

MENTORING MANUAL

B u i l d i n g G r a d u a t e N u t r i t i o n



MENTORING MANUAL
BUILDING GRADUATE NUTRITION

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PURPOSE

This manual has been developed as part of the USDA NIFA HSI Education Grant, *Curricula, Research & Technology: Capacity Building for Graduate Nutrition and Dietetics in Puerto Rico's* mentoring program where graduates of the Nutrition and Dietetics Program of the University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras Campus and other invited guests, will serve as mentors for undergraduate student mentees in areas of research and professional development. Forthcoming, we hope to expand the mentorship program to also include graduate students as mentees.

HOW CAN I BE A GOOD MENTOR?

A mentor is an experienced guide, a person who provides counsel about his or her own career path to a mentee who is less experienced in that specific field. This seems pretty straight forward, but what are some of the things one can do to become a really **good** mentor?

For a mentor to be really **good** at mentoring, he or she should be a person with integrity who is an active listener and communicator, and who encourages and helps others with their goal setting and attainment, and their personal and professional skills development. Therefore, mentors take on the role of honest leadership.

The first step is getting to know the mentee, establishing a foundation of trust and confidentiality, and identifying the needs of the mentee. After this, short- and long-term goals can be discussed to identify which goals are of priority so the mentee can draft and organize a plan. Once the mentee puts the plan into action, a good mentor must make time to assess the mentee's progress and provide feedback, and not just leave the mentee to fend for himself or herself.

According to *The Helping Hand* (2017), which is the California Dietetic Association's guide for dietetic mentoring programs, a successful mentor should provide corrective feedback. Positive and constructive criticism is very important for anyone who wishes to better their performance since it promotes inner growth, greater focus, and the improvement of results. This type of feedback can maximize the efficiency of the mentoring process. How else will a mentee know if he or she is on the right path if the things that need reinforcement are not respectfully pointed out by someone more knowledgeable?

A good mentor should also be inspiring. Besides being knowledgeable and exemplary, he or she must open diverse doors for the mentee. Finding and offering opportunities for those who are being mentored is a great source of inspiration! It can expand the mentees' points of view, expose them to new approaches, help develop certain competencies and motivate them regarding the future.

Let's not forget about emotional support! For some mentees, it is easy for them to understand the advice given and execute a plan correctly; however, for others, it may be a difficult task due to personal or non-personal problems. Because of this, mentors should be genuinely empathic and offer authentic motivation. They must be present for their mentees even if it means telling them, discreetly, that needing emotional support is not a sign of weakness and that perseverance is possible even if achieving it is difficult. Empowerment is key and leaders/mentors should promote this constantly.

Even with all these outstanding qualities and favorable characteristics, it must be clear that mentors are not perfect and should not be seen as infallible idols, substitute parents, therapists, nor a means to obtain credit or prestige. Mentors are, however, sources of wisdom, support, strength and empowerment who see and help extract the potential from the mentees.

HOW CAN I HAVE A MENTEE MINDSET?

Our thinking processes direct the course of our lives, either in a positive or negative way. Due to this, changing attitudes and turning thoughts to a much more positive focus during adverse experiences has a great influence on how we act. The mind works mysteriously, but when one learns to take control of it, it is much easier to become aware of tiny fractions of thoughts.

It is essential for mentees to remember that unfavorable outcomes are inevitable and many times, unexpected. It is also fundamental for them to remember that they have the ability to deal with those unfavorable outcomes head-on. This will give them the confidence to fully grasp their potential and subsequently, enhance personal performance results.

This being said, to have a *mentee mindset*, one needs to be positive, open and willing. Mentees don't have to always be completely prepared for any outcome, but they should be eager to learn from mistakes or bad experiences and believe in their self-resilience. In addition, mentees may not always like or appreciate all the advice or guidance given them by their mentors. Should this occur, mentees should have the confidence and respect to ask their mentors to explain or abound on the seemingly unwelcome advice.

Being welcoming to new opinions and suggestions will help broaden and grow the mentees' thinking processes, knowledge and skills in preparation for graduate school and the workforce. The mentee and mentor should deliberate together and decide on any changes or additions to the work plan.

The most important skill for a mentee to possess is to learn quickly (Lipscomb & An, 2013). This way, he or she will be able to make rapid and adequate decisions, keep up with the demands of the work plan, and integrate new ideas, among other skills. This is very important in research projects and professional development. This doesn't mean mentees have to be perfect and comprehend everything immediately, nor compare themselves to others who they consider are "better" or "quicker." It means challenging oneself with the sole purpose of gradually adapting over time to think faster or learn more quickly.

Mentors are not the only ones who have great responsibilities. Mentees also have many responsibilities, which require taking on leadership roles, such as reporting their successes and/or failures to their mentors, communicating effectively, putting in the effort to self-assess their strengths and weaknesses, having a realistic point-of-view, identifying their current and future objectives, and letting their mentors know that they are free to provide any constructive feedback.

