

Cultivating a Culture of Mentoring

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2009 Dean's Awards for Excellence in Mentoring: Faculty Awards

Purpose Statement

There is widespread agreement within the academic community that mentoring is an important element of graduate education. First, providing adequate mentoring support for graduate students is a key factor in ensuring that they are well trained in their disciplines, successfully complete their degrees, and have good career opportunities. Second, students who have mentoring relationships are more productive, more involved in their departments, and more satisfied with their programs. Third, whether acquiring a fresh perspective in a particular field or gaining a reputation for identifying and developing top-notch talent, mentors receive immeasurable benefits from the mentoring relationship. The benefits of mentoring are passed on as good mentors promote a tradition of mentoring practices in their students.

Mentoring is a sustained partnership that is necessarily multifaceted and is enhanced by mutual respect and concern. While a mentor can be defined in many ways, a mentor for graduate students is fundamentally someone who serves as a guide throughout their professional training. Far from being just an advisor, a mentor serves as teacher, advocate, sponsor, and role model as well. When unable to fill a particular role, good mentors have access to a network of helpful resources and exercise the discernment necessary to point students to appropriate resources at the appropriate times in their careers.

To recognize the considerable efforts and accomplishments of faculty who consistently serve as effective mentors, the Duke University Graduate School established the *Dean's Award for Excellence in Mentoring*. Designed to allow graduate students to identify faculty who embody both the letter and spirit of mentoring, this award has taken its place among the University's continuing efforts to cultivate a culture of mentoring.

Criteria

1. Promotes successful completion of students' research and degree programs by monitoring progress and offering honest, constructive feedback when needed or sought
2. Commits to advancing students' long-term professional development—throughout their journey from student to professional—by recognizing and making potential colleagues aware of their natural talents and acquired skills and by integrating students into the broader culture of the discipline
3. Ensures that students master the content and skills of their discipline, including the ability to teach or present that content to professional and non-professional audiences
4. Creates a supportive environment for research and scholarship by fostering mutual respect and demonstrating sincere and active interest in the well-being of the student
5. Maintains accessibility by providing consistently open lines of communication
6. Connects students with the resources necessary to take full advantage of academic and professional opportunities and enables students by helping them to develop their own local and national networks
7. Models a solid record of scholarship marked by excellence in research and teaching skills, research presentation and publication, the ability to obtain funding, and the exercise and nurturing of good mentoring practices
8. Exercises discernment in directing students to appropriate resources and shows a willingness to work collaboratively with other faculty in multiple-mentoring relationships

Recipients

JOHN D. FRENCH

Modeling Hands-on Mentoring

John D. French received his B.A. in history from Amherst College, his M.A. from the University of Pittsburgh, and his Ph.D. from Yale University. He has been on the faculty at Duke as a scholar of Latin American history since 1992. Professor French has exercised a “hands-on mentoring style” that served as the example for mentoring guidelines issued by Duke’s Department of History in 2005.

“What I believe sets John apart from other mentors is his commitment to fostering a supportive and nurturing community for Latin Americanist junior faculty and graduate students in our department. Although John is the senior Latin Americanist in the department, he is constantly looking for ways to bring faculty and graduate students together as both colleagues and friends. He understands that the most significant intellectual exchanges and personal connections often occur outside the classroom and realizes that it is critical for students to have networks of support and camaraderie throughout their graduate careers. During my six years at Duke, John has hosted an annual end of the year dinner at his home, organized regular Friday night social events for Latin Americanist students and faculty, arranged mock job talks for students on the job market, and taken students out to dinner to celebrate personal and professional milestones. These events have allowed me to develop close relationships with all of the Latin Americanists in my department and sustained me during challenging periods in my graduate career.”

John shares his time, wise guidance, and energy equitably with all students that are fortunate enough to have him as an advisor.

“Unlike most of John’s mentees, I did not enter the department as one of his students or begin my graduate career as a Latin Americanist. Indeed, I entered the department with an interest in African-American history and planned to work with two other professors. However, when the two professors I came to work with both went on leave my first year, John voluntarily stepped in and served as my mentor throughout the year. Although John was not my official primary advisor at the time and I had not expressed any interest in studying Latin America, he still met with me on a regular basis to discuss my research interests, helped me to select appropriate classes, and supported me through the challenging transition from undergraduate to graduate work. When I decided to apply for a research grant to explore an M.A. thesis topic in the field of modern Caribbean History, John walked me through the complicated process of grant-writing and read at least half a dozen drafts of my proposal over a two-week period.”

His hands-on style also extends to maintaining meaningful communication during seasons that take him away from campus.

