Career Advice

RUNNING 'ROUND THE IVORY TOWER

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The Importance of Mentors

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Mentors have played an important role in my life since I was in elementary school. There was always a teacher or counselor who kept an eye out for me, or helped me through the latest "tween" or teenage angst. Through the years I have come to rely on the mostly sage advice I have received, not only from my elders, but often from my peers.

What I always found amazing was that my mentors always saw more in me than I saw in myself. I was often surprised when a mentor would recommend that I try some new activity, or take on a leadership position that I hadn't considered. One of the turning points in my life was when my high school principal stopped me in the hall one day and asked if I would be applying to Harvard or Princeton. That stopped me cold. Me? Harvard? Princeton? I was just a young black girl from the town of Spokane, Washington who happened to do well in school. I never imagined that I could go to such a high profile university, given that no one in my family even had a B.A. In the end, I only applied to Stanford University and a couple of public universities, because I couldn't afford the application fees, and Stanford was the only institution to recruit me to run track, but I was confident in the knowledge that I belonged at a place like Stanford.

As a first-generation college student, traveling through the world of academia was often a series of blind turns. I was very lucky to have landed at Stanford as an undergraduate. Everyone from my resident assistant, to the professor and his wife who were the resident fellows in my dorm, to my track coach, to my employers played an important role in getting me through to my B.A.

After Stanford, I entered the working world, but always had a desire to go to graduate school. I first tried going to school part-time to get a master's in public administration, hoping to build a career in nonprofit administration. One of my professors at San Francisco State University took an interest in me and encouraged me to apply to the Presidential Management Fellows Program. Although I didn't apply, I was again surprised that someone saw such potential in me. He eventually encouraged me to go on to get my Ph.D. He inspired me as a teacher as well as encouraging me to pursue an academic career.

By the time I entered graduate school full time, I had been working for six years and knew that I wanted to be back in the academic environment. I spent my first semester at UCLA with a big grin on my face – not only was I back in school, but I had a fellowship that basically paid me to go to school! I had never considered myself particularly good at math, but I actually enjoyed my statistics class and was good at using the computer software that my professor preferred. I performed well in the class and my professor asked me to be an RA for him. That experience really helped to socialize me into the world of academia. I learned a great deal about academic research, the process of getting a book published, and perhaps more importantly, some of the "unwritten rules" that those who come from academic backgrounds take for granted.

For example, I had to learn how to choose advisers based not only on their interest in my research, but also based on whether or not they were talking to each other. Without a faculty member willing to provide that information, working with a dissertation committee could have been difficult.

Mentoring was also important when it came time to choose a dissertation topic. My dissertation adviser convinced me to drop my initial topic on immigration policy, and change to a study of voting behavior and the radical right. Although it wasn't my first choice, the
topic ended up being very interesting and important, and the dissertation was relatively easy to turn into a book. I have also been able to return to the immigration policy topic, as a more mature scholar with a better sense of how to approach the issue.

When I became an assistant professor, mentoring became even more important. As a grad student, I didn’t think much about the process of getting tenure, except for watching some of my professors sweat through close decisions. I needed help from mentors both in and outside of my university to help me understand when and where I needed to publish, to get access to top-notch university presses, and to make a case for me when I went up for tenure.

Mentoring is not a one-way street. It is important to get out and meet people at conferences and meetings who may be helpful contacts in the future. Even as a graduate student, I had developed a network of scholars who I admired and who were doing similar research. This has stood me in good stead over the years, helping me to be invited to write chapters in edited volumes, attend conferences, or even to get funding for projects. Networking has most importantly played a role in getting a new job when my husband lost his (non-academic) job and we both had to go on the job market. As in many other fields, it’s often who you know that matters as much as your qualifications for the job.

Over time, I have learned that mentors can be an important source of advice and support. However, I also learned that you can’t always expect mentoring to be a positive experience. I have had to learn the difference between people who had my best interests in mind, and those who had their own personal agendas. Although I generally respond well to mentoring, I also have a tendency to take it as a challenge when someone tells me I can’t do something, which is also a good form of motivation. It is important, when accepting advice, that you carefully weigh the pros and cons, and make sure that the decision you make is yours in the end. I’ve made plenty of mistakes along the way, but I have always appreciated the people who made time to help me navigate the often choppy seas of an academic career. I consider it my duty and privilege to repay them by using their example to develop my own skills as a mentor.

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