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Growing New Professionals through Mentorship: A Two Way Street

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Growing New Professionals through Mentorship: A Two Way Street

Abstract

Participating in Mentoring Programs, such as the VRA Mentoring Program, can be satisfying and beneficial to both parties involved. Tips for a successful mentoring partnership can be found in this presentation from the VRA/ARLIS Joint Conference, 2011, Minneapolis, Minnesota

Keywords

Mentoring, mentor, mentee, protege

Author Bio & Acknowledgements

Marcia Focht has been Curator of Visual Resources at Binghamton University since 1986. She is currently Secretary of the Visual Resources Association, and recently stepped down as the Mentoring Program Coordinator after 13 years of Service in that role.

For the past 13 years, it has been my great pleasure to work with the Visual Resources Association Mentoring Program. Betty Antrim, the former Chairperson of the VRA Membership Committee, suggested the program at a routine meeting. Since I had spent an early conference or two stuck in my room, alone, eating from the room service menu, I jumped at the opportunity to work with Betty in forming the Mentoring Program, and I have been coordinating the Mentors and their protégés ever since.

Over the years, I have seen 264 new members mentored in their conference experience by 93 volunteer mentors. Obviously, many of these mentors volunteer year after year, and their contribution to the profession must not be taken lightly. Wishing to expand on the conference mentoring, in 2009 the Year-Round mentoring program was added. 15 mentors and mentees have been matched within the Year-Round program.

What is Mentoring, exactly? Where does the term come from? Relationships that are defined by guidance given and received are as old as time. The word “mentor” comes from the Greek poet Homer, who describes the character “Mentor” in the epic *The Odyssey*. Mentor was the friend and surrogate father to Telemachus, son of Odysseus and Penelope. When Odysseus was off to the Trojan War, his old friend Mentor watched over Telemachus and introduced him to community leaders. Together they embarked on a journey to search the islands of the Mediterranean for Telemachus’ lost father. Mentor guided the young man’s search for his father, his heritage, and his inheritance, and provided him with the skills and confidence necessary to complete the journey. Today a mentor’s protégé is sometimes referred to as “a telemachus”.

You may hear a number of words for a person who is mentored, even within this presentation. The traditional term is “protégé”, French for “One who is protected and guided by another”. Unfortunately, protégé has (in some minds) acquired negative connotations, so, recently, some have begun to refer to “mentees” (as if “ment” is a verb and “mentor” means “one who ments.”). “Neophyte” and “apprentice” are others. Following the mythological origins of the word, a rather vocal minority will refer to a Mentor’s “Telemachus.” That said, we all have to get used to “mentee”, because it seems to be here to stay.

The Uncommon Individual Foundation (<http://uif.org/>) states on its website that: “Mentoring in its finest form recognizes the protégé as the focal point and the driving force in mentoring relationships. It is the protégé’s dream and the protégé’s development of dreams that define the need for mentoring and the purpose of the relationship.”

The concept of mentoring can be found throughout time in many religions and cultures, and the emphasis and aims of mentoring can vary, whether it is used for an individual’s professional development, religious instruction, an employer’s benefit, or for the common good of society.

One firm, common thread runs through these differences of what the final objective of mentoring can be; life transitions are key times for mentoring, such as the time

between school and professional life, a time that requires re-tooling, such as mid-career, or the transition into retirement.

The focus of any mentoring relationship should be the aims of the protégé. This is the driving force behind the mentorship. Nevertheless, in its best form, the benefit of the relationship works both ways. When leading the way through a process such as revamping a resume or formulating a work flow chart, or even just selecting the most valuable sessions to attend at the Conference, mentors are reminded to re-evaluate their own choices as well. In addition, often fresh out of school, or coming from a different culture or set of experiences, newcomers may have gifts that they can give to their mentors. For example, they may have networks of their own they can draw their mentor into.

This satisfying exchange of gifts helps our organizations stay relevant, fresh and vital. VRA President Maureen Burns said the following about her local ARLIS Chapter mentoring experience:

“Getting together helped us both expand our professional horizons and learn more about what different generations of information professionals are thinking, doing, and dreaming. It also made us take the time out from our busy schedules to talk about professional development, career goals, and how rapidly our world is changing. It is very helpful to run ideas by a colleague like this, obtain feedback, and ponder the future.”

