LONG-DISTANCE MENTORING

Engaging in mentoring from a distance can lead to phenomenal opportunities, but does present some challenges. Here are some tips for making the most of a long-distance mentoring partnership.

Discuss expectations up front
Complete the Mentoring Partnership Agreement Form. Determine who is responsible for initiating contact. How often will you meet? How will you set up your meetings? When using email, what is the appropriate “turn-around time” for responding? Establishing basic ground rules will clear the way for a focus on discussion and exchange of ideas and advice.

Make it personal
Instead of only using phone and email, use video chat to make your conversations feel less virtual and more “real” and to show that you are truly investing the time to get to know one another. You don’t need to use video chat every time, but you are encouraged to try it at least every other meeting.

Switch it up
Diversify your activities or conversation topics. If you have a great conversation over video chat one month, maybe the next month you can focus on reviewing resumes or a class project. Students can send materials over email and the mentor can offer feedback by marking up the documents themselves and over the phone. Job and internship screening interviews often take place via Skype or phone: mentors can offer great practice interview opportunities.

Grow your networks both in the Twin Cities and in the mentor’s location
Mentors can connect students with contacts in the Twin Cities to engage in informational meetings, site visits, or job-shadowing. If the student is interested in opportunities in the mentor’s area, local contacts can benefit the student’s experience also.

Tips on using phone, Skype, and email in a long-distance mentoring relationship

- Avoid multi-tasking
When on the phone, Facetime, or Skype, give the conversation your full attention. Try to avoid interruptions and listen actively. Let your mentor or student know in advance if you are taking notes or may be interrupted by a meeting or phone call.

- Be spontaneous
Between your scheduled check-ins, allow yourselves to send a quick email or make a phone call to share news, ask a question, or send a thank-you or hello. Spontaneous contact helps build rapport. However, mentees, make sure you are not sending a quick email to get help on something you could easily solve yourself.

- Lost in translation
Phone and email limits our abilities to both express and interpret body language and tone. Be attentive to one another, and check in if you are unsure of either your tone or your mentor/student's tone. Do not make assumptions about a perceived tone when you receive emails.

- Set a topic of discussion in advance
Deciding on a topic or agenda ahead of time will ensure you are making the most of your time together. Some long-distance mentoring pairs find reading an article to discuss at the beginning of a video chat to be a good way to break the ice and get the conversation flowing.
ADVICE FROM LONG-DISTANCE MENTORING PARTICIPANTS FROM AROUND THE U:

“As a displaced Minnesotan, I am often home at or around the holiday season. An on campus or in person get together helps to make video conferencing more natural for future meetings.”

“Video conferencing is the most simple way to have an effective long-distance mentoring relationship, but it is also the most effective. Speaking over the phone doesn’t cut it for lengthy conversations.”

“Set up a time to “meet for coffee” over video conferencing. When you are both sitting down with a coffee in front of you and conversing, it really feels like you are sitting across the table from one another at a coffee shop. To get over initial awkwardness, it helps to have both people read an article beforehand to discuss.”

“My mentor moved away from Minnesota shortly after the mentor program began so we only met in person once. We overcame the distance by sending emails to communicate with one another. She sent me contact information of professionals she knew in the cities, and I was able to contact them to set up a job shadow, so that was great.”

“I would like to encourage future mentors and mentees to not let distance stop you from doing the mentorship program. Although face to face meetings are rare, we have been able to maintain our connection through the various technological methods that are available. Successful mentorship can happen even given that long-distance relationship.”

“All of my communication with my mentor took place via email and through phone conversations. I knew she was a very busy person and it would be my responsibility to reach out to her. Because we communicated mostly via email, I felt very comfortable emailing her whenever I had a simple question and I did not feel the need to wait until our next phone call to ask. I didn’t need to worry about picking a place to meet my mentor or allowing myself extra travel time to meet because I could literally take her phone call anywhere I was. I also sent my application materials to her through email and she would critique them, send them back, and then converse with me about them. We could go back and forth like this several times in one week. Some of the things we talked about included: how to pick the right school for me, what things to look for and ask on the visits I went on, critiquing of my application materials, and interview practice. Because our relationship was primarily through email, I would feel comfortable contacting her anytime I had a question later down the road. Even though we have never met, I believe we created a long-lasting relationship. I am very glad I decided to join the mentor program.”

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