

Mentoring Handbook: March 2010

A Guide for Protégés and Mentors: Newly Appointed Scientists Professional Development Program (NASPDP) Northern Plains Area

INTRODUCTION: PROTÉGÉS

Welcome to NPA and to the NPA Mentoring Program. For those of you new to USDA-ARS, the learning curve can be steep in regards to the multiple layers of bureaucracy, making sense of the seemingly endless acronyms, understanding your own accountability/assessment requirements, and appreciating the importance of collegiality. Understanding the micro and macro aspects of ARS is critical, especially as you begin laying the foundation for a successful scientific career in ARS.

If you were to look back on your achievements throughout your life you can probably list a number of people – family, friends, teachers/faculty, co-workers, supervisors – you have turned to for advice or used as a sounding board for personal, educational, and/or professional situations. During this early part of your career with ARS we anticipate that you might at times have the need for advice, guidance, or maybe just want to be able to talk to someone who can lend a caring and unbiased ear. With that in mind, the Northern Plains Area (NPA) incorporated a mentoring component within the Newly Appointed Scientists Professional Development Program (NASPDP), where each new scientist (protégé) is matched with a senior scientist (mentor). The goal of the NPA Newly Appointed Scientist Mentoring Program is to assist all new scientists to successfully begin establishing a research career and transition into ARS and the NPA. At the end of the NSPDP (typically three years) the mentor-protégé relationship will no longer be required although non-mandatory continuation is encouraged.

Although your supervisor (typically your Research Leader [RL]) plays a significant role in assimilating you into the research unit, there are a myriad of issues and questions about the NPA, ARS, and personal transitions that may best be handled by someone who is not involved in evaluating your performance. While your supervisor conducts your annual performance evaluations, your mentor will not participate in any informal or formal evaluation of your performance.

PROTÉGÉS AND MENTORS:

Matching Mentors and Protégés

The Area Director, Associate Area Director, and your RL determine the best mentor match for each protégé. Mentors and protégés each complete a one-page application, which is used to assist in matching protégés and mentors. The Area Outreach, Diversity and Equal Opportunity (ODEO) Program Manager coordinates the mentoring program in consultation with the Area Director and Associate Area Director.

Once a match is identified, the mentor is given the protégé's application and the protégé is given the mentor's application. Every attempt is made to match each protégé with a mentor who has the same or similar disciplinary background and/or area of expertise. By design, the mentor will most likely not be from the same location as the protégé. Although that geographical separation may present challenges, distinct benefits for both mentors and protégés include having the perspective of someone from a different location and having opportunities to make connections with other NPA scientists at other locations. Some of the more compelling challenges are the reliance on telephone calls and emails rather than face to face or casual encounters. Bear in mind that this mentoring match does not preclude new scientists from seeking other mentoring relationships with other colleagues.

While every effort is made to make a good match, if you as a mentor or protégé feel the relationship is not working out, simply contact the Associate Area Director (Dr. Mickey McGuire) or Area ODEO Program Manager (Barbara King) about options for either having a new match or brainstorming ideas on how to improve the situation.

Developing the Mentor:Protégé Relationship

The design of the mentoring component was purposefully intended to be relatively informal. There is no required training, nor are protégés or mentors required to submit reports. Instead, protégés and mentors are expected to define and build their relationship based on their needs and interests. Probably the best advice for initiating and maintaining your mentor-protégé relationship is to schedule, at a minimum, a monthly telephone conversation. The Area Office will send monthly checking-in topics to all protégés and mentors, as a reminder to keep in touch and also to spark discussions on relevant topics.

The Area Office has developed the following list (in no particular order) as a framework for some topics that mentors and protégés might want to discuss:

1. Structuring, implementing, and maintaining a research program in ARS, and explaining:
 - ARIS
 - OSQR
 - CRIS projects
 - Impact
 - Technology transfer
 - Patents
 - Annual reports
2. Understanding the federal performance evaluation system:
 - Annual and mid-year performance reviews
 - Probationary periods
 - RPES
3. Identifying possibilities for collaboration

