Conceptualizing and Writing a Statement of Mentoring Philosophy[1]

Preface

In Spring 2020, the Department of Communication at the University of Pittsburgh marked its commitment to mentoring by instituting a standing Mentoring Committee. In the Bylaws constitution of that committee, the Department affirmed that "on the part of both mentors and mentees, mentoring entails a self-conscious practice of articulating and developing the skills and experiences that are necessary and valuable in a profession and in other aspects of life." This document is designed to aid the articulating and developing of skills and experiences named in the Bylaws and should be understood alongside the Department's Mentoring Compact Guide. This discussion about mentoring philosophy therefore comes out of a particular context, but it is made freely available for use by others elsewhere.

Often, the expectations for and relationships between professional mentors and mentees carry implicit or tacit understandings and implications. When these tacit expectations are not shared, misunderstanding, confusion, and frustration can result—for both mentor and mentee. A statement of mentoring philosophy can help to avoid this mutually disappointing outcome by making expectations explicit. We believe that, with its emphasis on articulation and consideration, this is very much a communicative approach to mentoring.

This document can help mentors craft a statement of mentoring philosophy. It offers (1) a description of the statement of mentoring philosophy and its ethical-practical functions; (2) some of the Mentoring Committee's guiding assumptions about mentoring in an academic department; (3) suggestions for reflection and preparation prior to statement writing; and (4) a series of sample prompts, topics, and ideas for anyone seeking to write or revise their mentoring philosophy.

What is a mentoring philosophy statement?

In general terms, a statement of mentoring philosophy outlines what the mentor and mentee can expect of any mentoring relationship they voluntarily undertake, from the mentor's perspective. As such, it is informative and affords some measure of balanced power that would otherwise not exist in the relationship. Expectations typically cover the forms of engagement, interaction, and support the mentor will provide, and what they expect of the mentee in turn, as they work collaboratively towards the mentee's goals and suitable independence. In short, the statement of mentoring philosophy explicitly conveys the mentor's expectations for mentoring relationships of particular kinds, including

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obligations for the mentor, for the mentee, and for both parties. Like most academic and professional documents, it is a work in progress. As the mentor develops their thinking about mentoring and its practice, their philosophy is likely to evolve. Still, crafting a statement means you will always have one on hand to share with a potential mentee.

Guiding assumptions

Many of us have implicit conceptions of mentoring. As in many professional and academic relationships, however, the basic principles are often unstated and assumed. We believe that making tenets explicit is useful for both the mentor and their potential mentees. It promotes self-reflection and communication, and provides a platform for a mentor and potential mentee to discuss, deliberately agree on and, if necessary, revise the terms of any specific mentoring relationship they form. We encourage them to make use of the Department's Mentoring Compact Guide.

Additionally, the Mentoring Committee believes that crafting mentoring philosophy statements is a valuable exercise for any and all in an academic department—faculty, undergraduate and graduate students, and staff—who want to mentor, are expected to mentor, or both. The value emerges regardless of how much mentoring one has done or received. We also believe that mutually rewarding mentoring can and does happen within and across department constituencies; and that, depending on the goals, persons of any institutional rank or role may have expertise of value to any other department member. Additionally, we note that mutually beneficial mentoring relationships can span less than a year or last years and even decades. Finally, mentoring can encompass a wide span of topics and goals. These include goalsetting; planning; how to prioritize and fulfill professional responsibilities; how to articulate and improve one's role capacities; oral and written (and other) visual communication skills; how to conceptualize professional growth and its relationship to personal fulfillment; and what it means to be part of an organization and network of professional relationships and wider communities.

How to approach this document

What follows is a series of questions that mentoring philosophies typically address. Each question is immediately followed by a list of common answers. The list is intended to be neither exhaustive nor exclusive. It represents ideas culled from and inspired by multiple mentoring philosophy samples the Mentoring Committee has reviewed. It is our hope that the list will prove both instructive and generative. Pull from it what makes sense to you.

As you read these questions, it might be helpful to do the following:

- Think about what you can offer as a mentor—your knowledge, expertise, skills—and who you might therefore be in a position to mentor, bearing in mind that rewarding mentoring can transcend the boundaries of university-designated positions. Use those possibilities as one heuristic to evaluate the questions and recommended topics below.

- Consider whether your justifications for the expectations you (would) include in your philosophy will be obvious to potential mentees, and whether readers would benefit from their written provision.

- Reflect on how you might conceptualize mentoring and craft your expectations in ways that open up rather than cramp mentoring opportunities.

- Consider your own existing mentoring resources and thinking. If you've already written a statement of mentoring philosophy, you might approach the present document in search of overlap and ideas for further developing your statement. If you've thought about a mentoring philosophy but haven't yet spelled one out, this document might assist you with ways to clarify and communicate your ideas. And if you're just now starting on the journey of actively thinking and writing your conceptualization and practice of mentoring, this document might serve as an inductive bedrock.

