

# Creating a Mentor Program

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## BACKGROUND

WHILE SIPPING COFFEE IN CARPETED HALLWAYS OR waiting in queues to refill my cup, I find side chats to often be the most memorable parts of a conference. Don't get me wrong—the presentations, map galleries, and training sessions have their merits—but it's in these informal, in-between moments that pearls of insight often emerge. It begins simply: **someone informally seeks knowledge or clarification from someone with a little more experience in a particular area.** From there the idea grows layer by layer, and these freeform conversations can lead to unexpected insights and surprising collaborations, or even grow into brand-new programs. This article introduces you to one such program. I invite you to read through the full details on your first pass, and note that the bolded portions have been selected to serve as key takeaways for easy review later.

In October of 2021, I attended my first NACIS conference, in Oklahoma City. Due to the COVID pandemic, the organization was trying new a hybrid option that led to a significantly smaller in-person attendance. This reduced conference size benefited me, as I was afforded the opportunity for conversations with many seasoned NACIS folks in small groups, which I find less intimidating. These side chats boosted my confidence in the possibility of a career in digital cartography. At the time, I was a non-traditional student (in my thirties), halfway into a (digital mapping) Master's program at the University of Kentucky, years after my initial BS and MS. Completely changing my career was unnerving. Could I make a major career shift with this degree? Would I be able to get on my feet before my young family was affected, since we needed two incomes to make ends meet? Did I miss the boat by not starting out in cartography in undergrad? **I didn't know anyone who followed my same path, and really needed input from someone with a little more experience.** While in Oklahoma City, I inquired of NACIS

veterans about whether the organization had ever had a mentor program—one that could allow space for me to ask these questions of others. They had not, but did say it was an interesting idea that could undoubtedly gain support.

I myself had previously participated in a couple of rounds of professional mentorship within the local university I worked at. These had given me points of contact to help navigate the university system, and to ask broader questions about the professional world at large. I saw how beneficial it was to have access to a mentor who had my best interests in mind and could teach me tips and tricks gleaned from years of experience. My mentors often helped silence the little voice of doubt in my mind, validating my thoughts, concerns, and direction. I wish every career path was guaranteed a built-in mentorship across its entire arc, and I wanted something like that for my journey into cartography.

Fast forward to spring of 2022, when NACIS put out a call for nominations for its Board of Directors, with a term starting that fall. I ran for the board with a platform containing several ideas, but the one that resonated most with colleagues, and which I most hoped to execute, was starting a mentor program for NACIS members. In the fall, I returned to the annual conference, this time as a newly elected board member. I had a delightful conversation with a member who affirmed the value of and excitement around the program. You never know what those side chats, especially with someone you barely know, can lead to. (Spoiler: months later this person would accept my invitation to co-coordinate the mentor program, enter the brilliant Kate Leroux.)

With that boost of confidence, I returned home post-conference to feverishly craft the beginnings of a program. The immediate dive into the drafting of the program was



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a result of two factors. One was me trying to continue riding the conference energy rather than being depressed at its conclusion for the year; it would take another 365 days before we were all together again. The second factor was that I wanted to have a program proposal ready to discuss before the next NACIS board meeting.

For the initial bones of the NACIS mentor program, I referenced documents from my prior mentorship experiences, because **no one should reinvent the wheel. I copied ideas or processes** that would benefit the program I imagined, and skipped what wouldn't. As the beginning of December rolled around, I was able to share the initial drafts with Kate. **Having a co-coordinator was critical.** This is not to say a program can't be created alone; I just hesitate to recommend it. Collaboration allows for more ideas to be considered, and collaborators can rely on each other's strengths. When I pulled together novel-length documents, Kate was spectacular at making them clear and concise. When I would wander and overexplain, Kate would reel me back in. When a presentation needed to be given, we collaborated until it could all be covered in the right amount of time with supporting visuals. (Insert my eternal thanks to my co-coordinator here.)

After Kate's revisions of the draft documents, we proposed our pilot program to the board in mid-December, aimed

to launch in the spring of 2023. Fun fact, **organizations are usually more than happy to let you create something, as long as you are willing to step up to lead it.** The board was excited about the prospect and gave us feedback on our documents. Having **review and feedback from folks invested in the organization helped keep the program aligned with the organization's own goals.** In mid-January we published the documents online, opened the application survey, and announced the mentor program to NACIS members via email newsletters, Slack channels, and LinkedIn posts.

