

Effective Mentoring in Geography

A paper for the

AAG Healthy Departments Website

Submitted by:

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Abstract

This paper discusses how effective mentoring can help early career geographers in the professional development process. While our focus is on geographers in the early years of their academic careers, the principles discussed here may be of value to geography faculty at all stages of their careers, both as providers and as recipients of mentoring support. We present a list of guidelines to help both prospective mentors and early career faculty to develop and sustain positive mentoring relationships.

The term “protégée” is used to describe a person who is given advice and provided with support by the mentor. Generally speaking, the protégée is junior to and less experienced than the mentor. Throughout this paper, however, we emphasize that the most effective mentoring relationships are those in which all parties benefit. Good teachers often claim that they learn as much from their students as their students learn from them. Similarly, effective mentors will say that they learn as much or more from their protégées as the protégées learn from their mentors. Early-career geography faculty members should take careful stock of the situation before rushing to develop mentoring relationships with potential mentors. Appropriate mentors may or may not be employed in a young geographer’s own department or organization. Sometimes it feels more safe and comfortable to establish mentoring relationships with persons who have some professional distance from direct supervisors or a person’s closest colleagues. In many cases, the ideal mentor outside one’s immediate sphere is an outsider-insider – someone who is well informed about challenges that a protégée may face in his or her own

department and at the university as well as being able to recommend solutions that may help ease them.

Introduction

In this paper, we discuss some of the ways that effective mentoring relationships can help early career geographers in the professional development process. While our focus is on geographers in the early years of their academic careers, the principles developed in this paper may be of value to geography faculty at all stages of their careers, both as providers and as recipients of mentoring support.

Many professional geographers experience considerable anxiety and discomfort as they develop their careers. Some report feeling overwhelmed and stressed as they endeavor to succeed in professional positions while trying to maintaining a balance between their faculty positions and their personal lives. Effective mentoring relationships can help ease and mediate the challenges associated with adjustment to and success in professional positions. Mentors are key to providing personal and professional support and advice for new faculty and advanced graduate students who are planning to enter academia.

In Homer's *The Odyssey*, before going to fight in the Trojan War, Odysseus left his son Telemachus in the care of his friend Mentor. Mentor served as a guardian, teacher and father figure to the young man. Today, the term "mentor" is used to describe an experienced person who shares advice and expertise with newcomers to a particular field of endeavor. Mentors recommend strategies for career development and help their protégées develop confidence, skills, and experience.

In this paper, we use the term “protégée” to describe a person who is given advice and provided with support by the mentor. Generally speaking, the protégée is junior to and less experienced than the mentor. However, it should be emphasized that the most effective mentoring relationships are those in which all parties benefit. Good teachers often claim that they learn as much from their students as their students learn from them. Similarly, effective mentors will say that they learn as much or more from their protégées as the protégées learn from their mentors.

In an earlier publication, Hardwick (2005) discussed strategies for mentoring early-career faculty in geography. She pointed out that “appropriate mentoring is a vitally important aspect of surviving the early years of an academic geography career” (2005, 21). This article and others identified helpful mentoring behaviors and described characteristics of effective relationships between early-career faculty members and their mentors (Boice 1992; Schoenfeld, Clay, and Magnan 1992; Boyle and Boice 1998; Kolodny 1998; Goldsmith, Komlos, and Gold 2001).

In this paper, we build upon and expand the ideas presented in these earlier publications by situating mentoring within the broader context of professional development in geography. We also discuss principles of effective mentoring activity from the perspective of both the mentor and the protégée.

Fostering Positive Mentoring Strategies and Relationships

Over the past two decades, many books and articles have focused upon strategies for mentoring early-career faculty in academic positions (see for example Tierney and Rhodes 1994; Diamond 1995; Tierney and Bensimon 1996; Caplan and Toth 1997;

Moody 1997; and Coiner and Hume 1998). A few have focused on the mentoring experiences of women and other underrepresented groups (Caplan 1993; Finkel, Olswang, and She 1994; Thompson and Dey 1998; Moss et al 1999). These and many other publications address several critical questions about the mentoring process. For example, Hardwick (2005) focuses upon mentoring early-career faculty members who are working to succeed in tenure-track academic positions. She presents strategies that early-career tenure-track faculty members can use in order to meet the demands of their positions effectively while preserving balance in their lives. Identifying and maintaining mentoring relationships with more senior faculty members, both within and outside the early-career faculty member's department and institution, is an important strategy discussed in this earlier publication.

What makes a mentoring relationship successful? Mentoring relationships vary in levels of formality, duration, and intensity. Many institutions, including many universities, maintain formal mentoring programs. Tenured faculty members or other senior officials serve as mentors for newer employees. In some cases, the assignment of a mentor is a formal process; in others, such relationships arise in a more informal way. Most of the literature on mentoring assumes that the goal of the mentoring process is to ensure professional success in one's current institution or position, in part because institutions invest considerable effort in making sure that their employees are productive contributors. However, geographers who have not yet obtained academic employment, or who are seeking to move to more desirable positions elsewhere, can also benefit from knowledge of the basic principles of mentoring.

