Mentoring Can Be an Effective Professional Development Experience to Enhance or Expand Your Career

As recently as the 1980s, education was not universally approached as a lifelong process except to maintain certification, but at present, dietetics practitioners are keenly aware that lifelong learning has evolved from simply being important to something that is essential to achieve professional success. In fact, in 1980, Malcolm S. Knowles, a noted educator often referred to as the “father of adult learning,” predicted that lifelong learning would inevitably become the organizing principle of education, and a few decades later, the term lifelong learning is part of the everyday vernacular in education circles, with many university departments featuring the title lifelong learning and offering courses on this topic.

An important component of lifelong learning—for both the seasoned practitioner and the student—is the mentoring program of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics, which can be beneficial to members looking to expand or change their career in dietetics. In a field as multifaceted and extensive as dietetics, locating a mentor who comprehends specific professional challenges, interests, and career goals can be a key part of the lifelong learning process for registered dietitians (RDs), dietetic technicians, registered (DTRs), and students.

The Academy provides mentoring opportunities through a variety of channels—several dietetic practice groups and member interest groups offer mentoring programs, and there are many affiliate programs as well. The Academy’s web-based eMentoring program, launched in January 2011, was developed to provide users a cost-effective, flexible platform without the limits imposed by geography, and the opportunity for members to earn valuable continuing professional education (CPE).

eMentoring and CPE
In addition to enhancing an RD’s career and expanding his or her professional network, participating in the Academy’s eMentoring program offers both mentees and mentors the opportunity to earn CPE credit by reading approved self-study materials. In addition, mentees may earn CPE credit by planning and implementing a Sponsored Independent Learning (SIL) activity with the guidance and input of a mentor. See the figure for a sample SIL contract.

CPE Credit for Mentors and Mentees
Participants are required to read a packet of approved self-study articles and exercises on the topic of mentoring and successfully complete a postassessment quiz. Currently, this self-study packet is composed of the following articles (please note: this is subject to change):

- “Mentoring 101: Building a Mentoring Relationship,” which addresses what makes a good mentor and the role of the mentee;
- “Instant Mentoring: Sharing Wisdom and Getting Advice Online with eMentoring,” which includes information on the benefits of eMentoring and tips for getting started; and
- “California’s Professional Mentoring Program: How To Develop a Statewide Mentoring Program,” which outlines steps for developing a regional mentoring program.

According to Diane Moore Enos, MPH, RD, director of Professional Development for the Academy, these self-study exercises were developed to benefit all professionals, particularly mentors, because they provide a map for guiding perspec-

CPE Credit for Mentees
Grady Barnhill, director of Recertification and Professional Assessment for the Commission on Dietetic Registration, suggests mentees start this program by first deciding what dietetics-related field the member would like the SIL to focus on. For example, a mentee might want to learn how to build a website to promote their business or services, or an RD might require the input of a mentor in a more clinical-related matter. The next step would be for the mentee to search the eMentoring platform for a member who is an expert in that area or field and then connect with the mentor to establish an official match. Once all of the interactions are complete, the mentor will sign the contract for the mentee, and both parties are advised to keep a copy on file.

As members develop their Learning Plan—which is an important part of their Professional Development Portfolio—it is important to note that 1 CPE unit (CPEU) is equivalent to 2 contact hours with a mentor and/or the activity. “During each 5-year recertification cycle, RD mentees can earn a maximum of 50 CPEU, whereas DTR mentees can earn a maximum of 35 CPEU,” explains Barnhill. The 2-to-1 credit ratio was established in anticipation that the mentor/mentee relationship “would naturally include some slippage during these in vivo learning experiences,” adds Barnhill, “due to the on-and-off nature of shadowing someone during their daily activities.”

To join the Academy’s eMentoring database, participants are required to register first, as a member’s Academy username and password will not automatically pro-

This article was written by Tony Peregrin, editor and writer for a Chicago-based medical association and freelance writer in Chicago, IL.

Figure. A sample Sponsored Independent Learning (SIL) contract. (continued on next page)
**Sponsored Independent Learning Contract**

To be completed only by those using this activity type (see instructions in the Professional Development Portfolio Guide, page 13, for Activity Type 220, Sponsored Independent Learning).

**Learner Name:** John Smith  
**CDR Credential:** RD  
**Registration #:** 85001234  
**Sponsor Name:** Lindy Lyber  
**Title:** IT Associate  
**Institution:** University of Wisconsin  
**Phone Number:** 123-456-7890

**Learning Need:**

Which learning need(s) from your Step 3: Learning Plan does this learning contract address? List the learning need/s being addressed.

- 1020 - Computer, electronic technology
- 1000 - Professional Skills
- Expand professional skills in website development

**Learning Outcome:**

What do you intend to learn? Describe the learning outcomes (skills, knowledge, or behaviors) you will be able to demonstrate following completion of this learning contract. The outcomes must be measurable or observable, clearly stated, and focus on what you will be able to demonstrate.

As a result of my learning, I will...

- Learn about HTML coding, web extensions, Adobe Dreamweaver, web development, and maintenance at a beginner’s level.

