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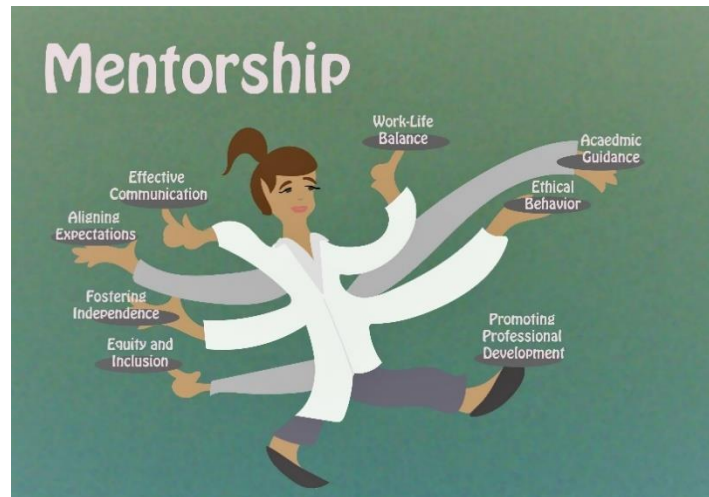
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# MASTERING THE ART OF MENTORSHIP TRAINING

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## Mastering the Art of Mentorship Training

Mentorship is a frequently used word in academia, but probably the least well-defined. As postdoctoral scholars we have first-hand experience with varied mentoring philosophies that often perplex us when formulating our own. To transform this word into clear, implementable objectives and provide a discussion forum, the Office of Postdoctoral Affairs at Washington University in St. Louis held its first [mentorship training program for postdocs](#) in 2017. Consisting primarily of case study discussions, this program provided postdocs with a guide to improve their relationship with their mentors and hone in on their own mentoring skills.



### ***Navigating Mentor-Mentee Relationships***

The mentorship training program was organized and conducted by Erin Heckler, PhD, the director of the Office of Postdoctoral Affairs at Washington University. The program used training materials from the [Center for the Improvement of Mentored Experiences in Research](#) (CIMER) and the [National Research Mentoring Network](#) (NRMN) Mentor Training Core, both of which are based at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. The training materials focused on mentorship and networking while striving towards increased diversity in research.

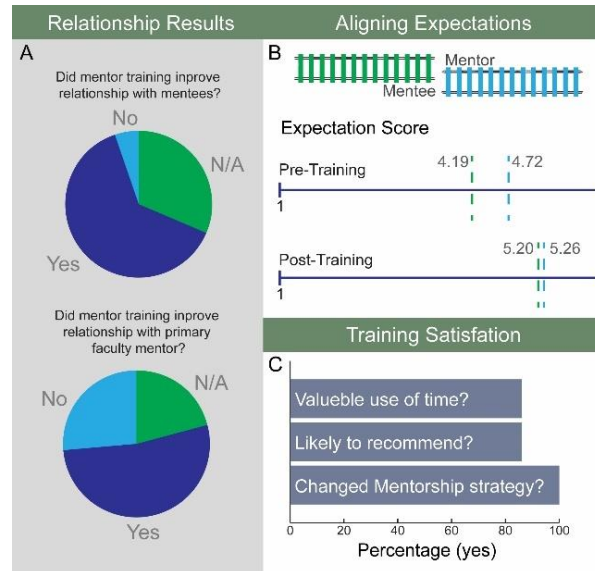
*Mentoring is a skill. Perfecting it needs patience, training and practice*

The four-day program comprised of daily 90 minute sessions during which case studies highlighting conflicts in common aspects of mentor-mentee relationships were debated and discussed. Key topics that were covered included:

- maintaining effective communication
- aligning expectations
- addressing equity and inclusion
- promoting self-efficacy

- fostering independence
- work-life integration

Additional resources such as testimonies, frameworks for individual development plans, and goals lists were also provided for framing one's mentoring philosophy.



\*Mentorship training results, collected from participants before and after training, shows improvement in the following areas: (A) relationship with mentee and primary faculty member and (B) aligning expectations. (C) Bar plot showing training success. Data collection and statistics done by Erin Heckler, PhD. Source: [Office of Postdoctoral Affairs, Washington University in St. Louis](#)

The program was attended by 22 postdocs from eleven departments in the School of Medicine and the School of Arts and Sciences. Most of the attendees were in their second and third years of their postdoc training. They displayed a wide range of previous mentoring experiences. Most attendees had trained more than three mentees, who had in turn worked on the postdoc's project and other projects in the lab.

During this workshop, different types of conflicts were discussed. A key solution to conflict reiterated was maintaining effective and regular communication and aligning expectations early in the mentoring relationship. One suggested tool was completing and signing a mentorship agreement, preferably at the beginning of the appointment that clearly states the goals, steps to achieving those goals and other parameters like meeting frequency, confidentiality, and a relationship termination clause and duration (see other suggestions in the NPA's [Postdoc Guide to Mentorship](#)). Such agreements help to document mutually agreed parameters that can guide future mentor-mentee interactions.

Importantly, it was also highlighted that mentorship involves counseling for holistic development of the mentee. In that regard, mentors should provide direct academic guidance. They also should role model appropriate attitudes and values, provide advice for handling difficult work situations, suggest strategies for handling work and life responsibilities, foster

mentees' self-efficacy and advocate for mentees' career progress. These basic duties are expected from mentors and need to be consciously implemented.

### **Mentorship Training is Key to Postdoc Success**

Overall, this workshop was incredibly inspiring. It provided an engaging forum for sharing different perspectives, offered practical and implementable solutions and provided helpful resources to prepare a clear mentoring philosophy. Surveys done before and after the training showed 100 percent satisfaction with 89 percent of the participants agreeing to modify their mentorship strategy because of this training. The skills that were most improved were:

- considering the biases and prejudices one brings to the mentor/mentee relationship
- aligning expectations
- building mentee confidence

Mentoring is a skill. Perfecting it needs patience, training and practice. It is also fundamental to academia and plays a crucial role in affecting the mentee's performance as well as future career choices. As postdocs, we play the roles of both mentees and mentors. This program trains one to be actively aware of the finer nuances for both these roles.

Having recently benefited from this program, Washington University postdocs can use these [resources](#) and implement similar mentorship training programs to build a more informed generation of mentors. PDOs interested in creating their own mentorship training program can contact the Washington University postdoc [postdoc office](#) for more detailed advice.

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