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# Research Mentor Training

## Diversity

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# Diversity

## **Introduction:**

Diversity along a range of dimensions offers both challenges and opportunities to any mentor-mentee relationship. Learning to identify, reflect upon, and engage with diversity is critical to forming and maintaining an effective mentoring relationship.

## **Learning Objectives for Diversity:**

Mentors will have the knowledge and skill to:

- Have an increased awareness of the biases and prejudices they bring to the mentor-mentee relationship
- Have some concrete strategies for addressing issues of diversity and engage in conversation about diversity with their mentee
- Understand their impact on a mentee: how their interaction with and role modeling for the mentee can impact that mentee's decision to commit to careers in science
- Improve their multicultural competency.

## Materials for Facilitators Leading Discussions on Diversity

### **Guiding Questions for Sessions Focused on Diversity**

#### *Questions to Get the Discussion Started:*

- As a mentor, would you feel comfortable asking a mentee about their race, ethnicity, gender, disability, etc?
- Specifically, how would you go about engaging someone in a discussion about their race, ethnicity, gender, disability, background?
- What is your approach to addressing diversity with the people with whom you work?
- What are some ways you can learn to better understand your mentee's attitudes and experiences?

#### *Questions to Guide the Discussion towards the Benefits and Challenges of Diversity:*

- How can you accommodate different working styles?
- Do you think someone's race, ethnicity, gender, disability, and background impact their experience as a mentee?

#### *Questions to Broaden or Deepen the Discussion:*

- Do you think everyone should be treated the same? Does treating everyone the same mean they are being treated equally?
- How can you use diversity to enhance learning?

### **Suggested Facilitation Techniques: Diversity Discussion**

- If you have a group of mentors who are all the same ethnicity or gender, the conversation may need some prompting for them to consider what it may be like to be an underrepresented mentee. Try to get them to consider diverse perspectives by asking them to reflect on a time they felt they were in the minority.
- Ask mentors to consider how they and their mentee differ and how these differences affect the mentoring experience for both. Ask each mentor to write a reflection of this topic and share it with the mentors in your group to generate a larger discussion.
- Ask mentors to list types of differences that can be significant in a research/education setting. List them on a board or flip chart. Ask the group why they mentioned certain types of differences. If they failed to bring up some important differences (e.g. – gender, disability, race, age, etc.) ask them why. Urge them to talk about why some types of difference are difficult to discuss.

- Ask the mentors in your group if their gender has ever impacted their experience as a mentee and if so, how. Also, ask them if they have ever been asked how their gender has impacted their experience? How does this compare to asking someone about their race and ethnicity?
- Ask mentors if they would be comfortable giving an underrepresented student an application for a scholarship targeted at minorities, thereby acknowledging their race and ethnicity. Why does this feel different than asking someone how their race or ethnicity impacts their experience?
- Consider changing a case study to focus on a different person in the minority role:
  - A foreigner, perhaps a Vietnamese student from Hanoi (so there is some historical complexity).
  - A white person who grew up on the family farm in the deep south, has a very strong drawl, goes to a fundamentalist church with family, keeps a gun as a hedge against home invasion, and hunts whenever possible.

### **Suggested Assignments to *Precede* Discussions about Diversity**

- As preparation for the discussion about diversity, ask mentors to write a brief description of how they and their mentee(s) are different. Warn them to not take the easy way out and talk about mere differences of education, age or opinion. Encourage them to look deeper into relationships, experiences, cultural affiliations, and backgrounds.

### **Suggested Assignments Following Discussions about Diversity**

- Reading about the Benefits and Challenges of Diversity
  - Ask mentors to read and reflect on the reading: Evelyn Fine and Jo Handelsman “The Benefits and Challenges of Diversity” in *Entering Mentoring: A Seminar to Train a New Generation of Scientists*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press. 2005.
- Exploring your own biases and assumptions at various websites
  - Have mentors visit "Dig Deeper" at [http://www.tolerance.org/hidden\\_bias/index.html](http://www.tolerance.org/hidden_bias/index.html) and select various tests to better understand their hidden biases and assumptions. These are not meant to scare anyone, they are just to make folks aware of the biases and assumptions we all carry.
  - At <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/>, mentors can find a number of tests that let them explore specific biases and assumptions, such as our biases and assumptions about gender, disabilities, skin-tone, etc. These are not only informative, but fun and quick to take.

