
Dealing with Diversity

Resources for Dealing with Diversity



TIPS FOR DEALING WITH DIVERSITY

1. Keep in mind that you are the adult. You are the experienced one. Imagine, for a moment, what your student must be thinking and feeling. In general, young people of all ages, but particularly teens, believe that they are not respected by adults and worry about whether a mentor will like them or think they're stupid. They are coming to you for help and many already feel insecure and embarrassed about the problems in their lives. Thus, it is your responsibility to take the initiative and make the student feel more comfortable in the relationship.
2. It's also important to remember to be yourself. Sometimes, with the best of intentions, we try to "relate" to young people and try to use their slang and be like "one of the gang." Students can see through this trust facade and may find it difficult to trust people who are not turning to themselves.
3. Furthermore, even though you may learn a lot about another culture, lifestyle, or age group, you will never be from that group. Don't over-identify with your student; s/he is feeling or experiencing. A student may actually feel invalidated by your insistence that you truly know from where s/he is coming. There is a big difference between the statements "I know exactly what you're feeling" and "I think I have a sense of what you're going through." It is helpful to paraphrase what you think your student has said or is feeling and to give examples of similar situations that you have experienced.
4. If something about your student is bothering you, first determine whether the behavior is simply troubling to you because you would do it differently, or whether it is truly an indication of a more seriously troubled youth. If, in fact, you feel the troublesome situation facing your student is detrimental or harmful to him/herself or others, you have an obligation to discuss this with your program coordinator. The coordinator will know when and where to refer the young person for professional help.

CULTURAL RECIPROCITY

An important but often forgotten aspect of cultural diversity is the mutuality of the mentoring relationship, which is what we call cultural reciprocity. This phrase refers to the fact that both

mentors and students alike can benefit from their increased understanding of others that may at first seem unfamiliar.

For the mentor, greater breadth and depth of understanding of others can facilitate better relationships at work, at home, and in other social situations. As your students begin to trust and know you, s/he will begin to learn about life outside his/her limited circle of ways of doing things and that s/he can discover new opportunities and alternative ways of doing things that s/he never knew existed. You can model diversity for your student.