

The Unseen Labor of Mentoring

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I became a professor because I wanted to teach. I really wanted to be a middle-school English teacher but — even at age 19 — I knew that salary wouldn't allow me to pay off my undergraduate loans, so I decided on a Ph.D. Twelve years later and I'm extremely happy with my decision, particularly because I landed at a small liberal-arts college where I have the freedom to teach whatever I want and the good fortune to have small classes.

But it would be dishonest not to admit that I truly had no idea what it meant to be a teacher. Specifically, I had no idea what it meant to be a professor of color at a predominately white institution.

Being among the approximately 15 percent of faculty of color at my institution means I am highly visible on my tiny campus. The ratio of students of color to faculty of color is about 20 to 1. Of my 20 mentees, the majority have never taken one of my classes. They wander into my office — sometimes accompanied by a familiar student but, more often than not, they've arrived because of word of mouth.

It's extremely flattering that students recommend me to peers who are in need of extra support. However, it can also be frustrating to continuously have to manage unscheduled drop-ins when I'm trying to grade papers, prep for class, respond to emails, write letters of recommendations, and prepare for meetings. (I don't even bother trying to work on my scholarship in my office.) But despite the disruptions, I've never ignored a knock on my door or turned students away before determining exactly what they need from me.

Excessive advising is expected at a teaching-oriented college so I am unsurprised when students ask me to sign forms, help with course scheduling, attend meetings — or even when they ask me to host a student dinner. Such interactions are usually quick and have a clear resolution. But the amount of time required to handle all of the frequent official and less-official requests I get from students pales in comparison to the mentoring I do for marginalized students.

Even after six years on the faculty here, I find that helping students of color, queer students, work-study students, athletes, and others manage the day-to-day difficulties of life at a wealthy predominantly white institution continues to be a professional and emotional balancing act.

I can tell when students want “Manya” — and not “Professor Whitaker” — by the way they enter my office. Students in personal crisis enter in one of two ways. They either: (a) hesitantly walk in with lots of apologies for interrupting me and dropping by unannounced, or (b) storm in, plop down in a chair, and immediately start talking. In either event, I shut my laptop, close the door, and move my chair so I am directly facing them before I ask, “what’s going on?”

Unfortunately, their answers are rarely simple. After 20 minutes of yelling, crying, or sometimes sitting in silence, it becomes clear that they need me to help them articulate and process a problem that is far more severe than deciding which courses to take next year. Nine times out of 10, the students arrive in my office because they feel as if I am one of few people who understands how their identity characteristics have taken what should be a simple problem and escalated it to an emergency.

Some students come to me for advice on how to manage a problem with a friend or a professor who has said or done something prejudiced or offensive and no one else intervened. Because of their tokenized status, these students feel like they have a responsibility to respond but they don’t always know how to navigate the power differential with staff and faculty or how to manage conflicts with classmates or roommates. Other students come to me because they are in a financial crisis and can’t pay for books or tuition, or because they are experiencing mental and emotional health problems that their family members believe can be resolved with more effort and healthy eating. The worst situations are students who come to me because they’ve been sexually or physically assaulted by a partner and aren’t ready to file a formal complaint.

In each of these instances, I and other marginalized faculty are sought out because our identities make us safe and compassionate resources for students who’ve been — at best — let down by institutional policies and — at worst — punished by them. We are the first and final line of defense for these students against an educational system that refuses to acknowledge the ways in which race, class, gender, and sexuality shape and often dictate college experiences.

As a black woman, I get it. As a person who always had at least two jobs during college and graduate school, I get it. As someone who has experienced bullying in professional spaces, I get it. I share my stories with students to help contextualize their experiences and to let them know they are not alone and that, like me, they can and will get through this.

But the process of mentoring students involves a lot of emotional labor that can be retraumatizing and is always draining. Walking the line between being supportive and being a “fixer” is difficult when all I want to do is hug my students, send them to their dorm for a nap, and pick up the phone to yell at whomever did something to break their spirit. Instead, I put my own emotions on the back burner and take the time to review campus and community resources and remind them of policies and laws meant to protect them. I do my best to ensure they leave my office empowered — even if it leaves *me* exhausted and anxious.

By the start of my third year I began to relate to the many articles I’d seen highlighting how [female](#) and [minority faculty](#) bear the burden of unseen labor. On any given day, I would (and still do) spend one to four hours talking to students in my office. I was devoting at least one night a week to campus events they had invited me to attend. Every day, by the time I got home, all I wanted to do was enjoy a glass of wine and catch up on mind-numbing reality TV. Unsurprisingly, I was behind in my scholarship and my personal life was in shambles.

That’s when I realized: Being a mentor for marginalized students was never going to stop. I wanted to keep helping them but I had to make certain that I could still complete my official responsibilities. So for faculty who find themselves with extra unpaid and emotionally taxing labor, I advise you to do two things to facilitate your personal

and professional success.

No. 1: Set boundaries. I've learned how to maintain positive and open relationships with students while also protecting my own emotional and mental well-being. Here's how:

- Make sure the relationship is mutually beneficial. By that, I mean that I should have a sense of pride in students' accomplishments to which I contributed. It's not about vanity or ego, but about knowing that I am using my time and energy well.
- Say no and be honest. If I need to write, plan a lesson, prepare for a meeting, or eat lunch and breathe, I tell students to come back at a specific time. That way it doesn't feel like a dismissal, but a rescheduling.
- Expand your own network. I've built up my list of contacts so that I can refer students to trusted colleagues and to campus resources. That is especially critical for instances when students have issues on which I am unqualified to offer advice — such as sexual assault, mental/emotional health, or legal problems.
- Keep the relationship professional. No matter how much I enjoy chatting with students, I am — first and foremost — their professor. As such, it is my responsibility to model professionalism for them. So unless it's an emergency, I don't respond to their calls and emails during nonbusiness hours. And if they start to gossip to me about other students, staff, or faculty, I let them know when they've crossed the line.

No. 2: Get credit for your efforts. Given the time I spend mentoring students — particularly compared with older, white colleagues — I make certain it “counts” toward my professional advancement. Here's how:

- Note your mentoring work on official employment evaluations. For example, I include my mentorship on the service section of annual reviews and on tenure-and-promotion materials. I detail the number of hours I spend each week engaging with students in unofficial but student-initiated capacities. I list every activity with dates and brief descriptions.
- Talk about your efforts with your supervisors. I have discussions with my chair to remind him of my additional service work. In many institutions, the department chair is the first advocate for untenured faculty during review processes so it is imperative that your chair is aware of how you use your professional — and sometimes personal — time.
- Let students know you are going above and beyond for them. Again, that is not about bragging or making students feel indebted to me. The reality is that students hold a lot of power when it comes to tenure and promotion, so I don't want them to forget the time I've spent with them when they are asked to write letters for my file or to evaluate my courses.

Working with students is my greatest pleasure, and the reason I continue in this profession. I truly love spending time with them and learning about them as people, not just as students.

On the days when I am tired of being “the only,” or when I've experienced one too many microaggressions myself, a student visit always lifts my spirits. I am reminded that I am not here — on this campus or in this profession — for myself. I am here for the students. I am here to show them that people of color, queer people, disabled people, working class people — people like my students — can not only survive, but thrive at an institution that was not designed to meet their needs.