

MENTORING IN ACADEMIA

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Let me begin by making a distinction between “advising” and “mentoring.” Although advising is certainly a part of mentoring in the academy, many faculty members do a lot of advising that does not necessarily entail mentoring. For example, many colleges and universities do not have enough full-time academic advisers to meet with and advise incoming freshmen regarding courses that they may register for, or already be registered for, in their first semester at an institution. To meet that need, faculty members may be asked to meet with such students during student orientation and to advise them regarding those courses. Now, that is a very valuable service that such faculty render. Depending on the institution and the faculty member, that kind of advising may take a few hours, or even a few days. In the typical university calculus of what counts, however, such service doesn’t usually count for much. Student advising and the upper administration may be grateful, but your chair may not be, preferring for you to spend your time doing research and writing or preparing for class. And your colleagues may think that you are an idiot for doing it, or they may be grateful that *you* are representing the department in rendering such service, so that *they* do not have to do so! But whatever recognition or thanks one receives or does not receive for such service, it’s not really mentoring. You may never see those freshmen again, or if you do, it is likely to be only one more time, when they are getting ready to register for courses for the spring semester.

Once again, you may function as the adviser of undergraduate students who are doing a major or a minor in your department, and if you are a DUS, a Director of Undergraduate Studies,

you may do that a lot. Depending on the size of your department and the number of majors and minors, you may know those students well or hardly at all. If you only meet with such students to advise them regarding courses and/or to discuss career options, and you do so only at regularly scheduled times during the academic year, that's not really mentoring as I want to define and use the term. Don't get me wrong—what a DUS does is terribly important and can be enormously helpful to students, but in my view, mentoring involves some kind of ongoing personal relationship, not advice rendered on such ad hoc or regularly scheduled occasions.

An example: Earlier in my career, I spent four years as the director of the Honors Program at the University of Miami. It was a large program that involved every school at Miami that had an undergraduate component—Architecture, Arts and Sciences, Business Administration, Communication, Education, Engineering, Music, and Nursing—plus those graduate schools that had some kind of undergraduate track that led to those schools, including Law, Marine and Atmospheric Science, and Medicine. During my time as director, I advised on an ad hoc basis undergraduate students from all of those disciplines, not about the more technical matters, of course, but about basic matters affecting all students. But there was one group that I met with on a more regular basis: students in the Honors Program in Medicine, whom I advised regarding the humanities and social sciences, and whatever else they wanted to talk about. That was a group that I met with from their first day at Miami to the day when they left to enter our School of Medicine, usually two or three years. I was much more involved in their lives, and for some of them, I became not simply an adviser who made sure that they were meeting all of the necessary requirements, but also a mentor and friend.

As most people who read these reflections already know, our word “mentor” derives ultimately from the character “Mentor” that appears in the *Odyssey*. Homer depicts him as an old

friend of Odysseus, the person he had put in charge of his household when he had set off for Troy. Furthermore, he is a *gerōn*, an old man, who denounces the suitors of Odysseus' wife Penelope and those who have allowed them to devour Odysseus' property. The suitors in turn insult him, calling him a “rabble-rousing fool,” an “idiot” who “talks nonsense.” But it is precisely in the guise of this feisty old codger that Athena appears to Telemachus, who accompanies him on his journey, and who gives him advice and counsel. And it is also in the guise of Mentor that Athena prompts Odysseus to attack the suitors on his return to Ithaca.

We see here in the figure of Homer's Mentor several characteristics of mentors from later periods of time. First, mentors tend to be older than their mentees—they are not necessarily “old men and women,” but they usually have a few years on the individuals whom they counsel. Second, there is an ongoing relationship between the older mentor and the younger mentee, with the mentor engaging in what the ancient Greeks called psychagogy, or the guidance of souls, in matters pertaining to life. Third, the mentor sometimes engages in frank speech, which the ancient Greeks called *parrhēsia*, which could take the form of both bold exhortation and candid criticism for constructive purposes. Fourth, ideally the guidance offered by the mentor is wise, marked by *phronēsis*, the practical wisdom that comes from experience. One aspires to offer the sage kind of counsel that the goddess Athena offered, not the “nonsense” that the suitors accused Mentor of spouting.

