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Mentoring Across Cultures

Tomorrow's Teaching and Learning

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Mentors need not have the same cultural or social background as their mentees. But they must pay close attention to the implications of the differences.

Folks:

The posting below is an important article on mentoring across cultures. It is by Betty Neal Crutcher and is from the July-August issue of Academe, Voilume 93, Number 4, a publication of the American Association of University Professors, 1012 Fourteenth Street, NW, Suite #500; Washington, DC 20005. http://www.aaup.org/aaup Reprinted with permission.

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Rick Reis

reis@stanford.edu

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Tomorrow's Teaching and Learning

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Mentoring Across Cultures

By Betty Neal Crutcher

Since the 1960s, increasing numbers of students from traditionally underrepresented racial and ethnic groups have enrolled in U.S. colleges and universities, marking one of the most visible changes in higher education. Despite this shift in campus demographics, we in higher education have not yet lived in an integrated community long enough to know how to communicate effectivel with one another and to work together as peers to create a more global academy. Cross-cultural strategies that help faculty members mentor across boundaries of race, ethnicity, and gender, liftin each of us as we climb, can help us move toward a more equitable academy.

This article draws on a study of best practices in cross-cultural mentoring that I conducted for my 2006 dissertation at the University of Miami. I interviewed successful mentors from diverse backgrounds, asking them to reflect on their practices, both formal and informal. I refer to them here by the pseudonyms I used in my research project. Not all the cross-cultural mentoring they describe was directed toward students of color-some of these mentors are faculty of color who mentor white students. But each mentor has something to share with other faculty members who ar looking for ways to better support their students-and perhaps their junior colleagues as well.

Faculty motivated to mentor people whose backgrounds or identities differ from their own must be adept at navigating cultural boundaries: personal, gender, racial, ethnic, and geographic. Because of the complexity of cross-cultural mentoring, mentors also need certain attributes or abilities, including selflessness, active listening skills, honesty, a nonjudgmental attitude, persistence patience, and an appreciation for diversity.

In the face of numerous challenges-dealing with difficult personalities, maintaining boundaries, and surmounting gender and racial tensions, for example-the mentors in my study generated many strategies for what I call "HOPE" (helping others prepare for education). Although many of their practices fit most mentoring relationships, some of their suggestions are uniquely suited to the cros cultural mentoring experience. I conclude with an examination of the mentors' perceptions of the benefit of engaging in sometimes challenging cross-cultural mentoring relationships.

The Mentors' Experiences

One of the unique challenges of mentoring across race is overcoming the notion that races "have different values or understand the world differently," according to Ann, one of the mentors in my study. She notes that this perspective, which is prevalent in our society, can ironically foster trust in same-race mentoring relationships, because the mentee automatically assumes a similarity in values and worldview with the mentor. Marie, another mentor, finds same-race mentoring relationships easier than cross-race ones. She emphasizes, however, that not all crossrace mentoring relationships pose the same types of challenges.

For Marie, it is often white mentees who struggle most with racial issues. Consequently, they may have the most to gain by engaging in mentoring relationships with nonwhite faculty. Ryan, a Latin professor, reported a mentoring relationship in which his white mentee had to work to overcome his position of white privilege. He explains that the student would express thoughts such as, "I don't know if I'm saying this from just the perception of a white man at a pretty white college, but I am coming from this particular place." Ryan says that the student's approach enabled them "to talk about things in a really rich way, to point out where there's privilege and where there's not, and to own really difficult things." Ryan's testimony demonstrates the potential for intercultural growth in cross-race mentorships-for both the mentor and the mentee.

Mentors coming from the dominant culture must overcome their fears, biases, and stereotypes about other races and ethnicities, and they need to find a way to empathize with and understand their mentee's personal life situation. Gus, a white middle-age and middle-class professor, describes his struggle to understand the life of his minority mentee, who came from a lower-income family: "I [didn't] really know first hand what he [has] to put up with. . . . I understand it a lot better now. I'm not frightened to talk to him openly about those types of things. Those are big challenges when the cultures [of the mentor and mentee] are opposites."