**Learning Resources and Activities:**

How will you accomplish each learning outcome? Describe the resources (material and/or human) you plan to use to achieve the learning outcome and the activities (techniques and/or tools) you will employ.

- Will read "HTML for Dummies", complete Dreamweaver tutorial, shadow the IT professional for hands-on experience, and will utilize additional web resources as needed.

**Target Number of Hours Needed to Accomplish Learning Outcomes:**

How much time will you devote to achieving each learning outcome through the activities described? List the hours you anticipate spending on each activity. You must keep track of these hours in order to receive CPEUs for the activities. Remember that two hours of activity equals one CPEU.

- 40 hours - Rosetta Stone
- 10 hours - Meeting with my sponsor to practice my skills

**Target Completion Date:**

When will your learning outcomes be met? List your target date:

- 12/31/2013

**Evidence of Learning Outcome(s) Achievement:**

How will you know if you have achieved the learning outcomes? List the evidence you will use to measure achievement of your learning outcomes. Examples of evidence include a peer audit, chart review, completion of a project, publication, self-assessment, question-and-answer session.

I will complete levels 1, 2, & 3 of Rosetta Stone's Spanish language education program, as well as meet with my sponsor, who will test my skills to ensure that I am a competent speaker of the language.

**Sponsor and Learner Agreement:**

We have discussed the Independent Learning Contract and agree to implement the activities outlined in this plan.

**Signature of Learner:** Jane Doe  
**Date:** 3/8/2012

**Signature of Sponsor:** David Smith  
**Date:** 3/8/2012

**Complete this section after learning outcomes have been demonstrated:**

I verify that the learner has devoted 50 hours towards achieving the learning plan outcomes and produced evidence of such achievement. Describe the evidence and attach documentation, if applicable.

**Signature of Sponsor:** David Smith  
**Date:** 11/2/2013

---

**Figure.** (continued) A sample Sponsored Independent Learning (SIL) contract. (continued on next page)
**Sponsored Independent Learning Contract**

To be completed only by those using this activity type (see instructions in the Professional Development Portfolio Guide, page 13, for Activity Type 220, Sponsored Independent Learning).

**Learner Name:** Jane Doe  
**CDR Credential:** RD  
**Registration #:** 4321  
**Sponsor Name:** David Smith  
**Title:** Faculty  
**Institution:** Ohio State University  
**Phone Number:** 555-555-5555

### Learning Need:

Which learning need(s) from your Step 3: Learning Plan does this learning contract address? List the learning need(s) being addressed. 

- 1130 - Verbal communication skills, presentations
- 1040 - Cultural sensitivity
- 1060 - Foreign language, cultures

### Learning Objective:

What do you intend to learn? Describe the learning outcomes (skills, knowledge, or behaviors) you will be able to demonstrate following completion of this learning contract. The outcomes must be measurable or observable, clearly stated, and focus on what you will be able to demonstrate.

As a result of my learning, I will...

...be able to better communicate with Spanish-speaking members of my client base for whom English is a second language.

### Learning Resources and Activities:

How will you accomplish each learning outcome? Describe the resources (material and/or human) you plan to use to achieve the learning outcome and the activities (techniques and/or tools) you will employ.

I will complete Rosetta Stone levels 1, 2, & 3 in order to help gain a better command of the Spanish Language.

---

**Target Number of Hours Needed to Accomplish Learning Outcomes:**

How much time will you devote to achieving each learning outcome through the activities described? List the hours you anticipate spending on each activity. You must keep track of these hours in order to receive CPEUs for the activities. Remember that two hours of activity equals one CPEU.

- Reading - 8 hrs, Tutorial - 6 hrs, Hands-on experience - 16 hrs

---

**Target Completion Date:**

When will your learning outcomes be met? List your target date: January 15, 2014

---

**Evidence of Learning Outcome(s) Achievement:**

How will you know if you have achieved the learning outcomes? List the evidence you will use to measure achievement of your learning outcomes. Examples of evidence include a peer audit, chart review, completion of a project, publication, self-assessment, question-and-answer session.

I will demonstrate learning achievement by constructing a rudimentary website on nutrition guidelines for dialysis patients. Though just a beginning, I can add to the site as my skills develop.

---

**Sponsor and Learner Agreement:**

We have discussed the Independent Learning Contract and agree to implement the activities outlined in the plan.

Signature of Learner: [Signature]  
Date: 2/10/2013

Signature of Sponsor: [Signature]  
Date: 2/11/2013

---

**Complete this section after learning outcomes have been demonstrated:**

I verify that the learner has devoted 30 hours towards achieving the learning plan outcomes and produced evidence of such achievement.

Describe the evidence and attach documentation, if applicable.

Signature of Sponsor: [Signature]  
Date: January 15, 2014

---

*Figure.* (continued) A sample Sponsored Independent Learning (SIL) contract.
vide a user with access to the site. The member should then complete an online profile to be added to the database. The system uses these data to search for available mentor or mentee matches who best fit a user’s selected areas of interest, practice, geographic location, number of years in the field, languages spoken, and even preferred communication style.

The eMentoring platform can connect participants no matter what region they happen to live in,” says Moore Enos. “This platform allows mentees to be matched up with a true expert in their field, regardless of physical location of both the mentor and mentee.”

