

Mentoring Matters

By Jeff Mortimer

We all remember our mentors, a boss or a teacher or just an older person in the neighborhood who took us under his or her wing and showed us the ropes. Making progress without them is difficult, if not impossible. Whom do I call? Where can I find this?

The nature of graduate education renders the mentor's role especially crucial. Absent hordes of peers and a well-marked path, it's easy for a graduate student to feel at sea without the lifeline that a solid, one-on-one relationship with a mentor can provide.

The benefits flow in both directions. Faculty with a reputation for good mentoring attract good students, and the chief benchmarks for faculty achievement include producing accomplished scholars as well as ground-breaking research.

"I recently read a big national study that talked about the centrality of the advisor-student relationship as the key to graduate education, and especially doctorate education," says Rackham Dean Janet Weiss. It didn't come as news to her, or to Rackham.

"One of our agendas at the graduate school has always been how to recognize and support that relationship," she adds. As an example, Rackham has for many years published, on paper and on its website, mentoring guides for both students (*How to Get the Mentoring You Want*) and faculty (*How to Mentor Graduate Students*).

"We also run workshops for students on how to get good mentoring, how to work with your mentors, and how to work with your dissertation committee," says the Dean. "Mentoring is something we've been working on for a long time."

In 1995 Rackham created the John H. D'Arms Faculty Awards for Distinguished Graduate Mentoring in the Humanities to honor its longtime Dean upon his retirement.

"It is difficult to imagine all but the most highly motivated, independent, self-assured, and brilliant students succeeding in graduate school without strong mentoring," says Donald Lopez, Arthur E. Link Distinguished University Professor of Buddhist and Tibetan Studies, who received a D'Arms Mentoring Award in 2007. "Especially in my own field of the humanities, the best students, just like their professors, are absolutely absorbed by and dedicated to their subject but are often largely

unaware that scholarship is also a profession, with its own conventions, both profound and trivial, that one must master. Good mentoring is able to take that initial sense of fascination and dedication and help the student find ways to sustain it throughout a career."

As the name indicates, only humanities faculty are eligible for the D'Arms Mentoring Awards, so the Rackham Distinguished Graduate Mentor Award was established in 2006, open to any tenured faculty member who mentors Rackham doctoral students. A year later, the Rackham Master's Mentoring Award was presented for the first time to recognize faculty who make exceptional contributions to master's students.

Lynn Walter, Professor of Geological Sciences, was one of the first recipients of the Rackham Distinguished Graduate Mentor Award. "I can pull my own wagon, and I teach my students how to do that," she says. "My students come out and they know what's going to hit them. You want to win? This is how it works. You have to be strong and good and willing to work quietly behind the scenes. Sometimes you're going to lose. If you want that seat at the table, there are some things you have to put up with, but never lose sight of the fact that you're a player."

Such a no-nonsense approach is a boon to students, who, as Lopez points out, need to know the lay of the land as much as they need disciplinary expertise. "For students who will pursue a career in the academy, graduate school, even in a college of arts and sciences, is professional training, training for the profession of scholar and teacher," he says. "Part of that training is to gain mastery of an academic discipline through coursework, but a great deal of mentoring is also required outside the classroom, both throughout the student's time at the University and in the early stages of the student's career."

When it comes time for his students to hit the job market, Lopez gives them "advice on how to compose the application letter and design the CV, critiques of practice job talks, and mock interviews. And once the job begins, I have remained available to my students to offer comments on first articles, syllabus design, and how to attract the interest of a university press."



As Lopez’s comments suggest, mentoring resonates. Walter even has a picture of her undergraduate mentor hanging on the wall of her home office. A psychology major at Washington University, Walter was just getting her science requirement out of the way when she met a sedimentologist named Dorothy Echols.

“She was awesome, very hip, sort of an Auntie Mame,” Walter says. “Before I knew it, I was a geology major. It’s totally thanks to her that I became a scientist at all.”

Mentoring was tough enough when most faculty and students shared similar backgrounds. The rise in the number of international students and the increasing diversification of the academy present problems that good intentions alone can’t solve, and they’re complicated by the fact that, as Dean Weiss says, “Mentoring happens behind closed doors. We don’t get course evaluations of the one-on-one mentoring that’s so important, especially to doctoral students.”

“Faculty get tremendous satisfaction and reward from working with their graduate students,” she adds, “but whether it’s going well or not going well is often invisible except to the two people involved. We are looking for ways to make it more visible and encouraging thoughtful conversation about mentoring, so that we can learn from each other

about how to do this well.”

Addressing that task is the idea behind Rackham’s newest initiative, MORE, which stands for Mentoring Others Results in Excellence. Lorraine Gutierrez, Arthur F. Thurnau Professor of Psychology and Professor of Social Work, is the facilitator of a faculty committee that’s developing a presentation to use with their faculty peers to increase awareness of successful mentoring practices. The project has received funding from the Provost’s office as well as Rackham.

“This will give us a way of encouraging faculty to work with other faculty on identifying positive and constructive ways of being good mentors,” says Dean Weiss, “especially when you’re trying to mentor someone who’s different from you, whether by gender, by race or ethnicity, by religion, by family status, by age. Sometimes we think of the Golden Rule, but not everybody wants done unto them what you want done unto you. You have to be an effective mentor not only for people who want to be treated the way you want to be treated but also for people who need things you don’t need or want things you don’t want.”

What MORE will provide, she says, is “a peer-to-peer discussion of these issues so faculty members can learn from each other about things that work well and what to watch out for.” ■