mentee should speak with the Mentoring Program Coordinator for advice and support and to discuss the possibility of an alternative match.

Q: What if I move or leave?
A: As with mentees, it is possible that some mentors will change position, campus or leave the University during the course of the Mentoring Program. Follow the advice given above – be open and honest from the outset, consider options for continuing the relationship, make time to reflect and review, and consider the impact that your move may have on the mentee.

Q: Will my mentee need a lot of time from me?
A: You and your mentee should establish the time commitment you are going to make when you confirm your Mentoring Agreement. Any changes to this arrangements – whether it be that the agreed commitment is not working or one or other party’s circumstances change – this should be discussed and negotiated.

If your mentee is requiring more time than you are able to provide be honest and discuss other avenues of support and advice. Seek advice and assistance from the Mentoring Program Coordinator if required.

Q: What if I can’t help my mentee?
A: Your mentee’s goals and needs should be clear and documented in your Mentoring Agreement at the initiation of the relationship. Any issues you may have about your ability to meet these needs should be discussed openly with your mentee to ensure that you establish realistic expectations. Remember that you are not expected to be the ‘expert’ on all topics. Your role is of a ‘learning facilitator’, assisting your mentee to identify their goals, appropriate strategies and to put these into action.

At times, as the mentee’s goals are reviewed and revised, it may become clear that you are not the right person. At this time you can explore alternative goals that could be met through your existing relationship. You may also decide between you that the mentee would be better served by a different mentor, support structure or resource. At this time it is important that the mentee contact the Program Coordinator to discuss the issues and clarify future actions.