ESTABLISHING RELATIONSHIPS WITH MENTORS

Fostering a collaborative relationship with an effective mentor in your field is essential to enhancing your professional growth and optimizing your learning opportunities. We know from various studies of professional career development that a positive, supportive mentoring relationship can help you achieve higher levels of research productivity and success, increase confidence in your academic capabilities, enhance your professional reputation, and increase your long-term career satisfaction (Allen et al., 2006; Chao, 2009; Dohm & Cummings, 2002; Ragins, & Kram, 2007; 2003; Johnson, 2002; Wanberg et al., 2003). However, we have also learned that similarity and liking between mentor and mentee are important moderators of the success of the relationship, as is the quality of the mentor and the quality of the relationship overall. Finally, we know that it is important to match mentor and mentee on important dimensions, but that matching sometimes proves to be difficult, especially within the confines of a given institution (Chao, 2009; Lankau et al., 2005; Ragins et al., 2000). But in general, working constructively with an effective mentor can be an enjoyable experience that can also add an important social element to your work as a researcher.

According to the National Council of Graduate Schools and National Institutes of Health, mentors are:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mentor Roles</th>
<th>Qualities</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Advisors</td>
<td>Have similar career interests and a willingness to share their knowledge</td>
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<tr>
<td>Supporters</td>
<td>Provide emotional and moral encouragement</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tutors</td>
<td>Give specific feedback on one's performance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervisors</td>
<td>Monitor academic and professional progress</td>
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<tr>
<td>Trainers</td>
<td>Teach students about professional responsibility</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sponsors</td>
<td>Provide source of information about grant, research, internship, career, or other opportunities and assists in obtaining them</td>
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<tr>
<td>Role Models</td>
<td>Exhibit the qualities and ethical values important to academia</td>
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(Adapted from National institutes of Health, 1999; Zelditch, 2001)

When selecting your mentor, consider your own needs and style of learning, the ease of access to the potential mentor, communication preferences and styles of each person, expectations, involvement in achieving goals, and the reputation of the potential mentor within the discipline. Building an effective relationship with a person quite senior to you will likely take some effort and patience, and the relationship may need to grow over time. Establishing a strong and positive communicative partnership is a key to an effective mentoring relationship.

Qualities of a Good Mentor

A good mentor is actively involved in nurturing your personal and professional development. This relationship should be mutually beneficial. Over time, you may also become a valuable colleague to your mentor. A good mentor can help you learn more effectively, providing you tailored strategies appropriate to pursuing your goals within your circumstances:

**Table 1: Qualities of a Good Mentor**
Believes in you and is a positive role model
Values your opinions
Listens to your goals and helps you form them
Offers emotional and moral encouragement
Offers guidance to ensure integrity and ethical conduct
Provides guidance and honest feedback, both good and bad
Is not exploitative, smothering, or overly controlling
Maintains friendly, professional boundaries
Is respected by colleagues and others in the field
Facilitates your professional networking
Is a good problem-solver
Creates and fosters a sense of community
Values diversity and is sensitive to cultural, ethnic, social, linguistic, gender, and religious differences
Fosters your intellectual development, and encourages independence and creativity.
Recognizes your accomplishments
Celebrates your success
Promotes your career, pushes you to publish, present your work, and participate in research opportunities
Meets and interacts on a regular basis to provide essential guidance and advice to help you progress

Monitors and evaluates your performance and progress
Helps you to evaluate career options and opportunities
Explains the requirements for promotion and tenure early in your academic appointment
Provides constructive and timely feedback, and clearly explains what is expected of you
Supports your goals and aspirations, even if they are different from his or hers
Provides and shares resources as appropriate
Opens doors of opportunity to you in the department, institution, and professional organizations
Provides occasions to present at seminars or conferences
When appropriate, involves you in professional writing and the journal review process, including co-writing proposals, manuscripts, and professional correspondence
Is fair about co-authorship and sharing credit for mutual work
Is a good collaborator and colleague and with a strong spirit of collegiality
Respects confidentiality
Is on time for meetings and minimizes interruptions

(Adapted from Worley, Borus, & Hilty, 2006; Graduate Council, 1998-1999; The Division of Graduate Studies, Jackson State University, MS, no date)

Based on a review of the empirical literature and their extensive mentorship experiences, Brown and Daly (2009) summarize the specific skills above that are shown by successful mentors:

1. Supports the mentee’s transition to independence.
2. Educates, encourages, and inspires work in clinical, research, and science settings and fosters the developing capabilities, skills, and professional identity of the mentee for a career as a scientist-practitioner.
3. Uses relationship skills that communicate empathy, positive regard, and genuineness, including interpersonal reinforcement for research activities.
4. Exposes the mentee to a variety of research methods, guides the development of research, evaluates and critiques ideas and work, provides corrective and timely feedback, and is available for meetings.
5. Opens doors for mentees in research, helping them to gain exposure and introducing them to new opportunities in the research community.
6. Promotes scholarly values, scientific integrity, and ethical decision-making, while modeling strong moral and ethical character, and promotes, demonstrates, and teaches appropriate conduct of a researcher.

