

TIPS FOR DESIGNING A SUCCESSFUL MENTORING PROGRAM



BEST PRACTICES

Five practical tips on creating and maintaining a vibrant, user-friendly mentorship program.

1. Consider the generation.

- Millennials tend to incorporate a “committee of advisors” approach in their lives, consulting with many audiences about their life decisions (peers, parents, employers).
- Focus on what mentees of this generation need to learn: business culture and etiquette, online presence (professionalize—no text-speak), and the basics of in-person communication (respect the secretary!), to name a few topics.
- Consider what mentors of other generation(s) might want to learn from their mentees (“reverse mentoring”): e.g., technology, social media, multi-tasking on a whole new level.

2. Be strategic when recruiting mentors.

- Make sure to define the time commitment and communicate it clearly to mentors.
- Articulate the benefits for the mentors: It’s good for their resume, allows them to give back to their school, and, depending on the particular mentoring program, can offer professional networking opportunities with colleagues.
- Train your mentors (remember, mentoring doesn’t come naturally to everyone) and communicate the program goals.

3. Tap into existing networks and traditions in your school’s community.

- Consider co-designing a mentor program with a local bar association or affinity group, which capitalizes on existing shared interests and backgrounds.
- Collaborate with your Alumni Relations and Advancement offices—they can provide names of engaged alumni and co-sponsor events.
- Be creative. Sports, hobbies and volunteer activities can yield strong connections. For example, if your local law firms have softball leagues, create a mentorship activity around softball.

4. Educate students about professionalism.

- Encourage students to problem-solve independently by giving them perspective and tools. For example, if a mentor has not returned a student’s phone call or email, the student can be reminded that attorneys tend to be very busy, and can be encouraged to reach out to the mentor again, instead of giving up after one attempt at connection.
- Train students about the power of mentors in their legal profession, and about how to maintain mentorship connections over time—seeking out and connecting with mentors is a lifelong skill.

5. Maximize technology.

- An online system (e.g., Symplicity) allows you to stay organized and automate follow-up to mentors and mentees.
- As an alternative, consider tapping into existing social media communities, such as LinkedIn or Facebook, to house your program.
- To market your program, use Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, your school’s website, and unique hashtags (e.g., #LawMentor).



CONSIDERATIONS

How to tailor your program to meet your school's needs and demographics.

Your mentoring program should accurately reflect your student and alumni population, and capitalize on existing networks, programs, and community culture.

Consider the Following:

1. Staff capacity (make sure that your program is time-limited and small if you are short-staffed).
2. Alumni community (create programs that will attract your alumni—if it's tough to get them to participate, in general, then consider holding mentorship events that have networking perks).
3. Student community (are your students mostly coming directly from undergrad? If so, you might consider a highly-structured program that guides them more closely).
4. If you don't have a strong local community of alumni, reach out to non-alumni and build a community.
5. Inter-departmental collaboration. Work with your advancement and alumni offices; they can support your efforts and will be invested in the alumni-development aspect. Consider collaboration with other departments on campus as well.



PITFALLS TO AVOID

Learn from our mistakes! Avoid these pitfalls, and you'll be on your way to a successful mentoring program.

1. Avoid relying on uninterested mentors—be sure to keep your mentor database updated regularly! Even an annual “clean-up” email to all mentors helps weed out those who no longer want to be part of your mentorship program.
2. Don't overpromise on your program or overtax your staff. Start with a small pilot program, and then build a more robust program if the pilot was a success.
3. Avoid scheduling mentorship events that conflict with major academic assignments or campus/community events, such as bar association galas.
4. Plan carefully if your mentorship program involves long-term pro bono projects with students and outside law offices. CDOs often don't have the leverage (i.e., grades) to make sure the students complete their parts of the project, potentially leaving the law offices frustrated.
5. Consider liability for your law school. For example, avoid engaging attorneys with bar-license issues, and coach program participants on keeping mentoring relationships professional.

