Mentoring Philosophy, Elizabeth Skidmore, PhD, OTR/L

I mentor doctoral students because I have benefitted from excellent mentoring, and because I want to share what I have learned to address the dearth of scientifically trained rehabilitation scientists. The 21st Century Cures Act (2016) requires federal research funding agencies to prioritize rehabilitation research to address the tsunami of chronic conditions and disability that significantly strain our public health systems. Scientifically trained rehabilitation specialists are essential to this research. I mentor doctoral students from groups historically underrepresented among biomedical science investigators because the impact of rehabilitation science on public health will be optimized as those leading rehabilitation science reflect those intended to benefit from this science. Each of these choices influence my mentoring philosophy.

My mentoring philosophy is informed by theories of learning and skill development inherent in my occupational therapy training and my rehabilitation intervention research program. Collectively, these theories espouse the premise that each learner, or student, possesses intrinsic expertise that can be uncovered and enhanced through collaborative and personalized approaches to self-assessment, goal setting, strategy development, self-reflection, and strategy enhancement. This is particularly important when mentoring students from historically underrepresented groups, reinforcing the specific knowledge and experiences that they bring to rehabilitation science, while creating collaborative opportunities to grow their research skills. These collaborative practices are most effective when I facilitate – rather than direct – the integration of students' inherent expertise into successive learning activities the development of knowledge and skills. I personalize these practices with activities aligned with students' goals, strengths that ensure the "just right" challenge for skill development, mastery, confidence and achievement.

Building collaborative relationships. As an occupational therapist I prevent, ameliorate, and when possible, eliminate disabilities prohibiting people from doing the activities that they need, want, or are expected to do as they live active, engaged, meaningful, and healthy lives. I establish collaborative relationships with my clients so that they may achieve their goals as we match their capacities (strengths, abilities), their desired activities, and their circumstances and environment. I start the process with an interview, an inventory of meaningful activities that are problematic, and an assessment of client's capacities and physical, social, and practical context.

I start every mentoring relationship using the same practices – a meeting to ascertain the potential students' values, interests, and goals; an assessment of the students' strengths and abilities; and an assessment of fit with the training environment that I have developed and any unmet needs that may need to be addressed through augmented resources. When necessary, I match potential students to other mentors when an optimal fit may be obtained elsewhere. For those students whose values and interests align with my research program, I request a one-page overview of specific interests and learning goals and an additional sample of written work. These documents form the basis of written feedback and verbal discussions that collaboratively clarify and refine goals. This feedback and subsequent discussions help to establish mutual expectations and to assess our ability to work together. We also discuss a personalized training plan that lays a strong and strategic foundation for our partnership. I encourage potential students to meet with current students to query the student experience in my laboratory. My process ensures successful partnerships and student learning outcomes. I ensure that potential students understand that research training requires significant investment of self, time, effort, and resources – and that it is a worthwhile investment when they are able to make informed choices.

Facilitating student-centric training plans. Both my clinical practice and my rehabilitation research program have taught me that person-centric approaches are critical to mastery, confidence, and life satisfaction. I can tell students what do to, step-by-step, and direct their achievement of specific goals. However, this does not equip my students with the knowledge and skills necessary to confront current and future challenges in their careers. Rather, I train students in the skills needed to identify, assess, and address challenges encountered throughout their career. As one of my mentors once said, "We do our job best when we work ourselves out of a job; when our students need no longer rely on us to achieve their goals." Education, psychology, and rehabilitation evidence suggests that lasting goal achievement, independence, and life satisfaction are more likely to occur when the learner "drives" and the mentor facilitates or guides. To be clear, this approach requires a thoughtful learning structure that ensures guided skill development, self-reflection, and explicit strategies for learning and generalization.

I weave these practices into my mentoring in several ways. Once I and my student agree on training and research goals, we discuss the structure and expectations of the doctoral program (e.g., milestones, deliverables, timelines), and specify the tailored plan of study (i.e., core requirements and optional cognates relevant to the student's goals). We also discuss required department and laboratory competencies that complement program requirements. I developed these competencies to match core skills of independent scientists (i.e., manuscript development and submission – to include authorship guidelines and expectations; scientific presentation development and delivery; research protocol development, submission, management; study procedures manual development; interprofessional communication and collaboration; scientific review of manuscripts, grant proposals; hypothesis presentations for peer/faculty review; grant proposal development; training and supervision of undergraduate, master students, research staff; regulatory tracking and reporting; project and budget development and management; and post-graduation application and interview processes). We design an initial plan for merging program requirements and competencies that the student tracks as their training progresses. I and my laboratory director also provide an orientation to our laboratory group and train each student in core skills of the laboratory (e.g., research ethics, good clinical practices, assessment and intervention skills, research documentation, data entry and analyses, data safety monitoring). These activities, combined with weekly individual mentoring and weekly laboratory meetings, are all provide the necessary structure for student success.