YOU’RE REGISTERED—NOW WHAT?

After a member has created a profile in the Academy’s eMentoring database as either a mentor or mentee, he or she will be taken to a “My Mentoring” page that features the eMentoring messaging system. The user will then click on “View Matches” to review suggested matches based on the percentage of commonality between the individual’s profile. After users click on a potential mentor or mentee’s name they will be able to view a partial profile, and at that point will have the option to click on the “Request Mentor” or “Request Mentee” buttons on the right side of the screen to send an e-mail request.

**DIETETIC PRACTICE AND MEMBER INTEREST GROUPS WITH MENTORING PROGRAMS**

**Dietetic Practice Groups (DPGs)**
- Diabetes Care and Education
- Dietitians in Business and Communications
- Dietitians in Food & Culinary Professionals
- Dietetics in Health Care Communities
- Dietitians in Nutrition Support
- Food and Culinary Professionals
- Management in Food and Nutrition Systems
- Nutrition Entrepreneurs
- Pediatric Nutrition
- Sports, Cardiovascular and Wellness Nutrition
- Vegetarian Nutrition
- Weight Management
- Women’s Health

**Member Interest Groups (MIGs)**
- National Organization of Blacks in Dietetics and Nutrition
- Latinos and Hispanics in Dietetics and Nutrition
- Muslims in Dietetics and Nutrition

Once a match has been established, it is suggested that both parties confer on goals, communication style, meeting frequency, and an overall relationship timeline. The eMentoring platform allows mentors and mentees to send messages to each other by the website’s dashboard, with new messages appearing according to date and time. The platform also features a chat function (located on the lower right portion of the screen) that allows users to send messages to each other in real time. (Note: the platform currently allows a user to be either a mentor or a mentee, but not both.)
One of the nice things about online mentoring is that, because people’s lives move so fast, and because users needs are constantly changing, the eMentoring program allows users to address needs as they come up, instead of users relying on a face-to-face meeting at a regional event,” observes Barnhill. In fact, research suggests that the increase of online learning opportunities has been a great way to expand access for professionals working full time. 5

TIPS FOR SUCCESSFUL eMENTORING

The American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE) offers its members web-based mentoring opportunities through its eCareerMentor program. As with the Academy’s eMentoring program, the ASCE’s offering is intended for members at all stages of their careers. According to the ASCE, there are many benefits to an online mentoring program as electronic communication eliminates barriers imposed by time and location, but online mentoring also comes with its own set of unique challenges. 5 Specifically, e-mail communication lacks the body language and vocal tone cues of face-to-face exchanges, so ASCE eMentoring coordinators encourage their mentors to make careful, clear communications a top priority. The ASCE offers the following tips for mentors engaged in an online mentoring relationship:

- Be realistic about what can be achieved online, and set goals based on how often the mentor/mentee will connect.
- Talk about yourself and describe your present position, preferably in a positive light.
- Listen carefully and be sure to read the entire e-mail message; ask questions, if necessary.
- Respond in a timely manner. If you don’t have time to respond to a mentee, send them a note to let them know you will get back with them in a specific timeframe.
- Communicate “e-motions,” including emoticons, carefully to be sure intentions are not improperly interpreted. Be professional in your e-communications.
- Spark conversations. Be proactive in reaching out to mentees.
- Offer positive reinforcement.
- Be open and honest, and communicate any concerns in a respectful and clear language.
- Avoid multitasking during an eMentoring session, and give the mentee your full attention.

According to the American Society of Association Executives, mentee involvement is equally important to the mentor’s role when it comes to building a successful mentoring relationship, and the organization offers the following guidelines for mentees:

- Be prepared for your mentoring sessions.
- Establish a mutually agreeable plan for mentoring sessions, including how much time each of you need if a session has to be postponed.
- Focus on the relationship, rather than outcomes.
- Ask direct questions about what you most want to know.
- Practice learning from anyone.
- Listen with an open mind.
- Provide context and brief updates to help your mentor understand you.
- Respect your mentor’s boundaries.
- Follow-up on agreements.
- Say “thank you!”

As is the case with traditional mentoring, it is important for both mentors and mentees to remember that eMentoring is not counseling or therapy session. Although personal issues may arise during the course of the relationship, it’s essential that both parties focus on professional development as the ultimate goal of eMentoring. 7

IMPACT OF MENTORING

Lifelong learning is increasingly recognized by educators, employers, and the general public as one of the most important competencies for professionals in today’s workforce. 2 Tapping into the knowledge and experiences of seasoned dietetics practitioners through a mentoring program can be a viable component of an RD’s lifelong learning plan, and can be a smart way for RDs to expand or even change directions in their career.

A successful mentoring program not only boosts an RD’s career, it can also contribute to the association’s strategic goals. According to an article published by the American Society of Association Executives, “mentoring can have an exceptional impact on the legacy aspect of any organization by providing continuity from one generation of leaders to the next.”8 “From the perspective of the overall mission of the Academy—to empower members to be the nation’s food and nutrition leaders—mentoring programs elevate the entire field,” says Moore Enos.

References