To shift from Homer to contemporary America, let me speak briefly about my experience as a mentor in academia. The Department of Religious Studies at the University of Miami does not have a graduate program, and so when I was at Miami, almost all of the students I mentored were undergraduates. Those with whom I was closest were those who wanted to go to seminary and enter the ministry, or to graduate school in order to pursue their intellectual interests in

religion or theology. In addition, some were religious studies majors or minors who wrote undergraduate theses with me but then went to law school, dental school, or med school.

Now that I am at Notre Dame, all of my mentoring involves graduate students, either those in the PhD program or masters students who aspire to enter doctoral programs. That includes some students who are either ordained or in a religious order. In their case, my mentoring involves their academic aspirations rather than their ecclesiastical commitments. Good mentoring, like good advising, entails recognizing one's limits in both knowledge and experience.

The advising and/or mentoring of students, whether undergraduates or graduate students, is part of one's job, something for which one is being paid, and one should try to do it to the best of one's ability. But there is another kind of mentoring, which, depending on the circumstances, may or may not be part of one's institutional obligations, and that is the mentoring of junior scholars, either at one's own institution or elsewhere. It is on this last domain of mentoring that I want to focus my remaining comments, and I shall make six points or, to be more precise, six set of points.

The first of these concerns the history of institutional mentoring in the United States. Many years ago, long before anyone reading this paper was born, colleges optimally sought to hire a junior faculty member before the senior person—whom he or she was going to replace—retired. This practice resulted in there being one or more years when the appointments of the senior and junior person overlapped. The senior person took over the role previously played by the junior person's dissertation director and provided guidance to the younger colleague during those early transitional years from graduate student to assistant professor. Institutions, of course, did not do this when another senior scholar was appointed as the retiring person's successor, but

colleges without major doctoral programs have traditionally opted to replace senior people with junior faculty. Doing so is, after all, cheaper, and most deans have limited budgets. Although this practice of overlapping appointments was not the cheapest way to operate, it was done because it was viewed as an investment in both the junior faculty member and the institution. The presumption was that junior faculty members would spend most or all of their careers at the school, and thus it was a good long-term investment.

In more recent academic history, that practice became increasingly rare. The days when professionals in any field spent most or all of their careers working for one company or employer vanished, and that included professionals working in academia. Professional mobility became the new standard, and with that new *modus operandi*, there was little institutional incentive to do overlapping appointments. For many people of my generation, our primary commitments were to our guild, our discipline, our field of study, our careers, and we fully expected to make several moves in our careers, whether it was in the business world or in academia. We were grateful for our academic positions, and most of us tried to be responsible in fulfilling our institutional duties. That typically increased after tenure was granted, especially at universities with a low tenure rate. After all, at institutions where only 10% of junior faculty were awarded tenure, there was little reason for junior faculty to make a long-term commitment until the institution had made a long-term commitment to them.

For a variety of reasons, however, in the past two decades some institutions have undertaken initiatives to provide for better mentoring. Lawsuits brought by junior faculty who were denied tenure has been one motivating factor, but another is the desire to retain good faculty, especially those who are minorities in general and/or work in areas where minority members are scarce. Many universities now provide support for junior faculty to participate in an

intensive 12-week online mentoring program offered by the National Center for Faculty Development and Diversity. This is designed as a “boot camp” to help young faculty members increase research productivity, engage in effective time management, maximize work-life balance, and accomplish other laudable goals. Other institutions assign all newly appointed tenure-track assistant professors a tenured faculty mentor, usually in their department, to help with the transition from graduate school to first job.