“Although John was not in residence during my first year in the program, he made a special effort to communicate with me over telephone and e-mail to discuss class selection, paper topics, and grant proposals. Whenever he was in town, he set aside time to meet over coffee or a meal. These interactions cultivated a personal relationship of trust between us at this early stage in my graduate career. His dedication and careful guidance during this period led to my receiving several fellowships to support international travel for research and language study in the summer after my first year.”

Nominators recognize and are able to articulate many aspects of excellence in mentoring because of the example they see in Professor French.

“Throughout my graduate career, John has demonstrated all of the characteristics of an exceptional mentor: he has been a knowledgeable academic advisor, enthusiastic student of history, an inspiring teacher, and a caring and trusted confidant. Although history is a discipline based on an apprenticeship model of graduate training, John French remains a rare jewel. He is both a respected scholar in the field of Latin American History and an acknowledged ‘model mentor’ by students and colleagues across the University.”

KAREN L. REMMER

Promoting Graduate Student Development

Karen L. Remmer received her B.A. in political science from Wellesley College and her Ph.D. from the University of Chicago. Remmer joined the Duke faculty in 2001 as a professor of political science. During her previous tenure as a professor at the University of New Mexico, she served as both assistant director for the Division of Inter-American Affairs and a department chair. At Duke, she directs the innovative Markets and Democracy in Latin America (MADILA) program.

“Much of Karen’s willingness and capacity to mentor graduate students is reflected in her Markets and Democracy in Latin America (MADILA) program. That she negotiated for this program when coming to Duke is a testament to her desire to develop graduate students. ... Karen has told me that prior to coming to Duke, her experience with graduate students was that they would often make ‘rookie mistakes’ when going to do fieldwork for the first time, just because of the newness of being in the field. These mistakes would often delay graduate students for an extra year or two, and she thought they could be easily avoided if students had some prior experience in the field. However, funding for students to conduct fieldwork early in graduate school is almost impossible to find. Thus arose the idea of using MADILA to send students out after their first year. Now, under Karen’s tutelage, all Duke comparative politics graduate students develop a project in their first year and spend the summer conducting fieldwork.”

Nominators note that Remmer’s commitment to helping students fund their research doesn’t end with MADILA.

“After this first year, Karen constantly helps students find additional opportunities. With her as a co-principal investigator, three of us have won Dissertation Improvement Awards from the National Science Foundation. And it was her idea to apply for a Vertical Integration Grant from the Graduate School, which we were awarded in Summer 2005.”

“Karen has always gone the extra mile to help me make contacts with scholars of similar interest. This initially included writing letters of introduction to senior scholars working on my research topic or arranging for us to meet at conferences. During my last year at Duke, she took this one step further and provided funds for me and two other graduate students to organize a conference of other scholars working on our topics and helped use her contacts to ensure that several senior scholars would participate. This forum allowed us to showcase our research while building another network of professional contacts that have yielded several joint projects that I am currently engaged in.”

Professor Remmer realizes that concepts built on rigorous scholarship are a key to successfully obtaining research funding. Thus she is able to connect her own academic work with the mentoring process. As one nominator notes, she thus “illustrates that the alleged trade-off between doing research and providing mentoring is overblown. Karen has a very active research agenda, and yet she also manages to give us graduate students a lot of time.”

“While caring passionately about politics, she at the same time takes the science in political science seriously. Time and again, she has been simultaneously supportive and challenging. She is not known for having warm and fuzzy words of support for arguments that won’t hold water. But at the same time, her criticism is never destructive. It is always about improving our research—from our theoretical model to our actual data to our methods.”

“I think of Karen as a wonderful mentor because she was always there when I needed her advice and always supportive of the way I chose to shape my research and career path. Her mentorship is defined not only by a very strong desire to work closely with graduate students and provide tremendous advice, but above all by a rarely matched effort to promote the development of her graduate students through conferences at Duke, applications for research funding, or even the creation of new programs in the University.”

GRANT WACKER

Investing in a Family of Scholars

Grant Wacker received his B.A. in philosophy from Stanford University and his Ph.D. in religion from Harvard University. Currently a professor of Christian history and director of graduate studies in the Department of Religion, he joined the Duke faculty in 1992 after serving as an associate professor in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The current research focus of this prominent scholar of American religious history is the influence of Billy Graham on American religious culture. In their nominations, an extended family of past and present students bore witness to Wacker’s intense investment in their personal and professional growth.

“Recognizing excellence in others and doing nothing takes very little time. Yet I am forgoing other work and taking time to nominate Grant for this award because that is the sort of thing he would do. I have learned from my mentor the importance of taking time to help colleagues, to work with them and to convey to them my respect and admiration. I have benefited from a mentor who will put other work aside to write a letter of recommendation or to read the third draft of a dissertation chapter. I have benefited from a mentor who understands that mentoring takes time—and who takes the time to do it well.”