What you have read thus far is the origin story for the NACIS Mentor Program. It was almost selfish, truly. I wished for access to something that didn't yet exist (others might call this identifying a gap): I, as a student, had questions that I wanted to ask of those more experienced than myself, but didn't feel comfortable outright cold emailing professionals I had never met or only chatted briefly with. I figured I wasn't alone in this matter. Then, in Oklahoma City, I found a unique group of experienced professionals who I had heard would be willing to give input to me and others like me. There just needed to be a structure to bring people together for the implementation of the program based on a few files/documents.

## GENERAL TIPS

IN THE EVENT YOU OR SOMEONE YOU KNOW IS INTERESTED in starting a similar program, I have a few tips to offer regarding the creation of the documents that built the program.

**Tip 1: Take the pressure off by reminding yourself these documents will, and should, continue to evolve in the future.** What is put in ink today need not be set in stone. Acknowledging this permits more freedom in knowing that if something is omitted by accident or misses the target, it could always be altered later. Our short turnaround, which involved launching the program only months after drafting the initial documents, was only possible because of the knowledge that nothing had to be perfect from day one.

**Tip 2: Stay in line with your organization's goals/brand.** These are a great place to launch from when creating the

structure of your program. It gives you a touchstone to come back to and ask yourself: does this structure accomplish or support the overall goal(s)? For our program we focused on two of NACIS's stated objectives (as they were in 2022):

- Promote communication, coordination, and cooperation among the producers, disseminators, curators, and users of cartographic information (from the NACIS constitution).
- Broaden opportunities and inclusivity for underrepresented and historically marginalized groups within the society (from the NACIS DEI Statement).

**Tip 3: Documents are scaffolding for the mentorship relationship, not a full curriculum.** We knew the field of cartography was vast, with many subfields and paths, and

so in order to make the program relevant to all of these variations, we'd have to be flexible in our documents. The program could not follow a strict structure in the way that a degree program outlines specific courses. We also knew we'd have folks who had not participated in a mentoring program before and might like guidance on how mentoring works, in general. Our documents initially included:

- **A Fact Sheet** (two pages): A bulleted overview that described how the program fulfilled NACIS's objectives, outlined goals for the program, described roles for mentors and mentees, listed expectations, listed important dates or deadlines, and gave a dedicated program contact email.
- **Program FAQs** (one page): Here we answered the top ten questions we thought we were most likely to get. Who could be a mentor or mentee? How many months was the program? How many meetings would there be (in person/virtual)? What would it cost (the program was free, to make it widely accessible)? What type of commitment would this require, and could someone exit the program early? What support would pairs have?
- **Handbook** (six pages): This had some overlap with the Fact Sheet and FAQs, but expanded upon responsibilities of both the mentor/mentee, and suggested meeting topics (including goals and guidelines for each meeting, followed by steps to be taken between meetings). Examples can be seen in the sidebar.

**Tip 4: Have a survey** as the application to the program. In my previous mentor programs, there was a formal but basic application to participate. That application didn't ask any questions to get information about what a participant was looking for in the program, or their background, both of which could help in the pairing process. Using a survey invites participants to share their interests and goals, giving organizers the information needed to match mentors and mentees effectively. **Use a mix of fixed response questions and open-ended questions for pairing. Use the same survey for both mentor and mentee candidates.** Open-ended questions give people space to tell their story—what they hope to gain, what they can offer, and why they want to be involved. You'll learn more from a

## AN EXPANDED EXAMPLE OF ONE HANDBOOK TOPIC

### Meeting 1: Introductions

*Goal:* Get to know each other and establish meeting guidelines.

#### Proposed Topics:

- Share information about your life stories to help get to know one another.
- Discuss both of your career and educational backgrounds.
- Discuss how you both came to NACIS.
- Discuss 3 talents/hobbies you have related to your work or your life interests.
- Share mapping projects you're proud of or are working on.
- Discuss your goals and objectives for the mentorship program (i.e., Why do you want to have a mentor/mentee? What made you decide to participate?)

#### Guidelines:

- When, where, and how will we meet that both mentor/mentee will be comfortable? (Whatever meeting platform they prefer.)
- How will we schedule meetings and who will be responsible for setting up meeting links?
- How will we communicate between meetings?
- Will there be any fixed agenda items to discuss at every meeting?
- How will we exchange feedback?
- Next Steps: Schedule date, time, and place of next meeting.