Ultimately, we hope this document will provide a sense of the kinds of expectations laid out in a mentoring philosophy, invite you to reflect on your tacit expectations of a mentor, and encourage you to craft or revise your philosophy statement so you can readily share and discuss it with current and potential mentees.

Questions

1. How do you conceptualize the mentoring relationship?

   - A mutually beneficial and respectful relationship in which both parties grow professionally;
   - A formal relationship in which the mentor seeks to facilitate the mentee's achievement of their goals and ultimately their suitable independence;
   - A relationship in which both parties positively contribute to the story of their department or organization, discipline(s), and broader communities;
   - A set of mutual obligations/commitments;
   - A part of a purposeful network of (in)formal mentoring relationships that acknowledges the multiplicity of knowledge, backgrounds, experiences and skills relevant to overall professional development and well-being;
   - A means of growing knowledge and skills to work with people throughout an organization, organizational network, or community, which, in an academic setting, might be a means of navigating between staff, faculty of all ranks, graduate students, and undergraduates.

2. <u>What expectations do you have of your mentees?</u>

- Preparation; initiative; hard work; progress; general enthusiasm regarding their goals;
- Self-reflection, self-reflexivity, and honesty;
- Collegiality with all department members;
- Primary responsibility for their career development and ownership of their career objectives, goals, development plan and associated deadlines;
- Primary responsibility for their personal well-being;
- Interest in institutional knowledge acquisition;
- Knowledge of relevant institutional policies, requirements, deadlines; an active mentoring network approach to their professional development;
- Professional and/or academic integrity with respect to published work (e.g., departmental documents, course materials, scholarly essays);
- Production vis-à-vis relevant metrics for retention, promotion, and other aspects of career development;
- Development of research skills that facilitate their teaching, scholarly and/or administrative work;
- Appropriate demonstration of initiative;
- Effective communication regarding such topics as email response time and what constitutes a satisfactory response;
- Commitment to advancing the common good;
- Explicit commitment to amicably and formally ending the mentoring relationship if it ceases to function and efforts to salvage it fail;
- Regular feedback on mentoring performance, including completion of an annual formal evaluation;
- To ask questions when in need;
- Identify goals and create a plan and deadlines for achieving them;
- Meetings at least monthly.

3. <u>What should your mentees expect of you?</u>

- Punctuality, candor, constructive feedback, confidentiality;
- Sponsorship, advocacy, tailored mentoring;
- Cultural sensitivity, contribution to an equitable and inclusive mentoring environment free of harassment;
- Collegiality with all Dept. members, without regard to gender, gender identity, race or ethnicity, national origin, religion, (dis)ability, sexual orientation, etc.;
- I will strive to maintain a relationship that is based on trust and mutual respect; enthusiasm and encouragement;
- I will seek the assistance of others and other resources when necessary;
- I will provide a supportive mentoring environment to facilitate mentee's personal and professional growth;

- I will facilitate transmission of institutional/workplace knowledge, practices, and skills;
- Co-exploration of multiple employment, advancement and career options;
- Model workplace professionalism and communication, management, and leadership skills;
- Responsible workplace conduct and ethics;
- Professional and/or academic integrity with respect to others' work and contributions to the department, school, university, field, and wider communities;
- I will foster empowerment, progressive responsibility, and suitable independence;
- Openness, enthusiasm, ongoing commitment;
- Reliable up-to-date statements on the amount of time between submission of material for my feedback and receipt of my feedback;
- Practical information about departmental divisions of labor;
- Information regarding my work and communication practices during university holidays, breaks and (other) religious observances;
- Debriefing and discussion following committee or faculty meetings;
- Availability for regularly scheduled conversations;
- Conversations on how to interpret relevant policies and requirements;
- Timely conversations regarding course selection, thesis and/or dissertation committee membership;
- Grant writing assistance;
- Pre-agreements regarding co-authorship;
- Annual self- and mentor-evaluation of mentee's progress towards their goals;
- Mutually agreed-upon plan with well-defined goals and timelines;
- Regular feedback on their performance including an annual formal evaluation;
- Openness about strengths, weaknesses, and improvement opportunities;
- I will respect all ethical standards as they relate to my work with mentees in and outside of this University;
- Commitment to advancing the common good;
- Mentoring beyond the formal relationship should former mentee desire.

4. <u>What are the mentor's areas of specialty? Where can the mentor be expected to provide the most useful input and feedback?</u>

- Career development that facilitates retention and promotion;
- Institutional or workplace knowledge and skills relevant to department, school and/or university;
- Administration (department, school, university, and/or disciplinary level);
- Community engagement;
- Teaching (pedagogy, remote or hybrid instruction, assessment, course design, active and/or collaborative learning strategies, educational technology, etc.);

- Research and/or publication (getting started, project development, publicity, publication, collaboration, writing process, etc.);
- Service (department, school, university, disciplinary level and/or community engagement).

The above lists are not comprehensive. Not every point needs to be addressed in every statement of mentoring philosophy. We recommend you use these lists as a way of deliberately generating, naming, and communicating your understanding of mentoring and your expectations of a mentor and potential mentee.