

Mentoring Remotely During Disruption

Thanks to: Boston University PDPA S. C. Hokanson [here](#); and Cornell Graduate School S. X. Hernandez [here](#).

Preamble: This document has three parts: A first short section focuses on both mentors and mentees and seeks to shift perspectives to support the collaborative learning relationship between mentors and mentees during this time. A second part that discusses key mentoring principles of *health and safety, goals and expectations, and communications* that due to disruption need to be reconsidered and potentially repositioned. This section is written from the mentor's perspective, but mentees can translate the content into their frame. The third section applies the *C. Pfund et al* framework of attributes to a set of challenges mentors and mentees face and is accompanied by a set of suggested strategies for both mentors and mentees. Strategies were co-created during a workshop for the Northwestern CuBISM project as well as added to by Searle Center staff.

Part 1: COVID-19 has created an environment where faculty and staff need to mentor and advise students remotely, under disruptive circumstances.

For mentors - Consider what this means for you personally. Depending on individual circumstances, some mentors will be in the position to provide more support than others. Allow yourself to be available within the boundaries that meet your needs. If you are unable to fully meet the needs of your students and postdocs, consider what colleagues may be best positioned to help. Recognize also that mentees may be crossing boundaries, sharing information that hasn't been necessary previously.

For mentees - Consider what this means for you personally. Reflect on your situation and think about how you would communicate your situation in ways that express the needs you have while also being comfortable in what you share.

Below are suggestions for thinking about the special circumstances in which we find ourselves:

- For mentors - Acknowledge the uncertain times and psychological distress graduate students and postdocs are experiencing. Reassure mentees that you will be as available, supportive, understanding, and flexible as possible.
- For mentees - Recognize that mentors may be in challenging situations too. Recognize also that mentors may have limited experience or knowledge of the situations many graduate students and postdocs are facing.

Part 2: The following suggestions are directed toward mentors, supporting their relationship with mentees:

- The health and safety of graduate students and postdocs is the first priority. Provide reassurance and check-in when possible.
 - Do this at a regular interval that graduate students and postdocs can look forward to, even if there are not explicit things to update.
 - Bear in mind that everyone's home environments look different – graduate students and postdocs may have different levels of access to technology and internet connections, and caregivers may be juggling those responsibilities in real-time with their professional work.
 - Remind your mentees to get outside, and where possible, include exercise or other strategies for well-being in their schedules.
 - Encourage students and postdocs who feel overwhelmed to step away from social media and the news.

- Be responsive to your mentees' concerns about health, feelings of isolation, housing, family and loved ones both local and afar, travel, food access and insecurity, etc. The list of concerns can be long for many of our students and postdocs, and many offices across campus are working to help students address and manage these concerns.
 - Northwestern's TGS has an FAQ [here](#).
 - Also, Northwestern's FSM has good information on wellness [here](#).
 - What are the resources in your home institution?
- Review the goals and expectations you established with your mentees/advisees under normal conditions (e.g. face-to-face interactions, regular check-ins, group meetings, etc.).
 - Identify which of these goals and expectations are important to maintain and which may need to be reprioritized and redefined.
 - Consider how new constraints (available time, remote work, new stressors) may factor into how mutually understood expectations can be met, how individual and shared goals can be achieved, and within what time frame. Many students and postdocs whose work depends heavily on being in the field, lab, clinic or other external environments are concerned about how this time working remotely will impact their continued progress.
 - Students closer to degree completion or postdocs nearing the end of their appointments are also concerned about a rapidly changing job market both within and beyond academia. Do what you can to ease their concerns, but also work with them on realistic action plans, including pointing them toward the resources and support offered by the university and elsewhere.
- Communicate clear ways of working with your graduate students and postdocs (as clear as you can under rapidly changing circumstances).
 - How do you plan to communicate, individually and in groups? (Email? Zoom? Slack? Phone? Facetime? Skype?)
 - How often can your mentees/advisees expect to hear from you? Schedule regular check-in times for one-on-one meetings.
 - How often do you want to hear from your mentees/advisees for check-ins and progress updates?
 - If you mentor a team, maintain regular, virtual, team meetings, as well as social times such as virtual coffee hours, and virtual lunches.
 - What do you want your mentees/advisees to do regarding research and writing? Any modifications? What degree of flexibility?
 - On what schedule do you expect progress to be made? Again, with what modifications and flexibility? Consider asking for written progress reports. Keep track of progress with structure e.g., pre-meeting summary of key tasks; pre-meeting report on accomplishments, obstacles, questions for discussion.
- It's okay to tell your graduate students and postdocs that you and other faculty are also trying to figure out how to continue your teaching, research, writing and publishing under these challenging circumstances. It is okay that you may not have a fully developed strategy for how all aspects of your collaborative work will continue remotely or come online when normal operations resume.
- Help students stay connected to peer writing groups, prof networks, journal clubs, seminar series, etc.