According to the Minority Fellowship Program (2012), here are some tips to have a *mentee mindset*: recognize that you have something different, unique and important to offer; ask your mentor any question you might have to clear up all your doubts or uncertainties; don't be a "black hole of need" but limit the quantity of requests and depend primarily on yourself and try to be as organized as possible.

DEVELOPING A SUCCESSFUL MENTOR/MENTEE RELATIONSHIP

The main aim of a mentoring relationship is for mentees to become more independent and self-sufficient with the help of their mentors. As in any relationship, this takes time, nourishment, and commitment from both sides.

Mentors also benefit from their interactions with the mentees. They become role models, share their wisdom, build their own confidence, feel the satisfaction of *giving back* to the future of the dietetics profession and nutrition sciences, and have the opportunity to gain perspective on how different generations think and act. There are many ways that mentors learn from this mentor/mentee experience!

Mentor/mentee relationships can be spontaneous, informal, formal, or very structured. This depends on many factors including the environment and the personalities of the mentors and the mentees. The factor that has the most significant impact on the connection is how well mentors and mentees get along and work together as a team, regardless of the type of formality in the relationship.

The initial thing to do to develop a successful relationship is for mentors and mentees to sit down and get to know each other. Every individual is unique in his or her own ways. Sometimes collaborating with someone new can be strange, intimidating or just uncomfortable. Getting to know each other's background, cultural sensitivities, and way of being on a professional level, will help break the ice and facilitate the establishment of boundaries for the work plan. Being acquainted and developing a rapport is very critical for the success of a mentoring relationship (Lipscomb & An, 2013).

After establishing boundaries to understand each other's expectations and deciding specific and attainable goals together, they can talk about what is necessary to accomplish those goals. Once the mentee begins following the work plan, which must be clear, the mentor will focus on guiding that mentee instead of imposing their decisions upon him or her. This will allow the mentee to contemplate the potential as well as the consequences of his or her decisions and provide enlightenment for the mentee to pursue or walk away from a certain path. If obstacles appear along the way, mentors will encourage perseverance, and continue to support and motivate the mentee, helping him or her to have a better understanding of what steps to take to accomplish the work plan and professional goals.

Some crucial aspects of this mentoring relationship is checking progress with frequent participation, being attentive to what is said during evaluations, and maintaining open communication. Keeping both parties motivated is a difficult mission if the relationship is not based on mutual commitment or enthusiasm. Therefore, they must be dedicated to actually working and thriving together. There should also be reciprocal and transparent respect to avoid stress and conflicts, and promote a healthy atmosphere.

What's next? The celebration of accomplishments! We cannot forget the recognition of achievements! If mentors give constructive feedback, they will celebrate the fact that their mentees used that feedback to achieve their goals. This is a very special part of mentoring. Showing mentees they are deserving of celebration will increase their confidence, diligence and stimulation towards success.

Another tip for mentees from the *Mentoring manual: A guide for mentors and mentees* (2021), is to say “thank you” once in a while! This is not an obligatory action but it is indeed a priceless and selfless one, and will help strengthen the relationship. This conveys sincere gratitude to those who have gone out of their way to share their lives with you in order to help you fulfill your dreams. There is nothing like successfully reaching your goals and then expressing appreciation to those whose efforts helped you get there.

PROFESSIONAL MENTORING IN NUTRITION AND DIETETICS

Professional mentoring in nutrition and dietetics is based on the guidance by or of a graduate student, academic faculty member, or a working professional with the objective of aiding in personal, academic and career advancement in fields of nutrition and dietetics and nutrition sciences.

Undergraduate and graduate students can take advantage of mentoring programs to clarify doubts concerning their studies, learn the steps, selection criteria and nuances to applying for dietetic internships or coordinated supervised experiential practice programs both within and outside their home state or countries. Mentees can also gather detailed knowledge about the experiences of dietetic interns and students of supervised practice and what they do in preparation for taking the credentialing exam to become a Registered Dietitian Nutritionist (RDN). Mentees may also be oriented in regard to other possible internships with different organizations and agencies such as the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), shadowing experiences, volunteer experiences and potential career opportunities.

According to the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics (2013), encouraging mentoring harvests rewards by increasing performance as well as loyalty, and those who receive this careful supervision and counsel are the people who will most likely become active participants in professional organizations and future leaders of the profession of Nutrition and Dietetics.

Expanding professional networking is essential for mentors and mentees since it contributes to the creation of long-lasting beneficial relationships. Networking increases employment opportunities, provides valuable resources and other professional's support, creates partnerships, facilitates the trade of evidence-based information and ideas, and promotes self-improvement.

The California Dietetic Association's *The Helping Hand* guide (2017) suggests that even if the goals of any professional mentoring relationship are flexible, they should also be SMART: Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, and Timely. This framework is favorable because it places the mentee in perspective of the feasible goals that matter the most and aids in his or her organization and compliance. Sometimes mentors must work closely with their mentees to enhance the structure of the established goals and bring them back to focus.

For those students who are interested in nutrition-related research, this can be a tremendous opportunity for them to receive direct help from others who have already gone through the process of investigative research.

