

Tips for a Meaningful College Access Mentor/Mentee Relationship

1. **Lose the language and find your purpose.** Get rid of the “I am the adult and your mentor and you are the high school student and my mentee” way of thinking. Work together to decide and understand why you each engaged in this relationship. Work together to decide how each of you can operate both as a mentor and a mentee. What can each of you teach the other? What can each of you learn from the other? In this, you will develop a sense of purpose for your relationship.
2. **Set the vision.** Now that you have considered your purpose for initiating this relationship, set a vision together for what you want this relationship to look like by the end of the year or beyond. Together, you might finish this thought: This mentor/mentee relationship will be successful if _____. Additionally you might ask: what, specifically, does each of you hope to learn during this time? What are your personal goals over the next few months? What are some goals for the mentor/mentee relationship? How can you work together to achieve these goals? How can you support each other’s achievement? A relationship with a purpose can survive the days when you don’t feel like being a mentor or mentee. Your sense of purpose should be stronger than the daily fatigue or temporary disinterest that will inherently arise.
3. **Share your power.** In order to live up to the shared purpose above, adults have to practice the discipline of sharing our power. In other words, don’t slip into the one-directional mentor-to-mentee relationship but ensure two-way engagement and support. Doing this requires checking yourself and the way you are engaging with the student. One way to avoid claiming the power of the relationship is to ask a lot of questions. Be sincere in your interest in the life and unique knowledge of the student. On the flip side, if they have a question regarding their school work or other such things, help them find the answer, don’t just give it to them – even if you know it! Show them the *process* of learning not just the instance of getting the answer. Acknowledge and reinforce when they teach you something or offer an idea that you had not thought of – don’t initially judge or immediately react to the idea, but encourage their offering.
4. **Set high expectations.** Work together to establish some basic norms that you each expect to live by. This is an important process for understanding what is important to each of you and will give you some baseline accountability for your interactions. Expectations should be established about how and when you will communicate with each other, what you expect in terms of honesty, openness, respect and other issues that the two of you deem important. In addition to these broad notions, you should set expectations around things as specific as cell phone use, punctuality, and any other such things you find critical to the success of your relationship.
5. **Draw your boundaries.** Having set your norms and expectations, it is important to get down to some details about what the relationship is and what it is not. You need to acknowledge certain conversations are simply not appropriate and endanger the safety of the relationship. You are not there to be the student’s best friend. Talking about sex, alcohol and other such conversations, while sometimes seeming harmless, can put you and/or the student in a compromised or dangerous situation that you might not see coming. It is best, if there is a question, simply to acknowledge that “this is not a conversation that I feel comfortable with”. It is most likely that the older mentor will need to step in and acknowledge this as the student may be challenging boundaries and exploring their own sexuality and/or other life experiences.