

Mentoring – an open invitation

I first joined the RACI in 1994 with vague notions of furthering my career. I guess I just expected that if I joined up, I would come to know people, and career opportunities would flow. But of course, I had very few networking skills, and found it very difficult to make connections at the events I attended.

Over a few short years of membership, I was able to discern relatively few tangible benefits, and my ties to the RACI weakened. I let it lapse, and moved on with my commercial career.

The membership statistics say that this is a common story. As an organisation, we are getting pretty good initial interest from young chemists (it could be better), but we are then losing many of these during the first years of their career.

Given that the membership fees are not very high, my interpretation is that these early career losses must come down to *perceived* value – in loose terms ‘what’s in it for me?’ – and our struggle as an organisation to answer that question really well. Possibly the best answer to that question is ‘you get from membership what you put in’, but that is much easier later in your career than earlier.

I rejoined RACI in 2013, with the express intention of giving back to the profession that I love. One focus has been to trial various initiatives to create direct value for young chemists via networking and advice.

Via the New South Wales Analytical and Environmental Group (NAG), we created a two-hour lecture series on understanding the job market (bit.ly/1Nou93Z) as part of a wider initiative to create educational webcast content for the RACI. And I invite any universities or groups to contact me if you would like me to give some version of the talk to your students.

Last year, together with the NSW Young Chemists Group, the NAG organised a ‘speed dating’ event (October 2014 issue, p. 40), and we followed this up with a short flyer for young chemists on how to network at events – techniques for walking into a room full of people you don’t already know and making good connections.

There is one more initiative that I want to raise – and I do so with an open invitation to our RACI members (both established members and young chemists) to contact me if you are interested in participating.

For the last year or so, the NSW Branch has trialled a mentoring program for young chemists. Following an application and matching process, two student members, Melissa Neskoski and Tom Frith, were selected to work with me to help prepare them for the workplace, grow their networks, and generally support them through their Honours year and into their chosen career paths.

As their mentor, I spent time getting to know the young chemists, talking with them about their university experience and aspirations. I offered them guidance on *how* to select their Honours project topics (but not *what* to choose). I invited them to RACI events and paid for their tickets to make their attendance easier (which would of course be entirely optional for other mentors, and we might in future be able to fund this from sponsorship if the program grows).

At the RACI events, I introduced them to other members, and generally kept an eye on their movement in the room to

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As an individual who was unsure of my future career path, and who lacked confidence in the area of networking and communicating with ‘new’ people, I found this program to be quite beneficial.

This program has allowed me to find out more about myself, and made me realise that I am a valuable and capable individual who has something to offer the science industry. It has allowed me to develop many friendships, including with my mentor as well as with the other mentee, and has improved my self-confidence significantly, which has resulted in me being able to take more from each networking opportunity and connect with new people in the science industry. This has resulted in me being able to determine the career path that I want to follow, allowing me to focus my attention on my optimal career objective.

This has all been achieved by the meaningful advice, attention, guidance and assistance that was provided to me by my mentor. My greatest achievement while being in the program has been earning an interview with my dream job, which may not have been offered to me if I had not received the support and assistance that I did with structuring my job application. I highly recommend this program for individuals who require guidance for that smooth transition from university to the workforce – especially if they are unsure of the path they want to follow.

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make sure that they didn't become isolated. More widely, I also facilitated introductions through my own network to people of interest in the mentees' chosen careers, either as general contacts or for specific guidance.

We met semi-regularly, to catch up and to plan their job preparation and application process. I reviewed their resumé and some of their applications, and discussed the specifics of individual applications and interviews to try to increase their chances of success.

These last paragraphs have contained a lot of 'I'. So it is important that I add that I got a lot out of this too. This has been an immensely enjoyable experience. I have had the opportunity to play a small part in helping two intelligent, capable young chemists during an important phase in their life. I have watched them grow in confidence and preparedness (noting that their innate qualities were already there). And I believe that I have made two new friends.

As you can see from the two boxes, the experience has been mutually positive and beneficial. Based on the success of the trial, the NSW Branch would now like to extend the pilot. We'd like to establish up to five mentor/mentee pairings, on the same sort of principles as above, and support the relationships as we establish some structure to the program. We invite anyone who is interested to contact me at dave@dcstechnical.com.au.

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Tom Frith (BAdvSci(Hons)/BMus), University of New South Wales

I began working with my mentor about 18 months ago, as I was starting to prepare for my honours year. At that stage, I wasn't exactly sure whether I wanted to take on a career in research or industry or diverge from chemistry completely. I applied to the mentoring program, looking for guidance on how best to make this decision, for which my mentor offered an experienced point of view.

The mentoring program helped me to begin to understand the nature of developing professional relationships through networking, as well as more generally begin to tune my thinking to how the professional world operates. The program was very relaxed, which worked well for me, as I felt comfortable to chat openly with my mentor.

Through working with my mentor, I was able to develop my resumé and cover letter preparation skills, and as a result have been able to secure a full-time graduate job starting in 2016. I would highly recommend the mentoring program to all students coming to the end of their studies, as I found the experience incredibly rewarding. I would also hope that more mentors could be available to allow for more students to get the same experience I was allowed.



Centenary Book – volunteer helpers required

In 2017, the RACI will be 100 years old and to celebrate this mega RACI milestone, the Centenary Committee is working to write a coffee-table-style book covering the Centennial RACI history. Obviously this is an enormous project and we are looking for interested parties to research and write relevant pieces on important events and people over the years.

We also wish to make contact with anyone in possession of past RACI-related documentation, letters, records and, in particular, photos that can be incorporated into the project.

If you are interested, please contact Roger Stapleford (roger.stapleford@raci.org.au).