Chapter 21
Mentoring and Advising

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Advice is like mushrooms. The wrong kind can prove fatal.

–Unknown

Abstract   Mentorship refers to the development of a relationship between a more experienced individual (the mentor) with a less experienced individual (the mentee or protégé). The role of the mentor in the development of the junior faculty member’s academic relationship is extremely important. As such, this chapter discusses the expectations of the mentor, mentee, and the mentor-mentee relationship.

Mentoring vs. Advising

Mentorship refers to the development of a relationship between a more experienced individual (the mentor) with a less experienced individual (the mentee or protégé). The word itself was inspired by the character of Mentor in Homer’s Odyssey. Historically, mentorship goes back to ancient Greek and Hindu times. Today, the definition of mentor continues to encompass ‘a trusted counselor or guide’, and a ‘wise, loyal advisor or coach.’

Mentoring in the research sense developed mostly in the basic science laboratories, where an experienced researcher would literally take a junior person ‘under their wing’ and would help them develop research independency. This concept has been taken up by the NIH through its K23 and K24 programs, but this has been a relatively recent development (see below). The problem has always been, that there is little in the way of formal training in how to be a good mentor, and there is usually no external reward for the time spent in mentoring.

In academics, mentoring and academic advising are frequently used synonymously, but we view advising as a lesser responsibility than mentoring. One can over-simplistically say that advising is an ‘event’ while mentoring is a ‘process’. A mentor has both a professional and personal relationship with the mentee, an advisor, in general, does not, to the same degree, have a personal relationship. Also, mentoring is more dynamic, in that there is a distinct change over time.
Although there is no single formula for good mentoring, most would agree that a good mentor is approachable and available, and this is where good mentoring most often comes up short, since in a busy academicians life (who has multiple demands, and has requirements for promotion, research grants, manuscripts, etc.); little academic reward is provided for mentoring. Although perhaps more empathetic with the role of the mentee, junior faculty are often ill-equipped to serve as mentors. Factors militating against effective mentorship by junior faculty include an (appropriate) emphasis on one's own career advancement, limited resources to devote to the mentee, and limited opportunities to promote the mentee’s career by virtue of limited personal recognition as a result of being early in one’s career. Students, for their part, must recognize the professional pressures and time constraints faced by their mentors, but still must insist on obtaining adequate time and availability from their mentors, or be willing to change who their mentor is. Much misunderstanding can be circumvented with a well intentioned discussion about these issues prior to choosing a given mentor. As such, both the mentor and mentee should be clear about their respective expectations, have a clear agreed upon career development plan, with regular meetings a priority. On the one hand, the mentor cannot be too busy, otherwise they should not have accepted the responsibility, but the mentee cannot expect unlimited access.

Guidelines for Faculty/Student Interactions

Faculty members often develop a close working relationship with students, especially advisees. Often a relationship is formed that provides benefits to both the faculty member and the student. Faculty should be cognizant of the power differential in these types of relationships and set appropriate boundaries. Although faculty members may not intend a favor or request to be an obligation, they should be aware that this may place some students in a difficult position. Some students are intimidated by faculty members and may not feel free to decline such requests. http://www.epi.umn.edu/academic/pdf/FacAdvising.pdf. It is recognized that many situations are ambiguous. Examples are of some of these ambiguous situations include:

- **Asking a student to drive you someplace, including the airport, home, or main campus.** Such a request does not fall under a student’s duties. A situation when this may be acceptable is when the student has the same destination.
- **Asking a student to work extra hours or late hours.** Students should be expected to work the hours they are paid for. Students may volunteer to put in extra hours to gain more experience (e.g. grant writing) or gain authorship on a paper or help meet a deadline – but these extra hours should not be an expectation.
- **Asking an advisee to housesit, take care of your children or pets, or help you move.** While some students may not mind house sitting, taking care of children