

Evaluation of the UAA/USAID Mentoring Program

August, 2016

A. **Background:**

The purpose of the USAID/UAA Mentoring Program is to contribute to the development of Agency leaders by providing overseas Foreign Service Officers (mentees) with leadership, management and career guidance from experienced USAID Alumni, who serve as mentors. The program was launched in the fall of 2012 with an initial pilot program based on a Memorandum of Understanding between the E & E Bureau and the UAA. The program has expanded from the initial pilot in one regional bureau to include partnering arrangements with six Agency bureaus. USAID has designated the Center for Professional Development (CPD) in the Human Capital and Talent Management (HCTM) Office as the program locus within USAID. CPD identified a program coordinator in each of the participating bureaus to work with UAA on the program.

The program to-date has consisted of five cohorts or rounds. The fifth cohort was launched in December 2015, bringing the total number of matched pairs since inception to 87. The Agency's decision to continue the program, following the pilot, was supported by a positive evaluation and recognized as an opportunity to continue to tap the collective experience and knowledge of Agency Alumni. A sixth cohort is tentatively planned for the early fall of 2016.

USAID and UAA have agreed to keep the program demand-driven, having at its core the needs, objectives and specific requests of field-based Foreign Service Officers. At the outset of each cohort, mentors and mentees receive USAID-provided training, which explains how a mentoring relationship functions and how it differs from coaching. The time commitment agreed to by each pair is six months, extendable indefinitely by common agreement. Frequent and regular virtual communication is the basis for building and sustaining the mentoring relationship.

The purpose of this evaluation is to get an idea of how the program is going, to draw out practical and usable lessons learned from experience with the five mentoring cohorts to date, and to fashion recommendations based on that experience to help guide the management of the program moving forward.

B. Methodology

Population

The population of interest for this study was the USAID-affiliated personnel who have participated in the USAID/UAA mentorship program. The targeted sample groups were divided into three sub-groups: current mentees, previous mentees, and mentors. Bureau Coordinators provided feedback through individual interview sessions. The major purpose of this study was to determine the possible areas for improving the current mentoring program based on recommendations from mentors who volunteered to provide this service and the Foreign Service Officers (FSO) who took advantage of this career development opportunity.

Approach

A combination of quantitative and qualitative research collection methods were employed to gather the data for this study. Surveys were developed and vetted through the UAA evaluation committee prior to distribution to the identified sub-groups. The surveys were designed to capture both numerical measurements and personal feedback through participants' comments on their experiences. One-on-One interviews were conducted with Bureau Coordinators.

Responses

Nineteen current mentees provided responses to the survey and 21 mentors provided feedback. The low number (4) of responses from former mentees made it difficult to provide a true representation of that group. Therefore, former mentees' responses were not used in the final evaluation report. Four Bureau Coordinators were interviewed for this study.

C. Findings

Survey Results: Current Mentees

1. Overall, how has the UAA mentoring program met your expectations?

Excellent	Very Good	Good	Fair	Needs Improvement
3	4	2	6	2

Mentees' comments were about equally divided between positive and negative. Those who felt the match with their mentor was a good fit were more active in the relationship and more satisfied with the results of the program. Those less satisfied listed a variety of reasons. Some admitted fault for not understanding the program, or not making the effort to take advantage of their mentor. Two found fault with the mentor for not being more proactive and knowing more about effective mentoring.

2. How effective is the relationship between you and your mentor?

Excellent	Very Good	Good	Fair	Needs Improvement
6	5	2	4	3

Of the twelve people who wrote comments, nine were very positive about their mentors and only one was negative. The other two negative comments concerned the difficulty of communicating satisfactorily using the telephone or emails. Regular and frequent contact between the mentor and mentee seems to be a strong factor in making the relationship work.

3. What specifically have you gained from the relationship with your mentor?

Four people wrote that they didn't feel they had gained much of anything from the program. Most of the respondents identified a variety of positive results including advice on the AEF process, the bidding process, management problems and more generally how to navigate in the Foreign Service

4. How well do you think your mentor understands your professional needs?

Excellent	Very Good	Good	Fair	Needs Improvement
5	4	3	5	1

Most of the mentees feel that the mentors understand their professional needs. However, the few negative comments consistently point out that the agency has continued to change after their mentors retired and that some are now not current with regulations and procedures.