Fostering professional and personal growth. Weekly mentoring meetings provide iterative practice of self-assessment, goal setting, strategy development, self-reflection, and strategy enhancement skills tailored to each student's personalized training plan. Students learn how to structure and prioritize agendas and discussions for these meetings; initially I model this process and then quickly transition leadership of these meetings (typically within the first three months). In the first few months of each student's program, these meetings focus on foundational skills (e.g., time management, scientific writing, professional communication). As students advance, these meetings focus on advanced personal, professional, and scientific development (e.g., work-life balance, conflict resolution, post-graduation planning). These meetings also allow for individual feedback on products, cultivation of critical mentors and collaborators to augment those in my laboratory, and individualized problem solving with challenging situations. Often, I combine these meetings with strategic conjoint meetings, as I have found that my students benefit from a broader discussion with mentors and peers on select topics. These conjoint meetings have been tremendously successful allowing for diversity of thought, methods and communication styles.

Weekly laboratory meetings focus on 1) team communication about laboratory projects, and 2) peer review and professional development through laboratory products review. I have designed these meetings to provide a venue for the full-time research staff, doctoral students, postdoctoral trainees, junior faculty trainees, clinicians, and research assistants (undergraduate, masters, professional doctoral students) in my laboratory to meet weekly. This larger venue provides a risk-free environment for socialization to research laboratory and project management, as well as "early and ugly" product review. It also provides opportunities for "cross-generational" collaboration and learning, as each member of the group regardless of career stage brings expertise and shares their expertise through the products that they develop and share (e.g., data tables, manuscript drafts, scientific posters/presentation, grant proposals, hot topics). I submit my own products for review and discussion in the group illustrating that each person can contribute meaningful feedback to every other member of the group.

Outside of weekly meetings, I and my students collaboratively seek introductions to and opportunities for conjoint mentoring with faculty, practitioners and leaders outside of my laboratory. It takes a village to develop independent scientists as they master a variety of disciplinary expertise and methods. Within the first six months of training, we consider collaborators who can provide complementary expertise in methodological collaboration, manuscript development, and grant proposal development – as well as coursework, independent studies, and preceptorships. We also identify venues including scientific and professional meetings in the department, the school, the university, outside institutions, and professional associations. These experiences not only expose doctoral students to broader perspectives on mentoring and training, but they also provide practice in developing collaborations. These experiences also provide opportunities to explore post-graduation employment and mentoring opportunities, thus ensuring successful transitions to the next phase of career development.

My investment in my clients, my investment in rehabilitation intervention research, and my investment in students are parallel pursuits that achieve the same goal – the development of people through the enhancement of their skills and contributions to society. To be successful, this development must be holistic – cultivating the necessary cognitive, affective, and social skills to become the person each one wants to be and achieve the goals each one wants to achieve. With doctoral students, I seek to support their professional and personal development, and the balance of both as they become scientists, collaborators, and leaders.

I have been very fortunate to benefit from outstanding mentors throughout my own professional and personal development. Each mentor taught me something different, but collectively these mentors helped to shape the person and mentor I have become. I have learned the value of humility, integrity, precision, collaboration, and service. I also understand the importance of bringing my whole self to the work that I do; to acknowledge my strengths, my abilities, and my challenges; and to be intentional about developing and nurturing my multi-dimensional self, both inside and outside my professional world. Put simply, while I learned several professional skills from my mentors, the most important lessons were those that sustain my ongoing professional and personal growth. I seek to model these lessons and to assist students in identifying their own strategies to best align with their own capacities, goals, and contextual factors. Through doctoral mentoring I share the wealth of knowledge, skills, and resources that others have shared with me. But more importantly, I promote self-discovery through healthy peer, mentor and collaborator relationships to develop highly trained and well-rounded rehabilitation scientists – an essential resource to lead the charge as we confront the public health challenges before us.