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Abstract

Mentorship offers benefits to both the mentee and mentor in terms of professional development and productivity. It can take many forms and is not limited to mentee-mentor pairs that are employed at the same institution. Mentoring relationships that span institutions offer an avenue for expanding one's professional network beyond the local environment. We refer to this type of mentorship as "long-distance mentoring." We offer four critical strategies and reflections for successful long-distance mentoring based on our experience in the AAHB Research Scholars Mentorship Program.

Keywords

mentorship, lessons learned, reflections

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Strategies for Successful Long-Distance Mentoring

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Abstract

Mentorship offers benefits to both the mentee and mentor in terms of professional development and productivity. It can take many forms and is not limited to mentee-mentor pairs that are employed at the same institution. Mentoring relationships that span institutions offer an avenue for expanding one's professional network beyond the local environment. We refer to this type of mentorship as "long-distance mentoring." We offer four critical strategies and reflections for successful long-distance mentoring based on our experience in the AAHB Research Scholars Mentorship Program.

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Mentorship is an important component of academia. When successfully implemented, mentorships help to facilitate professional growth of the mentee and expand the profile of the mentor. One-to-one, mentee-mentor pairs are typically comprised of a junior faculty mentee and a senior faculty mentor. Traditional models of academic mentoring emphasize training junior faculty in specialized areas of research within successful research groups with a goal towards launching the independent research career of the mentee (Davis, 2013). In practice, mentors serve broader roles beyond serving as research advisors. Mentors act as teachers, give career advice, nurture ideas, encourage innovation, advocate for mentees, and provide reassurance (Wallen, Rivera-Goba, Hastings, Peragallo, & de Leon Siantz, 2005). These various facets of mentorship not only contribute not to research advancement for mentees, but also play a critical role in fostering a culture that helps to retain junior faculty in academia (Jeste, Twamley, Cardenas, Lebowitz, & Reynolds, 2009).

Mentoring often occurs within the context of a specific institution with both the mentee and the mentor employed as faculty at the same institution. There are obvious benefits to this model of mentorship because the parameters and policies around advancement, including promotion and tenure, are often institution-specific. Home mentors are attuned to the local culture of the institution and can offer strategies on ways to thrive within specific departmental and institutional structures and contexts. However, mentoring opportunities also exist outside of one's immediate environment and can be an avenue for expanding one's professional network beyond the walls of the home institution. Many professional organizations offer structured programs and opportunities for junior faculty to be mentored by experts in the field, some of whom may be at a different institution. We refer to this as "long-distance mentoring." We offer our strategies for successful long-distance mentoring after participating in the American Academy of Health Behavior (AAHB) Research Scholars Mentorship Program.

Rationale for Pairing

The first author is an assistant professor at the University of Southern California. She has expertise in aging research (Nguyen & Seal, 2014; Nguyen, Green & Enguidanos, 2015) and

wanted further exposure to HIV research, given that about 20% of all new HIV infections occur in persons ages 50 years and older and 50% of all persons with HIV in the United States are ages 50 years and older. She hoped to apply her strengths in aging research and theories to further develop her experiences in HIV research to meet the emerging HIV epidemic within aging populations and was looking for the right mentorship fit that would help further her research goals. Through the AAHB Research Scholars Mentorship Program, she was matched with the second author, who has considerable experience in the development, implementation, and evaluation of HIV prevention and care interventions (Rhodes, Leichter, Sun, & Bloom, 2016; Rhodes et al., 2017). Through a mentoring relationship that has lasted four years to date, the authors identified four critical strategies that they employed to maximize their long-distance mentoring (see Table 1).

Table 1

Critical Strategies for Successful Long-distance Mentorships

Strategies	Action points
“Matchmaking”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have a mutual, trusted, colleague facilitate the match. • Get an informal recommendation from someone who knows both the mentee and mentor to increase confidence that the match is a right fit.
Mutual commitment and follow-through	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • View interactions with the other person as a commitment, not an obligation. • Be open to fostering friendship and a continued relationship past the structured mentorship period. • Prioritize and follow through on commitments. • Be responsive and timely in fulfilling promises.
Purposeful interactions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Plan and be prepared prior to mentoring meetings. • Use a tool like a work plan to set goals, deliverables, and deadlines to help track progress. • Prepare ahead of time but be open for organic discussions to emerge from meetings.
Technology and in-person meetings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Schedule reoccurring meeting times. • Use teleconferencing technology rather than telephone meetings to foster connectedness and focused attention. • Find opportunities to meet in person at academic and research conferences or invited visits.

Strategies

Matchmaking and the Mentee-Mentor Relationship

Our mentee-mentor relationship was facilitated by the AAHB Research Scholars Mentorship Program; however, we relied on a mutual trusted colleague to “vouch” for each of us. As the mentee and the mentor, we each had more confidence that the fit was right based on the mutual colleague’s informal recommendation. This colleague (“matchmaker”) knew each of us quite well, having served as a trusted mentor for the mentee and a colleague and close friend of the mentor. Mentee-mentor pairs often emerge on the basis of having mutual research interests but additional considerations for matches based on personalities, communication styles, and work ethic can potentially minimize conflicts and lead to more productive mentee-mentor relationships.

Mutual Commitment and Follow-through

A successful mentorship occurs in one where the mentee is eager to seek guidance and advice from the mentor, and the mentor is equally eager to provide thoughtful guidance and advice. Each respective role in mentorship should view the relationship as a commitment, as opposed to an obligation. A professional obligation to engage in mentorship might mean that each person views their role as part of their professional duty and that the obligation has been fulfilled once the associated tasks and activities are completed. However, we suggest that viewing mentorship as a commitment offers a more personalized approach where the mentee and mentor commit to developing the working relationship and view it as one that has the potential to continue beyond the structured mentorship period. We found that this mindset helped to foster a deeper appreciation for the experience and that it translated into mutual feelings of collegiality and friendship. This pushed us to remain accountable to one another and decreased the likelihood of canceling meetings, for example. This also helped to foster a sense of partnership in which we became comfortable in having dialogues where co-learning occurred.