### **Diversity Case (Any Discipline): Is it OK to Ask?**

Last summer I worked with a fantastic undergraduate mentee. She was very intelligent and generated a fair amount of data. I think that she had a positive summer research experience, but there are a few questions that still linger in my mind. This particular mentee was an African-American woman from a small town. I always wondered how she felt on a big urban campus. I also wondered how she felt about being the only African-American woman in our lab. In fact, she was the only African-American woman in our entire department that summer. I wanted to ask her how she felt, but I worried it might be insensitive or politically incorrect to do so. I never asked. I still wonder how she felt and how those feelings may have affected her experience.

### **Diversity Case (Any Discipline): Language Barriers**

I am a graduate student in a very crowded lab. One summer, we hosted two students from Puerto Rico. The students were great—they worked hard, got interesting results, were fun to be around, and fit into the group really well. The problem was that they spoke Spanish to each other all day long. And I mean ALL DAY. For eight or nine hours every day, I listened to this loud, rapid talking that I couldn't understand. Finally, one day I blew. I said in a not very friendly tone of voice that I'd really appreciate it if they would stop talking because I couldn't get any work done. Afterwards, I felt really bad and apologized to them. I brought the issue to my mentoring class and was surprised by the length of the discussion that resulted. People were really torn about whether it is okay to require everyone to speak in English and whether asking people not to talk in the lab is a violation of their rights. Our class happened to be visited that day by a Norwegian professor and we asked her what her lab policy is. She said everyone in her lab is required to speak in Norwegian. That made us all quiet because we could imagine how hard it would be for us to speak Norwegian all day long.

### **Diversity Case (Multidisciplinary): Too Much Information**

Some issues are stickier than others. I once had a student who would come into the research group every Monday and loudly discuss his sexual exploits of the weekend. People in the research group—men and women—dreaded coming in on Mondays and were intensely uncomfortable during his discourses. No one in the group wanted to deal with it, and most of them were too embarrassed to even mention it to me. Finally, my trusted technician shared with me her intention to quit if this student didn't graduate very soon. I was faced with the challenge of telling the student that we all need to be sensitive to others in the lab and there might be people who didn't want to hear about his sex life. I was uncomfortable with the conversation for a lot of reasons. First, I'm not used to talking to my students about their sex lives. Second, I was concerned that the student would be hurt and embarrassed that others in the research group had talked to me about his behavior and I didn't want to create a new problem in the process of solving the original one. Third, the student was gay and I didn't want him to think that his behavior was offensive because of this. I wanted him to appreciate that any discussion of sexual experience—straight or gay—was simply inappropriate for the open lab environment. But the student had never told me that he was gay, so I felt it was a further violation of his relationship with other lab members to indicate that I knew he was gay. The discussion did not go well because we were both so uncomfortable with the subject and I had trouble being as blunt as I should have been. The behavior didn't change. The student finished his thesis and defended it. At the defense, one of the committee members suggested that the student do more experiments, and I detected the beginnings of a groundswell of support for his point of view. I blurted out that if this student stayed one more day in my research group, my wonderful technician would quit, so if he had to do more experiments, could he do them in one of their research groups? In the end, everyone signed off on the thesis, the student graduated, and I never published the last chapter of the student's thesis because more experiments were needed to finish the story. I felt that I had weighed research group harmony against academic and scientific standards and have never been happy with how I handled the whole situation.

### **Diversity Case (Any Discipline): What Did I Do Wrong?**

I've been mentoring students in my discipline for several decades, the majority of whom have gone on to very successful research careers. But there were a group of students who didn't work out. For example, I had an undergraduate student in my lab who didn't seem very bright and I doubted that he would make it as a scientist. I encouraged him to move on. The next time I saw him, he was receiving an award for outstanding undergraduate research that he did in another lab. I was surprised. The next time I encountered him was when I opened a top-notch journal and saw a paper with him as first author. I was impressed. Next I heard, he had received his PhD and was considered to be a hot prospect on the job market.

