

# Navigating the Course of Scholarly Productivity: The Protégé's Role in Mentoring

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**Background:** The importance of mentoring for professional success, including mentoring in writing, has become increasingly emphasized in academic nursing during the past decade. Although much has been published on how to write for publication, as well as the roles of mentors themselves, surprisingly little has been written about how protégés (those who are the recipients of mentoring) can take an active role in assisting themselves to obtain mentorship. How newer faculty can obtain adequate mentoring is often less straightforward.

**Purpose:** The main goal of this article is to describe some ideas about how faculty can actively help themselves to obtain adequate mentoring, with a particular focus on mentoring in writing.

**Method/Discussion:** Five principles are illustrated as follows, with case examples of hypothetical new faculty members: know yourself, develop realistic expectations, reach out and get to know others, negotiate for what is needed, and learn from every experience.

**Conclusion:** We hope that this discussion will foster further exchange among mentors, protégés, and administrators about approaches to seeking mentoring and high-level success in writing for publication along career journeys.

The ability to successfully navigate one's academic career, including success in writing, has become increasingly emphasized in academic nursing during the past decade.<sup>1-3</sup> Especially for nursing faculty in tenure-track positions, success in writing for publication and research funding is critical to obtaining tenure and subsequent promotions and contributing to the knowledge base for nursing. Ideally, skills in writing publications and grant proposals are well developed by the culmination of doctoral study, but for a variety of reasons, these do not always occur. In addition, new faculty often face personal and situational barriers to writing,<sup>5,6</sup> which can impair career progress if not managed successfully.

Mentoring is an essential part of success for faculty who are either inexperienced in writing or who face substantial barriers

to writing. This is confirmed by published reports of the strong interest of nursing faculty members in how to obtain adequate mentoring.<sup>5,7</sup> Even though much has been published on "how to" write for publication, as well as the roles of mentors themselves,<sup>2,8,9</sup> surprisingly little has been written about how "protégés" (those who are the recipients of mentoring) can take an active role in assisting themselves to obtain mentorship.<sup>10</sup> Ultimately, obtaining benefit from mentoring depends on an individual's ability and willingness to locate the mentoring that is needed.

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Therefore, the main goal of this article is to describe some thoughts about how faculty can actively help themselves to obtain adequate mentoring, with a particular focus on mentoring in writing for newer tenure-system faculty. Our primary goal is to inspire discussion and further introspection among protégés and mentors for how to achieve high-quality mentoring. In addressing this goal, we (the authors) draw on both selected published literature and case illustrations with a basis on our personal experiences in mentoring and being mentored. We conceptualize the process of obtaining mentoring as analogous to the lengthy journey of a ship to a distant port, in which the protégé is the pilot of the ship. During the journey, calm seas, rough weather, and both visible and unforeseen perils can be anticipated. In large part, the success of the journey (arriving at port) depends on the knowledge and skills of the pilot for navigating the rough weather and perils. This is a different perspective on mentoring than has often been presented in the literature, which tends to emphasize the roles of those other than the new faculty member in plotting the course and navigating the ship.

We decided to write this article on the basis of our joint recognition of the need for a different kind of a "mentoring" article, which would provide for a basis for further thought and discussion, especially for doctoral students and newer faculty. Our college has recently begun a doctoral program and also has

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a number of new faculty for whom scholarly writing is an expectation. A key source of inspiration for this article also came from many shared conversations between the authors about how to enhance the faculty career journey as much as possible. One author, in her role as a newer tenure-system faculty member, remembers existential questions and learning experiences on her recent journey to tenure, such as, "Is this journey all it can be," and "Who is really in charge of this ship?" The other author, in her role as a scholarly writing consultant for the college, has puzzled over her role in the journeys of others, in which she recognized that the real-time agendas for others often have much more to do with the existential questions of the journey and not necessarily the ostensible outcome of the journey. We begin by defining mentoring, followed by a discussion of key barriers to mentoring. The core of this article, however, is on principles for seeking mentorship, specifically as related to writing. In our discussion of the principles, we hope to illustrate how faculty members can successfully chart and navigate their own courses to achieve success in obtaining mentorship for writing.

