

What is a Mentoring Relationship?

Most of us can think of people in our lives, more experienced than ourselves, who taught us something new, offered advice, presented a challenge, initiated friendship, or expressed an interest in our development as a person. These people were mentors. They helped us negotiate an uphill path or find an entirely new path to a goal in our academic, career, or personal lives. They pointed out talents that we hadn't noticed in ourselves and stimulated ideas about what we might be able to accomplish. They nudged us when we needed a nudge and cheered us onward.

At the Berkeley Community Fund, we match each High Hopes Scholar with an adult who will be the Scholar's mentor for four years, as the Scholar pursues his or her college degree. Our Scholars often do not have another adult in their lives who can play this role. Most of our Scholars are the first generation in their family to seek higher education and many are entering college with limited family support. Therefore, mentors play a vital role in the success of our Scholars, especially in the crucial first year.¹

The Mentor-Scholar Partnership

As a mentor, you are a valuable resource to your Scholar. You are a guide, a counselor, and a friend, and as such you inspire and facilitate academic, career, and personal achievements. The developmental transitions faced by young adults in each of these areas are enriched by your experience, wisdom, and guidance—always in partnership with the Scholar's particular needs and inclinations. You provide your Scholar with information, advice, self-advocacy skills and you are an important role model for meeting challenges. You may also be able to provide valuable opportunities by helping students to make contacts for academic and career success.

The relationship developed with your Scholar allows the reciprocal passage of information, challenges, and opportunities with the ultimate goals of facilitating achievement and having fun. How is this accomplished? There are probably as many mentoring styles as there are personality types, and there is no one right answer. The challenge and fun of mentoring is developing your own personal style as you share your strengths and skills.

Whatever your personal style, our mentors' primary role is to support their Scholars as they achieve success. This means helping your Scholar negotiate things that all students tackle in

¹ "60 percent of low-income, first-generation students who leave postsecondary education without attaining a degree do so after the first year" (Moving Beyond Access, the Pell Institute, 2008).

college, such as selecting classes, choosing a major, dealing with roommates, and finding a summer job.

It is also possible that your Scholar will encounter some significant challenges, perhaps in the form of a family crisis, an academic struggle, or an emotional roadblock. It is therefore important that your Scholar understand from the outset that you are available for support and problem solving whether or not he or she is succeeding. It can be tempting to want to step in and solve your Scholar's problems, but the role of a mentor is to teach and support your Scholar as she learns to advocate for herself. You are a safety net that protects your Scholar, while giving him support and encouragement to eventually soar on his own.

Culture and the Hidden Curriculum

As a mentor to a High Hopes Scholar, you may find that your Scholar has a different background from you. Age, race, ethnicity, sexual identity, religion, or socio-economic background may come into play during your interactions. In order to form a relationship based on trust and caring in the face of individual differences, it is important for mentors to recognize the value of a culture different from one's own. It is essential to be aware of assumptions, values and biases from your own cultural heritage that may impact interactions with your Scholar. Above all, being a culturally competent mentor means understanding how concepts related to diversity—such as power, privilege, oppression and prejudice—have operated and continue to operate at an institutional level and how this may impact your Scholar as an individual.

For example, a mentor from a higher socioeconomic class successfully established in their career can be intimidating for a scholar from a low-income family. They are often unsure what to talk about or may be hesitant to initiate contact. When offering advice, it is important for mentors to strike a balance between sharing their experiences and suggestions while trusting their mentee's capacity to make their own decisions and mistakes. A mentor may feel that a scholar is getting involved in many extracurricular activities and not prioritizing academics or is perhaps pursuing a career path they are not suited for. Being too persistent with advice can cause students to feel disrespected and to grow distant. One helpful approach is to let scholars know you are open to suggestions. Let them know you recognize cultural competency is an ongoing journey and that you might make mistakes.

In addition, these historically-based concepts are drivers of an unspoken hidden curriculum that may include knowledge of norms of college-going unavailable to our First Generation scholars. Often unacknowledged, this information can include helpful ways to interact with professors and other adults; how they may interact in very new situations with different races, or groups of people; or what ideas and behaviors are typically encouraged in the college setting. As mentors, we seek to daylight these college-going norms and unspoken rules.

Getting Started

Berkeley Community Fund mentors meet their Scholars before the Scholars begin college. Making a personal connection with your Scholar before the fall term starts is an important way to establish a relationship and to begin building trust. Ideally you will have at least two face-to-face meetings before the Scholar leaves, in addition to the BCF awards and orientation meetings. You might meet your Scholar for coffee or tea one afternoon or go for a walk. You might ask him or her to bring the course catalogue or have the online link to it or his or her class schedule so you can discuss it. Another useful focus is on the school's website so you can together explore the resources available.

