

# Opinion: Mentoring the Next Generation of Transportation Professionals

Richard Willson

Transportation professionals often enter the workforce with strong motivations to make positive change. Happily, change is afoot. Transportation agencies are shifting to multimodal approaches, while new technologies and analytic methods are shaking up the field. Policy attention to sustainability, system resilience, and social equity is growing. That's good news for aspiring change agents.

The bad news is that some entry-level transportation professionals feel constrained by their workplaces. Surveys of millennials show that they want to make a meaningful impact early on, and that reforms around multimodal, active, and equitable transportation strongly resonate with them. Yet, I hear complaints from young transportation planners about their organizations, and have been surprised by how quickly they will leave positions that don't feel like an immediate fit.

However, by offering encouragement and guidance, seasoned professionals can help younger colleagues understand the value of their early career work, which can reduce dissatisfaction and turnover. Mentoring helps young professionals see the subtle and indirect ways that their work makes a difference,

while making new transportation planners feel welcome and effective in their organizations. It can aid them in finding alignment with organizational culture, and offer insight into how discrete technical tasks affect project outcomes upstream and downstream. Mentoring also enhances young planners' capacity to make professional judgments pertaining to processes, methods, and ethics.

Young public sector transportation planners will sometimes describe their work setting as top-heavy and bureaucratic. They don't always find a satisfying connection between their day-to-day work and change on the ground. For example, a planner working on making service changes at a transit agency may encounter resistance from colleagues and get frustrated by slow progress. Mentoring can help young transportation professionals develop strategies to respond productively to such settings, and/or decide whether to seek a job where results are more tangible.

In consulting firms, young transportation planners can have concerns about a lack of training, insufficient manager feedback, and pressure to produce billable hours, while compartmentalized entry-level tasks can make them feel like cogs in a wheel. Mentoring can help such planners manage time pressure, understand clients' perspectives, and gain informal constructive feedback on their performance.

I have written extensively on idealists and planning in recent years, and through that work have developed some mentoring tips for transportation professionals.

### **Tips for young transportation professionals**

1. If in-house mentoring is available, take advantage of it. If it is not available from your direct supervisor, find it where you can. If mentoring is not available within your organization, or you'd like to keep it separate from performance reviews, cultivate mentors outside of your organization.
2. Be attentive to the many forms that mentoring takes. Mentoring can include career planning, professional coaching, life coaching, and mentoring-by-doing (completing a task with an experienced transportation planner). It could be happening without you noticing.
3. Be open to different mentoring styles. Mentors can range from kind supporters to those who challenge you. Some will take you under their wings on their own initiatives, while others will respond only if asked.

### **Tips for mentors**

1. Mentoring provides intrinsic rewards by extending the mentor's legacy through the work of others. But even from a utilitarian standpoint, mentoring can reduce employee turnover and increase engagement.
2. While storytelling is a powerful teaching tool, place the focus on the mentee's process of understanding and deciding. Rather than suggesting what the mentee might do, offer ways of thinking about the issue. Point out blind spots and offer approaches to dealing with ambiguity.
3. For mentees who are concerned with a lack of impact, provide tools to help them understand political conflict, organizational rivalries or coalitions, risks, timing, or external mandates. Share ways of processing cynical feelings if a good idea is scrapped.

New planners should take advantage of the numerous field-related organizations that offer mentoring, including the Institute of Transportation Engineers, the American Planning Association, the Women's Transportation Seminar International, the Transportation Research Board, and others. For example, the Transportation Research Board Minority Student Fellows Program empowers young transportation planners and engineers by having them write peer-reviewed papers alongside mentors. This program has led many participants to advanced degrees. Transportation planners can benefit from *ad hoc* mentors they meet through professional connections as well.

Employers also offer mentoring programs. For example, the Los Angeles Department of Transportation's in-house program pairs senior and junior transportation professionals, and LA Metro holds "lunch and learn" seminars for young employees. Employers should seek to canvas young employees about their needs, and design programs to fill them.

Perhaps the most important contribution of mentoring is helping young transportation planners master the dance of idealism and realism that is inherent in professional transportation planning practice. Personal idealism about desired changes must adapt to the work context. Mentoring can help young transportation planners develop a style of practice that is based on a realistic understanding of the prospects for change. Plus, it can keep young planners engaged in transportation professions over the long-term, so that they are ready and capable of tackling the transportation challenges of the coming decades.

## Further Reading

Willson, R. Ongoing. Launching your planning career: A guide for idealists. American Planning Association blog series. Retrieved from <https://www.planning.org/idealistblog/>

Willson, R. & Febey, K. (2018). Evaluation of the Transportation Research Board Minority Student Fellows Program. *Journal of the Transportation Research Board*. doi.org/10.1177/0361198118758057.

Willson, R. (2018). *A guide for the idealist: Launching and navigating your planning career*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Willson, R., Scherr, R. & Albrecht, B. (2017). Teaching Outside the Planning Curriculum: An Assessment of Mentoring Practices. Paper #609. *The 57th Annual Conference of the Association of Collegiate Schools of Planning*. Denver, CO.

## About the Author

Richard Willson is a professor in the Department of Urban and Regional Planning at Cal Poly Pomona.