Mentoring Continues in the WSS

Former ASA President David Morganstein challenged the WSS to start a mentoring program in 2015 using An Eight-Step Guide to Creating and Sustaining a Mentoring Program. The purpose of the program was to build community. It still is today.

At times, we thought maybe the 12-step program would have been more appropriate. The last couple of years' support during the pandemic was especially important. When the pandemic began, international students—especially Asian mentees—were going to classes online and applying to other programs from their apartments. One was afraid to go out because of a reaction to COVID-19 being called the Chinese flu. By the next fall, she had stayed three months after graduation because of grounded flights, finally made it to her family in Beijing, and is now in France in a PhD program. Having support from a mentor was especially important to her.

This year, we have an energetic committee with new members and a strong chair. We solicited mentors first because they are usually in short supply and have to be recruited. Following this, we solicited mentees.

Pairing is always a challenge but done to match those with similar backgrounds or interests. Virtual meetings make mentoring easy, even for out-of-state mentors in places like North Carolina, Colorado, and Florida. We ended up with more mentees than mentors but, surprisingly, many mentors offered to take two. We matched all 35 pairs.

After a couple of months, we checked in with our pairs and made any necessary adjustments. The rest has been easy: sending reminders of where they could be in their six-month formal mentoring period; pointing out events they could both attend; and offering support wherever needed. Of course, one of those events is JSM in DC this year.

Mentoring is a lot of work but satisfying. For a small chapter, it is a great way to build community. In fact, we have had fun meetings and supported each other. We share mentoring experiences and brainstorm about ways to make the mentoring program more helpful to our members. We are all mentors, too!
We have done two additional activities that may be of use to other chapters: a mentor workshop and a government hiring webinar. If you haven’t seen them, take a look at the links above. We talked about the development of the program and how it works and told mentor and mentee stories.

Mentoring in the WSS is different from in-house mentoring within a workplace. In-house mentoring is mainly focused on helping new and less-experienced employees understand and grow within the organization. Mentorship may be through collaboration on the same projects or organization-specific activities. It improves the organization and increases employee satisfaction and talent retention.

The WSS mentorship focuses more on individuals' growth independent of their academic or work situation. The mentor-mentee pairs are typically not affiliated with the same organization. The mentees vary quite a bit in terms of background, training, interest, and experience. Mentees may include undergraduate students who are interested in many subjects and have no idea yet what type of career path they will eventually take. They may also include mid-career professionals who want to improve their current work or are considering switching careers. Depending on the mentee’s background and interests, the mentorship may require taking different paths and approaches. Mentoring outside their organization forces mentor and mentee to work with a wider range of ideas and issues and gain new perspectives. It is more challenging, but eventually, we hope it benefits both our mentors and mentees.

At the end of the second month after the matching letters were sent out, we followed up with our mentor/mentee members through a simple Google form check-in questionnaire. Based on the responses received by the deadline (response rate=34.3 percent), the majority (71 percent) of the mentors/mentees had already met twice or more, as expected. About 25 percent had met once and one pair hadn’t met because of communication issues.

Highlights of the mentorship meetings included discussions about student involvement in various activities, internship opportunities, setting short-term and long-term professional goals, attending professional events, career opportunities, different career paths, federal job searching, and resources. Many of the responding mentees showed appreciation for being part of the WSS mentoring program and praised their mentors. Some of the respondents showed interest in continuing the mentorship beyond the six-month formal commitment.

“Mentoring is a brain to pick, an ear to listen, and a push in the right direction.” —John Crosby.

We will continue our efforts in maintaining and enlarging our mentoring program and making sure it’s a good resource for our members who wish to grow through mentorship.

**WSS Mentoring Committee Members**

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