

Mentoring for Different Paths

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“How am I supposed to mentor colleagues whose roles in the future may not look at all like what I have done?”

The question came from a HERS Institute alumna who had been asked to be part of a mentoring program on her campus. The goals were to encourage strong performance and to foster more satisfaction about working at the university among younger members of her department. She didn't want to seem unhelpful, but she was feeling unprepared.

Frequently, we assume that the work of a mentor is to help someone to follow the path she has followed. Basically the goal is envisioned as passing along the expectations, skills and inside information that we have acquired -- so that someone else can move into positions we have now.

But as this woman recognized, our campuses and our academic enterprises are changing in so many ways. Even as we hold to our mission of providing advanced education as a way of transforming lives and benefiting our communities and our world, we have to do things in different ways. If we are to help develop the leaders we need for the future, we must mentor them for jobs that are changing now -- and that will probably be different again in another decade.

So how do we mentor our younger colleagues? I suggest we reframe the question to ask, how can I engage in conversations with younger colleagues so we can share information and experiences that can be helpful as we work together today and as they move forward to face and shape what is ahead for higher education? Here are some recommendations.

Exchange information about what you both are doing. While the classic scene of mentoring seems to be the mentee asking the mentor questions, I urge you to change that expectation right away. If you want to be helpful in thinking about work, goals and setting directions for the future, you have to start with questions about what your colleague is currently doing. Start with open-ended questions -- “What are you working on now?” -- and let it flow from there.

At this point, you are doing more listening than talking. As you listen closely and ask good questions -- probing inquiries rather than examination questions -- you will be invited into deeper conversations. That's when you will begin to talk as well about what you are doing. This exchange is when the real mentoring begins: the gains go in both directions.

Make connections to extend the network and expand conversations. To be a successful mentor in these times on campuses, you have to be prepared to engage in conversations where you do not have significantly greater expertise in certain areas. One of the important

contributions you can make is to suggest connections with others who can expand the network around your colleague.

You may know experts in the field you are discussing, but that's not necessary. You need only know other people who might be interested and open to a conversation on the topic from another angle. Suggesting a couple of those connections will allow you to judge whether they seem a match for your colleague's interests right now. If so, you can offer to introduce them. You aren't responsible for following up to host a meeting, but whatever happens, make a point of checking back in a month or so.

Encourage your colleagues to identify their strengths and skills. As you get to know better the sorts of projects that your colleagues are pursuing, you will have a chance to talk more about the specifics of what is involved. With more of that sort of information, you can begin to make connections between what they are doing now and what they might be interested in doing in the future. For that, they are going to need to think explicitly about what strengths and skills they have developed and what they may need for the next level of professional development.

Yet they may not know exactly what strengths or skills they have or will need. That is an area where you can bring to bear your understanding of your own strengths and skills, and those of colleagues with whom you have worked over the years. If having this sort of conversation feels outside your realm of experience, you might suggest your colleague try some of the strength and skills assessments available through most career planning centers on your campus. But you should offer to talk about the results so you can help your colleague apply the information to the goals you have been discussing. In a world in which expectations for roles and positions are changing rapidly, it is vital to have help identifying strengths and skills that can be transferred to new situations.

Share stories -- and that means listening as well as talking. Mentoring colleagues who are not necessarily headed down the path that you've traveled is not so different from mentoring students who have arrived at your institution through paths that are different from yours. With colleagues, as with students, listening is the prerequisite to helping. Important things about the work you have done will most certainly be useful, as will illustrations of how you have handled things. Exchanging stories about all of those can be beneficial -- as long as, first and foremost, you listen for what your colleague needs. Your work is to offer your experience -- and, if asked, your advice. You cannot provide specific expertise in career trajectories for the future.

So mentor as an experienced person ready to provide suggestions rather than pronouncements. In the end, that's what you would want for yourself. It's what will be most valued and sought after when word gets out about your mentoring of your colleagues.