

Reflections on a Mentoring Partnership Journey

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Abstract

This commentary offers reflection on the mentoring partnership journey between a senior Fellow of the American Academy of Health Behavior (AAHB) and three early- or mid-career AAHB members. Their partnership was supported by the AAHB Research Scholars Mentorship Program. The authors discuss the nature of their working relationship, products they generated, and other lessons learned from the experience. The authors also offer their perspectives on effective mentorship characteristics.

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Background

In 2011, the American Academy of Health Behavior (AAHB) received an R13 conference grant from the National Institutes of Health—Center for Minority Health and Health Disparities (1R13MD005702-01: The Art and Science of Community-based Participatory Research: Methods; co-PIs: David W. Seal, PhD & Lisa A. Benz Scott, PhD; Note: This institute is currently called the National Institutes of Minority Health and Health Disparities). A key component of this grant award was the development of a mentorship program in partnership with the W.K. Kellogg Health Scholar Program (see earlier article by Smith et al. for additional details). As part of this process, the AAHB Professional Development Committee developed a set of procedures (e.g., application review process and guidelines, reporting requirements) and materials (e.g., call for mentors/mentees, evaluation and reporting forms). Several AAHB members contributed to these efforts, including key contributions from Dr. Jessica Rath (current Board Member and Fellow) and Dr. Rita DeBate (Past-President and Fellow).

This one-time mentoring partnership evolved into the current Research Scholars Mentorship Program in 2014. Although a distinct program of AAHB, the current Research Scholars Mentorship Program has retained the ideals and goals of the original Kellogg mentoring partnership. This commentary summarizes accomplishments and lessons learned from participation in the AAHB Research Scholars Mentorship Program from both a mentor's and three mentees' perspectives.

Current Commentary

The continuous development of junior faculty and future public health research leaders is essential to the growth of rigorous science and the growth of AAHB as an organization. It should be an academic obligation of every senior researcher to nurture and develop the next generation of top scholars. Senior mentorship is a valuable aid to help early- and mid-career investigators reach their full potential as academicians, in areas such as research, teaching, mentorship,

service, and work-life balance. Through well-rounded academic training and mentorship from senior academicians, early- and mid-career faculty can become the next generation of health behavior researchers and practitioners to work toward the improvement of society's quality of life through health practice and policy.

Mentoring Program Accomplishments

Contributors to this commentary include senior researcher David Seal, PhD (Mentor), mid-career researcher Nathan Grant Smith, PhD (Mentee: 2015-2016), early-career researcher Christina Sun, PhD (Mentee: 2015-2016), and early-career researcher Erika Thompson, PhD (Mentee: 2018-2019). All mentees were matched with Dr. Seal based on interests in sexual health behavior research, and interests in professional development topics. Below we describe our experience in the AAHB Research Scholars Mentorship Program and the successes resulting from the mentoring relationship.

Through the AAHB Research Scholars Mentorship Program, Dr. Smith submitted his first NIH grant application (an R21 application to conduct a randomized controlled trial of an HIV-prevention intervention aimed at young gay and bisexual men). Dr. Seal provided feedback on the application itself, as well as guidance and advice in terms of more general NIH insights. One of the most helpful aspects of Dr. Seal's mentoring was his guidance on how to revise and resubmit the application, including sharing examples of the one-page response to reviewers. Though Dr. Smith was not funded on his first submission, his second submission was successful, and he is currently conducting his research project with funding from the National Institute of Drug Abuse (NIDA).

With the support of Dr. Seal's critical review and feedback, Dr. Sun submitted an NIH administrative supplement to a funded R01 grant. This research is currently underway and funded by the National Institute of General Medical Sciences (NIGMS). During the mentorship year, Dr. Sun developed and taught three new courses, published multiple peer-reviewed manuscripts, and applied to the NIH loan repayment program. This mentorship period also supported her skills in balancing demands of teaching and research and refinement of additional research ideas, which have been subsequently submitted as a career development grant application that recently received a very strong percentile score.

Dr. Thompson's primary motivation for this program was to have a mentor outside of her institution to assist with her transition to a new faculty position. To achieve this goal, Drs. Seal and Thompson designated monthly professional development topics (e.g., developing a research agenda, service to the profession, tenure and promotion expectations, mentoring doctoral students) to discuss. Additionally, with resources and advice from Dr. Seal, Dr. Thompson developed a new Human Sexuality and Reproductive Health graduate-level course, began mentoring doctoral students, and expanded her research network at AAHB. The primary accomplishment of the year was a successful first year in a faculty position across the March 2018-February 2019 mentoring period with two grants submitted, several peer-reviewed papers published (including e-pub), and three new courses prepared, along with serving as a member on an AAHB committee. Dr. Seal's consistent advice provided valuable insight to beginning a new academic position.

Mentee Reflections about Participation in the Research Scholars Mentorship Program

Beyond the guidance Dr. Seal provided toward the academic products described above, the Scholars also reflected on areas of professional mentorship that were most valuable to them. Dr. Thompson commented: *“My most important lesson was to use the first 6 months of the faculty position to observe. It was also useful to have an outside mentor to provide a fresh, unbiased perspective on professional development.”* Although there are organizational structures shared across most academic institutions, every place is unique in its idiosyncrasies and nuances. It is important for new faculty to take time to understand these departmental and institutional idiosyncrasies and nuances, as well as personal alliances and non-alliances within the work environment. Having such knowledge better enables one to navigate institutional and departmental culture, processes, and personalities.

As a mentor, Dr. Seal often stresses with new faculty, post-doctoral fellows, and doctoral students the importance of getting to know the lay of the landscape before opening one’s mouth unwisely or doing something that will get an individual off to a bad start from which they may never recover. Commented Dr. Seal:

Identifying a trusted senior faculty member who is respected among her/his peers can help new faculty to avoid early pitfalls and help junior faculty to understand institutional and departmental histories and personal alliances or non-alliances. But it can also be very helpful for junior faculty to develop a mentoring relationship with an established faculty member who is not affiliated with their university. Outside mentors can provide a neutral safety net about which to safely discuss sensitive issues within one’s own institution and/or department that may not be safely asked about with individuals at one’s own place. Senior faculty often have the wisdom of experience. Junior faculty should seek out this wisdom and guidance, which can help them as they transition into established faculty.

Dr. Thompson has since recommended to other early-career faculty to seek outside mentors during that first year to provide advice and assist with navigating academia. Identifying outside mentors can be facilitated through programs like the AAHB Research Scholars Mentorship Program, or other professional organizations.

Dr. Smith was accepted into the AAHB Research Scholars Mentorship Program along with Dr. Sun, with Dr. Seal serving as mentor to both of them. This arrangement of an early-career investigator, mid-career investigator, and seasoned investigator allowed for nuanced discussions of professional development. For example, as Dr. Smith was closer in career trajectory to Dr. Sun, he was able to provide mentoring on promotion and tenure, such that Dr. Sun was able to access knowledge from two individuals who had been through the promotion and tenure process. Reflected Dr. Smith:

Having these three career levels in a mentoring triad resulted in more dynamic discussions and a lowering of the natural power differential inherent in dyads consisting of individuals at somewhat opposite ends of the career spectrum. Moreover, this arrangement was helpful in honing my own mentoring skills.

Dr. Seal added:

I love working with graduate students and early career faculty. They bring fresh energy and perspectives to my thinking through the discussions we have and the questions they ask. As a college friend once stated: 'We are all students of life.' I often tell people that I learn as much from those I mentor and teach as they can learn from me.

For Dr. Sun, she learned how to look at the “bigger picture” of a sustainable research career and to appreciate, but not get distracted by, the details. Through her experiences with the mentoring program, she developed a greater appreciation for how day-to-day efforts build toward her larger goals and learned to better identify and consider alternative approaches. Added Dr. Seal: “*It’s important for faculty at all levels to not get bogged down by the details but keep a big picture focus on where they want to get to and what are the essential stepping stones to get there. Let go of the rest.*”

Overall, a number of overarching themes emerged that highlight the successes of these mentoring relationships. First, mentoring needs to be developmentally and individually tailored. Mentee needs will vary both across career stage (e.g., postdoc, first faculty position, moving toward promotion and tenure, moving toward promotion to full professor) and across individuals. Second, mentoring can and should focus both on skill development and cultural adaptation. As noted, understanding the culture of academia and how to navigate and integrate into new academic work setting, as well as striving toward work-life balance, are important tasks for early-career academics. At the same time, academics at all levels should be striving toward increasing their skillset, be that in teaching, grant-writing, publishing, or the many other tasks associated with faculty positions. Mentoring that attends to both skill development and larger cultural adaptation into academia will provide a more holistic approach. Finally, mentoring can be multi-level, and the combination of mentees at different career stages provides for a rich and dynamic mentoring environment.

Concluding Thoughts

Mentoring relationships can provide value toward not only the development of academic products but also professional and personal growth. Successful mentoring partnerships are grounded in trust. Good mentors are willing to tailor their mentorship style and approach to each individual mentee’s needs. One-size-fits-all approaches are limiting and often result in unsatisfactory mentoring relationships. Take time to understand what your mentees need from you, but be realistic in what you agree to deliver as a mentor. Some mentees need academic product development assistance. Others need professional and/or personal development guidance. Have a work plan but be flexible enough to be responsive to changing priorities, new opportunities, and/or other emergent issues warranting discussion. Commented Dr. Thompson: “*Being able to tailor our year-long work plan ensured we were meeting the diverse professional development mentoring needs for a first-year assistant professor. Critical to that is having a mentor who can help anticipate the range of topics that might come up.*”

Mentees can also enhance these mentoring relationships by setting goals, sharing their needs and wants, and being forthcoming about difficulties in achieving those goals. For example, before applying for the AAHB Research Scholars Mentorship Program, Dr. Sun assessed desired areas of growth, which helped her identify the expertise and characteristics of a mentor she was

seeking. This provides an active pathway to measure successes, evaluate progress, and take additional or corrective actions with mentor insights and feedback. As noted by Dr. Thompson, the success of these strategies—and of the mentoring relationship as a whole—is dependent upon mentees being assertive and proactive. Mentees need to invest in their mentorship plan, share their wants and needs, and ask questions as issues arise. Being mentored is an active rather than a passive process.

Toward this end, open communication between mentee and mentor is paramount, and both parties must work toward creating open and direct communication. Good mentors create a safe space for open, honest communication. They can minimize the inherent power differentials that can arise between people at different stages of their career. Building upon Dr. Smith's earlier comment about potential power differentials in mentoring relationships, Dr. Seal commented:

I remind my graduate and junior faculty mentees when they are feeling intimidated by my seniority: Yes, I can share my experiences and knowledge with you to grow and learn from me. And I may know some things more than you. But all of you have unique skills that I don't have, whether it be artistry, musical capabilities, cooking skills... We are all experts at something. We are all students and teachers.

Added Dr. Sun: *"This co-learning philosophy may also promote mentorship by mentees who become mentors themselves. This, in turn, perpetuates a sustainable line of senior researchers who nurture and develop the next generation of academics."*

Successful mentorship also entails being available for your mentees. Dr. Seal maintains an open-door policy at work. Mentees should not have to wait until a scheduled meeting if they have a pressing question or issue that they want to discuss. Often taking a few minutes to deal with emergent issues in real-time prevents dealing with major, time-consuming issues that can develop through letting things fester until a scheduled meeting. Dr. Seal noted that his mother always would say: *"Paper can wait, people can't."* Dr. Seal asserts that mentoring is an extended commitment that goes beyond the initial parameters. He often reaches out to former mentors and has many former mentees who continue to reach out to him for guidance, including the three mentees who contributed to this commentary.

In sum, mentoring and being mentored can be a wonderful experience. Dr. Seal says he has been blessed to have had wonderful mentors from kindergarten through elementary school, middle school, high school, college, graduate school, a postdoctoral fellowship, and his academic career. He added that all his mentors have really asked in return is to *"give back to the next generation."* He says he has tried to maintain this ideal throughout his career. And to mentees, the best way to thank valued mentors is to keep in touch with them every now and then. Let them know you still think of them. As one of Dr. Seal's doctoral advisors told him: *"When a former student reaches out to me, it means I meant something to them. And that is a reward in and of itself."* Be open, learn from each other, and enjoy the journey together.