**MENTORING DEFINED**

Owens et al<sup>11</sup> defined the mentoring relationship as "... a supportive and nurturing relationship between an experienced professional, a mentor, and an aspiring protégé." A good mentor is a wise consultant during a career journey. A suitable match between a mentor and a protégé is made on the basis of specific knowledge and skills of the mentor that are well matched to the needs of the one being mentored. For writing for publication, a high-quality mentor obviously must have sufficient experience in writing and publication to help someone else learn these skills, but other characteristics of mentors that allow their expertise to be accessible to others are important. For example, Vance<sup>4</sup> described an ideal mentor not only as skilled, competent, and self-confident, but also as generous (beyond selfish self-interest in career pursuits), involved, and committed to the relationship with a recipient of mentoring. An ultimate reward for a mentor is the experience of seeing a protégé be highly successful.

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Skillful mentors are insightful in their abilities to both detect and nurture positive potential in others (eg, Klein and Dickenson-Hazard<sup>1</sup> noted that mentors often "... see the future that is hidden in another's personality and abilities") and take great satisfaction in fostering the well-being of another. More generally, mentors serve a pivotal role in helping those whom they mentor to define and shape what is wanted and then provide the specific input, support, and skills development for protégés to use in meeting their self-identified goals. Mentors serve a number of specific functions,<sup>8</sup> including enhancing motivation and self-efficacy for writing; monitoring progress; serving as a

sounding board and reality check for ideas; structuring accountability for goals; providing emotional support; providing practical information; listening to/brainstorming ideas; and, sometimes, providing needed material resources, including facilitating connections to other faculty. Stewart and Krueger,<sup>9</sup> in a recent concept analysis of mentoring in nursing that was done on the basis of a random sample of 82 published articles and abstracts, found that 6 essential components of mentoring were addressed. Those aspects of mentoring can be summarized as (1) a teaching-learning process (2) carried out for several years (3) within a reciprocal (4) career-development-focused relationship (5) characterized by a "knowledge or competence differential between participants" (6) that results in the one mentored being likely to mentor others (ie, a "resonating phenomenon" of mentoring is likely to occur).

**BARRIERS TO MENTORING**

Although the importance of mentoring is well recognized, how newer faculty can obtain adequate mentoring is often less straightforward. Availability and accessibility of mentoring are complex issues and are realistically constrained by the available resources. In many schools of nursing, there may be limited numbers of senior level faculty who are both able and willing to devote time to mentoring of junior colleagues. This problem is likely to intensify in the near future, as substantial proportions of the most senior level faculty retire from their academic careers. There may be established mentoring programs in which new faculty are assigned mentors at the outset when accepting a job offer. At the surface level, this may seem to be an ideal scenario, but mentoring programs may not always work as planned. For example, the skills of the mentor and protégé may not be well matched, or there may be an initial or later mismatch of personal or work styles, resulting in conflict and unmet needs. There is not uncommonly a mismatch of goals between an identified mentor and a protégé (eg, a person who appears to have necessary knowledge, skills, and resources to provide mentoring may be either unable or unwilling to help).

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Given that these barriers to mentoring occur in most academic work environments, how does a newer faculty member navigate a series of barriers (perils) to locate and access the kind of mentoring that he or she needs to be successful on a career journey? In this article, we take the position that much of a faculty member's success depends pivotally on effort and persistence in seeking what is needed, including an openness to learning from experiences and a willingness to try multiple approaches. We illustrate some general principles for this mentoring journey with hypothetical case examples of 3 new faculty members whom we refer to as "Kim," "John," and "Megan" during their first year of employment in academe. We hasten to add that these examples represent an amalgam of our personal

observations from a variety of settings and reflect no particular type of individual. Indeed, we freely confess that the inspiration for the scenarios comes from our recognition of ourselves, at various times, in Kim, John, and Megan alike. Although we draw conclusions from the cases about good judgment and personal responsibility for navigating one's career journey, we caution that there is no set course to successfully reach port. Depending on what is encountered along the way, different strategies will be needed to navigate rough weather and other perils.

