

Guest Editorial: Taking Mentoring Seriously

We had a “research duel” with students from The Ohio State University several weeks ago. Six of our top student researchers met with six of theirs. No shots were fired, and everyone at the duel came home a winner. The duel is an annual event that is part of the Student Research Program at our school. Following our Research Forum each September, where all of our student researchers have an opportunity to present their work orally, six students are selected to participate in the October duel. It is really a mini-poster session whose site alternates each year between Columbus and Ann Arbor. The students have a chance to present their studies, meet with students and faculty from another school, and learn the fine points of communicating their research findings.

For the most part, they made it to that day because of the quality mentoring they received as a result of participation in our student research program. They were the lucky ones. Someone cared and took the responsibility of mentoring seriously. We usually never talk about the casualties—those students who had faculty sponsors who either didn’t understand their responsibilities, didn’t have time, or didn’t bother to care. I know that those students are out there. I’ve talked with them, and they’ve written about their experiences in alumni questionnaires.

Levenson *et al.* (1978) described the roles of the mentor to include teacher, sponsor, host and guide, and exemplar. Most important, “he fosters the young adult’s development by believing in him, sharing the youthful Dream, and giving it his blessing.” This is an awesome responsibility to be assumed by a mortal faculty member. All too often, when a faculty member accepts a student during a “summer research program”, the student is farmed out to a graduate student, a post-doctoral fellow or technician, or even another faculty member, and never really gets to talk to that faculty member again. In one instance, I have heard of a faculty member accepting a student into his laboratory and then actually going on vacation for the summer and being totally inaccessible to that student for the entire research period. The student goes through the motions of “doing research” but is never taught the process. The faculty member never serves as the student’s sponsor to get him or her involved in the research community, nor does he serve as host and guide to foster a sense of family in the scientific community. Lack of contact prevents the mentor from functioning as exemplar or role model and as a personal counselor to provide support or a strong shoulder when the research is tedious or unfruitful. Levenson *et al.* (1978) identified the most crucial functions for the mentor as those of supporter and facilitator. When was the last time you *shared* the dream with your students?

We spend a great deal of time these days worrying about manpower needs for the future of Dentistry. We worry about how we are going to get the best minds in Dentistry to teach, to do research, to practice in the clinics, to become the “triple threat”—the consummate academic dentist. But, quietly, we have all experienced the faculty member, yes, even in our Dental School, who has privately stated that he does not bother with dental students in his research program. They’re too much effort for the paycheck. He would rather have a medical or Ph.D. student, someone with a future in research. Although he is shortchanging the profession, at least this person does no damage. The truly pernicious individual will take the student

and let him hang in the wind, perform some meaningless tasks in the laboratory for some other student, have him wash glassware under the pretext of “starting from the bottom”, or use him to take care of his personal business, including, but not limited to, helping him move, garden, and look up citations in the library.

Surely, only a small percentage of our students will go on to a research/academic career. In our last survey of Michigan students participating in the short-term research program, only about 10% ended up in academic or research-related environments following their professional training. But don’t think the rest have disappeared into the woodwork. They’re out there explaining new concepts in therapy to their patients, writing letters to Congressmen, joining professional and alumni associations, and supporting research with their tax dollars. All of these activities directly or indirectly affect the research environment for dentistry. Can we afford to do any of them an injustice?

In a book published by the AADS, Blauch (1945) likened the teacher (mentor) to a consulting architect and the student as both the designer and the builder. “He (the architect) extends the builder’s vision through criticism and example, coordinating the structure’s function and parts, and pointing out the best models.” The teacher “has been too long and too often mistaken for a purveyor of the builder’s supplies.” We have too long accepted a student into a laboratory, provided supplies, a place to work, and provided an outline of the experiments to perform, and then stopped short of being a mentor to that student.

We need to get serious about mentoring. I have never forgotten the jokes about the “younger generation” and how there is no one else warming up to take our places. Who *will* take our places? Are we teaching our students how we think about research? Are we kindling an enthusiasm for dental research? Are we passing down the traditions, anecdotes, and stories? Are we spending “quality time” with our charges? Are we providing the proper role models?

I do not speak “from above” when I cite failures in mentoring. We have all failed at one time or another. I can see myself in parts of the mirror that I present in this editorial. These images are reflections of acts all of us have performed at some time in our careers. I am not proud of my failures as a mentor. I’m sure that you aren’t of yours. We can only take the next mentoring opportunity more seriously. Remember, when there are no more students to mentor, our job is also ended.

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