What does a good mentoring relationship look like? Good mentors have the ability to break advice down to practical parts and sizes. They see situations and solutions from their mentees' point of view. Mentees and mentors alike should not be afraid to ask a question or to say “I don't know” if they do not have the answer. They should overcome their fear of appearing weak or stupid, and together tackle the problem using their combined experience, enthusiasm, and calculation to forge a solution together. Often, mentees that bring specific questions or problems to solve to a meeting are helpful to the mentor, so ask away!

In this presentation, I've listed just a few of many helpful suggestions for conference mentors gleaned from Jenni Rodda, a seven-time mentor.

What should Mentors do?

- Introduce yourself before the conference, and offer to answer questions
- Recommend sessions or workshops
- Set up a time and place at the conference to meet
- Attend social events with your mentee; introduce your mentee to colleagues who share similar interests and professional goals.
- Meet up with your mentee during the course of the conference
- Introduce your mentee to the chair of the regional chapter in his/her area, and ask the chair to help find your mentee a contact closer to home.

- If you are serving as a leader, offer to take your mentee to your committee or regional chapter meeting.
- Follow up with your mentee after the conference.
- Learn from your mentee, this is an opportunity for you too!

She notes that mentoring means sharing, guiding and being thoughtful. She views a good mentoring relationship as a team. The most important points in the list are to make contact early, make introductions whenever possible, and listen to your mentees questions and respond as best you can. Jenni reminds us to “remember what it was like to attend your own first conference, how awkward and a little lost you may have felt--and how hard it was to face meals by yourself! Help your mentee pass those stressful moments.”

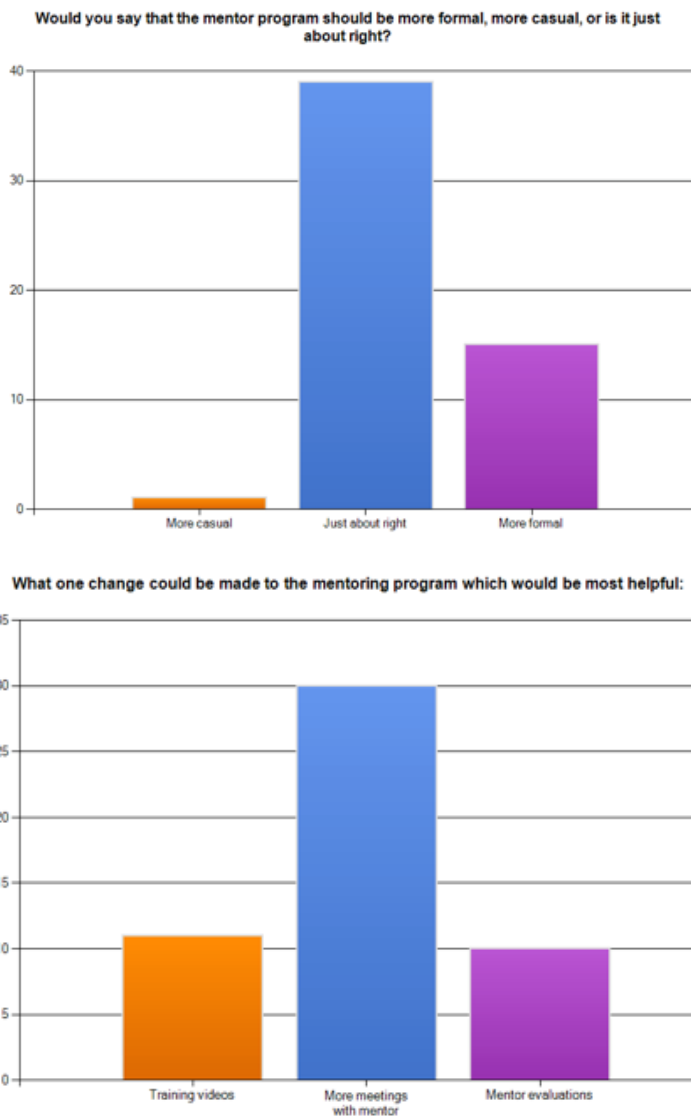
What should Mentees do?