“Grant’s success in the field in teaching, research, and writing provides his students with a wealth of relevant resources and wisdom. He is constantly working to improve our prose so that it will be accepted in the most prestigious journals in the field, and steering us towards a balanced philosophy of research that holds in tension both suspicion and charity towards our subjects. ... What I admire most about Grant is his uncanny ability to maintain a tension between collegial friendship and fatherly, pastoral mentorship, all while providing a guiding hand towards holistic scholarly success as a teacher, researcher, and writer.”

Professor Wacker plans a variety of activities that help his students grow together as academic colleagues, including monthly colloquia and social activities as well as opportunities for his current students to meet and network with his former students on a regular basis at annual conferences. These efforts lead to what one nominator called “a deep and lasting collegiality.” Because Grant models this collegiality with humility and consistency—generously offering his insights while also making his own works-in-progress available for review—it is effectively contagious.

“Grant offers his students not simply an academic direction but a place to belong. He often puts his own work aside to give students much more attention than any graduate student could hope for. He helps us choose courses, navigate academic hurdles, handle conflicts, and soothe anxieties. He hosts countless colloquium and meetings in his home and at professional meetings, making sure to assist students in making the transition from student to member of the academy. He asks our opinions like they actually matter, sharing his own work with us as fellow colleagues and treating our writing with critical but big-hearted honesty. In times of personal or professional crisis, this is a man who will invite you to dinner and help in whatever way he can. ... In my experience, Grant has meant the difference between an anonymous graduate experience and a cherished time of academic and personal development. He allows me to take on ambitious projects, eager to help me accomplish more and climb higher than I thought possible. Because he thinks so highly of everyone, he gives students the confidence to think big and produce work that seeks to change the field.”

“Grant creates communities for and from his students. The chief institutional form of this is the monthly colloquium held at his house. ... But Grant also fosters a general sense of collegiality among his students. I have been immeasurably helped in every step of my graduate student career by friendly and supportive peers. And despite my competitive and misanthropic nature, I’ve strangely found myself willing (even eager?) to help my peers in return.”

If his nominators' sentiments are any indication, Professor Wacker's investment is paying off nicely.

“Current and former students alike are considered part of the “Wacker Family.” As students, as scholars, as teachers, as friends, we are joined—in large measure—by our admiration for Grant Wacker and our thankfulness for the opportunity to be shaped, encouraged, and befriended by this great man.”

2009 Dean's Awards for Excellence in Mentoring: Student Awards

Purpose Statement

As research and problem solving skills become a more important part of the skill set required by the knowledge-based global economy, the demand for research mentoring has grown rapidly. Adequate mentoring support helps undergraduate and early career graduate students develop an understanding of the demands and benefits of the research process. Such students who have mentoring relationships are also more likely to properly assess their academic skills and intellectual passions and pursue graduate research opportunities to fully develop their talents for the good of society. Graduate students are uniquely positioned to identify promising researchers and help provide a supportive environment in which a passion for the discovery of new knowledge can thrive.

Mentoring is a sustained partnership that is necessarily multifaceted and is enhanced by mutual respect and concern. While a mentor can be defined in many ways, a mentor for these emerging researchers is fundamentally someone who serves as a guide throughout their academic training and orientation to the world of research. Far from being just an advisor, a mentor serves as teacher, advocate, and role model as well. When unable to fill a particular role, good mentors have access to a network of helpful resources and exercise the discernment necessary to point students to appropriate resources at the appropriate times in their academic careers.

To recognize the considerable efforts and accomplishments of graduate students who consistently serve as effective mentors of these researchers-in-training, the Duke University Graduate School has added a Student Award to the *Dean's Awards for Excellence in Mentoring*. Designed to allow the Duke community to identify graduate students who embody both the letter and spirit of mentoring, this award will further enhance the University's continuing efforts to cultivate a culture of mentoring.