In reflecting on her experience as a Filipina woman who came to the United tates to pursue graduate study, educator Virgie Chattergy asserts in the spring 1994 issue of New Directions in Teaching and Learning, "I believe that when ealing with international students, it may be more effective to go beyond the traditional mentoring formats to consider other aspects involved in adjusting to different cultural systems and norms." Mentors need to exhibit cultural competence. Some studies have shown that a lack of cultural awareness on the part of a mentor can adversely influence the quality of a mentoring relationship, and some have called for mentoring programs to train mentors in cultural competency.

Difficult Circumstances

Mentors must maintain a dual perspective in which they see the mentee as an individual as well as part of a larger social context. Barclay describes her experience: "I think one of the most challenging aspects of being a mentor has to do with my own personality. I get so invested and involved. . . . It has broken my heart many, many times when I've gone out of my way to open a door, out of my way to help someone get a scholarship, out of my way to pave the way, out of my way to make a connection, and the student says, 'Nah, I didn't need it, I didn't want it.'" Her experience highlights the challenge of caring for an individual mentee while not becoming too prescriptive or invested in the mentee's choices. When the mentor sets expectations that are too high for the mentee or tries to get the mentee to do things that the mentor could not do, the mentoring relationship can suffer.

Sometimes, however, what at first appears to be a troubled relationship can result in a positive outcome. Barclay offers the story of Lolly, one of her peer mentees during college:

I began sharing everything with Lolly . . . my food, my clothes, and I saw the boys come in. I knew that she wouldn't be able to graduate because they started taking her out every night, and I thought, "Oh no!" I would just try to coach her and nurture her and talk to her. She finally said, "You are not my mother." So I came home after our third semester, I think, and there was a note on th kitchen table in the trailer. It said, "Dear Barclay, you're not my mother. I can't stand this nurturing and hovering over me directing my life. Good-bye. Lolly."

And she left. She disappeared. Years later, when Barclay spoke at a national conference, she incorporated a story about her experience with Lolly, after which Lolly contacted her:

I went to my hotel room, and my light was blinking. [The desk receptionist] said, "There's something at the desk for you." I went down to the desk. I got this sealed envelope, went back to the room and opened it: "Dear Barclay, I was in the audience and heard you speak. . . . I heard you tell my story, and I wept and wept." It was signed "Dr. Lolly H.". . . I just lost it. I was alone in my room, and I cried and cried. This is the Lolly I took to school with me, the Lolly who disappeared. I didn't know where she had gone. And I cried. She had gotten her doctorate. Unbelievable.

The story of Lolly illustrates two things. The first is that mentees must make their own way; the second is that mentors must be prepared to face thorny issues and to understand their efforts may not pay off quickly or perhaps ever. Posse, who has recruited and evaluated numerous mentors, cautions, "For a person who's a first-time mentor, it can be overwhelming, especially if [he or she is] not prepared for the kinds of issues [mentors] have to confront with[mentees]." Sensei, another mentor, continues this point: "These [mentees] are going through a lot of issues and changes in thei lives. You know, some . . .come out as gay during this time, and that's a big deal, as you can imagine, particularly for kids who come from religious families. Some folks have other challenges . . . , and you have to really be there for them as their advocate, as their adviser, as their friend, as the shoulder for them to cry on."

Boundaries

Because the mentoring relationship can give rise to sensitive issues, the mentor must negotiate appropriate ethical boundaries with the mentee. Posse offers this caution: "Sometimes we've had a mentor who isn't mature enough and becomes friends with the [mentees]. . . . When you become friends, it is very difficult to then regain your professional authority as a mentor. So that's one of th things we are very careful about." Pastor, another mentor, elaborates on this point further: "You have to know what parameters to keep with the mentee so they don't become dependent on you an addicted to you. This is not a glory thing for you to satisfy some twisted [need to] have somebody following you around."

Tiger, another respondent, advises on the need for boundaries to avoid financial dependency: "I've got to be as close to them as I can, but I do have to maintain a distance. I can't tell you how many times I've wanted to just take out my wallet and write a check to solve their problems."