## GENERAL PRINCIPLES FOR SEEKING MENTORSHIP

### Know Yourself

A first step in seeking mentorship is to do a self-assessment with respect to your own strengths, areas of need for further development, and work style. What specifically do you need to be successful? Consider what each of these hypothetical new faculty members might benefit from the most in a mentoring relationship.

"Kim" is well organized and usually able to complete important activities on schedule. However, writing was not emphasized in her doctoral program, and Kim has never submitted a manuscript for publication. Kim is positively motivated and has read books and articles on how to write for publication, but she is not sure how the manuscripts she submits will "measure up" with journal reviewers.

"John" is a capable writer who already has published 2 first-authored articles with his doctoral program advisor and has several others in preparation. However, he often struggles with organizing his work and completing important activities on time. Although he has a clear understanding of the writing process, he is concerned about finding time for writing within his substantial teaching and service commitments.

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"Megan" is skilled in conceptual thinking and very articulate in expressing ideas. She has published 2 articles as second author with her doctoral program advisor but none as a faculty member. Although her work assignments are actually somewhat lighter compared with those of Kim and John, Megan has been overheard stating that she does not need help with her writing but just needs to have her teaching and service assignments reduced so that she can find enough time to write.

Kim brings strengths of self-discipline, organization, and positive motivation to the writing process. She may benefit the most from a mentor who can coach her on what to expect during the writing and manuscript review process, as well as bolster her self-confidence for writing and publication. She may also need practical guidance with writing style and content issues. By contrast, John brings strengths of writing skills and

personal knowledge of the writing and publication process to his work. He may benefit most from a mentor who can coach him about strategies for work organization and prioritization of activities, as well as help structure accountability for work outcomes. Megan presents a somewhat more complex scenario. Although she has good conceptual thinking and expressive abilities, she may not have particularly well-developed writing skills, nor does she seem to have insight into her own developmental needs. Megan may benefit most from a mentor with whom she can build mutual rapport and respect but who also communicates directly and firmly with her about skills that need further development.

### Develop Realistic Expectations

As well as being insightful about one's own strengths and areas for development, it is also important to recognize what resources realistically are and are not available within a given work setting. Despite the natural tendency to assume that there may be a more optimal employment situation elsewhere, there are no perfect jobs, nor are there usually perfect mentors available. Although undesirable work situations do occur, comparisons of one's own work situation with those of others may ultimately result in the conclusion that various work situations are more alike than different. In all career journeys, a course has to be plotted within the available resources, and all journeys will include some rough weather and perils that necessitate proper navigation. How successful the journey is depends in large part on the resourcefulness of the pilot (the faculty member) in anticipating and planning appropriate strategies to manage the challenges along the way.

Although ideal mentors sometimes exist, the likelihood of finding and working with one is rare enough to be an unrealistic expectation for most people. Mentors are, first and foremost, human and have their own strengths and limitations as a result. Unrealistic expectations of a potential mentor set up both the protégé and the mentor for frustration. For example, it may be possible to benefit substantially from the input of a mentor regarding one's own writing style, but that same mentor may not be able to help with the methodologic aspects of preparing a grant proposal. Another mentor may be able to provide positive social support but may not be the person who can provide critical comments about the conceptualization of a paper. It is also important to consider whether advice obtained from mentors is realistic or useful for one's own situation. Some newer faculty do not seem to believe that they have a right to an opinion or independent decision making on the basis of the belief that others surely know much more than they do. Consider the following hypothetical situations in terms of how unrealistic expectations and beliefs of new faculty members resulted in less-than-desirable outcomes.

