

SFNet's Mentoring Program: Continuing to Guide Growth

SFNet's second iteration of the program nearly doubled its participants and is proving to be an invaluable resource for members.



The Secured Finance Foundation, in conjunction with SFNet's Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Committee helped support the SFNet's second iteration of its Mentorship Program, which ran from mid-June to August 2023. This year's program encompassed a diverse cohort, hailing from 14 U.S. states and two countries. The program was designed to encourage diversity and foster inclusivity by enabling established veterans in the secured finance industry and those new to their careers to build relationships and learn from one another through a virtual mentoring initiative.

Within this vibrant community, 40 one-on-one mentor-mentee pairs were established to foster individual growth and development. An impressive 55 companies enthusiastically contributed their expertise and resources to the program's success. This year, there were 80 participants, compared to 44 in 2022. Women consisted of 36% of the program's participants, emphasizing SFNet's commitment to inclusivity and gender diversity. The initiative represented a convergence of talent and opportunity, showcasing the program's wide-reaching impact and potential for growth.

SFNet thanks this year's mentors for their guidance, support, and insights, and mentees, for their enthusiasm, receptiveness to learning, and proactive engagement. SFNet would also like to extend its deepest appreciation to the program chair, Bianca Barredo, managing director, ABL underwriting and originations, MidCap Financial Services, and program champions: Betty Hernandez, EVP & chief credit officer, SLR Business Credit; Terry Keating, CEO, Access Capital; Mignon Winston, vice president – underwriting, Great Rock Capital; Victor Pena, Gaurang Vyas, founder and CEO, Rise Line Business Credit; Candice Hubert, director, business development; Mike Jackson, U.S. director, equity & inclusion, BMO Commercial Bank ABL and Mark Cuccinello, managing director, JPMorgan Chase Bank, who provided unwavering support, guidance, and leadership throughout the program.

SFNet's virtual Mentorship Program offers a series of 1:1 meetings, structured group events and online discussions, facilitated through a private LinkedIn page and Zoom meetings. The program's focus is on professional development, providing Mentees with the chance to engage in a variety of activities designed to enhance their skills and knowledge.

SFNet recognizes the value of a workforce that represents all members of its community and the importance of providing equal opportunities, but growth and development of those in the industry is just as important for DEI initiatives as is hiring and retaining. The program will provide a supportive environment for mentees to enhance their skills, gain valuable insights and network with professionals who share similar interests and experiences. Additionally, mentors have the opportunity to give back to their industry by sharing their expertise, experience and insights by contributing to the development of the next generation of industry leaders.

The Mentee and Mentor Experience

As a first-time mentee participant, Greg Frattaroli, senior manager, Commercial & Industrial, Gordon Brothers, found the program

informative and beneficial and said it allowed access to successful mentors and like-minded and motivated mentees.

"I wasn't sure what to expect as this was my first time participating in a program like this as a mentee, but my mentor, Kevin Maitland of PNC Business Credit, did an excellent job of helping guide me through the process," Frattaroli said. "While we shared different industry experiences—him as a technology-focused ABL underwriter at a large bank and me, a commercial and industrial liquidator at a mid-size investment firm—he was able to find similarities between what we do and taught me a lot about career growth that superseded our day-to-day activities. I consider him a friend and look forward to maintaining our relationship beyond the program."

"The mentorship program is worth its weight in gold," said mentee Emily Neuherz, senior associate, Portfolio Management, Capital Foundry, who was paired with mentor Terry Keating. "This program has given me the time and space to connect with so many incredible mentors who 'walk the walk and talk the talk'. Doors are opening for me that I didn't know were possible. I'm now connected with thoughtful and insightful mentors who care about the growth and development of ABL's next generation of leaders. I am blown away by the generosity of our mentors and what we've accomplished in our sessions."

Mentors also cited their experience as rewarding, with each group bringing different experiences to the table.

"It becomes more evident every time I speak with young professionals, that it is essential to take into account the intrinsic power drawn from diversity in the market," said mentor Oscar Rombola, managing director, eCapital. "Seasoned professionals bring experience, younger ones bring innovation and a combination of both, bring success!"

"Mentoring the next generation in finance isn't a task, it's a joy," added Raphael Torres, head of business development, Access Capital. "Sharing my experiences in hopes of imparting wisdom, seeing potential ignite, and helping shape success is a reward in itself."

Interactive Teambuilding

Bianca Barredo, head of 2023's mentorship initiative, and mentor, especially enjoyed organizing bi-weekly, all-hands virtual structured events this year.

