

Mentoring: Long-Distance Relationships are Worth the Trouble

February 01, 2008

There are many ways for students to acquire and maintain mentoring relationships that foster research, clinical, and other professional development. The rationale for mentoring is clear. Students benefit from the wisdom of mentors' education and experiences as they begin their careers. But finding a good mentor-protege match isn't always quite as simple. If you are fortunate enough to find a good match with a faculty member, clinician, or researcher, hold on to it, even if you are challenged by geographical distance.

My Story

During my senior year of college, I discovered a natural connection with a new faculty member in my department. At that point in my training, I was fairly certain that I wasn't interested in research as a career. But I knew that I wanted to practice psychotherapy at the doctoral level and research was an important part of reaching that goal.

During one of our first meetings, the new faculty member asked me to describe the work I was doing on my senior project. Something about my description sparked a twinkle in his eye that would become familiar to me as a sort of research light bulb going off in his head. This inspired a discussion that both broadened my understanding and passion for research. As we discussed intersecting interests we had that merited further investigation, he helped me realize that the combination of our distinct research interests was a good fit.

Graduation came and went very quickly, and I moved on to a graduate program at a different university. I maintained communication and have been conducting long-distance research with my undergraduate mentor for the past few years. This means e-mails (a lot of e-mails), phone calls, an occasional visit, and meeting at conferences. In three and a half years of working together, he has directly contributed to my knowledge of individual research processes and writing for peer review. His direct and indirect contributions to my professional development include letters of recommendation for programs and positions, countless words of advice, and constant encouragement to always keep working.

Benefits of Long-Distance Mentoring

A good mentor offers an appropriate balance between fostering initiative and emotional support, regardless of distance. My mentor pushes me to always be thinking about research while offering words of encouragement and funny stories at just the right time.

My mentor provided information and insights at each stage of professional development including scientific writing, applying to graduate school, teaching, proposing, and presenting at conferences. He has "been there and done that." I can skip over mistakes that he made and trust that he knows what the experience is like.

When you do get to catch up and see your relationship developing, the dividends are noticeable. It is an

accomplishment to complete a research project, but it is a bigger feat to do this from 500 miles away.

These types of distance working relationship are increasing in frequency, especially with advances in technology.

Struggles in Long-Distance Mentoring

Your mentor is not right down the hall. Although absence may make the heart grow fonder, out of sight may mean out of mind. Distance may make it easy for the two of you to put your projects on the back-burner at times.

Long distance mentors have full time jobs in addition to other obligations to families and others who are near them. You may find yourself struggling to balance getting your needs met and respecting your mentor's other responsibilities.

Electronic communication is full of struggles. Beyond specific technological concerns, it is imperative to consider interpersonal factors in e-mail communication and their impact on the relationship (See Ambrose, 2003).

Advice

Be sure that continuing to communicate regularly is consensual and rewarding for both parties. Work together on something that you are both invested in. This helps to keep motivation and morale high.

Discuss expectations for the relationship, especially with respect to negotiating the distance factor. Consider scheduling regular times to "check-in" and whether these will be done via e-mail, phone, or in person. Be flexible.

Don't rely solely on a long-distance mentorship. Find someone in your area that can provide additional support. Although my research mentorship is long-distance, I work with faculty in my current department who are available for situations that are best resolved face-to-face or are related to clinical work.

Matching yourself to a mentor on the basis of working style or personality is just as important, possibly more important, as sharing specific research interests. If you're unsure about this process, start with an academic advisor, research team leader, teacher, or other trusted faculty member.

Combat the struggles of long-distance relationships by anticipating them, being organized, and committing to the relationship as an investment with long-term benefits.

Many publications exist that provide mentorship information for students in psychology (e.g., Prinstein & Patterson, 2003). In addition, many offer guidance through the process of finding a mentor and developing the relationship (e.g., Johnson & Huwe, 2003).

Overall, mentoring is about developing an alliance with another professional. You will begin as a student or protege and end as a colleague. Today, I am in a counseling psychology doctoral program and

am passionate about research *and* practice. Regardless of any particular outcome, having a long-distance mentor has allowed me a full and rich experience of both personal and professional development. It has also allowed me to avoid mistakes and have a great deal of support along the way. I believe that although great mentoring relationships may be discovered unexpectedly, the key is learning to recognize and hold on to them no matter where they are.

Thank you to my mentor, Loren Toussaint, for his insight on this and other work.

References

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