

# Mentoring Best Practices Guide

This guide outlines recommended practices for effective mentoring partnerships within the EARTH mentoring program. It is intended to support both mentors and mentees in establishing productive relationships, maintaining momentum throughout the program year, and using mentoring as one part of a broader professional development network.

## Program Structure and Guiding Principals

### 1. Maintain a non-evaluative mentoring relationship.

Mentors should not hold an evaluative role in the mentee's annual review, promotion and tenure process, or other personnel decisions. Program leadership should receive only the information necessary to confirm program participation, such as whether the pair met and completed required program activities. Maintaining separation between mentoring and evaluation supports candid discussion of challenges, uncertainty, career decisions, and work in progress.

### 2. Use a mentee-driven model.

The mentee should take primary responsibility for identifying goals, setting meeting agendas, scheduling meetings, and determining which issues the partnership will address. A mentee-driven structure keeps the mentoring relationship focused on the professional decisions and development needs most relevant to the mentee.

### 3. Establish a defined program cycle.

Mentoring partnerships operate on a program-year cycle. Matches are announced in September, pairs meet at least once during each active semester, and the program includes mid-year and year-end review points. At the conclusion of the program year, pairs may choose to continue the mentoring relationship informally or through a subsequent program cycle.

### 4. Position mentoring as one component of a broader professional network.

No single mentor should be expected to meet every professional development need.

Cross-institutional mentors may be particularly useful for:

- Research strategy
- Proposal development
- Career planning
- External perspective
- Professional networking
- Decisions that may be difficult to discuss within the mentee's home institution

Questions involving local promotion requirements, departmental expectations, institutional politics, teaching responsibilities, or other institution-specific issues are often better addressed by a department mentor, chair, supervisor, or other local resource.

## Recommended Practices for Effective Mentoring

### 1. Align expectations at the beginning of the partnership.

Mentors and mentees should establish expectations regarding meeting cadence, communication, areas of focus, confidentiality, and responsibilities early in the relationship. The Mentoring Partnership Agreement provides a structure for documenting these expectations and should be completed during the first meeting.

## **2. Establish and protect a regular meeting cadence.**

Regularly scheduled meetings are more likely to continue than meetings arranged only when a need arises. Meeting every four to six weeks may work well for many partnerships, although the appropriate frequency will depend on the goals and availability of the pair. Whenever possible, schedule meetings in advance or establish a recurring calendar appointment.

## **3. Use an agenda for each meeting.**

The mentee should provide two or three discussion topics in advance whenever possible. A brief agenda allows the mentor to prepare, keeps conversations focused, and preserves meeting time for meaningful discussion rather than determining what should be discussed.

## **4. Clarify the issue before offering advice.**

Mentors should begin with questions before moving directly to recommendations. The issue initially presented may reflect a broader question about research direction, workload, career priorities, collaboration, or institutional context. Clarifying the underlying concern helps ensure that advice addresses the actual decision facing the mentee.

## **5. Make the context behind advice explicit.**

Professional guidance is shaped by discipline, institution type, career stage, funding environment, and prior experience. Mentors should identify the context underlying their recommendations so mentees can determine how directly the advice applies to their own circumstances.

## **6. Provide specific, actionable feedback.**

Feedback should focus on the work, strategy, decision, or behavior rather than on broad assessments of the individual. Effective feedback identifies what is working, what could be strengthened, and what specific alternatives or next steps could be considered.

## **7. Incorporate sponsorship when appropriate.**

Effective mentoring may extend beyond advice. Mentors should consider opportunities to support the mentee through introductions, recommendations, invitations, professional visibility, collaboration opportunities, or connections to individuals and resources within their network.

Examples may include:

- Introducing the mentee to a program officer
- Recommending the mentee for a panel or committee
- Connecting the mentee with a potential collaborator
- Identifying a speaking opportunity
- Suggesting the mentee for a professional role or recognition
- Including the mentee in an appropriate proposal or project opportunity

Sponsorship should support the mentee's stated professional goals rather than simply reproduce the mentor's career pathway.

## **8. Address lapses in communication early.**

Changes in communication or meeting frequency should be addressed directly rather than allowed to continue indefinitely. A brief check-in can determine whether workload, scheduling, changing priorities, or uncertainty about the mentoring relationship is creating the problem.

## **9. Build and use a mentoring network.**

Professional development needs often span several areas, including:

- Career guidance
- Technical expertise
- Research development
- Sponsorship
- Institutional navigation
- Teaching
- Leadership
- Professional networking
- Personal and professional support

Mentors and mentees should periodically identify where additional relationships or expertise may be beneficial.

## **10. Close mentoring relationships intentionally.**

The end of a formal mentoring period should include discussion of what was accomplished and what should happen next. A deliberate conclusion helps distinguish a successfully completed mentoring cycle.

Pairs should determine whether they will:

- Continue meeting informally
- Continue through another program year
- Shift the focus of the relationship
- Seek an additional or different mentor
- Conclude the formal mentoring relationship

## **Best Practices for Mentors**

### **1. Commit only to a sustainable level of participation.**

Mentors should consider their full academic-year workload before establishing a meeting cadence. Periods of heavy teaching, travel, proposal deadlines, or other commitments should be discussed at the beginning of the partnership so expectations can be set realistically.

### **2. Recognize the boundaries of personal expertise.**

Mentors should be clear about the areas in which they can provide meaningful guidance and those in which another person may be better positioned to help. Referring a mentee to an appropriate colleague or resource is an important mentoring function.

### **3. Listen before moving into problem-solving.**

Not every conversation requires an immediate solution. Mentors should determine whether the mentee is seeking:

- Advice
- Feedback
- Perspective
- Connections
- Assistance thinking through a problem
- A specific decision or recommendation

#### **4. Share lessons from unsuccessful experiences as well as successes.**

Examples of failed proposals, difficult collaborations, stalled projects, changed plans, and professional setbacks can provide valuable insight. Discussing how decisions were made in difficult situations can be more useful than presenting only a polished career narrative.

#### **5. Maintain appropriate role boundaries and confidentiality.**

Mentors should maintain the non-evaluative nature of the relationship and follow the confidentiality expectations established in the Mentoring Partnership Agreement. Concerns about the partnership should generally be addressed with the mentee directly before being elevated to program leadership, unless circumstances require otherwise.

#### **6. Approach mentoring as a reciprocal learning opportunity.**

Expectations related to research, funding, publication, data and software practices, teaching, professional communication, and academic careers continue to change. Cross-career-stage mentoring can provide useful perspective to both participants.

#### **7. Support the mentee's goals rather than recreating the mentor's career path.**

Mentees may be pursuing professional goals that emphasize research, teaching, industry engagement, applied work, leadership, outreach, administration, or combinations of these areas. Effective mentoring supports progress toward the mentee's identified goals.

### **Best Practices for Mentees**

#### **1. Define specific goals for the mentoring relationship.**

Specific requests are easier for mentors to act on than broad areas of interest.

For example:

Instead of: *Help with proposals.*

Consider: *Provide feedback on my specific goals before the February submission deadline.*

The Mentoring Action Plan should be used to identify concrete priorities and desired outcomes.

#### **2. Take responsibility for meeting logistics.**

This keeps the timing of the mentoring relationship connected to the mentee's professional priorities and deadlines.

The mentee should generally:

- Schedule meetings
- Send calendar invitations
- Provide an agenda
- Share materials in advance
- Record agreed-upon next steps
- Follow up after meetings when needed

### **3. Bring work in progress to mentoring conversations.**

Mentoring is most useful when there is an opportunity to shape a decision or product before it is complete.

Useful materials may include:

- Draft proposal sections
- Research plans
- Publication strategies
- Collaboration questions
- Career decisions
- Timelines
- Presentation drafts
- Funding opportunities under consideration
- Unresolved professional challenges

### **4. Treat feedback as information.**

Mentor feedback should be considered alongside the mentee's own goals, institutional context, and other available information. The mentee retains responsibility for deciding whether and how to act on advice received.

### **5. Direct questions to the appropriate member of the mentoring network.**

The EARTH mentor may be especially well positioned to address research direction, proposal strategy, broader career perspective, and cross-institutional professional development. Institution-specific questions involving promotion, teaching assignments, service expectations, departmental procedures, or local policies should generally be directed to appropriate individuals within the mentee's home institution.

### **6. Address problems with the partnership early.**

If meeting frequency, communication, focus, or mentor–mentee fit is not working, the issue should be discussed directly. If the concern cannot be resolved within the partnership, program leadership should be contacted to discuss adjustments or reassignment.

## **Conducting the First Meeting**

The first meeting should establish the structure of the mentoring partnership rather than serve primarily as a status update. Approximately 60 minutes is generally sufficient.