We understand that both your schedule and that of your Scholar can make meeting challenging. As your Scholar continues their studies, much of the relationship takes place by phone, email, or other electronic communication, although we strongly encourage face-to-face meetings at least twice a year if at all possible. But developing a meaningful relationship takes time and at least some in-person contact, especially in the beginning. In general, the more face-to-face time you are able to schedule over the course of your relationship the better, although each relationship is different. However you meet, the consistency of contact is very important since the relationship is built in small moments over time.

We will touch on the following topics during orientation and provide some useful 'work sheets' and lists to guide communications during the first year with Scholars.

Building the Relationship

- Introduce yourself and get to know your Scholar. Explore interests by asking questions and promoting a broad discussion. Ask the best way to accommodate your Scholar as they communicate with you (phone, texts, e-mail, Facebook). Texting can often be a good way to set up a date to talk by phone or to wish a scholar luck on an upcoming test but is not usually the best method for discussing how things are going. Scholars may be inclined to quickly text back that everything "is fine."
- Clarify expectations. Discuss personal styles. Tell the Scholar what you can offer: information, advice, support, skills, experience. Discuss any questions or concerns. Discuss confidentiality.
- Acknowledge that the transition to college is hard for everyone (lack of structure, academic demands, balancing social and academic life). You may find it helpful to share stories of your own transition to college, good and bad. What did you find challenging? Did you or people you knew struggle? How did you handle it?

- Tell your Scholar that you want him/her to feel comfortable calling on you for help or support. Let your Scholar know you will not judge and you want to know about any problems or struggles as soon as possible so the situation doesn't snowball. Colleges expect people to ask for help when they need it and it is strongly encouraged. Let them know you are not only there to support success but to problem solve difficulties or mistakes.

College Life

- Discuss course selection, financial aid and budget issues. Provide ideas on how to budget, give tips for how to get what they need and want on a limited budget. Explore finding used textbooks if appropriate.
- You might jointly explore finding recipes for easy, inexpensive meals if the student is not on a full meal plan.
- Consider talking with the Scholar about socio-economic differences between students and dealing with that in college.

Developing Resources

- Go on-line with your Scholar and investigate resources available to students at the school. Does the college have an on-campus mentoring program? Is tutoring available if needed? Will the student have a faculty advisor? If so, talk about how to use that person. Go to the web site for the Office of Student Affairs and explore what is offered.
- Discuss all of the resources and ask your Scholar which ones he/she might find useful. Talk about or role-play how the Scholar would access the resources, and who and how to ask for help when needed. Talk about how to approach a teacher for help.
- *If it seems appropriate AND with the Scholar's permission, reach out to the Scholar's family.* Work with them when appropriate. This is certainly not necessary, but can sometimes be helpful.
- Encourage or facilitate a meeting for your Scholar with other High Hopes Scholars who attend or are alumni of your Scholar's college.

Specific Expectations

We expect that each mentor will:

- Arrange at least 2 face-to-face meetings or outings or other contact with the Scholar before the Scholar leaves for college, if possible.
- Initiate contact with the Scholar approximately once a month during the school year.

- Respect confidentiality.
- Promptly respond to electronic mail messages and phone calls from your Scholar.
- Promptly respond to messages sent by Berkeley Community Fund staff.
- Communicate with other mentors; act as a resource when possible.
- Communicate with the BCF staff promptly if unable to communicate with your Scholar regularly, or if you can't continue as mentor for any reason.
- Attend other BCF program events whenever possible, and encourage your Scholar to attend events.

Mentoring Resources

The Berkeley Community Fund staff is developing web-based materials to provide tips and ideas for best practices, as well as to seek contacts for jobs and internships for the Scholars, among other things. We are developing a plan for Lead Mentors to reach out to the new class of mentors with check-ins and suggestions.

In the meantime, the Regional Education Laboratory web portal at Education Northwest (<http://educationnorthwest.org/resource/364>) has helpful resources and Fact Sheets on mentoring. There is also a website for the U.S. Department of Education Mentoring Resource Center (<http://www.edmentoring.org/>). The website is undergoing changes, but should soon have a link to helpful resources to support best practices.

Thank you for caring enough to volunteer. You are making a difference for one of our remarkable High Hopes Scholars. We are confident that you will receive as much as you give. If you encounter a challenging issue with your scholar or aren't sure what resources could help, please don't hesitate to contact Lynn Walker, BCF College Success Coordinator, with any questions or concerns via email at lynn@berkfund.org or by cell at 510-463-1848.

Thank you,
Berkeley Community Fund Mentor Committee
Susie Goodin, Chair

July 2016