5. Is your mentor an effective listener?

Excellent	Very Good	Good	Fair	Needs Improvement
6	8	3	2	0

Generally the mentees were very positive about the ability of the mentors to listen and it is clear from other parts of the survey that they put a high priority on that skill.

6. How often do you meet with your mentor?

Daily	Weekly	Bi-Weekly	Monthly	Other
0	1	6	6	7

There was great variety in the responses but without written comments included in the survey question it is difficult to analyze the pattern. It is probably safe to assume that those who did not continue an active relationship are listed in the “other” category.

7. Is your mentor meeting your expectations in the area of knowledge, skills, and abilities?

Excellent	Very Good	Good	Fair	Needs Improvement
6	5	4	4	1

Few of the nineteen respondents wrote comments on this question. The numbers match up reasonably well with the mentors’ responses to a similar question.

8. What is the main communication method used with your mentor?

Face to Face	Phone	Email	Skype	Other
0	12	3	5	1

9. Was this communication method effective for you?

Excellent	Very Good	Good	Fair	Needs Improvement
3	8	5	0	4

Phone calls appear to be the main communication method and the most effective according to the numbers and the few written responses to this question.

10. What is the major benefit you are receiving from the UAA mentoring program?

Three found no benefit from the program. The rest cited a variety of areas where the advice and support of the mentor were very beneficial. Responses reflect an appreciation of the

practical, strategic advice from someone outside the chain of command and separate from the daily routine in the mission. General career advice and personnel issues are high on the list.

11. Are you planning on extending the mentor relationship beyond the initial six months?

Yes	No	Maybe	Other
9	9	2	

These responses reflect a generally positive response to the program since there a variety of reasons for a program not to be extended other than dissatisfaction with the relationship.

12. If your relationship with your mentor is not effective, can you provide a reason why?

Of the three comments, one was entirely negative about the skill of the mentor as a coach. The program failed to meet his expectations in all respects. It is not clear that his/her expectations were appropriate for this program. Another cited a need for a mentor who is more current with the Agency.

13. How could UAA improve the mentor/mentee relationship experience?

Several ideas were suggested: share best practices from other mentors/mentees, include an early face-to-face meeting if feasible, train/screen mentors for knowledge of communications technology, and work with the mentee to define goals within the program.

14. What should UAA keep as part of their program?

There were few responses to this question. There was one positive comment about keeping the MOU.

15. What could UAA add to enhance the mentorship program to better meet the needs of the mentees?

Although the number of responses are few, several ideas were put forward: share best practices from other mentors/mentees, more training for mentors and mentees, less reliance on remote mentoring, someone (undefined) make sure we are in contact, mentor put forward suggested topics for discussion monthly.

16. Is participating in the UAA mentorship program a valuable use of your time?

Yes	No
9	2

Although the number responding is small, they do reflect a general feeling that the mentoring program is worthwhile and should be continued.

Survey Results: Mentors

1. Did your mentee provide sufficient time to make the mentor relationship effective?

Excellent	Very Good	Good	Fair	Needs Improvement
5	7	1	3	5

The written comments were split, with eleven responding positively and four in the negative. This percentage split appears to be a fairly accurate reflection of the proportion of matches that connect effectively.

2. How well did you understand your mentee’s goals, interests and concerns?

Excellent	Very Good	Good	Fair	Needs Improvement
5	8	7	1	0

The mentors were just as positive in responding to this question as were the mentees. One conclusion from this agreement is that whatever problems exist in making an effective match, they were not often caused by a lack of understanding on the part of the mentor.

3. Based on mentee feedback what practices have proven to be of the greatest value to you as mentor?

The overwhelmingly positive response to this question was the ability and willingness of the mentor to listen and to listen carefully. Mentees expressed appreciation when they felt the mentor showed concern and support. Mentees were most often looking for advice on

interpersonal/management issues, tips on the AEF/evaluation system and help with deciding future assignments.

4. For your specific mentee, what were the most useful benefits gained from his/her participation in the program?

Mentors listed a range of specific benefits that mentees mentioned. These included advice and support on: management relations, supervision issues, solving problems, evaluation objectives, managing staff, good work objectives, employee statements on AEFs, and future assignments. They also mentioned being a good sounding board when mentees needed to vent frustrations.