Yet another mentor, Faith, advises faculty to avoid intimacy with their mentees:

Speaking as a heterosexual, any time you have a close relationship [between] a man [and] a woman, it seems to me there's going to be some sexual energy there. Even the most virtuous person ha hormones. The best way to remain virtuous is to not put yourself in harm's way, which means to meet in public places. If you feel a sense of attraction to that other person, recognize that as a natural outcome of a close and positive relationship. But just because you feel something, doesn't mean you have to act on it.

Maintaining appropriate boundaries is challenging, because if the mentor distances him or herself too much, the relationship can suffer. Clearly, mentors should get close to their mentees. Yet we must preserve appropriate power balances and ethical boundaries. Mentoring relationships are not identical to peer relationships,which are usually predicated on a horizontal or egalitarian reciprocity. Nor are they synonymous with the more vertically oriented parent-child relationship, where the child is completely dependent on the parent for sustenance and resources. In a mentoring relationship, the mentor must adopt different roles as the need arises.

Gender Differences

Some of the faculty subjects in my study noted the importance of being attuned to a mentee's gender, race, ethnicity, or cultural background. For example, in describing his relationship with a female mentee, Ryan says she "was a Latina student, and I'm Latino myself. But the gender piece, that was different, and it's challenging to know where you can push, because you don't know all those boundaries, as male/female." Another mentor, Major, expresses similar anxieties about working with his female mentees:

As a man, I need some different guidelines for how to mentor women than how to mentor men. I need to be particularly careful in mentoring women to be cognizant of their boundaries, to be cognizant of their sexuality, not to intrude in ways that can be misinterpreted or that open the doors to inappropriate kinds of relationships. As a straight white man, those kinds of boundaries are easier to work out with men than with women.

Yet another mentor, Ross, offers an even more complicated view of gender relationships in mentoring:

What I find for the most part is that men are socialized to pursue things fairly directly and linearly, and women are . . . socialized to be perhaps more holistic in their approach to issues or problems or matters of concern, to not necessarily come at something from [the perspective of] "okay, we [have] a problem, so we come up with solutions," or "we're going to fix it, you know, bam, bam, bam."

Ross says that he himself is "more comfortable with a less directive approach.

I don't think it's my job to come up with the answers. I think it's my job to help others come up with the answers they need." Although Ross is a man, he operates in what he deems a more feminine style of interaction-one that is less direct and more holistic.

Ross's observations about his female mentees dovetails with the work of feminist scholars such as Carol Gilligan and Nancy Chodorow, who assert that individuals with a more feminine dispositior value mutuality and relationships with others. Other studies have demonstrated that girls ask for help more often than boys. According to linguist Deborah Tannen, who has studied gender differences in communication styles, men prefer to diagnose and resolve problems, and women prefer to talk through issues in detail and confirm their feelings. In addition, words or phrasings can be interpreted differently by gender. According to Tannen, when women try to initiate a discussion by asking men what they think, men often conclude that they are being asked to decide an issue. A male mentor might therefore tend to adopt the role of a problem solver, while a female mentor might see her role as confirming the feelings of a mentee. Be aware, however, that at least one researcher has cautioned that overemphasis on differential treatment based on gender can lead to stereotyping of interests, skills, or career goals.

Mentoring helps to democratize and diversify higher education by providing enriched support for learning. Students from all backgrounds benefit from effective mentoring, and we must find ways to mentor all of our students. It is imperative, however, given the lack of diversity in higher education, that we support students from minority and underrepresented groups. Because few mentors, especially in the higher ranks of academe, come from nonmajority backgrounds, we especially need to focus on strategies to make cross-cultural mentoring work. The lessons taught by the experienced mentors in my study are good starting points. When we become culturally competent and practice relationship behaviors that foster trust and growth, then we can become the mentor our students need. And we will be the better for it. As Posse explains, "Because effective crosscultural relationships promote learning and development on the part of the mentee as well as [that of] the mentor, both parties can take pride in the other person's accomplishments."

Betty Neal Crutcher is the former Presidential Spouse at the University of Richmond and mentoring consultant. She can be reached at bcrutche@richmond.edu.

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