

A Second Look at Mentoring Graduate Students: Some Provocative Thoughts

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Recently much attention has been given to the concept of faculty mentoring as an effective remedy against the long times-to-degree and high attrition rates prevalent in graduate education. [William Lyons, Don Scroggins, and Patra Bonham Rule, "The Mentor in Graduate Education," *Studies in Higher Education* 15, no. 3 (1990): 277-285; Refugio J. Rochin, "Mentor/Mentoring: What it is and What it Means to Me." Presented at the University of California President's Post-doctoral Fellowship Orientation, U.C. Berkeley, October 2, 1989.] My experience during three years of research on graduate education and my own years as a doctoral student led me to rethink this concept and its underlying assumptions.

What do we mean by mentoring? What is the difference between a mentor and an adviser? These are difficult questions to answer. The word mentor comes from Greek mythology, first appearing in Homer's *Odyssey*. There a man, Mentor, nurtured, protected, and educated Ulysses' son, Telemachus, in the absence of his father. Mentor also introduced Telemachus to other leaders and guided him in assuming his rightful place. Underlying Mentor's role is the idea that someone knows exactly what the younger person's rightful place is.

Most current articles define a mentor as a person who takes the novice under his

or her wing. The mentor helps the protege set goals and standards and develop skills; protects the protege from others in a way that allows room for risk and failure; facilitates the protege's successful entrance into academic and professional circles; and ultimately passes on his or her work to the protege. [Roberta Hall and Bernice Sandler, "Academic Mentoring for Female Students and Faculty: A new look at an old way to get ahead," 1983.]

While the traditional mentoring relationship can be helpful to students, its success depends on personalities: the "right chemistry" between two persons. In some cases this may be stifling. Or, if students are unsuccessful in finding a mentor, they may remain unattended and abandoned outside their field's closed professional circles. Given the high factor of chance for a successful outcome of a mentorship relationship, I propose a systematic departmental program structure, wherein seminars and on-going workshops provide *all* students with the formal and informal knowledge necessary for becoming a professional in the field.

When I asked students at the nine UC campuses what would have helped them at each stage of their dissertation process, they said: *We want to be treated as equals, as adults, as junior colleagues. We want individual recognition and encouragement. We want honest criticism and constructive feedback in our work. We would like knowledge of how the system really works. We would like to know what we should consider when we choose a dissertation topic: how does this feed into long-term career planning? We would like*

opportunities to present our research and to learn how to give a talk. We would like to be introduced into our professional field and its associations and become familiar with important people in our field. We would like systematic information about opportunities for financial support, grants, publishing, and jobs. We would like to learn how our faculty go about revising articles sent back from editors, how they plan their time, and how they integrate family and career into their lives. While students said they wished their advisers would have had more time and been more accessible, they did not mention wanting a mentor.

Now, one could argue that if students have not experienced the benefits of being in a mentor relationship, they cannot express a desire for it. But, in a meeting with a doctoral student focus group, I explicitly talked about mentoring. I began by asking, "Who has a mentor, how would you describe the mentoring relationship, and what is the difference between an adviser and a mentor?"

Two students (out of twelve) had a mentor. One had a male mentor and one a female mentor; both were women students. The first said, "I could always trust my dissertation adviser, who was also my mentor. He looked out for me, specifically in terms of financial support, and now on the job market. He gave me more than just advice--he offered help, often unsolicited, and had my long-term career in mind. But," she continued, "I didn't feel totally comfortable in this relationship; it was always like he was the good father and I the dutiful daughter. I will always be grateful for what he did

for me, but I am looking forward to leaving, to going to another place and finding out what I can do alone, without his help and interventions--carrying out my **own** ideas and not his."

The second had a different experience. "I really admire my mentor; she is a role model in the true sense. I learned a lot from her, but sometimes I think, Who am I? Will I turn into a clone of her?" [See also Linda Johnsrud, "Mentoring Between Academic Women: A Conversation," ASHE, November, 1990.] But most interesting was the discussion that followed. Although some students were angry that they did not have anybody who looked out for them, one woman forcefully declared, "I am an adult. I do not want to go through a second parent/child relationship. I do not want a traditional patriarchal mentor. There is enough hierarchy in the system." An unexpected response!

The group concluded that the conventional mentor/protege system is a very exclusive one by which some benefit, but from which many are excluded. Faculty can mentor only a few students; their time and energy are limited. And, women faculty and faculty of color, who still are few in numbers, will probably soon be overloaded, burnt out, and as a result will become ineffective mentors. *Women* students, the group argued, sometimes have particular problems with male mentors: they can either play the dutiful daughter, or they must be on the look-out not to be viewed by others as having a sexual liaison, rather than a genuine helping relationship, with the mentor. Further, if the chemistry between the faculty and the student does not work, the best intentions fail.

Finally, if the relationship with the mentor goes wrong, it is very difficult for the student to continue, and quite some time might be lost in picking up the pieces and beginning again.

Might an artificially created mentor/protege relationship do more harm than good? Not everyone needs a mentor to succeed, and not everyone who succeeds has (or had) a mentor. Are we trying to push a concept that benefits only a few? Many are excluded, and if this delicate mentorship relationship breaks down, it can have disastrous consequences for the student. If it works, and the faculty adviser and student become friends, it is wonderful. But we cannot force a mentor relationship on either our faculty or our students.

I suggest that we look for alternative concepts to the traditional mentor/protege model. Network mentoring (or multiple mentors) and peer mentoring are promising alternatives. The network mentoring model encourages students to look for several faculty who can help them with certain aspects of their thesis and their professional advancement. In this way, students are discouraged from putting all their eggs in one basket. Multiple mentors may not have the same influence as a single, powerful, senior person, but the effect of multiple mentors is that the relationships between faculty and students are less hierarchical and more reciprocal. In the peer mentoring model, advanced students act as mentors to the new students in a big brother/big sister model. They share information and strategies, act as sounding boards, and offer advice. Peer

mentoring is not a substitute for, but a supplement to, departmental guidance and faculty advising.

The Graduate School and the Academic Senate's Graduate Council can encourage departments to develop a systematic program structure that consciously socializes students into the professional world. Then the necessary knowledge and skills--presenting a paper, giving a job talk, and submitting a good seminar paper for publication--will not be left to chance but, instead, will be built into the doctoral program.

While many departments on our nine UC campuses have elements of these structures, we need to define, for each stage of the doctoral process, the right programmatic activity to support interaction between students and faculty. At the first stage of the doctoral program, each department should offer a first-year seminar at which different faculty members present their latest research and where students can get to know all faculty members. Such a seminar should also give an overview and a history of the professional associations in the field, as well as ethical considerations, relevant journals, current research concerns, and information about research money in the field and where to apply. Departments should organize mock oral examination sessions and work-in-progress seminars for students at the research and dissertation writing stage. There also should be a faculty committee responsible for student placement. This committee should organize workshops to help students write curricula vitae and prepare for campus visits and job interviews at the big national conferences. Departments should

also sponsor activities that allow students to meet senior experts in their fields.

Departments should emphasize a collegial ethos and develop a collegial network which includes graduate students.

I am not against faculty mentorship, but why pursue a strategy that benefits only a few students when departments can develop systematic program structures that help all students obtain their degrees, become professionals in their fields, and gain independence in the process.