Regardless of the formal institutional context of mentoring, a positive mentoring relationship is a two-way street. For the relationship to be successful, both parties must make a commitment to it and should perceive that the relationship is professionally beneficial. Within academia, the concept of mentoring is relatively new. The importance of some type of formal mentoring as a gateway to professional development has achieved widespread acceptance in academic life only during the past two decades. Senior faculty members who entered the profession at an earlier time may never have experienced mentoring relationships and so may not have considered the importance of mentoring in professional development. Nevertheless, more experienced professionals are often open to participating in mentoring relationships if given the opportunity. Senior professionals who take a proactive role in developing mentoring relationships, both formal and informal, with junior colleagues are often valued greatly not only by their junior colleagues themselves, but also by department chairs and senior administrators.

During sessions on mentoring that we have organized at professional meetings and workshops, we have heard many senior faculty members say they would like to become effective mentors to junior colleagues, but that they are unsure about how to begin. Others expressed sympathy for concerns expressed by younger colleagues but were doubtful that they could make positive contributions to their colleagues' professional development. The following guidelines are offered here as a resource for senior geography faculty members who may wish to establish a mentoring relationship with early-career colleagues.

Bensimon, Ward, and Sanders point out that effective mentors offer professional advice in an approachable manner (2000, 135). They help their junior colleagues

understand and prepare for the tenure and promotion process. They encourage discussion about teaching, research, and service. They reinforce such discussion by offering suggestions to help protégées deal with specific issues. For example, effective mentors may offer to visit their colleagues' classes to provide advice about teaching or offer to critique a protégée's syllabus or writing assignments. They may also share information about conferences and grant opportunities, and volunteer to critique a draft of a protégée's research paper or funding proposal.

Effective mentors provide advice in a proactive yet non-intrusive manner, volunteering their time to visit junior colleagues in their offices or in more informal social settings to impart guidance. Good mentors recognize that their protégées may not find specific pieces of advice useful, and do not take offense if the protégée declines to follow the mentor's advice on a particular issue after giving it careful consideration. An effective mentor also recognizes that each protégée is an individual, and therefore is aware that advice that may be effective for one protégée may be less useful or even inappropriate for another.

Effective mentors also make an effort to learn from their protégées. Younger colleagues are likely to be more conversant with the most recent literature in the discipline, may be more conversant and comfortable with new technologies, and may have a better handle on the thought processes and motivations of contemporary undergraduates. A good mentor will take advantage of this opportunity to learn about these and other issues from his or her protégée, thus enhancing the mentor's professional development as well.

Bensimon, Ward, and Sanders also identify mentoring behaviors that they regard as disabling or ineffective. Good mentors should be prepared to initiate contact with junior colleagues; they should not assume that all is well unless there is a complaint, and should not expect early-career faculty to make initial contact and ask for help. Other disabling behaviors include telling “war stories” rather than offering constructive advice and assuming that the protégée should do things in a certain way because that way worked for the mentor.

The actions of protégées, like those of their mentors, can be constructive or can be disabling. The protégée should recognize that the mentor’s suggestions may be influenced by very different life experiences, especially if the mentor is considerably older or comes from a different cultural or ethnic background than the protégée. The protégée should listen carefully to the mentor’s suggestions and should make clear to the mentor that he or she is seriously considering the mentor’s advice, whether or not the protégée accepts that advice. The protégée should not take negative advice personally. For example, a mentor might visit a protégée’s class and offer suggestions for improving his or her conduct of that class. The protégée should not take these suggestions as personal criticism; rather, the suggestions should be seen as advice intended to improve the class, thereby improving the protégée’s teaching evaluations and his or her professional standing within his or her institution.

The protégée should also avoid actions that could be seen as belittling to the mentor or treating the mentor like an “old fogey.” For example, many older faculty members are uncomfortable with new research and communications technologies, or are unfamiliar with contemporary popular culture. The protégée should make allowances for

the fact that his or her mentor may not be as familiar with iPods or the nuances of hip-hop culture as he or she is, and should avoid comments or actions that might be perceived by the mentor as condescending.

Establishing and Maintaining Mentoring Relationships

How and with whom should one establish and maintain mentoring relationships? Early-career geography faculty members should take careful stock of the situation before rushing to develop mentoring relationships with potential mentors. Appropriate mentors may or may not be employed in a young geographer's own department or organization. Sometimes it feels more safe and comfortable to establish mentoring relationships with persons who have some professional distance from direct supervisors or a person's closest colleagues. In many cases, the ideal mentor outside one's immediate sphere is an outsider-insider – someone who is well informed about challenges that a protégée may face in his or her own department and at the university as well as being able to recommend solutions that may help ease them.

