A Quick Guide to Mentoring Student Employees & Interns

Serving as a campus student employee or working in an internship role are both important professional development opportunities for students during their time in college. As leaders and facilitators of student growth, supervisors can intentionally put into place supports and structures to make these work experiences transformational for the student, connects the work to individual goals, and builds skills and competencies that are critical to succeeding not only as a student but in their post-graduate careers and lives as well. This Quick Guide to Mentoring Student Employees & Interns offers tips and strategies for supporting the student’s experience while they are working in your office or on your team, beyond just the day-to-day work tasks they will perform.

As a supervisor, you may not be asked to serve as a formal mentor to the student workers who work for you, but there are still opportunities to use effective mentoring strategies to elevate their experience. These strategies - setting clear expectations, getting to know the mentee as an individual, setting goals, engaging in intentional conversations, providing feedback, and celebrating successes - are key not only to mentoring relationships but to effective supervisory relationships as well. By incorporating these strategies into your management practice, you will build better relationships, create and uphold accountability, and deepen the learning that happens through the work.

Here at Wake Forest, we define mentoring as a purposeful and personal relationship in which a more experienced person (mentor) provides guidance, feedback, and wisdom to facilitate the growth and development of a less experienced person (mentee). Effective mentors ask themselves:

- How can I keep the student’s growth and development as a personal commitment, even as they are completing their assigned work?
- How can I serve as a facilitator of that growth and development?
- How can I be intentional in the relationship that I develop with this student?

Use the strategies on the following pages to develop your own mentoring and management practices.

---

Set Clear Expectations

Effective mentoring and management relationships thrive on clear expectations. At the beginning of the year, sit down with your student employee or intern to discuss expectations for the office, the work, and your relationship together. Share a job description with clear measures of success. Be sure to offer these expectations in written form (online is fine) so the student can refer to them throughout their time in your office, team, and/or organization. Talk about the student’s short- and long-term scope of work and explain how their work fits into the overall goals of the office. Some potential topics for conversation:

© 2023 Mentoring Resource Center, Wake Forest University
● How the student’s work will be evaluated
● How you plan to offer feedback
● How the student can offer feedback to you
● How the student should interact with other members of the office, other students, visitors, colleagues, clients, etc.
● Office, team, or organization expectations, mission, and goals
● How often you will meet with the student employee or intern
● Expectations around confidentiality

Discuss and reiterate expectations at the beginning of each new project, so the student knows exactly what to do to be successful. Don’t make assumptions that they understand the work that your office or team does, why you do it the way that you do, or how you would like to see work delivered. Sharing clear expectations upfront allows for more supportive and intentional feedback conversations down the road.

Get to Know the Student as a Person

Mentoring is a relationship, and like any other, it requires trust and a comfortable level of rapport. It takes time and energy to develop this dynamic and relationship with another person, and that means engaging in ongoing conversations to get to know the student as an individual. Some questions you can ask:

● Where are they from?
● How did they end up at Wake Forest?
● What are they studying and why?
● What are they particularly interested in?
● What extracurricular activities do they enjoy?
● What kinds of tasks do they enjoy and why?
● What skills would they like to develop while they are in this role?

These are all great questions to engage the student in conversation, to start getting to know their interests, and to demonstrate sincere interest in their lives and growth. Offer them the same individual respect that you would with any other member of your team.

Additionally, you can start to build trust and set the foundation for open communication by sharing a bit about your own story, as well:

● Where are you from and how did you end up in your current job role?
● How did you make the decision to work in your career industry or field?
● What are the best and most challenging parts of your work?
● How do you spend your free time?
● How does your role build upon your skills and strengths?

Building trust and rapport takes time. It won’t happen in one conversation. Demonstrating consistent interest and genuine care in who they are as a person is a great first step.