5. Does your mentee provide you candid feedback on what is or isn't useful in maintaining the mentor relationship?

Ten of the thirteen written comments described very positive feedback the mentors had received from the mentees. This feedback ranged from general expressions of appreciation to very specific comments about the effectiveness of the mentor's suggestions.

6. From your perspective, what areas are crucial for maintaining a strong mentor relationship?

The three areas most often mentioned by the mentors were: (a) rapport and trust, (b) commitment on both sides from the beginning to make the relationship work, and (c) a definite schedule for conversations that is followed. It was also noted that preparation on both sides is needed before each conversation to make them effective.

7. From your perspective, what areas/actions were counterproductive to maintaining a strong mentor relationship?

No general factors were noted by the mentors other than the inherent difficulty of establishing a relationship with anyone at a distance and using the phone and email. It is clear that not maintaining regular contact weakens the bond and often can cause it to lapse.

8. What factors contributed to a mentor relationship lasting past the initial 6 months?

Mentors commented that it is important to establish a relationship that is built on both effective professional advice and personal interest and support. Common technical backgrounds are important but not essential. The mentor should be flexible and adapt to the mentee's interests.

9. Can you identify some factors that may contribute to a mentor relationship not lasting or being terminated early?

One of the responses included all the other comments: (a) mentor not sufficiently motivated, (b) mentee not sufficiently motivated, (c) poor vetting regarding the seriousness of participants on both sides, (d) time and logistics, (e) less than adequate matchmaking, (f) overwork and stress of the mentee, (g) reassignments, (h) demanding mentor work commitments.

10. As the mentor, what topic of discussion appeared to be the most useful for your mentee?

The topics most often mentioned were: management, supervision, interpersonal work relationships, AEF, assignments and career planning.

11. Was the initial training provided to mentors beneficial for their success as a mentor?

Excellent	Very Good	Good	Fair	Needs Improvement
5	6	5	0	0

The mentors were generally very supportive of the training. They mentioned specifically the value of being reminded not to tell war stories and to be patient. The coordinators all expressed an interest in being involved in this training.

12. If any, what additional training could be helpful to prepare mentors for success?

Several suggestions were made: (a) round-table discussions by long-term mentors and a few mentees, (b) update on the changing nature of USAID’s administrative operations, priorities, and the assignment system, (c) more information about one’s mentee beforehand, (d) share “best practices,” (e) additional training via audio or video conferencing.

13. What should UAA keep as part of their program?

There appeared to be some differences of interpretation of this question so the majority of responses were positive about the entire program while others picked one specific component. Confidentiality is cited as a key element and early tracking through contact with the mentor is

strongly urged. The coordinators are willing to help on tracking this with a one-time check of their mentees.

14. What could UAA add to enhance the mentorship program to better meet the needs of the mentees?

One suggestion is more careful selection of both mentors and mentees to ensure they are motivated to make the effort and take the time needed for the program. Another suggestion is that there is a budget to support one face-to-face meeting for each pair at the beginning.

15. What are the total hours you spend monthly volunteering for the program by preparing for a mentoring session, traveling to and from the session, and then actually conducting the session?

The estimates for hours spent monthly ranged from 1 to 10. It is not possible to decipher from the responses whether the mentor had more than one mentee.

Survey Results: Bureau Coordinators

Three of the five Bureau coordinators were interviewed in person and one was interviewed on the phone. All were asked the following five questions.

1. What are the major benefits to the Agency of the program?

All the coordinators were positive about the mentoring program and thought it definitely should continue. One cautioned about overextending the mentoring resources available and saw value in keeping it within manageable limits. The benefit most often cited was having someone knowledgeable outside the chain of command with which mentees can share concerns and problems and receive advice.

2. How does the UAA/USAID mentoring program compare/contrast with other programs offered by the Agency?

None were aware of any official Agency mentoring program. They mentioned that the previous Administrator had pushed to include mentoring in employees' work plans but that initiative never rose to the level of an official Agency mentoring program. More than a decade ago, there was a provision in the leadership training programs offered at the Federal Executive Institute for coaches funded by USAID for one year if participants chose to follow up. That provision has been dropped. The Global Health Bureau has an internal mentoring program for

employees in the health backstop that is voluntary and depends on self-matching. The GH program does not include the careful matching process employed by the UAA program.

