Mentoring

While working in a research team as an undergraduate researcher, you may find yourself being mentored by another student, a graduate student, a postdoctoral professional, a faculty member, or a research staff member. This module is designed to provide you with an overview of what you should expect from your mentor and to prepare you in your role as a mentee.

Learning objectives:
1. Familiarize yourself with the concept of mentoring.
2. Define the roles of mentors and mentees in a mentoring relationship.
3. Learn about expectations of mentors during a mentorship experience.

Let us begin.

Let’s start with looking at the definitions of mentoring. This will help you to understand the roles of mentors (i.e., the people facilitating the mentoring relationship) and mentees (i.e., the people who are receiving mentoring within a mentoring relationship).

Mentoring: Eric Parsloe of The Oxford School of Coaching & Mentoring defines mentoring as, “Mentoring is to support and encourage people to manage their own learning in order that they may maximize their potential, develop their skills, improve their performance and become the person they want to be” (Parsloe, E., 2008). It can also be defined as, “a professional relationship in which an experienced person (the mentor) assists another (the mentee) in developing specific skills and knowledge that will enhance the less-experienced person’s professional and personal growth” (Management Mentors, 2014).

“Mentoring is giving a mentee time, attention, insights, and advice. Mentoring is about helping a mentee develop social capital to complement their development of technical and intellectual capital. Simply providing resources for a mentee to accomplish a research project (i.e. assisting a mentee in developing technical/intellectual capital) is not mentoring. Mentoring involves moving beyond technical/intellectual assistance and entering into a meaningful personal interaction with the mentee” (The Mentoring Manual, 2012, p.10). This definition and explanation of various aspects of mentoring provides an overview of what you might expect from your mentor(s) during your undergraduate research experience. A mentor’s job is to provide advice and guidance and point a mentee in the right direction when needed.

Mentee: “A mentee is a self-motivated individual seeking to continuously promote personal development. A mentee recognizes personal strengths and weaknesses and actively seeks methods for personal growth. [...] A successful mentoring relationship not only depends on the characteristics of the mentor, but also on the characteristics of the mentee” (NASA FIRST Mentoring Handbook, 2006, p.6). An ideal mentee is one who is eager to learn, is a team player, is patient, is not afraid of risks, and has a positive attitude (The Mentoring Manual, 2012).
As an undergraduate researcher, you will need to ask your mentor for help and advice. This advice may relate to personal or professional issues. Both parties may want to determine the extent to which personal issues are addressed within the mentoring relationship. The following points will help you in your role as a mentee:

1. Become familiar with the research material, your research team, and the day-to-day functioning of the team.
2. Get acquainted with your mentor.
3. Ask your mentor questions that will help you to adjust to your new work environment. These questions may relate to the lab that you will be working in or the people with whom you will be working.
4. If you need guidance about a particular work matter, do your own research before approaching your mentor. Look through lab manuals or search online to determine if answers have already been presented to the issues they you are facing or to questions that you have. This shows the mentor that you are proactive, resourceful, and genuinely invested in solving the problem.
5. As a mentee, you will rely on the guidance of your mentor during the first two or three weeks of your research experience. During this time, do not feel overwhelmed. Remember to ask your mentor and your colleagues for any help and advice you need so that you can begin your experience in a positive manner and can feel confident about your first days as a researcher (The Mentoring Manual, 2012).

**What to expect from your mentor:** As a mentee, it sometimes is difficult to understand the roles and responsibilities of your mentor. Similar to the mentor, a mentee has roles and responsibilities too. This section will explain to you what you should generally expect from your mentor and some tips on being a successful mentee.

1. **Communication:** One of the key elements of a successful mentee/mentor relationship is communication. Although mentors often discuss with their mentees the types of communication that might be best for them within a research experience, it is not uncommon or inappropriate for a mentee to initiate a conversation about communication. Among these, questions may include the following:
   a. What methods of communication do you prefer? Email? Telephone? Text messaging? Face to face?
   b. How often would you like to communicate? Weekly? Biweekly?

When communicating results of your research or experiment, make sure you have either a hard copy or electronic copy of the topics that you will be reporting. Just saying “the plot looks like this or that” is not enough. Instead get a copy of the said graph, since it will be easier for your mentor to understand what you are saying. Presentation of these artifacts also allows you to focus on the key points of the results and to engage in a more fruitful conversation with your mentor (The Mentoring Manual, 2012).

The following are recommendations of when to use a specific type of
communication (The Mentoring Manual, 2012):

a. Email: Sending a document or information for review or for quick communication such as scheduling a meeting or providing an update of a schedule changes.

b. Phone: Clarification to follow up on a previous discussion or e-mail or in cases where a difficult issue needs to be resolved and time is of the essence.

c. Face-to-face meeting: This type of interaction is always preferred as it provides an opportunity sharing details and having meaningful discussions as well as additional follow-up conversations.

It should be noted that these are just recommendations and are not set rules of communication. As a mentee, you will need to exercise good judgment on the best mode of communication with your mentor. If a type of communication is not working, identify what the challenges are and ask for clarification from your mentor about possible ways to improve communication.

2. Meetings: Prior to meeting with your mentor, determine what the agenda at that meeting is going to be. If the mentor initiates the meeting, you may not have a specific agenda prepared. It is important, however, to take notes of issues that the mentor is presenting so that you can follow up with those items after the meeting. If you are requesting a meeting with your mentor, it is your responsibility to create agenda items that will address points that you need guidance on within that meeting. You might even send the agenda prior to the meeting so that the mentor can think about your issues and can review any papers or documents that you would like to present to him/her during that meeting. It is also a good idea to have any necessary materials at hand during the meeting. (The Mentoring Manual, 2012).

3. Ask Questions: Asking appropriate questions to your mentor is always an essential part of being a mentee. Usually, no question is considered a bad question, especially if the question cannot be answered through standard literature searches or inquiries. The way a question is worded and posed, however, makes a difference in how the question is perceived and responded to by your mentor. Questions should be straightforward so that the mentor knows what you are seeking within a response. If a mentor’s response does not answer your question, consider rephrasing the question until the mentor’s response is clear. You should never leave a meeting without a clear sense of direction or understanding about a topic that you wanted to address within the meeting.

For example, saying, “I just don't understand this problem at all. Where do I start?” does not provide details to your mentor about aspects of the problem that are not clear to you and does not demonstrate that you have made an effort to identify possible solutions to the problem. Consider rephrasing the question as follows: “I read the two articles that you gave me to read and what I currently understand is photosynthesis involves the harvesting of solar energy. However, I
am still not sure how to get started on the analysis of enzyme activity in the plants that you asked me to do next. Is there something that I am missing from my reading of the two articles? Can you help me make a connection between the two articles and learning the methodologies that you asked me to do? I am hoping that this will help me to complete the task to your standards”. The latter example informs your mentor where you are stuck and gives him/her an idea of the type of explanation and discussion that you will need to have to continue with your research. It also shows the mentor that you have made a concerted effort to define the problem and appropriate research solution (The Mentoring Manual, 2012).

We hope that you understand the difference between a mentor and a mentee and their roles. Whether you select a mentor or are assigned a mentor we anticipate that the information in this module will help you to maximize your experience within a mentoring relationship.

References:


