

# Maximizing Mentoring

## *A Guide for Building Strong Relationships*


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Since 1936, the William T. Grant Foundation has been committed to furthering the understanding of human behavior through research. Today, the Foundation supports research to understand and improve the settings of youth ages 8 to 25 in the United States. We are interested in studies that strengthen our understanding of how settings work, how they affect youth development, and how they can be improved. Important settings include schools, youth-serving organizations, neighborhoods, families, and peer groups. We also fund studies that strengthen our understanding of how and under what conditions research is used to influence policies and practices that affect youth.



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# INTRODUCTION

At the William T. Grant Foundation, we believe that strong mentoring is crucial for the career development of junior researchers. Since 1982, the William T. Grant Scholars Program has provided support—including mentoring—to promising early-career researchers in the social, behavioral, and health sciences. Over the years, many Scholars and their mentors have asked us for information about how to foster positive relationships, including the strategies and structures others are using. This guide provides suggestions for cultivating and managing productive mentoring relationships.

William T. Grant Scholars and their mentors are asked to submit progress reports to the Foundation. These reports provided us with much of the material contained in this guide, and we are grateful to the Scholars and mentors for submitting thoughtful, honest feedback. We hope the advice contained in this document will spark dynamic conversations and help mentors and mentees enhance their working relationships. Mentoring and being mentored are skills that can be refined through sustained practice and thoughtful reflection. You don't have to be a "natural" mentor to be a good one, nor does being productively mentored have to be a mysterious phenomenon.

This guide is a companion piece to *Pay It Forward: Guidance for Mentoring Junior Scholars*, which was published by the Foundation and the Forum for Youth Investment in 2010. *Pay It Forward* offers a range of suggestions and resources to help mentors build stronger relationships with their mentees by navigating cultural and racial differences, managing conflict, and providing strategic career support. We have created this guide as a complementary toolbox of strategies and activities for both mentors and mentees. Though this guide was written with William T. Grant Scholars and mentors in mind, we believe it will be useful for other early-career researchers and mentors.

Herein, we describe communication styles and strategies, different types and goals of mentoring, and advice for cultivating a strong mentoring relationship. It's important to remember that both mentees' and mentors' experiences of relationships, events, and institutions are influenced by their status as members of marginalized or privileged groups; the mentoring relationship is enhanced when these differences are acknowledged and their consequences discussed. Candid dialogue about these issues can help mentees better negotiate the effects of race, gender, class, sexual orientation, and disability status on their career development, while fostering trust and honesty in the mentoring relationship. Every mentoring relationship is unique, and some of these ideas will work better for you than others. You and your mentor/mentee might develop other practices as well. Thoughtful discussion and negotiation between mentor and mentee is a productive method for determining what will work best in each relationship.



# THE GROUNDWORK FOR SUCCESS

Though every mentoring relationship is unique, there are a few practices that we have found to be effective and others that can be detrimental. To begin your mentoring relationship on the right foot:

- Discuss expectations for frequency and length of contact,
- Set at least a tentative meeting schedule for the term or year,
- Plan beyond the immediate task or project at hand,
- Do not assume that you are overburdening mentors by contacting them, and
- Be aware that your mentee may hesitate to contact you even though they need your assistance.

## COMMUNICATE

It is critical that mentors and mentees consistently and openly discuss the mentoring relationship. You should provide each other with feedback on experiences and foment strategies to nurture the mentoring dyad. All Scholars and mentors create a mentoring plan as part of the application process. Make your mentoring plan as concrete as you can, with details on how and when you will meet and correspond. There are many ways to formalize your plan, including creating a contract that outlines goals and expectations. Consider asking your colleagues to describe their mentoring relationships. What topics do they discuss with their mentors or mentees? How frequently do they converse via phone, email, or in person? When and how do mentors critique manuscripts and proposals? How have their relationships evolved over time? Learning how other pairs interact can help demystify the

mentoring relationship and provide you with ways to use your mentor as a resource or ideas about how to support your mentee.

Establishing clear expectations is crucial to fostering a productive relationship. A commitment to ongoing conversations about structure and activities can help prevent impasses. Ideally, both parties should feel free to suggest new strategies and practices. Since needs and patterns shift over time, it's a good idea to regularly discuss what's going well and what can be improved.

## ESTABLISH SHARED EXPECTATIONS

Mentees should explain what kinds of advice and expertise they need. Mentors should, in turn, be explicit about the kinds of expertise and guidance they are able to provide. (For example, a mentor who is providing guidance on methodology may not be comfortable discussing an upcoming tenure review.) These conversations can prevent future miscommunication and can also be an occasion to identify additional supports for the mentee.

Some pairs have found it useful for mentors to be “on call,” especially on occasions such as the weeks leading up to a grant proposal submission. If you decide to implement this practice, you should discuss logistics. Will the mentor be available for a specified length of time? Is there a shared expectation about how quickly the mentor will respond to questions? Does the mentor need to balance the demands of more intensive contact with some time off? Discussing these sorts of questions at the outset can help prevent confusion or dissatisfaction.

Some mentors and mentees find it important to maintain contact when one of the pair goes on leave or takes other time away from work. Committing to regular (even if attenuated) email or phone contact helps maintain connection. However, some mentors prefer to step back from mentoring when on leave. Once you know that you or your mentor/mentee will be taking time away, you should discuss whether and how you will communicate. This makes it less likely that a mentee will worry about overburdening a mentor or that a mentor will feel hesitant about scaling back.

## **MAKE THE MOST OUT OF MEETINGS**

Formal meetings are different from informal check-ins and chats. Some mentoring pairs find that the structure and deadlines imposed by meetings scheduled on a weekly or monthly basis promotes fruitful exchanges. Others find that their most productive conversations happen on an ad-hoc basis. As your relationship progresses, evaluate how you are using your meetings and the other ways you communicate. Do you prefer to immediately discuss issues, ideas, or problems? Or, is it more productive to have focused meetings that guarantee time for lengthier consultation? Discuss when these different approaches would work best for you.

Meetings can always be rescheduled, but setting tentative dates makes it less likely that months will slip by without the intended meeting. A number of mentor/mentee pairs have found it productive to commit to specific dates and times (“February 15th at 1:00 p.m.” instead of “lunch once a month”).

Scholars may want to take notes during meetings and follow up with an email summary. When meetings are held weeks or months apart, this technique can help mentors and mentees track progress and recall pending concerns or agenda items. Also, if there is too much or too little to discuss at your meetings, consider using that as an occasion to adjust your mentoring plan.

### **CHECKLIST FOR SUCCESSFUL MEETINGS**

- ☑ Don't focus only on work products and tasks; discuss goals and opportunities.
- ☑ Set specific dates and times to meet.
- ☑ Take notes and send an email summary after meetings.
- ☑ Periodically evaluate your meeting schedule and format.
- ☑ Use meetings to share feedback with one another about the relationship, clarify expectations, and modify communication strategies when needed.





## **TRY GROUP MENTORING ACTIVITIES REFLECT**

Some Scholars engage their mentors collectively, holding occasional group meetings in which all the mentors review progress, discuss problems and challenges, and prioritize future research products. Because mentors often have varied backgrounds and specializations, group meetings can be excellent opportunities for mentors to hear new perspectives. Mentors occasionally give differing or even conflicting advice, and group meetings can illuminate these differences so that a resolution can be reached.

If your mentors are not near one another, try to schedule a group meeting around a professional meeting or conference to maximize everyone's time. Mentees have also conducted group meetings via conference call or Web conference, using such applications as GoToMeeting, Skype, and iChat. (The fees for these tools vary; an annual subscription to GoToMeeting is less than \$500.) Some mentees solicit collective feedback through group emails.

### **NURTURE LONG DISTANCE RELATIONSHIPS**

Frequently, Scholars do not live near their mentors. These relationships can require more creativity. Many have found it helpful to prioritize opportunities to meet in person. Some mentors have invited their mentees to give guest lectures in their courses. Others have planned conference sessions together or invited their mentor/mentee to speak on a conference panel they've organized. Some pairs use technologies like Skype to facilitate interactive remote meetings.

In the William T. Grant Scholars Program, the annual report provides one opportunity to reflect on the progress and nature of the relationship, but it can be helpful to do so at other times. Many mentors and mentees report that scheduling meetings to discuss the relationship provides an opportunity to tackle challenges in a productive way, alleviating the anxiety of broaching an issue. Even when the relationship is going well, check-ins can be used to identify challenges and think creatively about enhancing the relationship.

To make these conversations fruitful, focus on a few key questions. Does our meeting schedule and structure work for me? Are there important topics or concerns we have yet to address? As a mentee, am I receiving the advice and support I need? What am I currently struggling with in my research or career? In what areas do I need advice? As a mentor, do I have a clear understanding of my mentee's goals and needs? Are there other activities that could support his/her development? Do I anticipate any upcoming changes that we should plan for?

# TYPES OF MENTORING

There is a distinction between mentoring around a research project and mentoring around career development. In a perfect world, perhaps a single mentor could guide and support his or her mentee in all aspects of professional life, from designing a study to developing a satisfying work/life balance. Yet just because you are not a “super mentor” doesn’t mean you can’t contribute significantly toward your mentee’s needs.

Mentors can encourage their mentees to assemble a group of mentors and develop a strong support network. As mentees, Scholars might want to think of their mentors as team members who, collectively, provide comprehensive support.

Remember that a shared profession, field, or department can be experienced differently by two people, and that many of those differences are shaped by broader social inequalities. A helpful rule of thumb is to not assume what someone does or does not know about the subject at hand. Try to recognize your own assumptions and make them explicit.

## MENTORS AS RESEARCH RESOURCES

Many mentors play an advisory role in Scholars’ research projects. This role can include providing guidance on methodology or theoretical frameworks, reviewing grant proposals, providing reading lists, and referring Scholars to relevant trainings and conferences.

Through their mentors’ familiarity with different settings or groups under study, some Scholars have enhanced their conceptual and methodological approaches and met key individuals

(e.g., agency leaders). Mentors have given tutorials on new research methods and assisted with measurement and instrument development. Many mentors help resolve issues that arise in sample recruitment, data collection, coding, and/or analysis.

## WAYS TO SUPPORT YOUR MENTEE’S RESEARCH

- ⇒ Provide targeted expertise on methodology or theory.
- ⇒ Review draft proposals and articles.
- ⇒ Inform him or her of pertinent trainings, gatherings, or groups.
- ⇒ Direct him or her to relevant funding opportunities.
- ⇒ Direct him or her to the journals publishing in his/her research area.
- ⇒ Collaborate in various ways: write a manuscript, give a joint presentation, organize a conference panel, compile an edited volume.



Mentors can also be key resources as the products of a research project are refined. For example, you can discuss emerging findings, review manuscripts, and offer advice on publication venues and timing of submissions. It is helpful to establish a turnaround time for reviewing manuscript drafts, so that mentees know when to expect feedback and mentors have a deadline (even if it's flexible). Some mentees find it most useful to brainstorm early ideas with their mentor or to exchange edits in an electronic version. Others prefer that their mentor review a complete hard copy. Establish the most effective method for you.

Mentors are typically able to provide an “aerial view” of the field or discipline. By sharing this perspective and encouraging mentees to keep long-term goals in mind, mentors can help their mentees think strategically about the relationship of their work to the larger field. Mentors can also help mentees plan for the next stages of a project or a future research program. Mentors can share RFPs, fellowship applications, and other opportunities to help strengthen a mentee's strategic sensibility and expand their knowledge of potential supports. Mentors can also advise mentees about journals that publish in their research areas and resources for tracking publication venues and citations related to their specializations (such as SciVerse Scopus).

Finally, collaboration can provide a structured venue to build a working relationship. Such efforts could include jointly authoring a manuscript or presentation, co-organizing a conference panel, or coordinating an edited volume. Not only can this nurture the mentor-mentee relationship, but mentees are often introduced to new areas of research and networks through such projects.

## **MENTORING FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

Scholars often rely on their mentors as resources when navigating career transitions or decisions. Mentors can provide valuable professional development guidance, but this kind of mentoring can be challenging, because mentees and mentors are often uncertain about how to use the relationship productively.

### **CHECKLIST FOR CAREER DEVELOPMENT MENTORING**

- ☑ Remember that mentor/mentee expectations and assumptions may differ.
- ☑ Clarify and flesh out professional goals and priorities.
- ☑ Make concrete suggestions about career promotion opportunities.
- ☑ Be proactive: don't wait for your mentor or mentee to offer or ask for help.

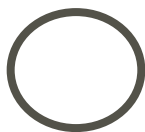


Mentees aren't always aware of all the ways that mentors can provide professional development guidance. While some mentees may feel comfortable asking their mentors to connect them with senior academics in their fields, others may not realize that mentors often make such introductions. Similarly, a mentee may feel uncomfortable approaching his or her mentor directly with such requests. In turn, mentors may think that if a mentee has not asked for a certain kind of help, it is not needed.