- Within ARS
 - University
 - Private industry
 - International
4. Networking
 5. Writing for scientific publication:
 - Writing Style
 - Collaboration
 - Length
 - Targeted journals
 - Authorship – who should be an author
 6. Extramural funding
 - What it is and how to go about seeking outside funding
 7. Identifying professional and personal strengths and weaknesses
 8. Communication
 - Writing
 - Speaking
 - Listening
 9. ARS and NPA expectations regarding diversity, EEO, and civil rights
 10. What sorts of Outreach opportunities are there?
 - Local – schools, community groups
 - HBCU (Historically Black Colleges and Universities, also known as 1890 schools)
 - TCU (Tribal Colleges and Universities)
 - HIS (Hispanic Serving Institutions)
 - Other organizations/professional organizations serving the needs of under-represented groups
 11. Collegiality
 12. Conflict Resolution
 13. The nuances of supervision
 - Leadership skills
 - Rewarding performance
 - Handling poor performance
 14. Understanding the federal budget:

- Federal employees are in the Executive Branch
- Executive Branch responsibilities vs Congressional responsibilities
- Earmarks
- Continuing Resolutions
- Mark-ups
- Redirection
- RIF

15. Maneuvering through the Federal, ARS and NPA bureaucracies

16. You've just been called by a reporter – what do you do?

17. You've just been called by a member of Congress (or other public official) – what do you do?

18. Agency and departmental opportunities for professional development

- USDA Graduate School
 - Ag Learn
 - Other

19. The importance of Customer Focus Groups

20. Time management

21. Balancing professional and personal life

22. Hiring Process

- Student/temporary
- Permanent employees

23. Making the most of your federal employee benefits:

- Annual leave
- Sick leave
- TSP
- FERS
- Health Benefits
- Flexible Spending Accounts
- Beneficiaries

24. Responsible Research

- Research ethics
- ARS research ethics policy

25. Career Development

- Research Leader

- Center Director
- Area administration
- Headquarters

26. Anything else that comes to mind!

What are the benefits of mentoring?

In an engaging relationship, both mentors and protégés alike benefit. The primary goal of the mentoring program for protégés is to give new scientists needed information and advice in order to quickly establish a research program, learn how to navigate Area and Agency cultures, and generally how to lay the foundation for a successful and long-term career with ARS. Other benefits noted by current and former mentors and protégés include: networking, establishing professional collaborations, developing technical knowledge, learning different perspectives and approaches, and refining communication skills. Among most, if not all mentors, two common sentiments for wanting to mentor a new scientist are to be able to “give back” to the Agency and to assist in developing the next generation of ARS scientists.

What makes mentoring successful?

As with any relationship, there are some key attributes to successful mentoring partnerships, such as trust, empathy, friendliness, openness, etc. Mentors often are in positions to facilitate introductions that are likely to lead to networking, and perhaps collaborative opportunities. Additionally, mentors can: constructively challenge protégés; help protégés prioritize; serve as models; demystify bureaucratic processes; offer advice; and listen without judging.

Protégés can offer mentors unique perspectives as new employees based on their previous employment and educational experiences, as well as perspectives based on their backgrounds.

Another aspect of any mentoring program concerns the ethical parameters surrounding mentors and protégés. Clearly, mentoring is not about finding a best friend. That said, mentoring partnerships may result in life-long friendships, while other mentoring relationships may last only so long as an official mentoring relationship exists. The primary role of the mentor is to provide guidance and advice. Accordingly, mentors ought not put themselves, nor allow themselves to be put into, an advocacy role or mediator type role between the protégé and his or her supervisor.

How will we know if the program is effective?

The NPA Newly Appointed Scientist Mentoring Program will be evaluated each year. All mentors and protégés will be asked to provide feedback to the Area Office. Part of the feedback process will include a series of questions and/or ranked statements, as well as open-ended questions that are designed to determine the quality and value of the program.

Additionally, each year, protégés will be given the opportunity to nominate their mentor for the Outstanding Mentor of the Year award.

Suggested Resources:

Power Mentoring (2005), Jossey-Bass. Ensher, Ellen and Murphy, Susan. Provides practical advice for mentors and protégés through stories and examples of actual mentoring relationships.

The Mentor's Guide (2000), Jossey-Bass. Zachary, Lois. Describes various phases of mentoring-protégé relationships.

Mentors and protégés are encouraged to add to this list of resources that they recommend for others – simply email your recommendations to Barbara King (Barbara.king@ars.usda.gov).