Follow-through is a critical component of demonstrating commitment. As mentee and mentor, we each had to ensure that we followed through with commitments in order to ensure that the relationship was productive and that trust was maintained. Not facing a mentee each day in the office meant that the mentor had to prioritize his commitments and ensure that he did what he said he would do and in a timely manner. This included reviewing manuscripts and research concept sheets, and making critical introductions that could benefit the mentee.

Purposeful Interactions

Working at different institutions means not having the advantage of geographical proximity to help facilitate interactions that occur spontaneously over coffee in a break room or a quick visit to the mentor’s office. Because dropping in to ask a question is not an option, long-distance mentoring requires planning and preparation prior to mentoring meetings. Planning tools can be helpful for providing structure and organization, and we found that utilizing a work plan to set goals, deliverables, and deadlines was useful for tracking progress. For mentees, putting thought into questions to ask or issues to discuss prior to mentoring meetings can help interactions be more productive. At the same time, we found that not having a strict agenda

allowed room and extra time for organic discussions that often resulted in meaningful conversations on varied topics around work-life integration. Under the right environment, mentoring meetings can be safe spaces for both the mentee and the mentor to “check in” and reflect on their well-being, a dimension of mentoring and professional development that should not be ignored.

Harness Technology but Meet in Person When Possible

Technology can help to close the geographical gap between a mentee and mentor in long-distance mentoring. Having regular and consistent meeting times facilitates continuity, and scheduling technology makes it possible to set reoccurring meetings on a calendar. However, it is important to be mindful of different time zones and set calendar occurrences accordingly. We chose to use teleconferencing technology (i.e., Skype) over telephone meetings and found it to be an effective way to foster connectedness and ensure focused attention. Having a visual of the other person allowed us to notice facial cues, read body language, and interact in a way that is similar to being in a face-to-face meeting. It also limited the temptation to multi-task, like answer emails, while in the meeting.

We also note, however, that it is still important to find opportunities to meet in person to maintain and reinforce connection and commitment. Opportunities to meet in person include academic and research conferences as well as visits and seminars at either the mentee’s or mentor’s institutions. For example, in our case, the mentor hosted the mentee at his home institution to talk through research ideas. This visit also provided the mentee with an invited talk, further developing the mentee’s experience and adding an important line on the mentee’s CV within the category of “invited seminars/talks”.

Benefits for the Mentee

Participating in a structured mentorship program through a professional organization can be an opportunity to work with mentors who have content expertise that is not available at one’s home institution. This can be a valuable opportunity to gain practical skills, develop research ideas, work on publications, expand professional networks, and gain access to resources beyond those that are already available at the home institution. Mentees should take stock of what is missing from existing mentorships and use these opportunities to “fill in the gaps” in order to maximize the benefits of mentorship.

As a mentee, it is important to be mindful that mentors are often highly productive researchers and educators with busy schedules. Busy schedules, as well as being at different institutions and in different time zones, can condense the amount of time realistically available for mentors to engage and interact with mentees. Being attentive to details and being prepared will make the interactions easier for everyone involved. For example, mentees must pay close attention to deadlines on goals and deliverables and give mentors enough time to review materials before deadlines.

Lastly, mentees can maximize the benefits of the mentorship relationship by giving careful consideration to what they want out of the mentorship experience. Are the primary goals of the mentorship relationship to build publications in a new content area, gain experience with methodologies, or perhaps expand one’s professional network? Identifying and prioritizing goals

for specific mentorship relationships can help all parties engage in a way that is mutually productive and helpful given the significant time investment that goes into the experience.

Benefits for the Mentor

Mentors must prioritize their helping role and stick to the calendars agreed upon by the mentee and mentor. Mentors must remember that they offer many things that the mentee wants and in fact needs, including guidance on research development, professional development and successful strategies for promotion and tenure, and entrée into the mentor's existing networks. Network entrée cannot be ignored as a role; it opens subsequent doors for the mentee and can be viewed as a form of sponsorship. Sponsorship tends to be a higher level of mentoring, in which the mentor introduces the mentee to others and further vouches for the mentee, broadening the mentee's network of colleagues and resources.

Furthermore, having a concrete project as the relationship is established can facilitate regular communication for the mentee and mentor as they work together on a product that is mutually beneficial. These products may be a small research project and/or a manuscript, as examples.

Working with mentees is rewarding. Often mentors are over-committed and have little time to consider the important issues facing community and population health, for example. A mentee can help the mentor refocus on science with the mentee's exuberance for science and research, unique perspectives, and innovative ideas. Often, mentors have less time to devote to thinking creatively about science and research because they are pulled into academic leadership and professional service; however, discussions with a mentee can be rejuvenating.

Conclusions

Long-distance mentorship should be a valuable professional experience for both the mentee and mentor, and it can also be an enjoyable one. Not all mentorships will result in establishing friendships but having mutual respect and appreciation for the other person will help to foster an element of positivity to the experience that elevates the mentorship experience. We found appreciation in being able to learn from one another and in engaging in thoughtful conversations that allowed us to gain different perspectives. The geographical distance of long-distance mentoring can be a challenge to accountability and accessibility but maintaining a purposeful and positive approach to the mentorship can facilitate a successful mentorship relationship.

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