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## ABBREVIATED EXAMPLES OF OTHER HANDBOOK TOPICS

**Meeting 2:** Introductory Career Conversation—discuss or outline the mentee's proposed career.

**Meeting 3:** Career Planning—talk through a 2- or 5- or 10-year plan and how the mentee plans to achieve professional success.

**Meeting 4:** Healthy Life/Work Balance—visit the previous meeting interval plans and how it can be achieved without sacrificing personal/family life.

**Meeting 5:** Identifying Professional Opportunities—identify what professional opportunities would be beneficial to mentee's career goals.

**Meeting 6:** Upcoming Professional Challenges—anticipate upcoming professional challenges and plan as best they can.

thoughtful paragraph than from a simple checkbox. Our fourteen-question survey included:

- Three logistical questions (name, email, time zone).
- Career focus questions that let the respondent pick from approximately twenty options that were based on common responses to previous NACIS conference surveys. Respondents chose one primary focus and were allowed to designate multiple others as secondary interests.
- A few open-ended questions to identify the potential alignments between prospective mentors and mentees (their hopes for the program, personal strengths, and identities or salient lived experiences they optionally wanted to mention).
- An option to share a link to a candidate's LinkedIn profile, resume, or CV, to help in pairing.

**Tip 5: Have a post-program survey to assess participants' experiences.** Remember, the program isn't set in stone, and this is a great opportunity to improve documents and program details. Again, I suggest using the same survey for both mentor and mentee. Some other tips:

- Keep it brief, so that people are more likely to answer it.
- I also recommend permitting anonymous responses so folks can be honest about what might need to change.
- For ease of summarizing data and looking at trends, ask as many quantitative questions as possible (number of meetings completed, average length of meetings, level of comfort in mentor/mentee pairing, etc.).
- It's also helpful to offer a few open ended questions so that you can get sound bites for promoting or modifying the program based on feedback (How was your overall experience? Was anything missing from the program? etc.).
- You may want to ask respondents for their permission to use open ended response questions in future presentations.

- Since one of our goals was to “broaden opportunities . . . for underrepresented and historically marginalized groups within the society,” we included some questions at the end for statistical analysis of the populations being served by the program (gender, age range, education, etc.).

**Tip 6: Draft newsletter and email announcement templates.** This saves time later when communicating with mentors and mentees at key times. You might have one for announcing the opening of program applications, or end of the program approaching, etc. Remember to update these each year so they remain relevant, and store them in a well-organized, shared location so they can be easily accessed and reused in the future.

**Tip 7: Create a brief video or presentation to announce the program.** When a program is brand new, it helps to have a brief summary that you can direct folks to. With social media today, videos or presentations garner more attention than a static document. We hosted our [2023 intro video](#) on YouTube, but you can place it anywhere your goal participants can access it.

**Tip 8: Create a program timeline backwards.** We started out knowing we wanted to summarize the final survey information for a presentation at the NACIS annual conference in October. October is also when members roll on or off the board, so it would be convenient to have the program wrap up around that time. Working backwards from that date, and incorporating personal schedules of the program coordinators, we determined rough deadlines. For example, we wanted one month to review the post-program survey. But before that, we would need to allow one month for people to fill out the post-program survey. And so on. This led us to a start date in the spring, which would allow time for people to hear about the program, sign up, be notified of their pairings, engage in mentorship, fill out the survey, and let us prepare a presentation.

**Tip 9: Have a dedicated email for program communications.** This keeps institutional knowledge and documents in one place as program coordinators roll on or off the program. New coordinators can be given access to the email account as needed. It's also a non-personal email, so folks' private emails do not get bogged down in program communications, and they can maintain their personal privacy.

## PROGRAM FLOW

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ONCE THE BONES WERE ESTABLISHED (OCTOBER–December 2022) our first year flowed from program launch (January 2023) to participants being paired and notified (March 2023), and then to the asynchronous mentoring during March–August 2023. The bulk of our organizing work was completed at the time of pairing notifications in March 2023. With the exception of rare instances of emails from participants (issues in making initial contact with mentee or maintaining consistent meetups), our coordinator inbox was quiet. It was practically crickets, which can really make a person nervous. **You have to accept that sometimes no news is good news.** During the first year, we created a private Slack channel dedicated to the participants. Its intent was to provide a location for them to collaborate, share resources they may have showcased during their meetings, and ask questions. As coordinators, we tried to kickstart conversations by providing thought provoking posts and questions in the Slack, and shared some links to videos or web sites related to mentoring. Again, we heard little but crickets. You may experience this if you have a program similar in structure. **Don't worry, when folks have something to say, they will speak up.** Once the mentoring period was done, the post-program survey (emailed around September 2023) gave us the feedback we needed to understand how the program went during the

period of radio silence from our participants. We received responses from 74% of mentors and 48% of mentees. For specific information on the feedback we received, you can watch the presentation Kate and I gave at the [October 2023 NACIS conference in Pittsburgh](#).

