

A Model for Research-based Mentorship and Professional Development

Matthew Lee Smith, PhD, MPH, CHES, FGSA, FAAHB

Mentorship is a reciprocal endeavor where knowledge and skills are transferred to improve the work performance and trajectory of one or both parties. Mentorship is a valuable process for advancing academic careers and establishing a desirable professional identity, which frequently includes both formal and informal relationships. Formal relationships often include students, while informal relationships often include faculty members and staff. Depending on the situation, professionals, clinicians, and organizations can be considered formal or informal mentees. Regardless of the degree of formality, research-based mentorship typically centers on a product or process (or a combination thereof). Examples of products include grant proposals, publications, white papers, and conference presentations. Examples of processes include developing a research trajectory, enhancing curriculum vitae, expanding professional networks, forming research teams, and navigating the promotion and tenure processes. Although a mentorship relationship may focus on a single product or process, strong mentors strive to ensure mentees develop practical and transferrable skills that can be applied to future products/processes. Examples of transferrable skills include technical writing, oral communication, statistical methods, team management, conflict resolution, and strategic planning.

This article provides a model for research-based mentorship and professional development by describing underlying concepts and processes and introduces a special issue about the value of and products from research-based mentorship relationships. The special issue opens by providing an overview of the Research Scholars Mentorship Program (RSMP), a formal mentorship program developed in 2011 and housed within the American Academy of Health Behavior (AAHB). It continues with 13 research articles resulting from AAHB members in research-focused mentorship relationships. These manuscripts highlight the productivity of mentees and mentors and surround a variety of subgroups (e.g., Hispanic adolescents, homeless individuals, African American females, clinicians) and topics (e.g., social networks, substance use/misuse, food insecurity, health literacy, sleep, cancer screening, diet, violence, medical education). The collection concludes with four mentorship-specific commentaries describing strategies for group-based mentorship, mentoring diverse underserved undergraduate students, long-distance mentorship, and mentoring mentors. Collectively, this special issue recognizes the commitment of AAHB to cultivate research careers through professional development opportunities.

Model for Research-based Mentorship and Professional Development

The following model for research-based mentorship and professional development was developed from multiple years of mentoring students, post-doctoral fellows, faculty, professionals, clinicians, and organizations. The concepts and processes presented here represent a personal philosophy for mentorship. They are adaptable and intended to drive productivity and the conveyance of practical and transferrable skills.

Mentorship is largely driven by the idea that others can benefit from the things a mentor does well, and vice-versa. Mentors find pleasure in seeing others succeed, especially when they have witnessed their progression and been a part of their professional/scholastic journey.

Mentors are driven by the idea that their mentorship enhances scholarship, research productivity, and competence among professionals and scholars at all ages and ranks. Based on the nature of health behavior research, mentors find satisfaction in knowing that their mentees are (or will become) change agents. And, as these change agents use their training and begin mentoring others, a mentor's collective impact on human health grows exponentially.

Mentors should take a genuine interest in teaching practical, applicable, and transferrable skills and shaping understanding about research and related content and processes. A mentor should be kind and nurturing, yet demanding. They should reward a mentee's efforts and celebrate their accomplishments together. Such a mentoring approach can help mentees enjoy their hard work and have fun because of positive team dynamics and newfound skills. Though a mentee's first research experience can be initially daunting, it can become pleasurable and rewarding and can encourage mentees to actively seek out additional research opportunities and obtain additional research training. Creating a positive mentorship experience for novice and emerging scholars is essential to successfully retaining mentees in research-based activities, degrees, and/or careers.

Table 1 provides an overview of simple and interrelated concepts for mentorship. Each of these concepts are present during every stage of the mentorship relationship and apply to both the mentor and mentee. Mentorship relationships should be an exchange where both parties learn and grow together through ongoing interaction. If or when one or both parties no longer receives value from the interaction, the mentorship relationship has likely 'run its course' and should discontinue. Mentorship is a vehicle to success and should not be viewed as an obligation. The dissolution of a mentorship relationship does not always imply that someone is at fault; rather, it can be a symptom of divergent views or non-ideal timing. Therefore, the mentor-mentee match is among the most essential keys to a strong and viable mentorship relationship. Without common and shared interests or goals, it is unlikely that a mentor-mentee pair will collaborate effectively.

While some mentorship relationships form naturally, mentors are recommended to explore the compatibility of the match prior to committing to the relationship. Mentors can use the following process: (1) assess mentor-mentee compatibility or match; (2) outline the parameters of a formal or informal mentorship relationship; (3) train mentees to ensure they can appropriately contribute to the product and/or process; and (4) refine and adjust interactions to maximize productivity. This protocol generally begins with a casual conversation to learn about the potential mentee, their stage of professional/scholastic development, their research interests (if any), their career plans, their perceptions about their skill deficiencies or needed resources, the amount of time they are willing to devote, and their definition(s) of success. The purpose of this initial conversation is to determine whether the mentor is a possible match for this potential mentee and can help them to achieve their goals and career aspirations. A mentor can provide a disservice if their interests/priorities are not aligned with those of the mentee or if there is clearly another more viable mentor candidate. Therefore, if the mentor can quickly determine they are not the best match, they can attempt to rapidly identify another mentor candidate and make an introduction.

The following activities and concepts can assist mentors in engaging and interacting with mentees to foster efficient, productive, scalable, and long-lasting mentorship relationships.

