This month I’d like to focus on improving mentoring and advising practices in geography. It is another issue, like last month’s column on international faculty, which stems from my work with the Geography Faculty Development Alliance and Enhancing Departments and Graduate Education in Geography projects. And, although I’ll be focusing here on mentoring of graduate students and early career faculty, the issues relate to mentoring and advising at the undergraduate level as well.

My interest in exploring mentoring practice comes from an unexpected finding in some of my research with Michael Solem. While it was clear that much of our work confirmed previous studies demonstrating the value of good mentoring, we also found that a substantial number of our respondents reported poor experiences. These were negative encounters which at times left mentees feeling less prepared to succeed in their work and, in extreme cases, inclined to quit altogether. And even respondents with overall positive mentoring experiences sometimes reported discouraging episodes.

So what is going wrong? The research literature is silent on this issue. Although the benefits of mentoring are clear across a wide range of professions, less attention has focused on factors which block effective practice. In the end, Michael and I explored factors related to both the structure and practice. In the end, Michael and I explored factors related to both the structure and practice.

One solution then is to expand the range of topics addressed in mentoring relationships, but other improvements might also be needed. When new and established faculty were asked to rate their own experiences of being mentored on scale of poor, fair, good, and excellent, the ratings tended to fall toward the middle and lower side of the scale. Ratings of excellent were fewer than those of poor and many respondents reported that a wide range of key topics were never brought up when they were mentees.

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