In particular, mentors of junior researchers from marginalized groups should be explicit about the support they can provide. These early-career academics can find themselves on the outskirts of the networks through which opportunities and resources flow. If you are a mentor, remember that your mentee may not be aware of some of the ways you can help, or he or she may be unsure of whether or how to ask. Again, remember that mentors and mentees can possess different assumptions and beliefs regarding professional relationships and networking. These assumptions are shaped by many factors, including class, race, gender, sexual orientation, and disability status.

Mentors should make professional development an ongoing topic of conversation. Proactively inform your mentees of the advice and assistance you can provide. This support might include inviting your mentee to participate in work groups and meetings, reviewing tenure and promotion dossiers, or connecting mentees with potential funding sources.

For all academics, effective time management is critical. Mentors can provide valuable strategic advice about managing the competing obligations of teaching, research, and service. Mentors can help mentees identify priorities and when to "say no." This can be especially useful for junior faculty of color, who often face a heavy service burden from departments and universities eager to enhance the diversity of committees and task forces. Many Scholars have found their mentors to be excellent sources of support as they negotiate relationships with junior and senior colleagues and serve their students and departments while maintaining a strong research program.





Finally, mentors can be valuable resources in the important area of grant applications. Your mentee may have seen few or no examples of funded grant proposals. Mentors can share such examples and discuss why they were successful. Explain how grant writing differs from other types of writing, and share your strategies for crafting a strong proposal. Mentors can also describe the landscape of funders and grant programs. Share your experiences working with specific organizations and agencies. In addition to asking for example proposals, mentees can schedule a meeting to talk through the grant process, asking questions such as: What distinguishes each institution and what do they look for in grant proposals? What are their review processes like? How do they prefer to interact with applicants and grantees? What are the best times to apply for different types of grants? How should I plan to transition to larger awards? This insight can help mentees create proposals from stronger positions, increasing their chances of success.

## GRANTSMANSHIP GUIDANCE

- ⇒ Share examples of funded proposals with your mentee.
- ⇒ Review a funded proposal together and discuss its elements.
- ⇒ Discuss the different types of grants and funders relevant to your fields.
- ⇒ Provide tips to your mentee about how to strengthen relationships with various funders. (e.g., “At this agency, program officers are accustomed to frequent contact with grantees.”)
- ⇒ Discuss the expectations, foci, and review processes of various funders.
- ⇒ Map out a plan for future funding, paying special attention to how to advance in grant amount and prestige.

# CRITICAL JUNCTURES

The focus of the mentoring relationship can shift as a mentee's project and career evolve. When these shifts are approached thoughtfully, the relationship can transition smoothly or come to an end, if necessary. The stress of the transition can be alleviated by open, candid communication.

## POST-AWARD PLANS

At the end of the award period, you may feel uncertain about the future of your relationship. In the absence of the structure of the Scholars program, interaction can wane. The good news is that mentoring relationships don't have to end with the award. However, this moment does signal an important shift. We suggest making concrete plans for future communication before the project ends, being honest about desires, limitations, and expectations. Revisit earlier conversations about time commitments and needs, as these will likely be different. Discuss what kind of relationship you will maintain and how you will do so. This can range from developing a grant proposal together or committing to a bimonthly chat.

## MAKING ADJUSTMENTS AND CHANGES

Even during the award period, changes can occur, which may necessitate revisiting expectations and plans. A mentee's needs may evolve, or a mentor's availability can shift. Discussing such issues can be difficult. Mentees can feel apprehensive about asking for different kinds of support or offending a senior colleague. Mentors may feel guilty about reduced availability or doubt their ability to provide necessary supports.

Your annual report is an excellent tool for framing such a conversation. Think of the annual report as an opportunity for thoughtful reflection on the relationship. Open a dialogue about what's going well and what could be improved, using the report as a guide. This can make it easier to address shifts and other issues. This conversation could lead to a revision of the original mentoring plan to accommodate changes in needs or availability. Other times, you might agree that it would be best to switch mentors for the remainder of the award.