**Qualities of a Good Mentee**

Mentoring is a multidimensional relationship, and both you and your mentor bear the joint responsibility of cultivating a constructive collaboration. Good mentees show many qualities:

**Table 2: Qualities of a Good Mentee**

| Takes an active role in his or her own growth and development | Keeps the mentor fully informed of his or her progress, including problems that develop |
| Is an active participant in the mentoring relationship | Communicates openly about goals, expectations, interests, and aspirations |
| Is diligent, disciplined, and reliable | Meets expected deadlines whenever possible, but is honest and direct if meeting a deadline is not feasible |
| Is efficient and respectful of others time | Maintains a ongoing professional portfolio containing the necessary components for promotion and tenure and honors (e.g., evaluations, time devoted to committee work) |
| Is courteous and tactful | Shares credit for academic and professional achievements |
| Listens and is responsive to advice from his or her mentor and other senior researchers | Shares information and knowledge gained with his or her the mentor in a reciprocal relationship |
| Is enthusiastic about contributing to ongoing work and projects | Reciprocates when mentor spends time and effort on mentee’s behalf |
| Asks well thought-out questions | Gives back by becoming a mentor to a junior colleague once mentee is are sufficiently experienced |
| Acts with high integrity in accord with high professional standards in all work | |
| Receives criticism in a professional manner and is open to the viewpoints of others | |
| Always gives his or her best effort for any task requested by a mentor | |
| Attends departmental lectures, meetings, and social events | |
| Makes the most out of every meeting and has comes to meetings fully prepared | |

(Adapted from: Worley, Borus, & Hilty, 2006; Graduate Council, 1998-1999; University of Maryland College Park, 2006; The Rackham School of Graduate Studies, 2008)

**Establishing a Relationship with a New Mentor**

During your academic career, you may cultivate many different mentoring relationships to achieve a multitude of purposes. Some broad common ways of establishing this important relationship are:

- Often, academic institutions establish formal mentoring programs to enhance the experience of junior faculty members, or graduate or professional students. A senior faculty member may be assigned to a mentee to assist that person in acquiring the general knowledge and skills needed for success early during his or her research career and beyond.
- As you conduct your first drug abuse research study, you may develop a technical mentoring relationship with a faculty member with expertise in statistics, for example, who will work with you on data management and analysis, or you may develop a technical relationship with a psychometric and survey expert who helps you to develop new instruments or surveys for your study. Technical mentorships are often time-limited and have specific short-term goals and expectations.

- Another type of relationship may develop out of the dynamic role mentorship plays in helping to establish productive research careers. NIH K-awards are grants that are offered competitively by the National Institutes of Health. K-awards provide funding for research career development and include requirements for formal mentoring relationships when awarded for junior investigators. K-awards exist for early career, middle career, and advanced researchers.

- An ongoing mentoring relationship may also develop naturally between people with similar professional interests and goals any time during a person’s professional career.

When you begin the process of choosing a mentor, careful evaluation of your options will help you make a well-informed decision. Create a list of potential mentors with general expertise in your area of interest and read some of their work. After narrowing the list, send a letter of interest and your curriculum vitae to your top candidate and ask for a meeting to discuss a possible mentoring relationship. During the first meeting, discuss each of your interests to determine if a mentorship would be mutually beneficial. Share with your candidate a one to two page summary of your short- and long-term career and research goals, how you intend to fulfill these goals, your strengths and weaknesses, your preferred working style, and how you believe the mentor could help foster your professional advancement. Also share any relevant publications or research products you may have produced thus far. Take notes and be very open to listening to everything the mentor shares with you.

After this meeting, send the potential mentor a letter of appreciation for his or her time with some indication of whether or not you desire to build a mentoring the relationship with them. Once you identify a candidate you feel is a good match, it is your responsibility to move the relationship in one direction or another. Neither you nor the potential mentor is obligated to meet again or further develop the relationship, but each should clearly communicate and briefly explain intentions in writing.

WORKING WITH YOUR MENTORS

The mentor and mentee are jointly responsible for producing a quality mentoring experience, which takes a great deal of work, practice, and patience. Establishing an active, effective mentoring plan is essential to the relationship. The plan should clearly state the respective roles and responsibilities of the parties involved, including goals, timelines, feedback, intellectual property, etc. These expectations need to be revisited at least annually to evaluate whether they are working. If not, revisions to the plan must be made. Problems often occur in mentoring relationships due to misunderstandings about expectations of both the mentor and the mentee.

Mentors can be categorized into two types depending on their role and purpose: a developmental mentor and a technical mentor. Both types can play key roles in your development as a drug abuse researcher. They may be the same person, or two or more different people depending on the skill sets of the people involved.
- **Developmental (primary) mentor.** A developmental mentor is someone primarily concerned with guiding your overall growth and progress as a researcher to help you to achieve your personal and professional goals. Usually, the person is in the same general field of study as you are, meets with you regularly, and works at the same academic institution.

- **Technical mentor.** A technical mentor is someone who will help you develop and master specific skills, such as grant and manuscript writing, data collection and analysis, research techniques, or protocol procedures. Again, the technical mentor is usually at the same site you are so you can more efficiently and effectively collaborate on your research project. However, technical mentors may also be located at other institutions if they have rather specific skills. In some situations, such as with NIH K-awards, you often may have multiple mentors with different goals for each skill area.

It is likely that you will have several mentors throughout your academic and professional career, sometimes at the same time. For a variety of reasons, not all mentoring relationships may be successful regardless of the positive efforts and intentions of the people involved. There are little data that distinguish highly effective from less effective research mentors (Brown & Daly, 2009). If you feel a relationship is not meeting your expectations, talk to your mentor about your concerns – directly but tactfully. If you cannot arrive at resolution or develop alternate plans that work for both of you, you may need to end the relationship and seek another mentor. Be aware that changing mentors may result in a change in your research emphasis due to the expertise of your new mentor. If you change institutions and that precipitates your need to find a new mentor, you may wish to seek a new mentor at the new location while possibly maintaining a long-distance relationship (probably of a different form) with your existing mentor.