

Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies

Mentoring Program Guide for Mentors

The Successful Mentor

The primary resource of successful mentors is their knowledge of the norms, values, and procedures of their field. This knowledge is essential to mentees, but there are also personal and professional characteristics that contribute to effective mentoring. These include the ability to:

- Value the mentee as a person
- Develop mutual trust and respect
- Maintain confidentiality
- Listen actively both to what is being said and how it is being said
- Ask open, supportive questions and provide constructive feedback
- Help the mentee solve his or her own problem, rather than giving direction
- Focus on the mentee's development, and resist the urge to produce a clone
- Be accessible

What Can I Do to Be a Successful Mentor?

Before contacting your mentee, you should clarify for yourself what you are comfortable with in your mentoring relationship and how you see your role as a mentor. What are your expectations of a mentee? Once you have thought about your respective roles, contact your mentee to negotiate the parameters and responsibilities of the relationship: what kinds of topics will you talk about? How will you communicate – via e-mail, phone, skype and/or in person at the ASEES Convention; and how often – once a month or 3-4 times during the academic year? What does the mentee expect from the relationship and what do you expect of your mentee? These expectations can be renegotiated, but they should be established early to avoid the potential for discomfort due to different expectations for the relationship.

It is important to talk early and regularly to establish a level of comfort in the relationship around the easy topics—then when a challenge arises, it is much easier for both of you to have a useful discussion. It may be difficult for a young professional to approach you with problems, either out of concern for your time or out of a worry about seeming naïve. Suggest topics for discussion and be sure to ask questions of your mentee. Gently ask for details, since, especially at the beginning of a relationship, your mentee may be unwilling to share problems.

Recognize and evaluate what you can offer as a mentor. You are not expected to have all the answers to the questions a mentee might ask. *No single mentor can fulfill every mentoring function or have an answer for every question.* Get help when you need it; be prepared to look for additional resources or people that might help your mentee with specific questions that are outside your expertise or knowledge.

Your role as mentor is to offer your mentee “insider’s advice” about the profession. What do you know now that you wish you had known earlier? What are the sources of institutional support for career development? Make sure your mentee looks into resources on his/her work environment. Introduce her to colleagues: who are the people she should get to know? Whenever possible, share your knowledge of the informal rules for advancement in the profession, and look out for opportunities to help your mentee present his work in the right venues and to the right people, both formally and informally.

Offering both praise and constructive feedback will be necessary in the course of mentoring. Praise is most useful when accompanied by descriptive statements about why or how something was done well. Likewise, give criticism when warranted, again using descriptive statements rather than making judgments. Importantly, even while offering strategies for improvement, make sure you help your mentee solve her own problem rather than just giving her directions. Invite your mentee's thoughts on how to improve a particular behavior or result, in addition to providing ideas of your own.

In all your conversations with your mentee, focus on his development; respond to his needs as they develop, and help him to think strategically. Young professionals often feel overwhelmed as they develop expertise in their careers. You may consider helping your mentee sort out priorities, budget time, balance professional and personal activities, and learn to say "no" in acceptable ways.

"Over-mentoring" is an easy trap to fall into for any well-meaning mentor. It is tempting to see your own career as a template for success for your mentee. You should certainly express caution about things that you see as potentially detrimental, but it will be important not to prevent your mentee from taking reasonable risks in developing her career—her creativity and perspective may help her to build new directions that were not available to you and your colleagues.

What Are Possible Mentoring Activities?

- As the first activity, exchange CV's with your mentee to stimulate discussion about career paths and possibilities
- Discuss teaching strategies—preparation of lectures, teaching materials, assignments and exam questions
- Advise on potential sources of funding for research, teaching, and travel
- Let your mentee know about research opportunities
- Suggest appropriate journals for publication
- Offer information on how to find and get nominated for fellowships, grants, and awards
- Initiate a discussion about promotion and career advancement
- Share experiences of setting priorities, managing time, handling stress, and balancing workload effectively
- Help your mentee to set up a plan of short- and long-term goals
- Discuss how to handle concerns, issues, or problems
- Encourage your mentee to utilize resources that might help with career advancement

Benefits and Challenges: What Can I Expect from My Mentoring Relationship?

You will have a hand in framing the future of your field, by helping a talented ASEEES member succeed early in his career. You will find new or renewed connections to other people and resources as you work to provide your mentee with needed information. Finally, one of the greatest benefits mentioned regularly by mentors is the satisfaction of discovering and getting to know a vibrant young colleague, and in the process finding that your own professional agendas are clarified and reinvigorated.

No mentoring relationship is automatically a success. It takes intentional effort on both sides to ensure an effective mentoring relationship over time. Mentoring relationships are dynamic, and each one is unique. So while there is never one single best way to overcome challenges or avoid pitfalls, some general statements about problems that can arise and how you might avoid them are in order.

Too much respect for partner's time:

A primary reason that mentoring relationships do not “take” from the very start is an ***overly pronounced concern for the mentoring partner’s time***: Mentors who are not regularly asked for help may not wish to seem “pushy” and thus do not contact their mentees without express invitation. Such concern for the mentee’s time and independence often has a negative impact on the usefulness of the mentoring relationship. Successful mentoring relies on the trust that builds up through regular contact, which will allow the mentee to share any difficulties, ask important questions, and get honest answers. ***It is important for both the mentor and the mentee to be proactive in the relationship*** so that the mentee gets the support she needs for professional success. Mentors cannot help if they do not know what the mentee’s primary questions and concerns are.

Unrealistic expectations:

Young professionals’ expectations for their mentors can be unrealistic: one mentor cannot be the only resource on every topic. Additionally, mentees can overestimate the information and guidance a single person can provide. They may also not be aware that they should always be looking for additional mentors and sources of information. Being seen as the only source of relevant information may result in mentors feeling overwhelmed. Mentors should discuss with mentees the value of gathering multiple perspectives and building multiple relationships. Mentors should also admit when they do not have expertise in a particular area, and look for other people who might be appropriate resources on that topic, and help the mentee build a solid support network.

Mentors can also readily overestimate their mentees. This usually takes one of two forms. First, having the benefit of great experience in a profession, mentors may not remember how hard it is to be a graduate student or to learn a new work culture as a young professional, to figure out the best ways to communicate one’s achievements, to learn the unwritten rules of success. Over time, these have become second nature to the mentor, and thus not visible as necessary foci of discussion. Mentees, on the other hand, may not even know what questions to ask! Additionally, mentors presented with a mentee who seems very accomplished may underestimate the need for guidance of this newcomer to the field. As a result, mentors may not ask enough questions.

Relationships that don’t work:

It is important to remember that, through no fault of the mentee or the mentor, some relationships may never “gel”. This possibility is much less likely if you begin your mentoring relationship with a frank and honest discussion about how you see the role of mentor and mentee. As a part of its foundation, any mentoring relationship should have a no-fault termination possibility so that mismatched mentoring partners are not trapped in a negative relationship.

The best way to counter these pitfalls is to communicate regularly, ***even if there is no particular problem to discuss***. As we have stressed elsewhere, informal contact leads to good communication, which allows the more difficult conversations, if there is a problem, to take place more readily.

*[Some parts of this guide are excerpted from U of Albany Mentoring Best Practices:
<http://www.albany.edu/academics/mentoring.best.practices.toc.shtml>]*