The Foundation supports both decisions and has created flexibility in the award so that mentor changes can be made when needed. To do so, Scholars should contact their post-award reviewer and submit the following:

1. A brief revised mentoring plan. This will be the written document of record.
2. If proposing to drop mentor(s), the Scholar should discuss the rationale.
3. If proposing to add mentor(s), the Scholar should discuss the mentoring needs and the fit of the new mentor(s) with those needs. As with the initial mentoring plan, the Scholar should discuss:
  - The value of the award for establishing or deepening a relationship (We do not want to support an existing strong relationship or one that would develop without the award.)
  - The proposed structure of the mentoring relationship, including frequency and form of communication
  - How the mentoring relationship will expand the applicant's expertise and professional development



- Plans to address such barriers as distance and schedule limitations
4. A letter from the new mentor committing to the revised mentoring plan and agreeing to complete brief annual reports. (Upon receipt of each report, the Foundation will send the mentor an honorarium of \$500.)

(Note that the award will support only one to two mentors at a time.)

When planning for this conversation, consider how and when you typically communicate. If you talk mainly by phone, for example, you could have this conversation by phone as well. If you sense that your mentor/mentee would appreciate an in-person conversation, schedule a meeting. You can probably anticipate your mentor/mentee's reaction to this conversation, so keep that in mind while respecting your own boundaries.

## **BREAKING UP DOESN'T HAVE TO BE HARD TO DO**

Finally, there are times when a relationship simply doesn't work, despite best efforts. Working styles and personalities may not mesh well. It's natural to worry about creating conflict with a colleague (particularly for junior researchers), but continuing an unproductive partnership may ultimately increase tensions. If it's clear that the relationship is not working, focus on ending it tactfully and respectfully. Acknowledge the issues, but remember that assigning blame is not productive.

Respectful communication is important. You can begin on a positive note: thank your mentor for his/her efforts, or express how much you've enjoyed learning about your mentee's work. However, state your intent clearly—"I think our relationship isn't as productive as I'd like it to be, and we should explore other alternatives." Even if your relationship has been contentious, maintaining a cordial tone can greatly ease the strain of the "breakup."

### **MAKING ADJUSTMENTS**

- ⇒ Brainstorm ways to maintain the relationship after the award period.
- ⇒ Use your annual report as a tool for evaluating the relationship.
- ⇒ Suggest improvements and be open to revising the mentoring plan.
- ⇒ Remember that you can switch mentors if needed.
- ⇒ Be candid about necessary changes, including ending the relationship.

# FURTHER RESOURCES

Mentoring relationships can be richly rewarding for both parties. In their final program reports, many Scholars reflect on the progress made in relationships with their mentors. Mentors, too, frequently comment on the growth of their relationships with Scholars over time. Mentoring pairs who have built strong partnerships often plan to collaborate in the future. We hope this guide helps build such relationships by outlining effective communication and planning strategies. Additional resources are below.

## ARTICLES

“Mentoring Clinical Researchers” (2002)  
Howard Bauchner  
*Archives of Disease in Childhood*, 87,  
82–84.

“On the Determinants of Academic  
Success” (2001)  
David Sackett  
*Clinical and Investigative Medicine*, 24.2,  
94–100.

“Cross-Race Faculty Mentoring” (2005)  
Christine Stanley and Yvonna Lincoln  
*Change*, 37.2, 44–50.

“The Truth About Mentoring Minorities:  
Race Matters” (2001)  
David Thomas  
*Harvard Business Review*, 79.4, 98–107.

## BOOKS AND GUIDES

*On Being a Mentor* (2007)  
W. Brad Johnson  
New Jersey, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates

*The Elements of Mentoring* (2004)  
W. Brad Johnson and Charles R. Ridley  
New York: Palgrave Macmillan

*Pay It Forward: Guidance for Mentoring  
Junior Scholars* (2010)  
Alicia Wilson-Ahlstrom, Nalini  
Ravindranath, Nicole Yohalem, and Vivian  
Tseng  
The Forum for Youth Investment and  
William T. Grant Foundation

*Making the Right Moves: A Practical Guide  
for Scientific Management for Postdocs and  
New Faculty* (2006)  
The Burroughs Wellcome Fund and  
Howard Hughes Medical Institute

## TOOLS

“Toolkit for Postdoctoral Scholars and  
Faculty Mentors”  
University of California, Los Angeles

“Sample Mentor’s Expectation Letter”  
University of California, San Diego