

Mentoring for the Millenium

by

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The year 1999 celebrates my 20th anniversary as a mentor. I know that I have changed drastically over the years as I learned more about how to be a better mentor. It seems to me, though, that the responsibilities of the role have changed drastically, too. Here I will discuss the new demands of the role of mentor and some thoughts on how to meet them.

In most of my 20 years as a mentor, I had the luxury of teaching students about theory, methods, writing, and publishing at a comparatively calm pace and in roughly that order of priority. The emphasis was on good scholarship and substantive concerns. More and more, the emphasis has shifted to teaching the skills of research and getting students' vitae ready for their job search. These days, any pool of applicants for a position as an Assistant Professor is sure to include people who have already been tenured and those who have had one or more post-docs or as many years in a faculty rank. The competition for post-doc positions is almost as great. Individuals are hired much less for their promise, and much more on the basis of their list of publications and grants. This is almost as true of smaller so-called teaching colleges as it is of major research universities. How is it possible to ready graduate students in a way that melds the ingredients of good scholarship with the demands of the job? Here is my list of goals that need attention if we are to succeed in our role as mentors in the next 20 years.

1. Teach students the whole job on the job. Mentoring these days means learning by doing. Here at the University of Texas, we use a highly successful apprentice model of research, in which students are required every semester to work in a faculty member's lab. In my lab, we carry the process a step further, as I try to let students work side-by-side with me in all aspects of my role, the way apprenticeships used to be. It is useful to talk to students frequently about what it takes to succeed with a Ph. D. in academic or corporate positions. It is important to let them see the process in action; for example, how are conference presentations reviewed and programs planned; how are grants and submitted articles reviewed, including revisions and re-revisions? Letting students see examples of rejected articles is informative too. (If the only way you can get examples of rejections is to borrow them from others, then that's okay, too.) Sometimes we are afraid to let students know what they are up against. Many faculty treat students in a sheltered manner, perhaps to protect students from the demands that lie ahead or to protect themselves from demands on their time. Other faculty expect students to function independently, perhaps for the same reasons. Regardless of the approach, reading books and papers isn't enough any more; learning by doing is essential.

2. Give students positive and negative feedback on all aspects of professional roles. This guideline probably sounds harsh, but it is really important to inform students about what they have done well and what they need to do better in all aspects of their role. Of course, it is important to give detailed feedback on writing and academic work. What I suggest here is to reach into any area of students' behaviors that has an effect on professional success. I call this "feet to the fire" mentoring. In my lab, for example, we work in teams, and team members need to cooperate with one another within and across teams. To accomplish these goals, I've been known to let students know when the team members are feeling taken advantage of, when someone needs extra help or support, or to write letters to students about some behavior. In one case, for example, the relationship between two of my RAs who had worked closely together became very strained when they both were asked to interview for the same position. The father of one of them died, and the other decided not to go to the funeral with me. I intervened, saying, "Yes, you need to show support by driving an hour and a half to go

to the funeral of your colleague's father." Praise a lot and notice when some behavior needs to be corrected.

3. Remember that success is achieved by people with different talents and different paths. Academics, especially, are guilty of putting too much emphasis on how smart people are and on preparation for only the academic life. I remember my graduate student cohort. We all knew who among us had the highest GRE scores and that those with the highest scores were the most sought after by professors. As the years went by, though, it became clear that, as studies show (e.g., Sternberg & Williams, 1997), many of my peers with lower GREs were much more successful than those with the highest GREs. Why? Well, it takes a lot more than smarts to be a successful academic. I won't list all of the characteristics here, but it takes perseverance, creativity, ability to communicate, and technical skills, to mention a few. There is room for lots of people with lots of different strengths. It is critical to help students identify their unique strengths, to nurture these strengths, and to allow them to be independent enough to pursue their own strengths. It amazes me to see that some faculty disdain some students. It is especially disconcerting to see when minority students with good letters, good grades, but lower GREs are disregarded. Some of my best success stories are the students who were rejected by some faculty. Part of the tendency to reject some student comes, I think, from faculty members' beliefs that academia is the job of choice, and other jobs are signs of failure. It is hard to defend that view in today's job market, when the high demands and low salaries of academia are weighted against the many exciting possibilities for talented Ph.D.'s outside of the academy.

4. Help students be successful and feel successful. Students these days need to get their work in the pipeline for publication early and to start to build their vitae early. Our job as mentors is to help them do that. They need to learn how to balance the demands of building their own career against their many other demands – their course work, TA or RA support, and social or family life. Teaching them how to do that, to get some lines on their vitae, and to have successes with the prizes by which we all are judged, is the best thing we can do for them.

5. Be ethical. Be generous. (This principle relates to #4.) The standard is higher for all of us than it used to be. Let's face it: The pressure is greater now than ever to have students do more for less credit. How can we balance our own demands against those faced by students? It is important to keep ethics and selflessness at the forefront of our behaviors as mentors and as colleagues, for that matter. Give students credit for their ideas, first authorship when deserved, and help with that dissertation grant. (See Committee on the Conduct of Science, 1989; Fine and Kurdek, 1993; Stith, Jester, & Linn, 1992.) In short, give of your self, time, and knowledge – the way good teachers must do.

What I have written here is not a cynical view, for mentoring is among my most favorite and rewarding jobs. It is, however, a realistic, honest view of what must be done in years to come.

References

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