Determine mentor-mentee alignment. based on whether there is common interest in one or more of the following: (1) problem/topic (e.g., diabetes, fall prevention, risky sexual behavior); (2) population (e.g., older adults, pregnant mothers, school teachers); (3) setting (e.g.,

Table 1

Simple and Interrelated Concepts for Mentorship.

| | |
|----------------|---|
| Respect | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Valuing one another as people and as scholars/academics/professionals • Valuing one another’s opinions, beliefs, needs, commonalities, and differences • Valuing the mentorship process and the efforts contributed by others |
| Enrichment | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creating a nurturing environment that encourages an open dialogue and exchange of ideas • Identifying realistic goals and parameters that will promote professional/scholastic advancement • Facilitating professional/scholastic betterment from the interaction and collective effort |
| Accountability | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agreeing to be mutually dedicated to the relationship • Upholding assigned roles and responsibilities • Remaining available and accessible • Adhering to predetermined timelines/deadlines (while still allowing for flexibility) |
| Reciprocity | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognizing that mentorship is not a unidirectional concept • Allowing (not expecting) the relationship to be mutually beneficial • Accepting that the ‘give-and-take’ balance doesn’t have to be equal and may shift over time (fluid, not static) |

workplace, faith-based organizations, rural); and (4) skillset (e.g., program evaluation, geospatial analysis, qualitative methods). A good mentor asks mentees thoughtful questions to evoke meaningful responses and dialogue. A good mentor asks additional pointed questions to probe for further detail.

Listen to what the mentee needs and wants to accomplish. A good mentor should be a good listener. To be of most value to a mentee, the mentor should fully understand the mentee's priorities, goals, and aspirations. A good mentor establishes a strong rapport with their mentee to ensure they are comfortable sharing their vulnerabilities, problems, and concerns.

Identify activities and resources that provide the mentee with the knowledge, skills, and experiences necessary to be successful. A good mentor should provide a uniquely-tailored service to each mentee, which takes into account the mentee's existing skillset, preferred learning style, and timeline (among other factors). There is no one-size-fits-all approach to mentorship.

Follow-up to define the structure and logistics of the mentorship relationship, which should ultimately feed into a more formal work plan. A good mentor identifies the best method (e.g., face-to-face, phone, email, video conference) and cadence (e.g., weekly, bi-weekly, monthly) for mentor-mentee communication early in the relationship. However, there is no need to rush the process. The frequency and communication format may differ over time based on the focal product/process or approaching deadlines. Relationships may ramp up slowly or escalate quickly. Regardless, a good mentor attempts to establish a 'standing' meeting time with each mentee to ensure regular interaction.

Create a tiered, team-based mentoring structure to enhance productivity and expand professional networks. A good mentor is inclusive and shares resources. Therefore, a good mentor often invites multiple mentees to join writing teams along with other academics, which allows them to meet new people and work with diverse sets of scholars with varying backgrounds, skillsets, and working styles. By assembling teams comprised of postdoctoral fellows, doctoral students, and masters students (and even undergraduate students), skills pertaining to management and communication are developed alongside technical writing and analytic skills. Clear and actionable tasks are assigned to each team member along with reasonable deadlines. With a tiered, team-based mentoring structure, the mentor can: (1) directly mentor each team member about their research activity; (2) allow team members to directly mentor one another based on predetermined tasks; and (3) mentor team members about their mentorship of other team members (e.g., a doctoral student mentoring a masters student). We can all learn from one other; therefore, a good mentor creates safe spaces where students and trainees can practice their teamwork and mentorship while receiving feedback in real time. In most fields addressing health behavior, we almost always work in teams. Therefore, this mentoring structure produces transferrable, practical, and applied skills for all mentees involved.

Train the mentee to perform essential tasks. A good mentor actively provides training to mentees while simultaneously referring them to complementary sources and encouraging independent discovery. The focal product/process will dictate what training is needed; however,

mentors can frequently use their own published articles and documents to facilitate trainings for mentorship research projects.

Nurture, challenge, and empower the mentee on an ongoing basis. A good mentor is supportive and encouraging, yet disciplined and inquisitive. A mentor should ask mentees questions to witness how they process information and react to *light* inquiries. By simply posing questions to the mentee, a lot can be learned about their rationale for making certain decisions, using certain processes to complete tasks, or interpreting statistical results in a certain way. The purpose of this *light* inquiry is educational in nature and can alert a mentor about the need to introduce more training or tailor mentorship strategies for this particular mentee. Inquires from mentors can enrich the relationship by challenging their own thinking and forcing them to consider alternative explanations or applications. Ultimately, with a positive mentorship relationship based on rigorous science and the development of transferable skills, the mentee should be empowered to assume more responsibility and function more independently (e.g., lead research projects, pursue a research career).

Collaborate. A good mentor will transition a mentorship relationship into a meaningful and lasting collegial partnership. After a positive and productive mentorship relationship, it is common for mentees to transition into strong and highly valued colleagues and collaborators.

Conclusion

Mentorship is an involved process that can be rewarding for all parties involved. With a thoughtful approach and structured processes, a good mentor can create a relationship that is enjoyable, efficient, productive, and long lasting. The model presented in this article is the product/philosophy of a single mentor based on their experiences. The commentaries and research articles within this special issue expand upon these concepts and provide unique insights for successful mentorship relationships. Overall, this special issue highlights the commitment of AAHB and its membership to mentorship and professional development.

Acknowledgments

This special issue recognizes the outstanding efforts all mentors in the American Academy of Health Behavior who dedicate their time to nurture the next generation of health behavior researchers. Further, this special issue thanks the Academy for emphasizing the importance of mentorship and driving the field for over 20 years. The author would like to thank Dr. Adam Barry for co-editing this special issue. Finally, the author would like to thank his mentors and mentees for helping to shape his professional identity and enhancing his productivity.