Criteria

1. Recognizes the natural talents and acquired skills of undergraduates and early career graduate students and connects them with colleagues who can help them assess and pursue a relevant and rewarding educational and professional path
2. Helps students define and achieve their academic and personal goals
3. Ensures that fellow students develop an understanding of the content and skills that undergird research in their discipline
4. Promotes the development of research skills and interests by monitoring progress and offering honest, constructive feedback when needed or sought
5. Creates a supportive environment for research and scholarship by fostering mutual respect and demonstrating sincere and active interest in the well being of their fellow students
6. Maintains accessibility by providing consistently open lines of communication
7. Demonstrates significant growth in the development of research and teaching skills, as well as progress toward regular publication and presentation of research
8. Thoughtfully directs students to appropriate resources and shows a willingness to work collaboratively with others in multiple-mentoring relationships

Recipients

ALEXIS T. FRANZESE

Guide

Alexis T. Franzese received a B.A. degree (cum laude) in sociology from Union College. At Duke she has completed an M.A. and Ph.D. in sociology, as well as an M.A. in psychology. She is now a candidate for the Ph.D. in psychology. Her research explores associations between levels of authenticity and affective consequences of self-regulation. Alexis's nominations demonstrate how she fosters academic and personal growth by guiding her mentorees to think carefully about their academic priorities, establish clear expectations for their work, and set reasonable goals.

"I was considering graduate school and perhaps one of the biggest questions I had for myself was 'Is life going to stop?' Her answer-by-example was clearly that if you set priorities and stay focused, NO! I do not know very many people who can be fully work-oriented and life-oriented at the same time; Alexis is one of those people. Now that I am in a Ph.D. program, I still keep in close contact with her and she has not ceased to be a continual source of inspiration and motivation as I begin my own career in academia."

"She takes a genuine interest in other people's research and career plans, whether it's critiquing an interview schedule or sharing her CV so that other students can see a sample. Alexis has continued to show a great interest in my work, and I can tell that she sincerely cares about how it's going."

"During the Spring semester Alexis began by asking me several questions about my work habits, including how driven I was, what times of the day I worked best, and how much supervision I needed. In doing so, she fit our schedule around me as best she could while still pushing me to develop better habits. She set up checkpoints for my work, even initial reading, and gave valuable and extensive feedback on everything I have done. ... Throughout the process I have frequently been overwhelmed by the challenges thrown at me by the nature of the work, yet Alexis has assisted me in understanding the problems I'm facing and done everything she could to help me prepare better for them. ... As she is now finishing her second Ph.D., she is the ideal mix of a person whose goals and practices are refined and sound, as well as one who is still in touch with people just beginning in the field. The direct help with early stages of application, the fantastic research experience I have gained through her own extensive data and new experiments, and the very proactive academic habits and techniques I have learned with her assistance lead me to believe that my acceptance into any graduate institution is directly due more to her ability to guide me these past months than any other single factor at Duke."

Taking a holistic approach in guiding undergraduates, Alexis shows a genuine interest in their lives, their intellectual endeavors, and their plans for the future.

JOSEPH O. SEXTON

Resource

Joseph O. Sexton is a doctoral candidate in the University Program in Ecology. He started his graduate study at Duke after receiving the M.S. degree (magna cum laude) from the Department of Forest Resources at Utah State University and the B.S. degree (cum laude) from the University of Florida in Wildlife Ecology and Conservation. Joe's research focus is forest landscape ecology and remote sensing. The consistent refrain from Joe's nominators was his willingness to serve as a resource for his peers—inside and outside his department.

"I always felt comfortable approaching Joe and seeking his clarification on a topic or assignment. Perhaps as important as his accessibility was the worth of the information Joe could provide once you had his attention. ... Through his accessibility, mastery of the subjects of ecology, statistics, and remote sensing, and his teaching ability, Joe ensured that my fellow students and I developed a solid understanding of the material that underlies the fields of landscape ecology and conservation planning. ... Joe coordinated my writing efforts with that of four other co-authors, spread across three different universities. ... After many months of collaborative work we produced a manuscript that has recently been accepted for publication in the Journal of Forest Ecology and Management."

"He makes sure that we have all the resources necessary to complete our projects and will work with us as long as necessary to make sure we understand the material and fix problems. ... He also takes time to help other students with things outside of the projects on which he is collaborating. For example, knowing that many of the MEM students at the Nicholas School specialize in GIS, he regularly sends job opportunities he is aware of out to students via e-mail and even helps with the applications when needed."

"I was working on a remote sensing project looking at deforestation in Madagascar, and at the time, there was no remote sensing class offered at the school. He was recommended to me by other students as someone who could help me, as remote sensing was his area of expertise in his thesis research. When asked, he agreed to help, however, there were two conditions: one, that I must be willing to learn the proper remote sensing techniques needed for my project and two, that if possible, I be willing to put in the extra time to publish my results. ... Now, nearly two years since I first talked to him about working on a project, the paper is in press. Without Joe's expertise, patience, and willingness to mentor, I would not have been able to complete my Master's Project and get it to publication. His role superseded the title of teaching assistant. ... I would consider him as one of my core advisors."

A key to Joe's success as a mentor is his openness to meet his peers where they are intellectually, identify the appropriate resources for them to meet their goals, and, then—with firmness and patience—to help them take their work to the next level.