© 2023 Mentoring Resource Center, Wake Forest University
**Set Goals**

Not only will you have specific, task-oriented goals for the student to complete as part of their student employment or internship obligations, once you get to know the student a little better, encourage them to set 1-2 personal developmental goals. These can connect to the work that they are doing in the office or can sit outside of it. Some topics for goals might include:

- Exploring values, interests, and strengths to gain clarity on self and direction
- Researching resources on campus to support personal interests and needs
- Learning new skills such as communication, presentation, project management, or leadership
- Specific academic goals connected to major or longer-term career interests

As you talk with the student about their goals, help them identify different resources that can help them to take intentional steps forward. When possible, connect the work they are doing in your office or team to their goals. For example, if they are interested in developing project management skills, try to identify a project within your office which can support this goal. Making these sorts of direct connections between the work they are doing and their personal goals will deepen their engagement with the work, benefiting them as well as you and your team.

**Build in Intentional Conversations**

Any effective relationship requires ongoing and regular communication. Look for opportunities to have intentional conversations with the student about the tasks that they are working on, about their experience in your work setting, and about their progress towards their goals. Ask open-ended questions (questions that cannot be answered with a simple “yes” or “no”) that inspire deeper reflection and conversation. Help them to connect their experiences to their goals and look for ways that you can connect them to resources, opportunities, and other people.

Create regular check-in meetings about the work they are doing for you, to revisit expectations and uphold accountability. Part of the experience of these first professional roles is to learn how to do work; look for opportunities to have intentional conversations about the work environment, the role and value of what they are working on, and how the work of your team or department supports the larger mission and vision of the organization.

And remember, they are students first, particularly if they are working while classes are in session. Consistent, ongoing communication around expectations and workload will go a long way to creating a supportive manager-student relationship. Talk about boundaries. What does it mean to be an employee or intern in your office, and not just a student? What are your expectations around communications, navigating conflict, and time management?
Once you have gotten to know the student better it is a great time to introduce the conversation around boundaries. Many college students have never engaged with discussions around setting and maintaining boundaries and this is a great opportunity for you to model that for them. The experience that they have setting personal and professional boundaries while working with you will help them navigate other professional environments after they graduate. Leading up to this conversation should be several discussions around recognizing and engaging with different communication styles, navigating conflict and taking feedback. This is an opportunity for you to educate the student on these topics but also for the student to provide feedback to you on your own management, leadership, and communication styles.

Provide Feedback

One of the gifts of mentoring is that it provides a space for individuals to do the hard work of personal growth, including staying open to supportive, objective feedback. Great feedback is:

- **Immediate** – delivered as close to the experience as possible
- **Objective** – focused on concrete, objective actions and behaviors
- **Impactful** – clearly states the impact of the action or behavior on others

Here are a couple of examples:

“Yesterday when you were thirty minutes late to work it prevented us from completing the project we were working on which resulted in us not being able to meet a deadline.”

“This morning when you volunteered to cover the front desk it really demonstrated teamwork and a positive attitude, which are two of our most important values in this office.”

You don’t need to provide feedback every day. But make sure that you are building in regular opportunities to talk with the student employee or intern about what they are doing well, and where they can grow and develop. And, encourage them to seek out feedback from others, which is a skill that they will take with them beyond Wake Forest. If they are comfortable with it, you can invite them to share what they are learning from these feedback conversations with you, for another intentional learning moment.

Celebrate Successes

Be sure to celebrate successes along the way. This means celebrating the work and specific tasks as they are completed, and also celebrating who the student is as an individual person. A mentoring relationship is all about being invested in another person and their growth and development. Everyone wants to know that what they do makes a difference and matters to other people. Make sure that your student knows that as well.
Serve As a Future Reference

After the student employment or internship experience ends, you might want to stay in touch with the student and follow-up about their future career plans. If the student was a high-performer and someone who you would be willing to recommend to other employers, consider offering to be a reference for future job applications or graduate programs. You could also write a general letter of recommendation that they can use for opportunities down the line.

Ultimately, we can all benefit from maintaining professional relationships and connections. LinkedIn is a great tool for adding student employees and interns to your professional network, plus it provides a communications channel for them to stay in touch with you moving forward.