

Definition of Mentoring

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Mentoring is a term generally used to describe a relationship between a less experienced individual, called a mentee or protégé, and a more experienced individual known as a mentor. Traditionally, mentoring is viewed as a dyadic, face-to-face, long-term relationship between a supervisory adult and a novice student that fosters the mentee's professional, academic, or personal development (Donaldson, Ensher, & Grant-Vallone, 2000). It is important to acknowledge that the term "mentor" is borrowed from the male guide, Mentor, in Greek mythology, and this historical context has informed traditional manifestations of mentoring.

The traditional model is but one configuration of mentoring within a wide range of possible models that vary in their structure and function. As for structure, mentoring can involve a one-on-one relationship or a network of multiple mentors (Bird & Didion, 1992). A network may vary in timing of access to multiple mentors and in its content. In terms of timing, multiple mentors may be enlisted concurrently (Burlew, 1991; Packard, 2003a) or sequentially (Baugh & Scandura, 1999; Nolinske, 1995). In terms of content, the network can contain peers, "step-ahead" peers, or supervisors (Ensher, Thomas, & Murphy, 2001). For example, mentoring may involve a peer group, such as when women scientists convene to talk about the science community (Davis, 2001). A network can also refer to "cascade mentoring," a popular group form in science education circles, where a professor may supervise graduate students or advanced undergraduates in research, who in turn, supervise lower division undergraduates (e.g., Davis, Ginorio, Hollenshead, Lazarus, & Rayman, 1996). Furthermore, mentoring relationships can be informal or formally assigned, long-term or short-term in nature, and convened electronically or face-to-face (Kasprisin, Boyle Single, Single, & Muller, 2003; Packard, 2003b).

As for function, two categories are usually used to describe mentor roles: psychosocial and career-related. Psychosocial mentoring involves mentor roles such as counselor or friend, and career-related mentoring involves mentor roles such as coach or sponsor (Noe, 1988; Ragins and McFarlin, 1990). Some prefer to view role modeling as a third category, rather than as embedded within psychosocial mentoring (Donaldson et al., 2000; Scandura & Williams, 2001). Mentoring is not considered an all-or-nothing enterprise; a mentor may fulfill only one role or take on many roles (Kram, 1985; Ragins, Cotton, & Miller, 2000). An effective mentor may differ from the mentee in terms of gender, field of study, ethnic background, socioeconomic status, or disability status (Blake-Beard, 1999), although students may prefer a mentor who is a close match along many demographic variables (Frierson, Hargrove, & Lewis, 1994). In the case of science mentoring, from high school through post-doctoral studies, additional mentoring roles may need to be examined, including the provision of research training and academic support.

Each structure of mentoring may be better suited to support particular mentoring functions or desired outcomes. For example, the structure of peer mentoring may advance psychosocial functions, while supervisory mentoring may advance career functions (Ensher et al., 2001). Also, a structure that utilizes multiple mentors may more likely yield a broader set of mentoring functions and strengthen training than a one-mentor structure (Baugh & Scandura, 1999; Burlew, 1991; Nolinske, 1995; Packard, 2003a). Overall, alternatives to the traditional model may be crucial to support under-represented groups, whether in or out of science fields (Dreher & Dougherty, 1997; Packard, 2003b). An awareness of the complex mentoring typology, including the various structures and roles associated with mentoring, should assist with innovative and effective research planning.

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