



## **Effective Instructional Practice:**

### **Cultivating a Mentoring Relationship**

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Like many of us, I would not have succeeded getting into and finishing graduate school without my mentors. These were scholars and teachers who generously shared their time, taking on a great deal of emotional labor when they certainly had no reason to do so. Although advising may have been part of their job description, mentoring was not. I make the distinction between advising and mentoring because mentoring oftentimes requires that we go beyond what is expected of us as faculty members. While there is certainly a plethora of work that addresses mentoring in more “traditional” or practical terms (Farmer, 2005), I center a critical perspective because emotional labor is political and connected to bodies in an academy that privileges the mind rather than body knowledge.

Mentoring exists in a space between the formal teaching that we do in the classroom and advising; thus, it is often unrecognized or not formally “counted” in the road toward tenure, promotion, or retention of full or part-time faculty (Calafell, 2007). Traditional understandings of mentoring have defined it in terms of an individual with more seniority and experience “helping” or “guiding” the professional experiences of a mentee (Farmer, 2005; Kram, 1985). In regard to academia generally and graduate advising specifically, this might mean writing letters of recommendation or giving advice about courses, graduate programs, conferences, publications, or jobs. In this sense, mentoring becomes about professional development and socialization into not only a field of study, but also into the institutional rules and norms of professional employment.

A great deal of scholarship argues that the mentoring literature lacks attention to race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability (Chrifi Alaoui & Calafell, 2016; Edwards Tassie & Brown Givens, 2016; Hao et al., 2012). Thus, from a critical perspective, a deeper and more nuanced understanding of mentoring must include not only a focus on professional development, but also the potential for it to be guided by social justice.

Alexander (in Hao et al., 2012) argued that mentoring in academia allows individuals to learn the “expected norms in order to gain legitimacy (e.g., graduation, appointment, retention, tenure, and promotion in the academy)” (p. 34). Writing about his mentors, he shared that they helped him “to not only navigate the practiced places of the university, but they also offered me deep understandings of my role within the cultural performance of academia--a role (and my potential) to not only navigate and maintain the system, but when needed--empowered me with the critical tools and insights to resist and transform the mechanism and machinations of that same system” (p. 35). While Alexander speaks to the potential structural benefits of mentoring, there are also important relational and professional benefits to mentoring for both the mentor and mentee, which include collaborating on and co-authoring research articles, gaining and modeling new pedagogical experiences, continuing academic legacies, increasing job satisfaction, building meaningful relationships with future alumni and possible colleagues, and diversifying and transforming the demographic composition and practices that govern the academy.

Though mentoring relationships can be emotionally and professionally gratifying to both mentors and mentees, they are not without their challenges. Research has demonstrated that faculty of color disproportionately do more service, mentoring, and

advising than their White colleagues (Tuitt, Hanna, Martinez, del Carmen Salazar, & Griffin, 2009). This can lead to exhaustion due to emotional labor, as well as less time for faculty of color to meet publication and other requirements for tenure and promotions. Boreen and Niday (2003) posited that factors such as age, sexuality, and attraction can lead to potential communication barriers. Furthermore, mentoring relationships between faculty and students or between senior faculty and junior faculty exist in the hierarchical structure of academia and a society in which identities matter. Thus, some of the first things to consider when beginning mentoring relationships are power imbalances between individuals in the relationship through intersectional reflection (Chrifi Alaoui & Calafell, 2016). Not only should departments recruit and retain diverse faculty, but also all faculty should be open to mentoring so that it does not fall on one faculty member. However, it should be acknowledged that not every faculty member may be a competent mentor (Chrifi Alaoui & Calafell).

Other barriers to mentoring include assuming a “one size fits all” model for mentoring relationships rather than failing to account for the specific needs and relational differences with mentees (Kram, 1985). Likewise, formal mentoring relationships based solely on assumed affinity, such as race or gender, often fail (Calafell, 2012). Conversely, departments with racially homogenous faculty--and I argue, heteronormative practices--may unwittingly minimize the possibility for mentoring (Reid & Wilson, 1993).

### **Three Tips for Cultivating Mentoring in the Classroom**

1. Create a department philosophy and statement on mentoring. Departments should have discussions about mentoring, with specific foci on the differences between

advising and mentoring (Chrifi Alaoui & Calafell, 2016). This creation may result in a department statement or philosophy that is included on webpages or in a graduate handbook (Chrifi Alaoui & Calafell). The presence of such a statement signals to students the value and possibility of mentoring.

2. Encourage multiple mentors. Faculty should encourage students to consider having more than one mentor, not simply to share the workload, but to provide students with the opportunity to create relationships with multiple faculty, which can be beneficial in terms of collaboration possibilities, networking, and hearing perspectives from someone who may be outside of the student's area of interest (Hao et al., 2012). For example, students might have one faculty mentor who advises them on pedagogical practices and choices and another mentor who works with them on a research team. Mentoring can develop informally or through formal channels, such as having a student who is facing challenges with teaching serve as a graduate teaching assistant for a faculty member who is an excellent instructor, or through faculty inviting students with similar research interests to collaborate on a conference paper or publication. Furthermore, universities may have special funds to support undergraduate research assistants. These positions can create pipelines to mentoring and graduate school.

3. Develop a shared understanding of roles. Instructors should have frank discussions with students about their expectations, deadlines, and work schedules. For example, an instructor may need to discuss norms of communication, such as when e-mailing, calling, or texting with questions is not appropriate to protect their own time and mental/emotional energy. As the mentorship progresses, instructors may need to have additional conversations about the boundaries or differences between mentorship and

friendship. Additionally, mentors should provide mentees with realistic expected turnaround times for drafts. Conversations about work ethic also are important. Exploitative or unethical behaviors, such as not giving students proper authorship credit, expecting advisees to babysit children, or taking a mentor's advice or confidences out of context and sharing with others, can flourish when mentors and mentees do not establish a clear set of boundaries and common goals. Therefore, "co-constructing clear ground rules and expectations can help create more meaningful and ethical relationships" (Chrifi Alaoui & Calafell, 2016, p. 77).

### **Assessing Mentoring**

Assessing mentoring is just as important as cultivating mentoring. Warren (in Hao et al., 2012) suggested that mentoring can potentially be assessed through "frank" conversations, reflexivity, and dialogue to ensure that all parties are gaining and growing in the relationship. Chrifi Alaoui and Calafell (2016) shared that "successful mentoring relationships require a great deal of trust, vulnerability, and reflexivity" (p. 77). Thus, mentors and mentees should stop to take stock of things, whether semi-annually or annually. Those departments that have adopted mentoring philosophies may also include time in faculty meetings to discuss the successes and lessons learned from mentoring experiences. Departments with graduate programs could fold this discussion into regular assessment of their program or during an annual review of graduate students.

These discussions, whether between mentor and mentee or departmental, allow for an opportunity to mark accomplishments birthed from mentoring relationships and note areas that need to be reassessed. Because honesty and mutual respect are

imperative, mentors must be prepared for, and open to the possibility of, uncomfortable conversations. As someone continually in the process of learning about mentoring through doing, there are things I would have done differently in some relationships, including being even more straightforward with students about what is not working in the relationship, setting firmer boundaries, and recognizing when I am being used or emotionally manipulated. However, I also have to be willing to be reflexive about what I can do to be a better mentor and be willing to hearing feedback from mentees.

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