

Teaching and Mentoring

What is the nature of the mentoring relationship? More than one hundred graduate students gathered to discuss the topic of mentoring as it relates to their roles as teachers and as students at the opening session of the 2nd Annual Teaching/Learning Conference on January 24th. The session began with brief presentations by three graduate students, Sherry Wein (SCILS), Nuri Emanetoglu (Electrical Engineering), and Troy Cross (Philosophy).

The first presenter, Ms. Wein, viewed the notion of TA as mentor as something of an anomaly. She described a mentor as an established member of a university's faculty, who guides and helps a student through the various academic and professional stages leading up to, and including, the job search. TAs offer informal advice and class-specific guidance to their students rather than the sustained relationship that mentorship demands. Mr. Emanetoglu, however, approached the notion of mentorship less formally and pointed out that TAs can provide valuable professional advice to students. He stressed in his remarks the value of TAs reflecting on their roles as mentors to better understand their relationship with their own mentor; a TA's sense of his or her own duties and limitations will serve to clarify what can realistically be expected from senior faculty. Troy Cross suggested that a successful relationship with a mentor is characterized by honesty, autonomy, and support. An ideal mentor is one who will offer constructive comments about the student's work and will, in turn, welcome the reverse, that is, a graduate student should not feel as if he or she is excluded from questioning and probing the faculty member's positions. Autonomy refers to the student's confidence that, while accepting advice and guidance, he or she nevertheless is implicitly encouraged in, and thus feels confident and comfortable in, the pursuit of his or her own avenues of research. Finally, support entails a personal and professional investment on the part of the faculty member to usher the student through the degree program's "hurdles," and to guide and assist him or her in the search for a job.

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TA Project Website Now On-line

Teaching assistants and other graduate students can now get up-to-date information on teaching, the TA Project, and related graduate school events by accessing the new website: <http://taproject.rutgers.edu>. Besides a calendar of events, the website contains information about the TA Project in general (its publications, its mission, its staff), the resources it makes available (for TAs or GAs who wish to visit the TAP office), and the services it offers (the videotaping of classes, for example).

All TAP publications, including the *TA Handbook*, *Voices from the Field*, and *TapTalk*, are available on-line. TAs with questions about a specific topic, mid-semester evaluations for example, can easily locate the relevant sections in all the publications, and also be pointed to further sources as needed. The website has links to other useful university and national websites.

Upcoming TAP and Graduate School-New Brunswick workshops, such as the dissertation workshops, are currently listed,

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Audience members raised a number of additional issues and a lively discussion ensued. In the case of TAs as mentors or simply as advisors to students, several people emphasized the advice that TAs should take great care to keep their relationships with students on a professional basis; students with pressing personal problems should be referred to campus counseling agencies.

In terms of the graduate student/graduate faculty mentor relationships, several significant points and some possible problems were raised. Some discussants suggested that a single mentor was perhaps a traditional or an ideal notion that is either no longer feasible or no longer desirable. Given the busy schedules of most faculty members, is it possible for graduate students to even find a traditional mentor? They suggested that it was more typical today for a

graduate student to seek out more than one professor for help and support, and to depend on their peers for a great deal of support and intellectual stimulus. If the mentor relationship is, indeed, a holdover from the days when older male faculty members found, as it were, a surrogate son amongst their students, several people suggested that the relationship subtly favors male students. As one presenter pointed out, a recent study on mentoring reported that male professors are less likely to criticize the work of female students but more likely to hold them to a higher standard than male students.

In the end, however, while most discussants agreed that they enjoy support from a number of faculty members, not just a single one, and that, the relationship still does (as the research suggests) possibly favor male students, a crucial reason to find and cultivate a relationship with one professor is that graduate students *must* find themselves equipped with an ally and champion when the time comes to find a job.

The discussion also focused on the pitfalls of such a close relationship with a faculty member. As in all relationships where there is an imbalance of power, students must establish boundaries for themselves. To prevent

situations of intellectual or sexual harassment from occurring, graduate students must choose their mentors with care. Graduate students should avoid working with professors they feel are too domineering. By the time a student is working on a dissertation, someone who will allow the student to develop his or her own ideas is needed; a professor who will attempt to sway a student to replicate his or her own thinking is not what is needed. Equally important is that students must realize that they are not obliged to provide any favors for professors, regardless of the extent of the help they receive. Mentoring is a part of the faculty member's job, and, actually, most professors enjoy this interchange with their proteges and treat them fairly and with respect. Further, as one discussant pointed out, the mentor-student relationship is not a one-way street: graduate students should think of themselves as, and try to be, intellectual equals who have ideas, energy, and feedback to offer their mentors, who, it must be remembered, continue to grow and develop intellectually and professionally themselves.

