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Mentoring Pluses for Underrepresented Faculty

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Mentoring Pluses for Underrepresented Faculty

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Much has been written about the demands from mentoring students. Mentoring is regarded as service work placed on top of faculty demands of teaching, scholarship, and more service. The unbalanced workloads, especially as to the demands on faculty from underrepresented groups, cannot be overstated.

Often the work of mentoring seems to go unnoticed and unrewarded. In one of my faculty evaluations, a former supervisor told me that all of my work mentoring was intangible work for which no allowance could be made in my annual raise.



With the insubstantial value many place on underrepresented faculty mentoring underrepresented students and White students (who may want mentoring because they are first generation students, etc.), it is not surprising that faculty may feel burdened by mentoring. This can especially be the case for faculty who believe they must publish twice as much or perish.

It is not surprising then that much less has been written about the benefits to underrepresented faculty from mentoring students. Here I do not seek to justify overworking already overworked faculty. Rather, I hope to shed light on how faculty from underrepresented groups can envision and capitalize on the benefits of mentoring students.

While the benefits to underrepresented faculty are numerous, here I focus on three: mentoring students can help save our career when we are tempted to leave the building running fast; mentoring students can provide student allies to help verify the truth about our greatness; and, mentoring students helps to pass on the legacy.

Mentoring students can help save our careers, both pre-tenure and post-tenure. In my early years of teaching, I felt overwhelmed, often, and did not believe I had time to mentor students. Still student mentees came, especially White female students and students of color, sometimes just to see a friendly face (our school was quite non-diverse). I was as helpful and patient as my younger self could be. One day, though, I got all the help back and more.

I was working on my promotion dossier. Some student class evaluations were good and some reeked with the language (and low numbers to go with the language) that said I did not “look like” what a law school professor should. Two students I mentored, and who were beginning to understand more the institutional culture, stopped by my office and, seeing my working dossier spread out on my desk and a look of frustration spread out on my face, asked if they could read my dossier. Then they took a red pen to my work; and, then they just took over at the computer. Their excellent suggestions made my dossier more powerful and far less angry sounding. Their suggestions saved my promotion.

While underrepresented faculty should not routinely burden our student mentees with being our advisers, our mentees can help save our careers in other ways, too. Post-tenure, as I started to see how long it can take to create more inclusive institutions, I started my “wall of fame” in my office. On one wall I created a collage of pictures showing the successes of so many of my students. When I walk into my office in the morning, particularly if I have encountered on my way some who do not think I belong, I look at the collage of mentees of all different colors and I tell myself that those mentees on my wall of fame (who are making positive contributions to our legal system, to underrepresented communities, and nation) are my institution and my reason for my work. They daily save my career.

Moreover these pictures save the careers of so many struggling student mentees who I walk to “the wall of fame” to provide examples of students who overcame obstacles and today are enjoying much success and contributing to our well-being. New students say that their goal before graduation is to have success deserving of their picture being emailed to me for the wall of fame.

Mentoring students can also provide student allies to help verify the truth about us. One year my class enrollment had dropped drastically. One rumor about me was that I only gave “A’s” to Whites, and another rumor was circulating that I only gave “A’s” to students of color. Neither was true; but, both were being entertained by faculty and students.

One of my former student mentees was a young White male, who was quite different politically from me and who was then a librarian at our school. He told me that he was going to provide some PR for me and help me rebuild my reputation. I excitedly asked what I should do to change myself. His reply was surprising. He said, “Nothing, you’re great. Students believe things that are not true about you, especially when they have never had a female professor of color.” He told me that from time to time he was going to bring students to me to meet me and I should just be myself. He did. And, I did. After that, my classes tend to fill. A caution here: student mentees who are allies may also tell us things constructive and critical. We have to treat their advice with the same consideration and respect that we expect them to give to our advice.

Mentoring students can also help us to pass on a rich and vibrant legacy. When I was a senior in college at Jackson State University (a historically Black university), the former Dean of the Business School, Bill Cooley, met, on a flight, the Chair of a Graduate School Foundation at an Ivy League school and promoted me as a candidate. Dean Cooley

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encouraged me to apply and then spent a year taking me to fancy, soulful restaurants, to encourage me that I could succeed in the graduate program and live an economically prosperous life. Now, I often bump into Dean Cooley, when I am having lunch with my own mentees and trying to persuade them to believe in their greatness. He seems delighted to see the legacy of mentoring gone forward. After I became a professor, I met now retired Boston College Law School Professor Ruth-Arlene W. Howe. She patiently taught me how to engage with the editors of law journals. She seems delighted to hear of my advising my mentees' scholarship. I look forward to the continuation of this legacy and seeing my own mentees helping their mentees successfully navigate their professional and personal lives.

My former supervisor was right, to some degree, when he said, in one of my faculty evaluations, that all of my work mentoring was intangible work. Yes, mentoring is intangible. The value of being a mentor is indefinable, subtle, and can be indescribably beneficial, especially for underrepresented faculty who mentor and those drawn to them as their student mentees.

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