

Reflective Statement on Mentoring from Marva Barnett

A mentor? As an assistant professor, I knew the word but hadn't considered the concept—or how it might apply to me. I tumbled into a conscious appreciation of mentoring only after reading research about benefits of being mentored. And that came five years later, here at U.Va. Only then, I realized that I had had a mentor during my time as a visiting assistant professor at Indiana University, where my intriguing, useful conversations with Professor Albert Valdman had not “just happened.” Though I had usually visited his office with factual questions, I had often stayed while Dr. Valdman imparted to this clueless colleague a wealth of information about the university, academia, and the then-new field of foreign-language acquisition. In my belated moment of epiphany, I understood that I had been a lucky neophyte: I had fallen upon a generous man who had helped me to invaluable understandings.

But, believing that graduate students and faculty should not have to trust to luck to start them on properly informed career paths, in 1990 I founded U.Va.'s Teaching Resource Center. And in 1992 I consciously built mentoring into the TRC's Lilly/University Teaching Fellows Program. What assistant professors might not know to seek out, these Fellows, at least, would have a chance to learn from someone who knew the ropes. So I helped each Fellow find a congenial mentor; and, along with these selected senior faculty, I thought through how to advise most productively. What I and my TRC colleagues have learned over the past fifteen years, listening to mentors and those they counsel, has enriched all of the Center's programs.

Over time, with the wisdom and experience of many colleagues giving emphasis and immediacy to what research suggests about the nature of mentoring, I've come to conclusions about how fine mentors function. A generosity of spirit is essential, shown as an interest in the well-being and advancement of others. This generosity manifests itself in strong listening skills, in being able—at least imaginatively—to “walk a mile in the shoes” of those they would counsel and to inquire from that vantage, asking questions which empower their mentees to think through problems for themselves. In this process, thought-inspiring questions may help those seeking advice to better see what really matters to them, not only what “common wisdom” values. Effective mentors are open-minded, humbly aware that what's worked well in their own experience may not be prescriptive for all. Instead, they're enthusiastic about helping others strive toward their own chosen goals, no matter the appeal of such goals for the mentors. They allow those they guide space in which to grow. In mentoring faculty, that may even mean celebrating when a junior colleague finds that her happiness resides in an industry or administrative position, not in a traditional professorial role. Superb mentors are energetic, focused, brave, yet diplomatic, able when necessary to tell hard truths in ways that never push insistently, never lead by the nose, but gently enlighten or persuade to a fuller reflection. Able mentors know that sometimes they serve best by facilitating quietly, helping colleagues make productive connections and find necessary resources.

Mentoring immensely satisfies me because I get such pleasure from seeing another's growth and happiness, feeling that I had some part in helping it along. And the good mentoring process is no mere dispensing of fact or opinion gleaned from experience; it's experience and empathy meeting inquiry and enthusiasm on a two-way street; it's a shared search for betterment, attended by faith in a potential common good. It creates a community of trust in shared aims, shared powers. I have discovered so much from working with others. It enriches each day with new challenges, new perspectives, new solutions. That word that I once hardly considered—mentor—now signifies a role I hope to fill (and gratefully to grow from) whenever I can.