Having more than one mentor is very often useful. For example, a tenure-track geographer grappling with balancing professional advancement and the needs of a young family might find that an older colleague may be in a good position to provide advancement on achieving professional success. However, if this older colleague is single, or has grown children, he or she may not be as valuable in mentoring the younger geographer about career-family issues. Rather, in this case mentoring on balancing family and career might be obtained effectively from a recently tenured colleague in another discipline who also has young children at home. Similarly, international faculty members teaching at U.S. universities can often obtain valuable mentoring from older international

faculty members who can help them deal with issues such as immigration and cultural norms of American students.

Geographers in tenure-track faculty positions should also look for external mentors who are employed outside their own institutions, as well as internal mentors within their own universities. External mentors can be especially valuable as a source of information about research opportunities and in helping their protégées to establish contact with highly regarded experts in their areas of specialization. A wide contact base of senior faculty members is especially valuable when the junior faculty member is being considered for tenure. Most universities require external letters evaluating the scholarship of faculty members under consideration for tenure and promotion, and it is far easier and more effective for the senior faculty member to write about a junior colleague at another university who he or she knows personally. Our experience has been that becoming active in an AAG specialty group is an excellent source of this type of mentoring, and an excellent place to identify and cultivate relationships with mentors outside one's own institution.

Once a potential mentor is identified, one should consider that person's potential as a mentor carefully. Are the mentors still involved in productive professional activity? Do they seem open, warm, and receptive to working with younger colleagues? Are they comfortable to be around? Check in with other colleagues to test their perceptions about the person under consideration as a mentor. Have they had positive experiences with this person as a mentor? Do they recommend the person as a strong candidate for becoming a mentor to others? Finally, consider whether or not the person has the time to become the kind of mentor needed. Are they too busy with their professional responsibilities to be

able to fit another commitment into their overloaded schedules? However, a prospective protégée should not assume that his or her prospective mentor is too busy to participate in a mentoring relationship and should not hesitate to ask if the prospective mentor is willing to serve in that capacity.

The following list of suggestions provides a guide to good mentoring practice for both senior and early career geographers who seek to create and sustain positive mentoring relationships:

1. Shared goals: Do both the mentor and his/her protégée share the same ultimate goals for the professional development of the protégées? It is essential at a foundational level for career goals to be shared and nurtured throughout the mentoring relationship. In order to achieve this goal, the mentor should be careful to avoid projecting his or her own experiences on the protégée. Statements like “This worked for me, so it should work for you too” should not be made unreflectively.
2. Personal traits: Do the personalities of the mentor and the protégée match up effectively, providing a comfortable environment for open and shared communication even in difficult situations?
3. Confidentiality: Is the mentor willing and able to hold all discussions in confidence that are shared by his/her protégée without passing judgment or the need to share gossip with other colleagues? The mentor may be tempted to initiate action intended to help the protégée, for example by trying to intervene in a problem between the protégée and his or her supervisor. However, the mentor should not initiate such actions without the protégée’s knowledge and approval.

Both should also recognize limits in the exchange of confidences. For example, the mentor should not be expected to spend a great deal of time on intimate details about the protégée's health, finances, personal relationships, or other aspects of life that are not germane to the workplace. Rather, these issues should be addressed by physicians, accountants, attorneys, or psychologists with professional expertise in these areas.

4. Limits: A good mentor cannot overpromise the amount of support they can give to a protégée. If time constraints make it impossible for regular follow-through to conversations and issues to occur, these constraints should be shared up front with a young geographer who is seeking a mentoring relationship with a more senior colleague before either commits a great deal of time to that mentoring relationship.
5. Balance: One of the most essential (and often most lacking) considerations to take into account in good mentoring relationships is finding a way to create and maintain the kind of open communication about strategies that help foster a balance of both career goals and personal lives. Particularly in the earliest years on the job, finding a way to maintain this balance may be one of the most difficult and most important topics of discussion between a protégé and mentor. Effective mentors not only take an interest in the personal development of their protégées, but they invest time and effort to help the protégées feel valued or comfortable. Mentors are encouraged to invite their younger colleagues to social events, take them out for lunch or coffee, and otherwise include the protégées in their social orbits. At the same time, it is risky for either party to become overly dependent on

the mentoring relationship. For example, the protégée should be careful to avoid making excessive demands on the mentor's time, and should not become clingy or needy.

This list of suggestions provides a beginning point for finding and maintaining a positive, secure, open, and perhaps even longterm mentoring relationship. Additional ideas are provided on several helpful websites that contain information about working within an appropriate mentoring relationship. We recommend the following sites for early career geographers as well as senior faculty who wish to further hone their mentoring skills:

Preparing future faculty: www.preparing-faculty.org/PFFweb.Resources.htm

Mentoring guide: <http://www.medschool.vcu.edu/ofid/facdev/facultymentoringguide/>

Research mentoring: <http://www1.od.nih.gov/OIR/sourcebook.ethic-conduct/mentor-guide.htm>

Being a mentor: <http://books.nap.edu/readingroom/books/mentor>

Suggested Readings on Mentoring

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