When an opportunity came along to work with Ellen, a more senior faculty member in another department, Kim jumped at the opportunity, unconsciously expecting that Ellen would be an "ideal" mentor with whom she could share her concerns and receive practical advice on how to write for publication. But after 1 month into her work on a manuscript with Ellen, Kim became distressed and felt "let down" when she

realized that Ellen was not willing to provide either emotional support or technical advice on writing for publication. Likewise, Ellen felt annoyed that Kim seemed to expect too much “handholding” during the writing process and regretted that she had agreed to collaborate with Kim on writing a manuscript.

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*A good mentor is a wise consultant during a career journey.*

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John asked his assigned nursing faculty mentor (Judy) for advice about how to better manage time to prioritize writing. In her own career, Judy had been productive by writing during evening and weekend hours, so she recommended that John use these times to write. John believed that he should follow any advice he received from his mentor, even if it did not feel quite “right,” because, he reasoned, Judy was much more academically experienced. On the basis of the advice he received from Judy, John made a writing schedule for himself that precluded spending recreational time with his family on Saturdays. Both John and his family soon became frustrated with not spending enough time together on weekends.

Megan complained openly to others about her perception of there being no “capable” faculty in her department with whom to collaborate on research-related writing projects. Megan declined offers from several more senior level faculty members to collaborate on manuscripts. She rationalized that these collaborations would not advance her program of research because the faculty members had “nothing to offer” her that she did not already know or could not otherwise manage well herself. These faculty members felt rebuffed by Megan and talked among themselves about their observation that Megan had yet to submit any manuscripts for review for publication during her first year on the job.

In each of these scenarios, the new faculty made decisions on the basis of unrealistic expectations or beliefs, which resulted in negative outcomes. Kim had unrealistic expectations of what Ellen could offer, John acted on the basis of an uncritical assessment of advice he received from Judy, and Megan offended others who potentially did have something to offer her. Kim might have avoided disappointment by having a frank discussion with Ellen at the outset about mutual expectations for the writing collaboration. John could have benefited from thinking through whether the advice he received was appropriate. Megan behaved defensively by quickly ruling out collaboration without first thinking through what she might have to gain. In addition, she may have created much larger problems for herself, by raising concerns among the senior faculty about her apparent lack of collegiality, nonreceptivity to feedback, and lack of career progress.

### **Reach Out and Get to Know Others**

Given that there are often significant barriers to obtaining mentoring, those who seek to be mentored must actively cultivate a spirit of assuming self-responsibility of the journey and being persistent in navigating obstacles to their own success. No

one else will do this as well as the protégé! However, it is important to understand that reaching out also involves willingness to take risks. It is highly normative to encounter many more situations that do not result in work progress than actual positive opportunities. There must be a willingness to tolerate the distress of making occasional mistakes in judgment about people and situations; both successes and nonsuccesses are fertile ground for learning. What is learned about navigating both foreseeable and unforeseeable obstacles will go a long way toward maximizing the likelihood of career success.

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It is important to get to know people within and outside the department/school in terms of the specific knowledge and skills that they might have to offer. Among a relatively large number of people with whom relationships are formed, a subset will be likely to have specific knowledge and skills to offer. However, to have a high-quality mentoring relationship, it is essential to collaborate with people with whom one can work effectively and who have the knowledge and skills to offer. A good mentor is able to provide what another person needs and has at least some of the key characteristics described earlier. People are likely to have several different types of mentors for various aspects of their work at different points in time. Most types of mentors come with strengths and limitations for a given person and situation. Task-specific mentors are the most common type of mentor with whom people work. The key to making good use of task-specific mentors is to be aware of what each person has to offer, versus what he or she does not have to offer, and to approach potential mentors selectively on that basis.