Recommended topics include:

1. Introductions, professional backgrounds, current roles, and current work.
2. The mentee's professional goals for the program year.
3. Two or three areas where mentoring support would be most useful.
4. One current decision, challenge, or project that can serve as an initial mentoring discussion.
5. Meeting cadence and preferred meeting format.
6. Communication expectations and preferred communication channels.
7. Responsibility for scheduling and agendas.
8. Confidentiality and the mentor's non-evaluative role.
9. Completion of the Mentoring Partnership Agreement.
10. Scheduling the next meeting before the first meeting concludes.

## **Addressing Common Mentoring Challenges**

Mentoring partnerships may encounter periods when meetings become inconsistent, conversations remain too broad, or the original goals no longer fit. These situations do not necessarily indicate that the match has failed.

### **Meetings are repeatedly rescheduled.**

Establish a recurring meeting time and consider shorter meetings. A consistent 30-minute meeting may be more effective than a longer meeting that is repeatedly postponed.

### **Conversations remain too general.**

Use a specific artifact or decision to anchor the discussion.

Examples include:

- A proposal draft
- A research question
- A career decision
- A publication plan
- A project timeline
- A list of funding opportunities
- A presentation
- A collaboration question

### **Advice does not fit the mentee's context.**

Discuss the differences in institutional setting, discipline, career expectations, or professional environment that may be affecting the recommendation. Making the mismatch explicit gives the mentor an opportunity to adjust the guidance.

### **The partnership lacks candid discussion.**

Both participants can help establish greater openness. Mentors can share challenges or unsuccessful experiences from their own careers. Mentees can bring unresolved problems, incomplete work, or decisions they are still considering.

### **Action items are not completed between meetings.**

Record action items with clear owners and target dates. Begin the next meeting by briefly reviewing progress on the prior meeting's action items.

### **The mentor's expertise does not align with the mentee's needs.**

Identify whether another person within the mentor's network can provide the needed expertise.

If the mismatch affects the overall usefulness of the partnership, contact program leadership to discuss an adjustment to the match.

## Mid-Year Relationship Evaluation

A mid-year review provides an opportunity to evaluate whether the mentoring partnership is functioning as intended.

Particular attention should be given to areas where responses differ, including:

- Meeting frequency
- Communication
- Areas of focus
- Expectations
- Progress toward goals
- Roles and responsibilities
- Areas where additional support is needed

The Partnership Agreement and Mentoring Action Plan can be helpful in evaluating and discussing when circumstances or priorities have changed. Goals that are no longer relevant should be revised or removed rather than carried forward automatically.

## Ending the Program Year Well

The final meeting should provide intentional closure to the formal program year.

Recommended practices include:

- Review the mentee's original goals.
- Identify outcomes and accomplishments, including those that were not anticipated at the beginning of the year.
- Discuss professional needs that remain unresolved.
- Identify additional people or resources that may be useful.
- Determine whether the mentoring relationship will continue.
- Update the Review Record in the Mentoring Action Plan.
- Complete required program feedback.

Mentors may conclude the formal year by offering an appropriate continued connection or identifying someone who may be particularly useful during the mentee's next stage of development.

## How the Program Resources Work Together

### Mentoring Partnership Agreement

Completed jointly during the first meeting. Establishes expectations related to meeting cadence, areas of focus, communication, confidentiality, the broader mentoring network, and review points.

### Mentoring Action Plan

Drafted by the mentee before the first meeting and revisited at mid-year and year-end. The plan follows the same general structure as the EARTH Individual Development Plan used by graduate students and postdoctoral researchers.

### Suggested Discussion Topics

Provides suggested questions and conversation topics across seven areas. It can be used when a mentoring meeting needs a starting point or when the partnership is considering a new area of focus.

### Meeting Log Template

Provides a simple mechanism for recording discussion topics, decisions, action items, owners, and target dates. At minimum, pairs may find it useful for tracking action items between meetings.

**Mid-Year and Year-End Reflection**

Supports private reflection by the mentee, shared assessment of the mentoring partnership, and program-level feedback reported in aggregate.

**Mentor Profile Directory**

Provides information about participating mentors and their areas of experience. Profiles should be reviewed during the matching process and again before the first meeting.

**Preparation Checklist**

Using the Mentor and Mentee Preparation Checklists can be used before the first mentoring meeting. Items that cannot yet be completed can become topics for discussion during the meeting.