3. What is missing that you would like to see from UAA?

Coordinators offered several ideas for UAA consideration:

- a. More emphasis in the training for mentees and mentors on taking initiative to make the relationship productive. For mentees, that would mean more effort at identifying from the start what they want from the program. For the mentors, it would mean not letting long gaps of time occur before taking action. Most agreed that if problems existed in the relationship, they were most often caused by a lack of effort by the mentee.
- b. Investigate possible connection with the Agency Staff Care program managed by HCTM.
- c. Develop a toolkit for mentors that they could use to make suggestions to mentees about possible videos or books/articles that relate to the priority topics of supervision, evaluation and interpersonal relations.

4. How could your role in the Program be enhanced or changed?

The coordinators thought it important that their role in the program not be viewed as one of oversight by the bureau, since a central feature of the program is confidentiality outside the official Agency structure. Anything that threatens that confidentiality should be avoided. On the other hand, they did see value in a check-in with the mentee after four to six weeks to see if the relationship is going well.

Several coordinators suggested enlisting Bureau Assistant Administrators in publicizing the program. Some suggested that an Agency-wide notice be sent out each year. Currently, the coordinators send emails to the mission directors in their region and rely on the directors to alert their staffs to the availability of the mentoring resource.

All of the coordinators would like to be involved in the mentor training for the program by offering suggestions ahead of time and/or helping implement the training.

One suggested that coordinators should be provided by HCTM since that is the unit responsible for Agency-wide training. Others saw the value in having bureau coordinators who know the region and possibly the mentees personally.

They mentioned that the need for mission directors and deputy directors to have mentors is just as great as or even greater than for junior officers.

All saw the matching of mentors and mentees as the most important element of the program and expressed interest in helping UAA make that better.

5. Is the value of the Program worth the time you devote to it?

All agreed that the time they devote to assisting the program is quite small and the initial stages of each cohort comprise the only busy time. They were willing to do more if it didn't jeopardize the informality and confidentiality of the program.

D. Conclusions and Recommendations

1. Put even more attention on the matching process since this is the heart of the program. Favor selection of mentors who have remained current with USAID priorities and practices. Involve the bureau coordinators in this process, benefiting from their personal knowledge of the mentees and the missions. Bureau Coordinators should also be trained in advance on the vetting of the mentees to assure adequate motivation and a constructive attitude regarding the program.
2. Share more information about the mentee with the mentor beforehand so he/she starts with a more comprehensive understanding of the mentee's career background, skills and interests. Through the initial training Webinar, enhance motivation and attitude regarding the program and commitment to it. The goal in doing this is to help ensure more lasting mentor/mentee relationships versus those that survive 0-3 meetings.
3. Introduce a regular check of the progress of each match after no more than 4 weeks by the coordinators with the mentees and UAA with the mentors. Consider doing this again after three months. The second check by the Coordinators could be in response to requests from the program tracker based on feedback from the mentors or from the mentees themselves. Mentees should also be encouraged to contact the coordinators if they believe the relationship is not on track.
4. Emphasize the importance of establishing a regular schedule for communication between the mentor and mentee and sticking to it. At least at the outset-if not longer, contact should be no less frequent than every week or two. In addition, the importance of careful planning and preparation for mentoring sessions should be stressed along with consistent follow-up feedback going both ways.
5. Make the training beforehand of both mentors and mentees more robust by adding involvement by the bureau coordinators and including discussions (round tables) on past best practices and lessons learned. Ensure that the training covers the importance of building quality relationships that have sustainability.

- 6.** Consider asking to have the initial message to the field about the program sent from the Bureau Assistant Administrators to the Mission Directors. Make sure the voluntary and confidential nature of the program is emphasized in the message. The message should emphasize that the commitment required from the mentee is serious, involves time and attention, and is not to be taken lightly. Stress that participation involves a confidential two-way exchange that will not affect the employee's annual performance report one way or the other.
- 7.** Provide periodic information to mentors about current agency priorities, systems, issues, etc.
- 8.** To get ready for the next cohort, identify quickly the replacement for the former USAID trainer who has rotated to a field assignment.
- 9.** Emphasize the importance of timely communication and response. For the mentors, when e-mails don't work, take the initiative to call and investigate.
- 10.** Emphasize the utility of the guidance available on the mentoring page of the UAA website, which is excellent.