Part 3: Consider these added challenges for international mentors and mentees during Covid-19

	Research/ academic	Interpersonal	Psychosocial and Career planning	Culturally Responsive Diversity
Mentor	<p>Less time for mentoring due to demands of remote teaching</p> <p>Experiencing stress related to concerns about loss of research productivity and research opportunities</p>	<p>Online interactions are awkward and exhausting with additional cognitive load</p> <p>Hard to read body language online and get other cues needed for good interpersonal interactions</p> <p>More electronic communication that can be prone to misinterpretation</p>	<p>May not feel equipped to deal with increased psychosocial stress in mentees.</p> <p>Online environment makes it challenging to assess psychosocial wellbeing of mentees</p> <p>May feel awkward asking mentees about psychosocial stress</p> <p>Stress related to working from home & managing family stress</p>	<p>May not be aware of extra stresses faced by under-represented students during covid-19</p> <p>May not know circumstances that mentees are working/living under</p> <p>May not be aware of unequal burden of effects of covid-19 on under-represented students, their families & communities, e.g. higher infection and death rates, higher unemployment, higher percentage working as essential workers</p>
Mentee	<p>Loss of opportunity to learn in the lab</p> <p>Concerns about remote learning & possibly of learning less</p> <p>Concerns about loss of research progress, time to degree, financial support</p> <p>Internet access</p> <p>Loss of informal interactions with mentors and peers that contribute to learning</p>	<p>Online interactions are awkward and exhausting with additional cognitive load</p> <p>Hard to read body language online and get other cues needed for good interpersonal interactions</p> <p>More electronic communication with mentors that can be prone to misinterpretation</p>	<p>Greater stress</p> <p>Greater anxiety</p> <p>Isolation</p> <p>Less community support</p> <p>May feel awkward raising psychosocial issues with mentor</p> <p>Greater uncertainty about employment prospects</p> <p>May not have received training in resilience</p>	<p>Under-represented communities affected more by covid-19 (deaths, unemployment) increasing psychosocial stress on under-represented students</p> <p>Psychosocial trauma related to trauma faced by under-represented communities</p> <p>Mentees from low income groups may have poor internet access</p> <p>International students may face stress due to visa issues and inability to travel to their home country</p>

Consider these strategies co-created from the mentoring workshop and Searle Center folks

	Mentee strategies	Mentor strategies
Research/academic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Set tangible goals with supervisor and set reasonable expectations ● If you have challenges advancing your research/academic knowledge, consider discussing it with your mentor in terms of more communication and seeking additional opportunities to learn. ● Create log books etc. to document progress ● Look for opportunities to work on group projects and work with others 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Create smaller, well-defined deadlines and schedule regular check-ups ● Invite mentee input when setting deadlines ● Consider a wide range underlying reasons for missing deadlines or missed meetings ● To help understand underlying issues (if any), discuss the process of doing work in addition to research work outcomes.
Interpersonal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Be open and honest with mentor ● Define your connectivity limitations and clearly communicate them to your mentor ● Reach out to other people for additional mentorship, for different perspectives 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Consider group mentoring sessions to reduce isolation in trainees ● Consider informal group or one-on-one meetings with mentees to discuss personal matters, invite students to share how they are doing ● Create anonymous sharing space, if your students are reluctant to share before group, or to share with you ● Be attentive to behavior changes in mentees, changes from 'before' as well as 'during' the current situation.
Psychosocial and Career planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● To fight depression, create incentives, routines, try to keep in contact with people outside of research, have group meetings with other trainees to help gauge progress & get support. ● Explore university and community support resources (CAPS, online counseling, etc.) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● To reduce mentees career anxieties, connect them with other students further along in job search
Culturally Responsive Diversity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Look for opportunities to be a mentor to others, e.g. masters students and undergraduates 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Pair mentees with more senior students for support and knowledge sharing