

The Mentoring Advantage

By Julia Quinn-Szcesuil

Want to graduate from high school with a confident attitude and a clear plan? A mentor can help you reach your goals.

“He always expected a lot of me,” says Lindsey Horowitz of Kevin LaCoste, her high school cross-country coach and mentor of four years. “He never wavered in his goals. He encouraged me to keep trying and to get better.”

Starting out as a fast-running freshman, Horowitz, of Stow, Massachusetts, had a less-than-stellar sophomore year and questioned whether or not she could reach as high as LaCoste was telling her she could. “I had her stay focused on her goals and realize there are good and bad days,” says LaCoste. “She ended up doing what I had been telling her she could do for four years: make it to the state championships.”

Horowitz, who now attends Bowdoin College, not only ran in the state championships, but also was captain of the cross-country team her senior year. “He showed me that all the hard work really pays off,” says Horowitz, noting that her self-confidence flourished under LaCoste’s guidance and support.

For many high school students, having someone encourage them and celebrate their success boosts their confidence enough so that they feel like they can accomplish anything.

Beyond High School

At a time when decisions about college applications, career paths, or post-high school life place enormous stress on many students, having a mentor—a trusted adult who can provide support, advice, and guidance—can give you an advantage in almost any decision-making process. In fact, many top-level executives say formal and informal mentors have boosted their career success. And if you have a mentor in high school, you’re more likely to seek other mentors, enhancing your chances for success in many areas.

“It’s so helpful to have an adult say, ‘I understand what you’re up against, and I’ll tell you how to handle it,’” says Gail Manza, Executive Director of MENTOR, a national organization that advocates mentoring. “The extension of the helping hand is really a powerful thing.”

Even if you have a thoughtful post-high school strategy, the best path to success isn’t always clear. And while parents, teachers, and guidance counselors can offer plenty of helpful advice, they may not always have the depth of knowledge you’re looking for.

That's where a mentor can make the difference. It helps to have someone who has been through the process and dealt with all the accompanying emotions. "[A mentor] can help you chart a course," explains Melanie Corrigan, director of National Initiatives at the American Council on Education.

Making Time for a Mentor

Because the high school years are so busy, becoming a mentee can seem like more of an obligation than a benefit to some students, says Michelle Tillis Lederman, founder of Executive Essentials, a training and coaching company in New York City. But finding a mentor in your chosen field is a fantastic way to fine-tune your goals and focus your plans for classes, internships, and volunteer efforts, even if you have already chosen a major. "Mentors can be so beneficial in answering questions," Lederman says. "They can tell you it is okay to not know all the answers. They can give you peace of mind."

Dr. Susan Weinberger (also known as "Dr. Mentor"), author of many books on mentoring, agrees. "A mentor can also help write a resumé, design a business card, explore options for post-secondary education, or even [help with] financial planning." The time you put into mentoring will pay you back many times over. As Kevin LaCoste notes, "Kids are not always confident in their abilities, but as a coach, we are always confident in what they can do."

Getting Started

If you think having a mentor would help you, do a little reflecting to figure out what kind of mentor you want and what you hope to get from your relationship. Perhaps you're feeling overwhelmed by the college decision process and want help narrowing down your choices. Or maybe you want to know what extracurricular activities will prepare you for the career you want. "Find someone who has faced similar challenges and found success," says Lederman.

If you're not comfortable seeking people out and asking for help, a formal mentoring program might suit you. Start with the obvious choices: teachers, coaches, or your school's guidance department. If those don't appeal to you, Dr. Weinberger suggests contacting your local volunteer center or United Way to learn more about mentoring opportunities.

Even if the process of finding a mentor seems awkward, don't be afraid to speak up and tell everyone you know that you want to go to college and that you have questions, suggests Corrigan. If you articulate that, she says, there are people out there who want to help you realize your potential. "The simple things can really change your path."

Making Your Mentoring Relationship the Best It Can Be

Found a mentor? Great! Here's how to make the most of your relationship.

- Don't be afraid to admit that one mentor is more helpful to you than another. Different mentors serve different needs.
- Respect your mentor's time. Be punctual and don't cancel at the last minute. Thank your mentor to let them know they're appreciated.
- Decide what you want to accomplish from your mentoring relationship and realize your mentor can help you in many ways. They have made it through the same questions or challenges that

you are facing now. Listen to what they have to say and adapt it to what you need.

- Determine how you should keep the relationship going. Take the initiative and call your mentor to set up meetings. Ask if it's okay to call or email with questions, and find out how your mentor prefers to be contacted.

- Do your homework. If you're working on college essays, come to your meeting prepared with ideas or even a rough draft. It also helps to keep a record of what you work on or discuss together.

- Periodically reevaluate how your relationship is helping you reach your goals. Speak up if you feel it has gotten off track somehow, and make suggestions as to what will keep you moving forward.

Julia Quinn-Szcesuil is a freelance writer in Bolton, Massachusetts. Her work has been published in many local and national publications.