A couple of years later, I had a graduate student who was incredibly bright and a wonderful person, but wasn't getting anything done. I had tried all of my mentoring tricks, and then borrowed some methods from others. In a fit of frustration, I encouraged the student to take a break from the lab and think about what to do next. While she was taking her break, she received an offer to complete her PhD in another lab. She did, published a number of highly regarded papers, landed a great postdoc, and is now a well-funded faculty member at a major research university.

These experiences have made me realize the power of the "match." The student, the lab, and the advisor have to be well matched, and all of it has to come together at the right time in the student's life. I can't be a good advisor to all students, and where I fail, someone else may succeed. It reminds me to be humble about mentoring, not to judge students, and never predict what they can't do. Happily, they will surprise you!"

### **Diversity Case (Field Work): All Alone**

I have a motivated undergraduate student who does lab work for me during the school year, and I wanted to hire him to help me with field work for the summer. He accepted the position, which involved living and working at a field station a few hours away from our university. Other graduate students and undergrads also lived on station, and everyone had to share rooms, cabins, and general space. When my undergraduate asked me questions about what it was like to live on station, I told him that it was a lot of fun and that usually by the end of the summer, everyone became a tight-knit community.

When the field season started, I noticed that my student didn't often participate in social events on station. Every night after work was finished he would just sit alone in his cabin and chat with his friends online. In the beginning, some of the other undergraduates made an effort to invite him, but he always politely declined. I wondered if it was because he was the only Asian student at the station. In fact, he was probably the only Asian person in the whole town that summer. I didn't know how to ask him about it, and eventually everyone just accepted that he wasn't interested in hanging out and stopped inviting him to events.

### **Diversity Case (Math): Inappropriate Advances**

Celia is working on complex interacting systems and suspects that progress on her thesis may depend on techniques from the theory of contact processes. She visits the office of Professor Casaubon, a leading expert on the subject, and explains how she thinks her problem can be formulated so that it connects to his area. Casaubon gives her books and notes to read, she masters the material quickly, and solves her problem. Celia goes back to visit Casaubon and describes her work. He is quite impressed, and soon mentions her accomplishment to several colleagues. A few days later the professor, who is considerably older than Celia, but single and lonely, asks her out on a date. She is shocked and perplexed since she has been hoping to get a strong recommendation from Casaubon. When she tries to turn him down in the most careful way possible, he does not seem perceptibly upset or disappointed. But in the end, she doesn't trust him enough to ask for a letter, no longer wants to interact with him, and requests a reference from another faculty member who doesn't know her research particularly well.

### **Diversity Case (Math): Adhering to Stereotypes**

One day Professor Montalban, the math department's undergraduate program coordinator, received an e-mail from her colleague Professor Julia who had a math major doing research for him. The message explained that the student's undergraduate advisor had said, "Asians are not good at theoretical questions. Perhaps it would be better if you did an applied math major." Both professors were livid! They met and agreed to ask for the name of the student's advisor, so Montalban could explain the fine points of appropriate mentoring. The next day they met again. Julia reported that the undergraduate student had declared her advisor was Professor Montalban. When Julia asked if the student was sure, the student explained, "It was a woman with long, curly hair, European."

### **Diversity Case (Math): Crossing the Line**

Catherine had been working with her Ph.D. advisor, Professor Eisenstein, for several years when they started having a relationship. Half a year later they broke up. A short while later, Eisenstein told Catherine that her thesis was not satisfactory, and that she should not expect to finish any time soon. Upon reflection she agreed with him that it was no good, and decided he was just being objective. Until then she had received positive progress reports, but now he told her he would not read the thesis. The department was surprised but, after some behind-the-scenes deliberations, arranged to have another faculty member sign her dissertation and let her graduate. Catherine quit doing research right after that, married, had kids, and went to work in industry.