TapTalk is a monthly newsletter
produced by the
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Graduate School—New Brunswick.

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TA Bookshelf

NOTES ON THE UNDERGRADUATES

Spring Transfer Students

The Weekly Journal: *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Ed: Corbin Gwaltney. Publisher: Robinnette D. Ross. Student Subscriptions: \$60.00; copy of student ID on college letterhead must be sent along with check or credit card number to the main office: 1255 23rd Street, N.W., Washington D.C., 20037; (202) 466-1000. Other subscriptions: \$75.00; P.O. Box 1955, Marion, Ohio, 43305; (800) 728-2803.

The Chronicle of Higher Education is a hefty (many-paged) tabloid-sized newspaper that is published on a weekly basis (except the third week in August and the last two weeks in December). A year's subscription costs sixty dollars, which might seem like a lot of money, but it is worth it. (Many graduate programs subscribe and make a copy available to their students.) Of great interest to TAs is *The Chronicle's* extensive job listings (about 100 pages) which offer a good indication of the market. The journal is designed for the educator who aspires to keep abreast of the issues and events that shape higher education in the United States and the world, and it delivers: excellent journalism on current issues and special subjects; job listings; notices of appointments and resignations (and deaths); calls for papers and notices for upcoming conferences—and more. Coming out of Washington D.C., *The Chronicle of Higher Education* is a major voice and source of information in U.S. higher education.

TAs who teach first-year students in the fall semester are usually sensitive to the special circumstances and needs of students who are new to university life and learning. Often forgotten are the many students who transfer to Rutgers for the spring term, often from community colleges. Their presence should be taken into account, especially since, unlike students who begin traditionally in the fall semester, spring transfer students do not enjoy as many initiatory, informational, and welcoming events as do fall students. TAs should be prepared to direct these transfer students to the university agencies and centers that are designed to enhance their collegiate performance and experience; a brief review of the "Teachers' Aids" chapter of the *The Teaching Assistant Handbook* should provide this suggested preparation.

Finding out who the spring transfers are is something to be done in the first weeks of class. Once they have been identified, TAs can approach them as a group in the form of a class announcement, or each student can be approached individually when a TA is circulating in the classroom or lab. A TA's goal in respect to these students is not simply to make them

welcome but to find out if they are adjusting adequately to Rutgers standards and the Rutgers environment. Do they need extra tutoring? Are they aware of Rutgers Academic Integrity Policy? Are they from a small campus and overwhelmed by Rutgers' size and scope?

The first thing to do is to inform transfer students (or those who are struggling) that the Campus Information Service (CIS) is their lifeline. This service can be reached by any of the following numbers: 932-INFO/9090/1766, or it can be visited in person at 542 George Street (CAC). CIS operators can provide information on numerous topics (e.g. bus and gym schedules), and they can, of course, provide the telephone number and address of any other agency a student might need. In the event of more personal problems, CIS operators can offer telephone numbers to a variety of peer and other counseling agencies.

Another crucial aid for all students is their college's Dean's Office; a telephone call to this office's main number should result in students being directed to the person they need to speak to, particularly if the question pertains to school business (such as academic advising, or

Transfer Students

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arranging for van service in the event of a broken leg, etc.). Most colleges have a dean who specializes in transfer student issues. Residence halls are staffed by undergraduate and graduate students, so if any student, transfer or otherwise, grumbles about his or her residence hall living situation, remind them of this.

At some point during the semester, TAs should hand out a list of tutoring and learning centers. This gesture might be particularly appreciated by transfer students who are less likely to be apprised of the services Rutgers offers.

TAP Website

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with the dates, times, and locations included.

Also listed are the telephone numbers and e-mail addresses of TA Project staff members, all of whom welcome questions, suggestions, and input about the services TAP offers. Students who have questions about or who would like to make comments or suggestions about the website itself should feel free to e-mail or telephone one of the members of the TAP staff.



February

2	Groundhog Day
12	Lincoln's Birthday
14	Valentine's day
22	Washington's Birthday
23	TA Liaison Meeting
25	Ash Wednesday
26	"Establishing Course Goals & Designing a Syllabus" GSNB, 12noon, 25 Bishop Place, CAC. All welcome.

COMING Events March 1998

2	"Preparing for a Job Search"
4	"Academic Publishing"
13	"The First Class: Establishing Authority"
24	Effective Teaching in Large Courses"

For details about the above listed workshops or other events, check the website, <http://taproject.rutgers.edu>. or call TAP at 932-11TA.

Teaching Assistant Project

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