Overall, our first year's feedback survey was mostly positive. It felt good to hear back that, even in its first iteration, the program was considered beneficial by its participants. The richest information came at the end of the survey, in honest responses to open-ended questions: What would folks want done differently if participating again? Did it feel like the program was lacking something? These comments from our participants, combined with our own experiences running the program, helped us as we modified the program details during the off season (October–December 2023). We received excellent feedback not just from the survey, but also from our audience after we presented the survey/program results at the NACIS annual conference in Pittsburgh. Multiple comments from our presentation were incorporated as adjustments for the second year in 2024. I can't express enough how important it is to share your findings so you can get input from the group you are serving.

## PROGRAM ADJUSTMENTS

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ALL OF THIS GREAT FEEDBACK LED US TO MAKE THE following adjustments to the mentorship program.

**Adjustment 1:** We created an **opt-out email template** accessible from the program website. In the first year, a few participants exited the program without notifying their mentor or mentee. We suspected this was due to discomfort, uncertainty about what to say, nervousness around ending the partnership. To address this, we introduced a pre-written email template participants could send to program coordinators when leaving the program without needing craft an explanation. This allows program coordinators to communicate to the counterpart on the mentee's behalf, helping avoid situations where someone was left in the dark. During year two our opt-out email template was utilized, which I consider a success. Even using it once helps ensure that participants feel seen and respected, rather than left wondering or forgotten.

**Adjustment 2:** Many NACIS members requested the mentee portion of the program be open to mid-career individuals instead of only early career. This was requested during informal conversations, in responses on the final survey, and when we presented our results in Pittsburgh. We **opened the program up the next year to both early career (less than five years' experience) and mid-career (more than five years' experience) mentees.**

**Adjustment 3:** Some participants requested two **dedicated private Slack channels (one for mentors only; one for mentees only)** to foster open discussion among the group of mentees or group of mentors. It was also commented in feedback that not everyone wanted another communication app. So, the new Slack channels and group Slack channel remained a means to optionally enhance the program and were not mandatory.

**Adjustment 4:** Mentors and mentees alike felt as though the participant community was very quiet and wanted more community building. So, the next year we **hosted a virtual meeting** in March, to introduce the program, share introductions, and answer initial questions. This kickoff meeting included an interactive slide presentation prepped in advance, but provided space for all to communicate. Presentation contents included:

- An introduction to the program coordinators.
- Guest speaker opportunities for NACIS committees to tell participants about NACIS scholarships, awards, publication opportunities.
- Icebreaker polling questions sprinkled throughout the presentation, with live views of online survey responses for participants. Questions like: where everyone was participating from, single words they hoped to gain from the program (examples: insight, guidance), ranking program benefits in order of most important to least, what folks like about mapping most, and an open anonymous forum to ask questions if they preferred to stay muted.
- A program overview (logistics, resources, mentorship best practices, recommendations from previous year's participants, and participant introductions), which took up the bulk of the meeting.

**Adjustment 5:** After presenting our findings from the first year in October of 2023, the floor was opened up for questions and comments. A NACIS member inquired if the program had given any thought to opening up to small group mentoring. The program coordinators considered how to best implement this option and agreed to incorporate the **ability for participants to indicate if they were interested in one-on-one mentorship and/or small group mentoring** on the next year's initial application, and some participants did choose to use the group format in subsequent years. This adjustment would prove useful in 2024 and 2025, as each year we received more applications from mentees than mentors.

**Adjustment 6:** During the second-year application process, a participant reached out to request their need for an **American Sign Language** interpreter for the kickoff meeting and their virtual mentoring sessions. We reached out to a Sign Language organization in Kentucky known for interpreting and translation. After learning the organization's requirements and confirming it would fit our needs, we signed a contract based on the number and length of meetings. The procedure was fairly simple. We would give a couple weeks of notice of when an interpreter would be needed in a virtual meeting, and forward the ASL Interpreter organization the virtual meeting link. We highly recommend having a contract in place like we did in advance of a request (payments were based on whether an interpreter was requested, there was not a holding fee just to be on reserve) so that when the need arises you are ready to roll to support your participants.

