

ESSIC Mentoring Program

Background

ESSIC has a large number of Professional Track Faculty (PTK) that are supported from largely competitively funded federal Cooperative Agreements. While many of these personnel have offices within ESSIC in College Park, others have off-site workplaces, such as those located at NASA (primarily Greenbelt, MD) and NOAA (Silver Spring and College Park, MD). This mentoring program aims to draw together these researchers, both on- and off-site to provide a cohesive mentorship structure to enhance their ongoing experience and career paths.

The purpose of this program, in its' first iteration, is to build upon or add to (rather than replace) existing mentoring structures. Some off-site workplaces have emerging mentoring programs focused on the entire mix of workforce at the location (e.g., federal, contractor and ESSIC scientists); however, this scheme would be UMD/ESSIC orientated, and of particular benefit for those with a career lifetime within the university research sector.

(Note that 'workplace' is used below to denote the location of the PTK's primary office as opposed to, specifically ESSIC, CNMS or UMD).

Mentoring Structure

The form of the proposed mentoring program is designed to be flexible, not least to allow it to adapt to different user requirements and circumstances as needs arise during its development stage. The overall goal of such a scheme is therefore addressing the goals of the individual PTK, which thereby also benefits their workplace environment.

The program will be based upon commonly used 'mentoring circles' and designed so that (eventually all) employees from across all levels within ESSIC can share their knowledge and experience with others within, and across each mentoring circle. While the meetings will be largely mentor-based meetings, they should allow the mentees themselves to meet up and share relevant experience and information to help improve and advance the program as a whole.

The size of each group will be determined by local needs (i.e., potentially aligned by PTK that support particular NASA or NOAA units, aligned by ESSIC research themes, etc.) but will be sufficiently dynamic to allow new employees to join, as well as allow adaptation to changing workplace requirements and external issues. Importantly, a range of seniority and experience would be included that reflects the overall ESSIC workforce and real-life experience. It should be noted however, that this mentorship program also envisages cross-cutting activities that allow both working within mentor groups, but also through interacting with other groups to share not only common experiences, but also new and challenging situations.

As the program progresses and matures a number of key performance indicators will be used to assess the value of the mentoring program to the individual and organization. The flexibility of the scheme will allow adjustments to be made where necessary.

The overall goal of the program is therefore to exploit the wealth of experience of senior researchers to help new, or early-career researchers, as well as provide feedback of new ideas. These senior researchers, taking the role of mentors will through their leadership and communication skills with their co-workers, be able to advise, develop new perspectives and identify talent and potential for leadership roles. The mentoring groups will (where necessary) providing onboarding to help individuals with adapting to new workplace routines, skills development networking, and gaining visibility for future promotions or career path development.

The development of this mentoring program has a number of key outcomes:

- provide mentees with guidance, advice and feedback on performance and career paths;
- help employees become more effective in their roles;
- boost employee engagement within ESSIC, CNMS and UMD, as well as within their working environment;
- strengthen connections within ESSIC and their particular workplace, and;
- enhance and bolster the reputation of ESSIC and their respective workplaces.

Program outline

The mentoring program will have a number of key objectives to:

- provide onboarding and integration of new employees into the working environment;
- help and encourage employees to develop the necessary skills and knowledge;
- encourage and empower employees from all backgrounds;
- assist employees in identifying and achieving their career goals;
- transfer of knowledge and wisdom from established employees to early career path employees;
- provide a productive and healthy relationships between employees to enhance workplace culture and environment.

An important aspect is setting clear expectations to provide a firm foundation for developing and building a successful mentoring program.

In particular, it is expected that the mentors should:

- Clearly communicate advice or guidance.
- Show empathy when listening to your mentees and when providing advice.
- Listen to mentees and understand before providing advice.
- Where possible, enlist others who can help mentees in areas outside your expertise.
- Share experience not just advice to encourage a strong relationship.

In return, mentees should:

- Know their goals and communicate them clearly with their mentor.
- Actively participate in the mentoring.
- Listen to things that are discussed or learned.
- Apply what they learn and provide feedback to their mentor.
- Be proactive: help the mentor to determine subjects for each session.

As part of this it is important to establish a two-way feedback mechanism between the mentors and mentees based around:

- Reflection – appraisal of their own work and how it relates to their development goals;
- Questions – key issues concerning their progression;
- Solutions – path to addressing key issues raised.

Program Implementation

As this is a more formal program than the current ad-hoc mentoring at ESSIC, the implementation of the mentoring program will encompass the following steps:

- Initiate a beta-mentor group, with a single mentor and up to 5-6 mentees. This mentee group should include a diverse set of PTK ranks. The beta group will exist for a 6-month period.
- Goals of the beta-group:
 - Conduct group meetings every 3 months, which will include overarching themes such as paper writing, proposals, task management, communicating research, and promotion planning.
 - Develop a tracking mechanism to identify and monitor career development progress during the test period.
 - Conduct one on one meetings 1 or 2 times during the test period
 - Allow for ad-hoc meetings, both for the group and individual mentees.
- At the completion of the six-month test period, the mentor will meet with the ESSIC Associate Director to report on the effectiveness of the program. Outcomes will include:
 - Refine the original mentor program based on the beta-group experience
 - Develop an ESSIC wide mentor program by identifying mentors and mentor circles
 - Develop linkages to ongoing UMD-wide programs that focus on specific skill sets
 - Etc.

Web-links: <https://gradschool.umd.edu/postdocs/mentoring>