

Guidelines for Mentors

The goal of the any Mentoring Program in physiology is to encourage and support young physiologists who are still in training or beginning new positions in academe or industry. Consequently, to better serve our mentees and mentors, APS has become a partner in the MentorNet Mentoring Program (<http://www.mentornet.net>). To sign up as a mentor, please visit their website.

One of the key factors in achievement in graduate studies and success in postdoctoral, first faculty, or industrial positions is having productive relationships with mentors.

Experienced mentors can provide valuable information and advice on how to make the most of graduate and postdoctoral experiences and what to expect in a new faculty or industrial position. Different mentors are sometimes needed at different points in a mentee's career.

As a mentor, it is anticipated that you will share with your junior colleagues your experiences and advice on topics that range through such diverse areas such as:

- career advancement
- grantmanship
- publishing
- teaching
- enhancing professional visibility
- networking with other scientists and practitioners
- overcoming barriers to career success

This advice pertains in particular to careers in physiology, because your mentee might (and should) have other mentors for guidance on other needs (such as requirements for his/her dissertation or the tenure process at a particular university). However, it could include other topics, such as meshing a career with a personal life and family or changing career paths. In return, your participation in the MentorNet program should expand your professional contacts, possibly lead to the establishment of new collaborative opportunities, and is an important contribution to your organization and to your profession.

Successful mentoring involves a dynamic process whereby each participant learns to respect and trust the partner's commitment, expertise, and individuality. A firm commitment to the mentoring process and a willingness to invest time and energy are the most important components for a successful relationship. Mentoring is in many ways an elusive concept and an individual process. Every mentor and mentee is unique because each partner's experience, personality, and professional development track will differ. Although both people begin the process with certain expectations, it is often wise to consider establishing a discrete time period as a trial basis for you and your mentee. A specific time frame will enable the two of you to determine whether the mentoring relationship is working and may help minimize any misunderstandings.

Below are some general suggestions to help you in establishing the mentoring relationship with your mentee. Since mentoring relationships come in all shapes and sizes, what we offer are

only guidelines, and you may want to review these guidelines with your mentee to help decide which you both think are important in your specific relationship. In addition, there are numerous resources that address issues related to effective mentor/mentee relationships available on this web site and elsewhere.

Suggestions

Achieving the goal of the program. The goal of the Mentoring Program is ideally achieved in the setting of your mentee's increasing participation in the membership organization that is most appropriate for his/her career (e.g., The American Physiological Society). Thus, your mentee should be encouraged to join the appropriate organization and attend scientific meetings (e.g., Experimental Biology) on a regular basis. This is also a very good opportunity for you and your mentee to interact personally, over breakfast, lunch, coffee, or dinner; at poster sessions; or at workshops on career development or research funding strategies. Other ways for you to interact with your mentee include email, phone, letters, and fax. Encourage your mentee to attend, if possible, specialty meetings in his/her discipline and other events that would help advance his/her career, such as workshops on research funding and practice strategies.

Take the initiative in the relationship. Invite your mentee to talk, suggest topics to discuss, and ask if you can offer advice. Ask about and encourage accomplishments and ask if you can make a suggestion or offer criticism. Your perspective on all aspects of a career in physiology is very valuable.

Respect your mentee's time as much as you respect your own. Be explicit about your own needs and limits, specifying times you wish not to be disturbed or ones that are particularly good for communication. On the other hand, your mentee may also have teaching duties and times during particular experiments when he/she is not available. The use of email greatly alleviates having to set a specific time to talk.

Be explicit with your mentee that you are only offering suggestions and that they should be weighed along with advice received from other mentors. You should be encouraging your mentee to seek out advice from his/her advisor or on-site mentor as well as others, depending on the topic or issue being discussed.

Make only positive or neutral comments about your mentee to others. Your mentee must trust that anything said to you will be held in the strictest of confidence unless instructed otherwise. One never knows where a mentee could end up (e.g., grant review board, journal reviewer, etc.).

If your mentee is interested, consider discussing how you have been able to balance work with personal life demands. Junior scientists and practitioners often find this a difficult issue and set unrealistic expectations for themselves and their personal lives. They appreciate hearing a senior colleague's thoughts and experiences.