An important part of identifying potential mentors is to know not only who to seek out but also who to avoid. Ironically, people who might be labeled as “anti-mentors” are sometimes the very people from whom the most can be learned. Anti-mentors may engage in destructive behaviors such as belittling work of others and otherwise interacting with others in non-supportive ways. Ironically, this type of mentor is someone from whom much may be learned, in terms of setting goals for how not to be. Behavior from those who seem to be less than constructive is something to study very carefully, and then one must plan sound strategies to avoid this type of behavior at all costs because of the potential career costs.

Related to this, it is also important to consider how accurate one’s assessments of people and situations tend to be. Where is one’s judgment about people and situations pretty good versus not so good? What can be learned on the basis of past successes and nonsuccesses in making judgments about people and situations? In the following scenarios, consider what Kim, John,

and Megan did well, versus could have done better, in reaching out and developing relationships with others.

Kim thought carefully about her unsuccessful experience in collaborating with Ellen, realizing that she had not done a careful assessment of her own and Ellen's expectations. When Kim heard about a potential opportunity to work with another more senior level colleague (Brenda) on a paper, Kim started by contacting Brenda to discuss mutual interests, goals, and expectations for the writing process. Brenda was favorably impressed by Kim's initiative and careful approach to assessing the adequacy of match for a writing collaboration.

John recognized that he tended to procrastinate on making phone calls to potential collaborators for his writing and research projects. His faculty mentor (Judy) also recognized John's procrastination tendencies and asked him directly whether he noticed what she was observing. John admitted that he felt very anxious about phoning people because of not being sure how he would manage to cope if he ran into a "dead end." He then thanked Judy for her feedback and asked Judy for ideas about how to "avoid avoidance."

Megan reluctantly made an appointment to meet with the school of nursing writing consultant (Sally), only after she was sternly admonished to do so by her department chairperson. To her surprise, Megan discovered that Sally was a "kindred spirit" who shared a number of her perspectives and interests and who also had much to teach her about the technical aspects of writing. Sally was also quite artful in commenting to Megan in a matter-of-fact way about beliefs and behaviors of Megan that she (Sally) viewed as barriers to writing and career progress. Sally and Megan also discussed possibilities for other mentors, who might provide help with conceptual aspects of writing and strategies for balancing other work demands.

Kim learned from a prior misstep and productively applied what she learned to a new situation. John was insightful about his own behavior and productively used his faculty mentor to problem-solve strategies for better managing anxiety-provoking phone contacts. Megan, by contrast, required an external stimulus (her department chairperson) to seek help from the writing consultant. Megan was very fortunate that the writing consultant was both willing and skilled in working with her needs. She found a very rare mentor in Sally, in essence picking up a much more skilled pilot along the course of her career journey, but this did not happen through Megan taking the initiative to reach out. Megan could be expected to have continued difficulties with writing and scholarly productivity in the absence of better insight into more productive approaches to her work and work relationships.

### **Negotiate for What Is Needed**

When someone has been identified as potentially having something to offer as a mentor, negotiation for that person's knowledge and skills needs to take place. The process of negotiation involves determining what the benefits for both individuals will be. Consider the following scenarios in terms of how the faculty negotiated for what they needed.

After talking with Brenda (more senior level colleague) about mutual interests, goals, and expectations for a writing project

collaboration, Kim summarized back to Brenda what she (Kim) heard. Kim clearly identified her need for peer support and technical aspects of writing. Brenda identified her own interest in obtaining additional publications but stated that she did not think she could provide technical assistance with writing and did not want to meet too often because of lack of time. Kim had anticipated that Brenda might respond this way and mentioned that she (Kim) could contact Sally (the faculty writing consultant) for help on the technical aspects of writing.

John contacted a potential manuscript collaborator (Tom) who had been recommended by Judy. A few sentences into the conversation with Tom, John realized that Tom did not have the necessary content expertise to collaborate on the manuscript. John found a diplomatic way to end the conversation after a short period but also obtained needed information from Tom about other potential collaborators possessing the needed expertise.

