What to Expect as You Enter Research Mentorship

The University of Cincinnati is a training ground for future research professionals. It is also a space where students discover that research is not for them. Because the relationship students develop with their research mentors influences whether or not they decide to pursue graduate school or a research profession, it is important that mentors and mentees alike understand **what effective mentorship looks like** and **how it develops**.

# WHAT EFFECTIVE MENTORSHIP LOOKS LIKE

Mentorship is a **reciprocal relationship** defined as “*a professional, working alliance in which individuals work together over time to support the personal and professional growth, development, and success of the relational partners through the provision of career and psychosocial support*.”[[1]](#footnote-1) **Effective mentorship leads to** ***productive*, *mutually supportive, and mutually satisfying experiences*.**

## Research Mentor Role

Mentors provide guidance, training, and psychosocial support to develop the mentee’s research skills.

## Research Mentee Role

Mentees receive guidance and develop skills that allow them to produce research outcomes that support the mentor’s broader research initiatives.

# HOW EFFECTIVE MENTORSHIP DEVELOPS

Because research mentors are in a position of power over their mentees, it is the mentor’s responsibility to guide the relationship in a way that allows the mentee to develop their potential. Below are 3 best practices[[2]](#footnote-2):

## 1. ALIGN EXPECTATIONS

The mentor and mentee should discuss their research goals and how they will work together. They should document their agreements so that they can return to them later and modify as needed. Specifically, they should discuss:

* Long-term goals: individual career goals and how they may help each other work toward them during their time together
* Short-term goals for the mentee (for one to two weeks)
* Meeting frequency and etiquette
* Protected time
* How to address challenges as they arise

## 2. CREATE AN INCLUSIVE CULTURE

No matter the career stage of the mentor (e.g., professor, post-doc, graduate student, professional staff), they are expected to be welcoming and encouraging to mentees of all backgrounds, ethnicities, and gender identities. Basic expectations include:

* The mentee is included in all aspects of the research process. This includes participating in paper discussions and lab/team meetings and other activities related to gathering, processing, and presenting information.
* All are aware of each person’s role in the group and ways in which they may collaborate.
* All have access to communication and information (e.g., rules, protocols, updates).
* Everyone respects preferred names and pronouns.
* Meeting facilitators invite contributions from all participants.
* Everyone is encouraging, kind, and respectful to everyone else.
* Members illuminate and challenge behaviors that devalue or undermine an individual or group.
* The PI (Principal Investigator) welcomes accountability for upholding an inclusive culture.

## 3. FOSTER INDEPENDENCE

Mentors foster independence by:

* Helping the mentee understand what independence looks like at their level
* Providing access training
* Coaching them along the way

Mentees achieve independence by:

* Being engaged
* Keeping meticulous notes
* Aiming for independence
* Asking clarifying questions

# WHAT DYSFUNCTIONAL MENTORSHIP LOOKS LIKE

Although most students report positive experiences with their mentor, negative experiences commonly arise unintentionally. When negative experiences are not addressed, dysfunctional mentorship may develop. Signs of dysfunctional mentorship include:

* Yelling and other behaviors that are threatening or aggressive
* Invalidating comments or slights
* Performing tasks unrelated to research (e.g., yard work)
* Performing tasks that support research (e.g., data entry, cleaning, organizing) without understanding how it relates to research
* Internal dialog that sounds like: *Can they do that? Is this appropriate? Am I misreading the situation? I don’t feel welcome here.*

# WHAT TO DO IF YOU ARE HAVING A BAD EXPERIENCE

If you are uncomfortable talking to your mentor about it, you should seek guidance from the UC Ombuds Office, Undergraduate Research Program Director Dr. Lamkin (megan.lamkin@uc.edu), an academic advisor, or your department’s undergraduate director.

1. National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. 2019. The Science of Effective Mentorship in STEMM. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Pfund, C., Branshaw, J., & Handelsman, J. 2015. Entering Mentoring 2nd Edition. New York, NY: W.H. Freeman & Co. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)