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Mentoring Is for Everyone— Make a Plan, Find Your Role



Editor’s Note: In an effort to provide environmental health professionals with relevant information and tools to further the profession, their careers, and themselves, NEHA has teamed up with the American Academy of Sanitarians (AAS) to publish three columns a year in the *Journal*. AAS is an organization that “elevates the standards, improves the practice, advances the professional proficiency, and promotes the highest levels of ethical conduct among professional sanitarians in every field of environmental health.” Membership with AAS is based upon meeting certain high standards and criteria, and AAS members represent a prestigious list of environmental health professionals from across the country.

Through the column, information from different AAS members who are subject-matter experts with knowledge and experience in a multitude of environmental health topics will be presented to the *Journal’s* readership. This column strengthens the ties between both associations in the shared purposes of furthering and enhancing the environmental health profession.

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As we mature and develop in our personal and professional lives, our perception of mentorship changes and we begin to see how broad the definition of mentoring can be.

As I reflect on my years in high school, I think back to my principal and to the teachers who took a special interest in me and encouraged me to remain focused. That was a great example of mentorship to me at the time and remains as one of the most important times in my life. As an undergraduate student at Western Carolina University, I

thought of a mentor as someone who would guide me through my college career and help me make employment connections. It was there that I met my long-time mentor and eventual colleague, Professor Joe E. Beck. As was expected, I became a mentor because of my involvement with environmental health and with various organizations on campus.

I realized the true power of mentorship when I left college and began the next chapter of my life. As I moved through my career as a practitioner, I began to see a mentor as someone who could help in adjusting to a

new workplace or to a new responsibility. I have always had great mentors around me and I owe my success to a number of individuals—many of whom are NEHA and American Academy of Sanitarians (AAS) members! Environmental health has always been a very close-knit profession and mentorship has been a part of what NEHA’s Annual Educational Conference (AEC) & Exhibition have helped to accomplish for decades. My introduction to NEHA was actually at a Student National Environmental Health Association (SNEHA) meeting as an undergraduate at Western Carolina University. As a professional woman who continues to develop her career, I have mentored several students, young practitioners, and new faculty over the years. I have learned that a good mentor must also be a good mentee and be able to assume a number of changing roles such as that of a listener, a confidant, a motivator, and many other necessary roles to help others excel in life.

What is your definition of mentoring? Is it a series of chance encounters at a professional meeting or venue, or is it the purposeful process of getting to know another professional who may influence you in some way? In today’s world of instant access to digital information and technology, it’s easy to see why students and young professionals sometimes turn to social media or other sources for career guidance and personal development. These are wonderful sources of information when coupled with the attention and time of a mentor. As I touched on earlier, mentoring comes in many forms and circumstances. Merriam Webster’s dictionary defines the term “mentor” as a *trusted guide or counselor*. The mentors I have connected with helped me to

maneuver difficult situations and move ahead with my life. Joe E. Beck taught me more than I could ever share in this article or even put into words, but suffice it to say that he showed me the true power of mentorship. We began as strangers and we went full circle to become colleagues. Our future generations of environmental health leaders deserve to have that from us. As the landscape of environmental health continues to change, and as our current leaders retire and move on, we will need new professionals to replace them and this is where mentoring culminates (Roberts, 2010).

We should not count on mentoring to happen by chance or accident; we must be purposeful in using our time to mentor our future leaders. In other words, we need a plan to implement the process of developing the next generation of leaders in environmental health.

AAS has always taken the time and interest to mentor students and young professionals who want to be leaders in our profession. AAS has done so with the collaboration and support of NEHA for many years. Past mentoring opportunities at NEHA with AAS include one-on-one sessions with AAS members, panel discussions, roundtable scenarios, and a student lounge where conference attendees could connect with each other. While these opportunities have worked and should continue, the challenges in reaching young professionals and students are different today than they were for past generations. Mentoring is most effective when done in person; however, getting mentors and mentees together at the AEC and other conferences like it is cost prohibitive. Without the advantages of SNEHA and other events I was fortunate enough to

attend, how can we bring young professionals and students together with mentors? Using social media such as LinkedIn, Twitter, and Facebook will help, but we still need more to bring everyone together. We need a strategic plan that AAS, NEHA, and other affiliate organizations can participate in to expand and strengthen the mentoring opportunities for young professionals and students. So if you're a practitioner and you have a college degree, that means you know how to plan, right? As it turns out, that is not always the case. We may often have good intentions, but creating a plan and putting it into action is easier said than done. Why is that? Because "true planning requires that we identify the desired outcome and the values that outcome will deliver, then form a vision and contrast it against other potential outcomes (Beck & Pressley, 2007)." Instead of planning, most of us like to sail into the future and see how it goes. This will not work for the current and future needs of environmental health because we have to consider the alternative outcomes. What if we don't have enough faculty members to teach at accredited environmental health science bachelor's programs to produce new professionals to mentor? What funds will be available to get new professionals and students to future AECs so they can meet new mentors? How will the workforce demands be different for future professionals?

I have been fortunate to have many types of mentors throughout my life and I want to give that to those who will follow me. I accept the challenge of creating a mentoring structure that will give life to future generations of environmental health professionals. What will your

role be? There are enough needs for everyone to be involved. Make your presence known, share your knowledge, and get involved in some way. You can mentor someone for a short time or you can make a lifetime commitment—as so many have in environmental health. Obviously, the impact will be greater if you devote more time. I have the incredible fortune of helping undergraduate and graduate students everyday in my role as a professor and an academic administrator. I can say with certainty that the future of our profession depends on your involvement as a mentor and/or a supporter of mentoring. To create successful outcomes, universities have had to become more intrusive in teaching and mentoring their students. We can no longer assume that students understand how to embrace a mentor or know how to create a plan for their lives. This is where you and I can make a difference in shaping the future of environmental health. Join me and together we can ensure that our next generation is ready for the challenges ahead. **Keep Calm and Become a Mentor!** 🌳

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