It is important not to confuse positive communication with a need for unwarranted praise or flattery. A mentor's job is not always to praise the work of the junior colleague. In fact, mentors who do not offer critical but constructive feedback may actually provide a disservice to the person they are trying to help. Too often senior faculty do not offer criticism for fear of offending. While accepting constructive criticism is an important lesson to be learned by all junior faculty, giving it is a lesson that senior faculty must master to become successful mentors.

When criticism is offered, it should be followed by constructive advice for improvement.

If possible, specific examples should be offered. Try to avoid offering advice in a way that would intimidate your young colleague from best availing his/herself of your expertise. It's not a bad idea to allow the mentee to think about your comments for some period of time and then come back together to discuss them.

If, after a period of time, you don't believe that either you or your mentee are able to participate in an effective mentoring relationship, then don't be averse to discussing this with your mentee and possibly ending the relationship. If this occurs, MentorNet can assist in placing the junior colleague in a relationship with a different mentor who may be a better match. If the relationship does end, if at all possible, try to end it on professional terms. It is no reflection on either of you if a particular pair isn't suitable.

Based on these guidelines your mentee should reasonably expect that you be in regular contact, provide career planning advice, keep confidences between the two of you, follow through on commitments, and be caring while giving honest feedback.

Tips on Interaction

When setting a date for the first meeting or contact, both members of the newly matched pair should arrange to exchange copies of their curriculum vita beforehand, so each will have them on hand for the first discussion. The mentee's CV is helpful for the you to begin a constructive review of the junior colleague's career at that point and to suggest some goals for the immediate future. Your CV provides a base with which the you can point out key steps in you career that were particularly valuable along the career path, such as research awards, types of grant funding, quality of publications, service and committee appointments, etc.

Second, the mentor should ask the junior colleague to share his/her goals for the upcoming year as well as more long-term goals, as a starting point for discussion.

The exact nature of subsequent meetings, including their topic and duration, will vary from pair to pair. For the majority of people, phone or email will be the most effective, regardless of where the two people live. In most circumstances, email probably will be the most effective way for mentor and mentee to stay in touch with a minimum of formality and time spent. However, it is important to also set aside a specific time or times to interact during appropriate scientific meetings (e.g., Experimental Biology), both because it may be a rare opportunity to interact in person and because this provides the junior colleague an opportunity to network with other scientists through your tutelage. Poster sessions and events such as receptions or dinners are good ways for you to introduce the junior colleague to other scientists with whom the mentee may not normally have the opportunity to meet and interact with. However, it is important for the mentee to understand that you have other demands on your time, including mentoring your own students and postdoctoral fellows, during the meeting. This is why specifying ahead of time a particular time and place for at least one face-to-face meeting is important.

Potential Pitfalls

There are at least three areas that need particular attention in any mentoring relationship.

Limited time. Studies have found that finding the time and energy for mentoring pairs to get together is a great obstacle. Take advantage of email, fax, telephone, etc., as ways of staying in touch. Email especially allows for relatively short but more frequent contact between the participants.

Lack of knowledge/skills. After you have accepted a role as a mentor, you may discover that there is not really the common ground between the two of you that was expected or that the junior colleague wants assistance in an area in which you do not feel particularly competent to advise. In this situation, you can feel free to either contact someone else or assist your mentee in locating others whose expertise may be more helpful for his/her specific need. Encourage your mentee to be open to taking the initiative to find another person to get a different point-of-view in a particular area.

Over-dependence. Over-dependence can go in either direction in a mentoring relationship. However, it is not wise for a junior person to become over-dependent on you as a mentor. It is helpful for you to encourage your junior colleagues to have other mentors and to eventually anticipate the end of the formal mentoring relationship. It should be everyone's goal to eventually become full-fledged colleagues, although it's always nice for the former mentee to have someone to go to for advice at any time in the future.

It is important that both mentees and mentors always consider whether a mentoring match may have served its useful purpose. It is better to part company on amicable terms than to struggle with a relationship without a firm foundation.