

Toward Better Mentoring

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 substance of the mentoring relationships for a short article in the *International Journal for Academic Development* last year (vol. 14, pp. 47-58). A few of the findings are worth relating here because they suggest concrete, practical ways in which mentoring can be improved and some problems avoided.

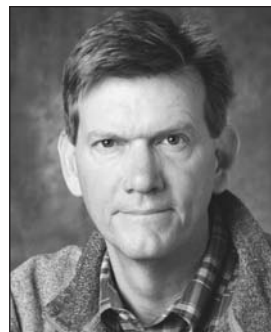
Much research has focused on varying structural models and characteristics of mentoring – such formal vs. informal; one-to-one vs. group; peer vs. junior-to-senior, and other factors. All of these models can work, but seem to be more effective when they: 1) involve regular, proactive meetings; 2) encourage diverse mentoring relationships both inside and outside of a depart-

ment; and 3) are supported in terms of time and commitment by the whole department or institution. As you can guess, ineffective mentoring often involves haphazard meetings (often precipitated by an unforeseen crisis); lack of contact with peers; and little institutional or peer support for mentoring – “Sure, we have a mentoring program – it's required – but don't worry, it's only a formality.”

In addition, improvement seems needed in the substance of the mentoring relationships, irrespective of how they are structured. We found a considerable difference between the topics mentees would like to have addressed in mentoring relationships and those that are actually covered. Too often mentoring seems to involve discussion of relatively few topics such as preparing articles for publication; lecturing; learning the “ropes” of university policy, and preparing for tenure. Mentees, on the other hand, seem to want guidance on topics such as balancing work and family responsibilities; handling grants and research projects effectively; managing time; advising students; and writing grant proposals. Overall, their suggestions fall into two broad categories: “nuts and bolts” issues about professional work (publishing, teaching, serving on committees) and more encompassing conceptual issues which will help these mentees make good decisions about their lives, work and careers.

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.

So improvement involves both a broadening and deepening of coverage. The open question then is whether senior faculty would be willing – or able – to address these issues at a level of value to their mentees. Since senior faculty may have received little help in these areas early in their own careers, they may be skeptical of its value to the next generation. But the notion that “what worked for me should work for you” raises again the potential effects of hidden curricula in higher education as I discussed in my August editorial. If we don't improve practice, then we can too easily privilege access to this vital knowledge to the detriment of many students.



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Perhaps improvement needs to run deeper. Mentoring goes hand-in-hand with the apprenticeship model of graduate education. This has been a remarkably long-lasting model, but is it always best? Can it be improved? We assume that it is the best way to nurture students, but perhaps there is some value in problematizing some of our these assumptions about advisor-advisee, mentor-mentee relationships. A first step would be to question more rigorously our one-on-one pedagogies and consider carefully the situations where practices can be improved.

In the meantime, I can point to a few useful sources which may spur debate and suggest improvements. Among the best recent sources are *Good Mentoring* (2009) by Jeanne Nakamura, David Shernoff, and Charles Hooker, and Gina Wisker's *The Good Supervisor* (2005). In geography, Susan Hardwick's article on mentoring in the *PG* (vol. 57, pp. 21-27) is excellent, as is “Towards mentoring as feminist practice” by Pamela Moss, Karen Debres, Altha Cravey, *Journal of Geography in Higher Education* (vol. 23, pp. 413-427). ■

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