The bottom line is that the pendulum has now begun to swing back a little towards institutionally-based mentoring. Such programs were certainly not in existence at the University of Miami when I started there in 1981. We didn’t even have a faculty orientation meeting. All transitional support was provided informally, none institutionally. That may still be the case where you are now or where you end up if you are still in graduate school. The National Center for Faculty Development and Diversity was only started six years ago (2010), and your institution may not provide financial support for it. If not, ask for it—they can only tell you “no,” and they may even say “yes.”

My second major point is this: Even if your institution has a mentoring program of some kind, there may be no one there to mentor you. That was certainly my own case. The chair who hired me at Miami was just three years older than I was, and he had already moved into upper administration by the time I arrived. The new chair was an untenured assistant professor who had been at Miami for a grand total of one year and was just two years older than I was, and the only other tenure-track person in the entire department was another new hire. In short, everyone in the department was functionally brand new—there were no full or associate professors to mentor us, no one was tenured, and we were all within two years of each other in age. We mentored ourselves, or individually found people outside of the department to function as mentors.

Fortunately for me, I had in my Doktorvater, the late Abe Malherbe, someone who continued to take a strong interest in my career and provided guidance; indeed, he did so not only in my early years but also throughout my career, doing so until he died some three and a half years ago.

Third, if you want to mentor someone, or are assigned by your institution as a mentor to someone else, recognize that not every junior colleague wants a mentor. Lots of scholars of all ages are highly independent and do not want a mentor or believe that they need one. In such cases, simply offer your services if they should ever want to discuss matters with you, but don't force yourself upon them. If you do, your well-intended advice may well be regarded as patronizing condescension and thus resented. To the extent that junior colleagues do want some occasional mentoring, recognize that they also have a lot to teach you. You can learn a lot from each other if both mentor and mentee approach the relationship with open minds.

Fourth, you may wake up one day and realize that you have become a mentor to people who are not your former students or your junior colleagues at the institution where you teach. That is certainly my situation. Of all the people outside of Notre Dame for whom I currently serve as a regular or occasional mentor, none is a former student. All sought me out; in no case did I seek them out. The sheep found the shepherd, rather than the shepherd finding the sheep. If that happens to you, I would encourage you, if you are willing and able, to offer them guidance. They are asking you because they feel a need for greater guidance. And the need, by all accounts, is significant. The American Academy of Religion at its 2015 annual meeting sponsored something that they called "Have a Cup of Coffee," with the AAR buying the coffee. It was designed chiefly for graduate students and early career scholars who wanted to meet with a more experienced AAR member and discuss various aspects of their professional lives for which they wanted basic or additional guidance. Tom Tweed, last year's AAR president, is an old friend—

we both began our careers together at Miami and we are now colleagues once again at Notre Dame. Tom told me shortly before the annual meeting that nearly 100 people had responded to that initiative, and I hope for everyone's sake that it was a success. We at the SBL should consider doing something similar.

Fifth, not all mentoring relationships involve friendship, but the most successful ones do evolve over time into friendships. Furthermore, friendship, as Aristotle observed long ago, is a reciprocal relationship that involves trust. Without mutual trust, the mentoring relationship simply cannot flourish.

Sixth, and finally, if you do become a mentor to someone else, recognize your limits, and I mean that counsel in a two-fold sense. In the first place, mentoring is a kind of apprenticeship, and you can't mentor someone in areas that you know nothing about. I can't, for example, mentor anyone on anything involving digital scholarship. For that, I myself need a mentor. In the second place, serving as a mentor is analogous to forming and maintaining close friendships. It takes time, and so there are a limited number of people for whom you can serve as both friend and mentor. When I was at Miami and did not have graduate students—who take a *lot* of time—I could function as a mentor to others. Now that I have increasing numbers of graduate students, I have less time, and my wife is working hard to instill the word “no” into my active vocabulary. In short, being a good mentor means recognizing the time and energy that it requires, and making sure not to overextend yourself.