## PAIRING PROCESS

THE DOCUMENTS, TIPS, AND PROGRAM ADJUSTMENTS are all pretty straightforward. The portion that I, as a program coordinator, was most concerned with was having a consistent and equitable structure for pairing participants while still allowing some flexibility for shifting of pairs. The method used for the first two years had three main concepts considered for pairing. First and foremost, we wanted to pair participants based on the interests they indicated in the application survey. The more answers a mentor or mentee had in common, the more likely we thought they'd be a good fit. This included skill-based pairing (based on skills the mentee wanted to develop and the mentor's areas of self-reported expertise) and career goal pairing (what experience the mentor had in the

mentee's goal field). The next area we considered was how well a potential mentor-mentee pair's open-ended responses fit together. The structured multiple-choice questions didn't always paint the entire picture of what participants were seeking, so we looked to the open-ended questions to learn more about what they were hoping for out of the program. Was a mentee seeking someone who recently moved from one field to another? Or perhaps someone who started their own freelance business and could give specifics on business management? Finally, the pairs were narrowed down based on logistics: Did both participants agree to a one-to-one mentorship or small group setting? What time zones were the participants in the proposed pair(s) working across?

The pairing process was conducted by the two program coordinators and a third assisting reviewer. To plan proposed pairings, we found it easiest to use a spreadsheet, with one tab per person. Each tab had the names of the proposed mentor and mentee(s); if it was a group or one to one pairing; time zones; number of commonalities that aligned in the initial survey; and a field for explaining other factors that influenced why that pairing was proposed. One program coordinator would start by reviewing the applicant survey responses, and would then fill in the first tab of the proposed pairings spreadsheet. The reviewer would then assess the proposed pairings, provide their recommended shifts and proposals. Finally, the second program coordinator would review suggested pairs and provide the final participant pairings. Why did we have three people instead of only the two program coordinators? Why didn't we have more than three involved? We found three to

be a happy medium. We had a hard rule that a program coordinator participating in the program themselves (as mentor or mentee) was not permitted to provide input on their own pairing, so having a third person always permitted a minimum set of two eyes to propose pairings and eliminate unconscious bias in the pairing while a coordinator still participated in the program. We could always have had more reviewers, but you have to remember to leave buffer time so that each person has time with the applications and proposed pairs to make thoughtful recommendations. Additionally, we emphasized to applicants that their confidentiality would be protected, so that they could provide us open and honest answers. Confidentiality is easier to maintain when fewer people are involved. But this also is highly dependent upon the folks in the position of reviewing the applications, so be sure your reviewers are capable of maintaining confidentiality as well.

## ADDITIONAL HURDLES

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DESPITE THIS THOUGHT-OUT PAIRING PROCESS, AS well as the level of effort that went into organizing the program in general, there still remain a few persistent hurdles, in my opinion.

**Hurdle 1: The perfect pairing does not exist.** Pairing is certainly a large hurdle to overcome for a program like this. While some matches may be obvious, sometimes a good choice doesn't come out of the survey data. From the perspective of the program coordinator, you may have a lofty goal of pairing every participant no matter what, but I'm here to tell you to watch out for this mentality. Instead of forming pairs that have few commonalities, it can be better to ask folks who don't necessarily have a great match to reapply next year, and prioritize the reapplicants. Keep in mind that it's not a perfect system and there is no such thing as the perfect pairing. Even if a pair looks good on paper, their communication styles, temperaments, or learning styles might end up conflicting. One item of feedback from the 2025 post-program survey was that participants might value knowing why they were paired. Sharing a bit of this reasoning up front might help them find common ground faster and potentially avoid an early disconnect.

**Recommendation:** Try your best, but understand nothing is perfect.

**Hurdle 2: Creating community requires time.** It takes consistent effort and buy-in from many parties, and it's not built overnight. Building a community around an asynchronous program, one that runs only six months, is a challenge I never felt we truly conquered. We attempted to build community with Slack the first two years, though there was little to no engagement. The virtual kickoff meeting that we introduced in the second year was well received, and if routine virtual gatherings occurred with break out rooms, I believe that more community could be built. However, getting numerous folks together for a regular virtual meeting across multiple time zones is tough. The mentoring program itself is already occupying valuable time for both parties, and to get most of them to agree to even more feels unlikely. Plus, with virtual meetings becoming so common post-COVID, folks end up with virtual meeting burnout. The best chance for community building is likely to be found in the group mentoring sessions. Those folks are building more connections than in the one-on-one mentoring sessions, and have more participants to reach out to after the six-month program ends in the future.