Megan and Sally discussed the need for Megan to find collaborators for her writing projects. After this conversation, Megan approached a senior level faculty member (Paul) whose work she respected, but whom she did not know well at all, to explore the possibility of collaborating on a manuscript. Megan felt rebuffed and unsure how to respond when Paul asked her, ". . . and what benefit would there be to me from writing a paper with you?" Megan then explained that she wanted help with her writing skills and also indicated that she was "anxious" about whether she could produce first-authored manuscripts on her own. Paul replied that he did not think that he could help Megan.

Kim was able to effectively negotiate with Brenda on the basis of clear mutual understandings regarding interests, goals, and expectations of each person. Kim had also thought through what her own responses could be to various scenarios for how the conversation might "play out" with Brenda. She anticipated possible barriers and planned effective strategies for navigating them. John, too, was able to think through the pros and cons of a potential collaboration and maximized his gain from a "dead end" by obtaining additional information for additional contacts. He was also able to make a reasonable judgment within a short period about the need to pursue other options for research collaboration. By contrast, Megan did not negotiate successfully, focusing only on her own needs and neglecting to find out her colleague's interests, goals, and expectations.

### **Learn from Every Experience**

A key investment in career development is to devote time to self-reflection and learning from each and every experience along the way. What has been learned that will change (for the better) approaches to future situations? In this article, we have already addressed various situations that hypothetical new faculty have faced. Here are a few more situations that new and experienced faculty alike may encounter and what each faculty member learned from the situation he or she faced.

Kim published additional papers with Brenda and found that she learned a great deal in the process from Brenda. This helped Kim to progress in her own career by achieving success in publishing in higher-tier journals. However, Kim found that she had to carefully set limits with Brenda regarding their roles and amounts of contribution for each paper. She put the skills

she gained from working with Brenda on “boundaries issues” to good use in other situations.

John had an important learning experience working as a coinvestigator on a grant writing project with a colleague (Edna), whom he described to Judy as a “predator.” Edna, also a coinvestigator, behaved destructively in team meetings, interrupting and “putting down” the contributions of others, refusing to acknowledge other points of view, and focusing on small details of the writing project as “critically flawed.” During the project, the principal investigator privately acknowledged to John that she found Edna very difficult to work with but said that “. . . the grant probably won’t be funded without Edna’s name on it.” In reflecting on this situation with Judy, John concluded that it was an important learning experience in how never to behave as a faculty member. John consciously evaluated his own behavior and focused on behaving in positive ways with colleagues, even in very stressful situations.

Megan received what she considered to be a substandard evaluation at the end of her first year as a faculty member. Megan’s department chairperson expressed concern about Megan’s potential for tenure on the basis of Megan not having yet submitted any manuscripts or grant proposals. Megan’s response to her chairperson was to complain that her teaching and service assignments were “too heavy” and that there was no one around who was capable enough for her to collaborate with for writing. After this experience, Megan wanted to look for a job elsewhere but recognized she might have trouble finding another job.

In these scenarios, both Kim and John appear to have learned from their experiences, including those that could be viewed as somewhat negative, as evidenced by their application of their learning to foster their positive career progress. They became skillful pilots of their own ships by learning from their experiences and benefiting from the support of multiple mentors along the way. By contrast, what Megan “learned” is quite different (ie, she remained persistent in her view that control for her own progress resided outside herself, in the form of insurmountable barriers). At this point, Megan’s colleagues would likely be forecasting a high likelihood of an unfavorable outcome for Megan’s career journey.

In this article, we have sought to explore some of the ways that protégés may take an active role in obtaining high-quality mentoring. We have discussed some pitfalls in seeking mentoring on the course of a career journey and have suggested principles for seeking mentorship, including knowing oneself, developing realistic expectations, reaching out and getting to know others, negotiating for what is needed, and learning from each and every experience. We hope that this discussion will foster further exchange among mentors and protégés about approaches to seeking mentoring and high-level success in writing for publication along career journeys.

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