



The New Era of Mentoring

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Last year when I was a graduate assistant, my supervisor asked me to be on the planning team for our ACUI Regional Conference. Not really knowing what ACUI was, I agreed. My introduction to ACUI was at a Region 2 Conference Planning Team meeting. I remember feeling as though I had known the people around the table for years. We worked quickly and efficiently and had a great deal of fun in the process. I remember how eager our regional director was to share tasks and to get me involved. Though she didn't know me, she was willing to take a chance on me to give me an amazing experience, and that is exactly what happened. The meeting was followed by months of planning that resulted in a great conference and one of the best professional experiences I have ever had. I walked away from that conference with conference planning experience, a great deal of information about ACUI and Region 2, and a group of professional mentors that have helped guide my career and involvement in ACUI.

In thinking about the sustainability and future success of ACUI, much of it lies in new professionals and graduate students. Being straight out of a graduate program, I realize the importance of finding a professional organization for your "home." Graduate programs are full of upcoming professionals looking for the association that best suits them. These are the new members we need to reach out to and get involved in ACUI. Many of us have graduate students working in our offices—are we introducing them to ACUI? What are we doing to help them develop professionally, and likewise, what are we doing to help ACUI develop professionally?

Most of us can attest to the numerous friendships and mentoring relationships we have developed because of ACUI. Many of us have been touched by a more experienced "mentor" and have learned the tricks of our trade. Research published in the journal [Mentoring and Tutoring](#) shows that mentored members learn to participate more fully in the organization, experiment with new organizational forms, and discover learning. Mentoring establishes trust and encourages persistence, the journal reports. Knowledge productivity for the whole association can be enhanced as new insights are generated in the mentoring relationships and shared with others.

Traditional mentoring tactics include formalized pairings done by an outside party, in-person interactions and face-to-face conversations, and supervisor-supervisee relationships. These methods have been focused on proximate relationships, but are limited when distance and time become factors. With increasing demands from family, work, communities, and professional organizations, student affairs professionals are constantly pulled in many directions. But that does not mean we can shirk our responsibility of renewing our profession by mentoring its new professionals and future leaders.

Virtual mentoring

To target this new population, we must change our thoughts on mentoring. "Virtual mentoring" is similar to traditional mentoring with one significant difference—the use of a computer as the primary mode of communication between mentor and mentee. Essentially, face-to-face contact is replaced by virtual interaction. Physical barriers of space and time need not stand in the way of a quality mentoring relationship, according to the U.S. [Department of Education's](#) Office of Educational Research and Improvement. Virtual mentoring enables these relationships to be established and flourished among employees who are in opposite corners of the world.

There is a growing need for individuals to communicate more easily and conveniently. To reach this new population, we must incorporate technologies such as e-mail, instant messaging, blogs, [Facebook](#), and texting. Virtual mentoring allows for more global relationships and sharing of ideas inside and outside the Association.

Some may argue that virtual mentoring perpetuates a lack of interpersonal and nonverbal communication skills development, or permits a lack of respect toward those in an authoritative position. However, virtual mentoring might be our most available option, and it is worse to forgo fostering intentional mentoring relationships. Additionally, it is possible to concentrate time spent in person with the individual focused on those areas of concern, particularly modeling good interpersonal communication.

Playful communication

Sometimes a shift from a virtual relationship to an in-person one can be awkward, and it can be difficult to remember this is the same individual who you know on both a professional and personal level. Playful communication can be a strategy you employ to remind each other of your connection.

Think back to some of the relationships you have with your ACUI colleagues. Though you have a professional relationship and are able to work well together to accomplish tasks and goals, chances are you have a lot of fun too. Playful communication is a type of informal communication that includes humor, telling stories, and teasing. Some may believe that playful communication promotes unprofessionalism. However, according to the College Student Journal, playful communication leads to effective mentoring because these forms of communication help the mentee ease tensions of socialization into an organization. The quicker you feel comfortable in an organization, the quicker you adapt; the more connected you feel, and the more sustainable your organization becomes.

Connections are important. New professionals and graduate students affiliate with the organization because of the inherent sense of belonging and conforming to the profession. At the same time, they want to feel free to express their individuality. While these goals have perhaps always existed as part of mentoring, we must find new methods if we are to be successful mentors. Traditional models of mentoring might seem unfamiliar or forced, or might not work given individuals' other obligations. Additionally, while new professionals certainly respect experience and sage advice, they might be more receptive to a less authoritarian approach to mentoring, building connections through humor and jest.

We often fail to see the positive impact we have on others. The level of involvement I was allowed to have in planning my region's conference, coupled with the absolutely amazing people who I had the privilege of working with, made me realize how special ACUI is. It might be a casual phone call to a colleague 600 miles away, a chain of e-mails back and forth, late-night IM conversations, or chatting with your running partner; but whether you're talking about life, work, or ACUI, what you say matters. The informal relationships I have developed with my mentors have given me a greater understanding of them, myself, and ACUI, as well as making me feel more connected to the Association. They have shaped my commitment to ACUI, and undoubtedly without them, I wouldn't be the person or professional I am today. A special thank you to my mentors (you know who you are). I hope the way you have inspired me will motivate others to reach out to someone new, to help ACUI grow as a home for other new professionals. Using blended techniques of informal virtual mentoring and playful communication, we will be able to recruit and retain new professionals and their energies into our association and help build a stronger, more sustainable ACUI.