MENTORING IN RESEARCH

Research is the backbone of any scientific community. It is imperative for mentees to develop research skills such as the searching, gathering, analysis, and synthesis of information with the purpose to discover solutions for nutritional problems in today's society, as well as to cherish new knowledge in multi- and interdisciplinary fields of food and nutrition at clinical, educational and administrative levels. Graduate students mentoring undergraduate students and faculty mentoring students, support the navigation of mentees through research experiences, which is significant for the development of critical thinking and problem-solving skills in their evolution as professionals in Nutrition and Dietetics or as nutrition scientists.

Mentoring in scientific research should strive to create a safe haven for minds that wish to be creative and think laterally, leave their comfort zones, and learn from their oversights. It provides an opportunity to transform undergraduate students into independent researchers.

Mentors expose mentees to diverse research disciplines and journeys that may be undergraduate or post-baccalaureate, so mentees can reflect on them and their future pursuits. They also help mentees connect and collaborate with other researchers; collaboration is very important in research. Working as a team and sharing discoveries strengthens science as well as the mentoring relationship. Also, just as networking is important for professional development, networking is also important for scientific advancement and for translating scientific research to communities and individuals.

When choosing a research mentor, the mentee should 1) reciprocate interest in the area of research expertise of the mentor, 2) be aware of the productivity of the potential mentor including publications, special projects and professional affiliations, 3) understand and fit well with the mentor's communication style, and 4) verify the potential mentor's accessibility and availability for the mentoring relationship. Furthermore, the mentee should consider the potential mentor's personality traits, such as patience, kindness, integrity and respect for others (Serrano-García & Figueroa Rodríguez, 2019). If the mentee cannot choose, but instead is appointed a research mentor, hopefully the mentor will be experienced, agreeable with the above-mentioned characteristics, and possess the personality traits favorable for a successful mentoring relationship.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS (FAQS)

1. Q: Why is a mentoring program advantageous?

A: A mentoring program is advantageous and valuable because it focuses on the professional development of mentees so they can enter a new field of work or new experience with motivation and confidence. Mentoring provides guidance and support when uncertainty reigns; increases productivity, effectiveness and skills; increases professional and research networking, and offers unique opportunities for advancement.

2. Q: How can I benefit from a mentor/mentee relationship?

A: A mentor/mentee relationship is beneficial because it provides a broader perspective on professional development and career opportunities; it can help increase your confidence in your abilities to grow from your own weaknesses, in the identification and achievement of professional development and research goals, and help you gain insights into your future work life. The mentoring relationship is a source of encouragement and empowerment.

3. Q: Is training and mentoring the same thing?

A: No. Training means teaching a trainee particular skills so that he or she can meet specific requirements. Meanwhile, mentoring is like a partnership between two people based on mutual trust and focused on experienced mentors offering guidance and support to mentees for their career paths.

4. Q: How do I establish short and long term goals?

A: First, determine goals that are reachable within your current time frame and then those that require more time or have a greater overarching impact. Then identify which reachable goals have priority; these would be your short-term goals. The goals in the future, or that require more time, would be your long-term goals.

5. Q: Do I have to be an expert in a specific area of nutrition and dietetics or nutrition science to be a mentor?

A: No, you don't have to be considered an expert in your field. You just have to be someone who truly wants to help others, and is willing to make an effort to help guide those who are less knowledgeable, based on those experiences you have already lived.

6. Q: How much time do I have to invest in a mentoring relationship?
A: There is no specific or required time that must be invested in a mentoring relationship. It will all depend on how the mentor and mentee work and interact with each other and the type of mentoring relationship. However, it is essential for both parties to communicate well and specify dates for reviewing the mentee's progress and attainment of goals, as well as for determining if the mentoring relationship will conclude or continue.
7. Q: How can my mentor and I maintain a positive relationship?
A: You and your mentor can maintain a positive relationship if both of you are honest, meet regularly, establish agreements regarding expectations, respect each other's time and individuality, celebrate each other's achievements and fulfill your commitments.
8. Q: What are some common barriers to a successful mentoring relationship?
A: Some common barriers to establishing an effective mentoring relationship have been demonstrated to be: 1) lack of conviction of the usefulness of mentorship, 2) ignorance of the work plan tasks and responsibilities, 3) incompatible personality characteristics and values for the expected functions, 4) difficulties in evaluating the outcomes of the relationship, 5) poor time management skills, 6) poor teamwork skills, 7) lack of institutional support.
9. Q: What do I do if I feel the mentoring relationship is just not working?
A: Review the guiding principles of mentoring in this mini-manual and external references, auto-reflect on your contributions (or lack thereof) to establishing an effective relationship, set up a time to speak respectfully and honestly to your mentor or mentee to restart or re-energize your relationship. If this does not work, or does not seem feasible, consider terminating the mentoring relationship on good terms, and seek out a new mentor or mentee that is more in line with your style, professional goals or research interests. Avoid speaking to peers or superiors against mentors or mentees and always maintain a professional work ethic.

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