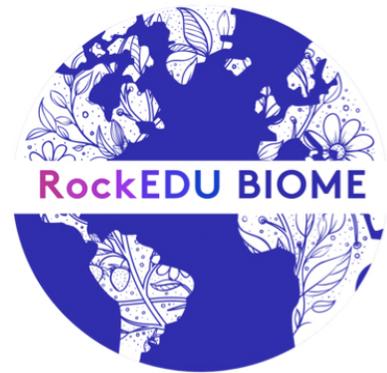# Revisiting the Basics of Mentorship

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Big Ideas

★ Mentors support mentee's psychosocial and career development
★ Mentoring relationships move through four phases over time

Based on the articles: The Science of Mentoring Relationships: What Is Mentorship? and Mentor as You'd Want to be Mentored.

Background

What is mentorship? Well, let's start with that mentorship is not. Mentorship is not a unidirectional relationship—like training or teaching—whereby one person transmits information to another. Mentorship can include elements of training and teaching (and it often does!), but beyond that, mentorship is a bi-directional and customized relationship that involves two active parties and the provision of personal and professional support. Historically, mentoring relationships have relied largely on the apprenticeship model (the direct information flow from a more senior individual to a less senior individual), however, more recent efforts have focused on more holistic and fluid mentorship strategies that promote collaboration and can exist in networks and varying degrees of formality (Dahlberg, & Byars-Winston, 2019).

The personal and professional support of mentorship can be summed up into two umbrella categories: psychosocial support and career (instrumental support) as outlined and framed in-context by Dahlberg & Byars-Winston (2019).

The psychosocial support refers specifically to support functions *within* the context of mentorship and includes:

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- Psychological and emotional support. The mentor provides encouragement for mentees within science, helps with problem-solving and actively listens.
- Role modeling. The mentor is a guide for the mentee and facilitates belonging for the mentee in allowing them to "see" themselves in science.

while the career (instrumental) support includes:

- Career guidance. The mentor supports the mentee in their journey towards a career path.
- Skill development. The mentor teaches them scientific skills and provides training within the field.
- Sponsorship. The mentor advocates for the mentee and recognizes their work.

To achieve success in the two categories of mentorship described above, interpersonal comfort is key. The idea is here being that an individual needs to establish a foundation of trust with their mentor and feel comfortable bringing their full selves to the relationship in order to reach their full potential. This further highlights the importance of the human element that underlies all parts of the mentoring relationship.

The stages of mentorship

Mentoring is fluid…right?! After all, it is a *human* relationship — which means that the mentor and mentee get to define how it works and when it changes. For those of us who have gone through mentoring relationships, either long or short, we know that sometimes we need more support and other times we need more independence. Kram, 1985a as cited in Dahlberg & Byars-Winston, 2019, define the four stages of mentorship as:

- **Initiation.** Think of this as the very beginning of your relationship — the "hello, how are you" phase of mentoring when everyone is a little uncertain and nothing has been formalized or discussed yet.
- **Cultivation.** This can be best described as the "crux" of mentorship, or what one who thinks of when they envision a solid mentorship relationship. Both parties know what's going on, mentors are intimately involved in psychosocial and career support, and everything is fine and dandy.
- **Separation.** At this point the mentee has learned a lot from the mentor, and is ready for a little more independence. During this time, there will be a

hopefully natural distancing where the mentee is still relying on the mentor, but in less time intensive ways.
- **Redefinition.** Think of this as the end of the relationship…or the beginning of an entirely new one. This could either happen expectedly (e.g. you were a summer mentor and the program ended) or unexpectedly (it's just time to part ways because you've received all that you can in the current relationship). During this time, the mentor and mentee "redefine" their relationship.

Practice > Theory

We're a tad backwards here, but let's see how these mentorship recommendations in practice tie back to some theoretical frameworks. These are pulled from theories of human behavior and relationships which feels apt given the human dynamics as play here. Some of examples of these as outlined in Dahlberg & Byars-Winston (2019) are:

- **Social Exchange Theory.** This theory focuses on the role of cost-benefit analyses in human relationships…which is completely normal! Even in mentoring, we enter into the relationship in search of something. This may range from professional development to goals for empowering scientists, but at its core, mentors and mentees both enter the relationship in search of some sort of *gain*. The theory shares that, if the costs outweigh the benefits, the relationship will be less likely to occur. Costs, in this context would be things like: burnout or decreased productivity. But this occurs for mentees too! The chapter recommends having clear guidelines in place that avoid the scale tipping into a deficit zone.
- **Tripartite Integration Model of Social Influence.** This theory discusses how being a member of a community requires compliances with a range of spoken and unspoken rules, roles, and values. Students are more likely to remain in STEM if they feel a sense of "belonging" within scientific spaces. Minoritized students (specifically, underrepresented) face particular struggles when faced with the social stress of integrating into a potentially hostile space while also navigating a new set of skills.

…and Back to Practice!

In the article Mentor as You'd Want to be Mentored, Wengert (2021) shares a simplistic but important reminder: treat others the way that you would like to be treated. Easy, right? Not quite. This doesn't only mean to be *nice* to your mentees (that should be a given), but also facilitating that sense of belonging that we discussed in the *Tripartite Integration Model of Social Influence*. This extends to

"ignoring the big picture" when we bring a mentee in our lab, specifically for a brief stay. In situations like these, it may not be apparent that they lack the context that we have for how our work fits into the broader world of science, *and* that this framing is critical in developing their sense of belonging and purpose.

Mobilizing Mentorship provides opportunities for asking questions, sharing experiences and actively listening to one another in the hopes of promoting effective, inclusive and sustainable mentorship practices. If you would like to navigate through this as a group, please refer to the discussion guide questions below.

Discussion Questions

1. In reflecting on support functions (psychosocial and career), which of these categories were/are offered to you as a mentee? Which of these categories, if any, have you provided as a mentor?

2. What, if any, additional support functions do you think are missing from the list?

3. How does your experience in mentorship fit (or not fit) with the 4 mentorship stages (initiation, cultivation, separation, redefinition)? Feel free to add or take away any of the stages in your explanation.

4. What sort of challenges do you foresee arising in each of the stages of the mentoring relationship?

5. Do you think the stages of mentorship are linear?

6. In thinking about cost-benefit analyses in mentorship, what sort of guidelines do you envision increasing the "benefits" of mentorship?

7. What are some potential costs of mentoring to a mentee?

BIOME (Building Interactive Opportunities for Mentorship Education) is a community that is designed to facilitate connection and collaboration among members of the scientific community at Tri-I (Rockefeller University, MSKCC, and Weill Cornell) around the theme of mentorship.