- Contact your mentor if you do not hear from them.
- Volunteer!
- Attend Social Events.
- Check out committees whose work interests you.
- Ask your mentor about local chapters that might be near you.
- Bring business cards and a resume if you will be job hunting.
- Be open to networking opportunities at all times and places.
- Make every effort to meet and respond to your mentor, be appreciative for their time and effort.

This list contains a lot of specifics for the Conference Mentoring Program, but I'd like to urge anyone who desires mentoring at any stage of their professional journey to take the leap and ask for a hand. Mentoring is not just for neophytes. The year-round program might be perfect for a mid-career professional who needs help re-tooling. Mentees should ask many questions, and be sure and give your mentor specifics regarding your situation that can help them to advise you. Even if you are naturally reticent, put yourself forward – you will have your mentor to help you meet others that have information you can use. I would specifically like to point out the last item on the list – be sure and let your mentor know that you acknowledge their efforts.

This fall the VRA Mentoring Program sent out a survey to past participants in the program. There were 117 responses of the 251 requests sent. Overall, most respondents were satisfied with their experience within the program.

When asked about the level of formality, again, most were satisfied with the current level. When asked what participants saw as the single most helpful change we could make, it was clear that more time with the mentor was what they desired most.



We asked two open-ended questions. One was “Was there a particular approach or activity which you found especially valuable?” Meeting early on, especially at social events like the New Member’s Breakfast, or for a one-on-one lunch, was the number one response. Contact via e-mail or phone prior to the conference was mentioned often, as was the value of mentors who drew their mentee into their circle and made many introductions.

The responses to the second question, which was simply for additional comments, were interesting. There were a number of suggestions to do more follow-up and feedback, which we plan to do from now on. Based on the survey feedback, conference mentors and mentees were handed a list of tips and guidelines. We are hoping to learn more from our ARLIS colleagues about mentor training, especially for our still developing Year-Round program, and through the joint workshop experience held at this

conference. There are a couple of Chapter Mentoring programs that have been established of late, and these programs might also benefit from any training materials we can produce.

I am personally interested in identifying those mentors who are the most successful – how can this be done? Most importantly, I would like to find ways to connect to those who might need mentoring the most since sometimes it seems that those who ask for mentoring are already well along on their journey.

Comments from both mentors and mentees were quite positive overall, but there were some that disappointed me. I was surprised to see how many mentors wished that their mentees had made more of an effort to spend time with them. Some mentees seemed too busy to meet or brainstorm with their mentors. A couple of mentees said this about their mentors, too. I would like to caution both parties to respect each other and to try and make allowances in your schedule. Meeting face to face takes time and effort but is so important.

Many respondents who said their experiences have been successful met again at the chapter level, or kept the relationship up through e-mail once the conference was over. While not always possible, this is the primary reason why the program seeks to match people based on geographic region.

A mentor's goal is basically altruistic. A mentor should not think of the relationship as training a competitor or replacement, but instead, focus on the goal of promoting positive growth in the association to its present and future members. This is your legacy! Mentees who have had a successful mentoring experience often feel compelled to return the gift. The Conference Mentoring program has had many protégé's who in turn become mentors. As a mentor you should be prepared to keep your symbolic role forever, even when you treat your mentee like a colleague and believe your mentee is your peer. That is how important your role and its potential for influence are. It is an awesome responsibility and opportunity. Do not take it lightly, even when in a casual or limited setting.

Can you mentor without knowing it? Is it confined to formal programs? Does it have to be called mentoring? Of course it does not. Opportunities to mentor are everywhere. As I walk around the conference this week, I see the faces of many fine individuals who mentored me in ways small and large. I would bet most of them do not realize how much they helped me, and what they mean to me. Mentoring can happen anytime, and can take place anywhere. A major role our organizations fill is to teach, train and encourage others in our professions – mentoring is key to our missions.

Each of you sitting here has the potential and the opportunity to share your experiences and knowledge. You will find mentoring moments every day: with a peer, a student, a family member, or even a stranger. Never forget that the smallest acts of guidance and encouragement can lead to someone else's launching point, turning point, or a resolving moment.