**Recommendation:** Don't try to push a new virtual community, and be cautious of providing too much of a time sink for a program that is supposed to focus primarily on the mentor/mentee partnership. Accept that there may be a limitation to how much community can be built around an

ephemeral program. Take comfort in knowing that even if the cohort of participants each year doesn't stay closely connected, a secondary community is continually forming within the organization—built naturally through the ongoing networking and shared growth of mentor—mentee pairs over time.

**Hurdle 3: Recruiting mentors can be tough.** Each year, gathering enough mentors is a huge obstacle. Many folks have interest in being a mentor but not the confidence. When we contacted people individually to encourage them to participate, some replied that they didn't think anyone would want to hear from a person who did not have a degree in cartography or related fields. Some expressed concern that no one would be interested in what they had to say, as they had retired and felt their knowledge was outdated. Others thought they simply didn't know enough to mentor someone else.

Group mentoring did assist in relieving this shortage in our second year. This was a year in which more mentees were interested because of the conversations surrounding the program in the first year, and our efforts to report on it during the off season. This was also the first year that we had mid-career folks as mentees, so we might have lost some potential mentors who had experience, but also wanted to participate as a mentee themselves this time around.

**Recommendation:** Keep the group mentoring. It provides relief for the mentor-mentee imbalance, but also will capture an audience of participants who are not comfortable in a one-on-one setting. Group mentoring should be limited to 2–3 mentees, so as not to overburden the mentor. Know that mentor shortages mean that you might not be able to pair every prospective mentee, and you can instead recommend that they reapply next year, where they'll have priority in getting paired. Seek out additional specific mentors as applications roll in if there's a gap in mentors of a certain field. Some folks just need the personal invitation to apply. Provide a bit of confidence-building into your

communications when recruiting mentors at the same time that you are announcing the program is accepting applications. State things like:

- Mentees benefit from hearing how folks navigated the twist and turns of a mentor's real world career path. It's not just about titles or degrees.
- Mentees often are interested in the historical context and perspective of how a field has changed and evolved. It's not just a discussion about the latest and greatest technological advances.
- If you've ever wished you'd had someone to talk to earlier in your career, you already know how powerful it could be to make this connection as a mentor. It's not about perfection.

**Hurdle 4: Knowledge transfer.** During the first year, a vast portion of our effort went into the development of the program at large. We did not, however, create a firm plan for how (or specifically when) to transfer the program coordinator positions to new leaders, and something like this can severely hinder program continuity. The program coordinator positions need to be rotated among members interested in the growth and longevity of the program, and folks committing to serve should be available for multiple years. This ensures that the program always has at least one coordinator who is knowledgeable about the details, understands the documents and changes each year, and can transfer that knowledge over a period of time to new coordinators.

**Recommendation:** Have a three-year rotation of program coordinators in place, with new folks being aware of the commitment before joining. The first year they could serve as the third reviewer. The second year, they could step up as a program coordinator. Finally, in the third year they can step in as lead program coordinator. And, in their first year out of the program, they can perhaps serve as someone the current coordinators can ask questions of.

## WHY

IF YOU HAVE READ THIS FAR INTO THE ARTICLE AND see the path laid out before you of how our program was created, yet you are still hesitating to participate or create one yourself, maybe this last bit will provide some inspiration.

Mentors offer so much more than just advice on the technical aspect of a career or job; they carry with them their life experiences and a wealth of knowledge from simply navigating the world they live and work in. In their post-program survey, many mentees commented about the

*connection* they made with their mentor or group, rather than any technical skills they learned. Not one of them used the survey to rave or rant about the degree their mentor happened to obtain (or lack). If anything, they were more excited about having a mentor who faced challenges and who didn't necessarily have all the answers, because the mentees identified with the mentor in that respect. The uncertainties, decisions, and lessons learned are exactly what they needed to hear. No one needs to have all the answers to be a mentor or to start a mentoring program.

Sometimes, it's just about the effort made in listening to mentees, and asking them the right questions, that can be the most impactful. Just like there is no one traditional cartographic educational/career path, there is no one true way to create or participate in a mentor program. By designing an iterative, evolving mentorship, you can transform the uncertainty of the next mentees into direction for the next set of professionals to empower themselves and discover their own potential.