"We had panels, interactive sessions, and group activities," she explained. "We had some rough themes for events from the pre-planning sessions with the Committee, but to put some meat on the bone for the events, I had to really think about the various skill sets I've amassed during my career. I gave a lot of thought to what I wish I knew when I was in my mid-20s and starting my career. Nearly a third of our mentees were under four years in the industry, so I had to put myself back to that mindset. We had an amazing group of mentors with wealth of knowledge and experience, so leveraging that group was a big part of the agenda. I loved how after the events I would get feedback from the mentors on how useful they found the event and how they learned something! Learning never stops."

One of Barredo's favorite events was group improv exercises to teach mentors and mentees to think on their feet. A universal critical skill of successful people in secured finance, regardless of profession,

is someone's ability to think critically on the spot.

For help with this exercise, the group relied on Frattaroli, who happens to do stand-up comedy. Two exercises were conducted in breakout sessions: "Yes, and" and "PowerPoint Karaoke" where members collaborated in smaller groups.

"With the help of Bianca, Betty Lam and Denise Castagna at SFNet, we decided to play these two different games," Frattaroli explained. "The first game, 'Yes, and', is perhaps the entire foundation of the improv skillset. The objective is simple: One person starts with a sentence and the next person in the group adds onto it by saying 'Yes, and...'" This continues until everyone has shared something or the story is sufficiently ridiculous. It promotes active listening, effective communication, confidence in public speaking and boosts creativity and quick thinking."

Following "Yes, and," the group played PowerPoint Karaoke, where members were given slides and had to improvise talking points. For example, one slide had a pie chart with varying percentages and the title was "How a dolphin spends its day."

"It was quite ridiculous and a bit silly, but it forces people to come up with something creative," Frattaroli said. "It's okay if it's awkward; that is sort of the point. It's about learning to deal with unique situations and roll with them to the best of your ability."

"Heading into the improv event, I was worried what the result was going to look like," Frattaroli said. "It can be hard to gain buy-in while in-person with people who signed up for improv class, let alone in a virtual meeting of people who had the idea sprung on them five minutes prior, but the effort and results from the groups I watched were very strong! Everyone was ready to roll up their sleeves and give this weird game a try – many did exceptionally well, and all put in solid effort. I think that strikes at the heart of the commercial and middle-market secured finance world; we need to be a bit more creative and think outside of the box more than our larger deal counterparts, but that is just my cheeky conjecture."

"Of course, both exercises resulted in awkward moments, dead air, discomfort and random hilarity, but it also encouraged other things like active listening, reading between the lines, open mindedness, teamwork, empathy and, of course, thinking on your feet," Barredo added. "I loved that event."

Key Takeaways

Although the 11-week program has come to a close, mentors and mentees who participated reported seeing the value of setting aside the time and energy to participate.

"People are busy and the reluctance to commit to an 11-week mentorship program is understandable, but I got such great feedback from the mentors," Barredo said. "Not only did they enjoy the structured events, which were definitely meant to cater to the mentees, but they all were so impressed by the caliber and engagement of the mentees. They saw how valuable it is to help the next generation of industry leaders and they do have great knowledge to impart. For the mentees, it is always challenging to put yourself out there for something that isn't part of your current day-to-day job. This program really forced mentees to ask questions, push themselves outside their

comfort zone and take control of their own career."

Barredo said some mentees would put together agendas and goals for their mentor to maximize their time together and ask questions.

"In just 11 weeks I saw so many people grow and garner confidence, which was apparent in the final capstone event where they had to give a three-minute presentation," Barredo said. "It was a testament, though, to the quality of the group that they really maximized the program. For the next class, I recommend that everyone who signs up to really make the time in the short program window. Feel free to reach out to those who participated this year to get a sense of the program."


Barredo hopes that as the younger generation continues in their career, they realize the importance of keeping in touch with their mentors along the way.

"I really hope people see this as an opportunity to form a longer-term relationship with someone that can be a part of their career development."

For Frattaroli, he advised focusing on strengths while mitigating weaknesses and continuing to network and be curious.

"Everyone gets imposter syndrome – even CEOs," he added.

SFNet is excited to announce that the next iteration of its mentoring program is scheduled for winter 2024 and promises to be even more engaging, insightful, and impactful.

For further information regarding the program, please don't hesitate to reach out to SFNet program manager-education and chapters, Denise Castagna, at dcastagna@sfnet.com. 

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