SAMPLE MENTORING PROGRAMS



Factors such as class size, alumni base, and available staff resources should play into a school's decision on how to structure its mentoring program. Below are sample programs divided into three main categories: (1) less-structured, (2) highly-structured, and (3) alternative mentoring structures for you to mix and match. These ideas are taken from an informal survey of law schools across the nation.

Less-Structured (“Informal”) Mentorship Program

WHAT: Pacific McGeorge School of Law allows students to select their own mentors from a mentor database, the Alumni Mentor Network, which is searchable by name, geography, practice area, and other criteria. The Network hosts about 400 active mentors. The CDO advises students that the appropriate starting point is a 20-minute conversation, and whether the relationship continues is optional and up to the mentor and mentee.

HOW: Once a match is made, automatic emails are sent to both mentor and student with contact information and an explanation of the program goals. It is the responsibility of the student to then initiate contact with the mentor.

PROs: The short time commitment and ability to interact with multiple mentors is appealing to participants, while allowing for some traditional, long-term relationships to organically develop. Additionally, the program can be administered with relatively low time and staff resources.

CONs: The lack of structure and passive training tools means that we are not assured that the students (or mentors) are adequately prepared (i.e., expectations, professionalism) for the program, and it is difficult to get feedback on the program.

Highly-Structured (“Formal”) Mentorship Program

WHAT: The Legacy Mentor Program at Concordia University School of Law is mandatory, earns academic credit, and focuses on a specific goal for each class year. In the first year, students interview their mentor and participate in one law-related activity with their mentor. In the second and third year of the program, a classroom component is added for a total of two credits. The course curriculum includes attorney panel discussions organized by practice area or subject matter (including a discussion on professionalism and civility issues). In addition, second and third year students complete law-related activities with their mentors, and draft memoranda regarding their experiences.

HOW: Students and mentors are paired based on practice interest, hobbies, and personality. Mentors are provided with a manual and orientation on the program. After pairing, students initiate contact. Mentor-student pairs can change every year or remain the same.

PROs: Students are immediately introduced to the legal community and the practice of law. These relationships can lead to externships, internships, full-time employment and significant growth in the student's professional development. Mentors are able to give back to the profession and to their schools (this is a way for potential donors to connect with the school).

CONS: A significant amount of staff time is required to run the program, manage mentor-student relationships, coordinate events, and communicate with participants. Some students do not see the value of the mandatory program and at times may act unprofessionally.

Other Innovative Mentorship Program Ideas



Below is a list of other mentoring program structures and ideas to incorporate into your program.

GROUP:

Consider taking traditional one-on-one mentoring structures and turning them into group mentoring sessions. For example, send students to mentoring meetings in pairs to take the pressure off the one-on-one dynamic. This may encourage shy students to participate and can be more comfortable for mentors, as well.

TOPIC-BASED:

Center a mentor program around a particular practice area or affinity group to allow for people with common interests and experiences to connect. For example, collaborate with your local women lawyers group (or pair a student organization with a local bar association section in the same practice area) to create a mentorship program or event. An added benefit for mentors is the opportunity to interact with other professionals with shared interests. You may even be able to share costs and resources with these outside groups!

SPECIAL EVENTS:

Special events lend a social tone to mentoring, allowing students to meet with more than one mentor in a short amount of time, and in a more relaxed setting than other mentoring programs. Speed Networking is a popular example of this type of mentoring event, or consider combining your alumni reception events in remote cities with student mentoring opportunities.

Pacific McGeorge hosts an annual "Dine with Alumni" program to correspond with the weekend that our Alumni Board meets. Each table seats two alumni in a particular practice area; students sign up for the table of their choice based on their practice area interest.

SHORT-TERM:

Short-term mentoring (i.e., any mentor event or program with a defined time limit) can yield great results in today's fast-paced, "sound bite" culture. Because of the low time commitment, it is often attractive to busy students and lawyers alike. An example of this is a 30-minute meeting with a guided conversation (i.e., topics are provided by the career development office).