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On Students, Diversity, and Mentorship

Nimisha Barton
Consultant and Independent Scholar

The single greatest determinant of social mobility in the US today is a college degree, and indeed more students attend college today than ever before: if, in 1965, less than six million students were enrolled in college, nearly twenty million enrolled in 2015.¹ The expansion of the undergraduate student body has also unfolded against the backdrop of major shifts in the US population's ethnic and racial composition (what some refer to as the "browning of America"); the steady expansion of federal aid programs making college more affordable (Pell grants, for example); and growing institutional efforts to recruit, admit, and enroll diverse students (including new admissions practices and increasingly generous financial aid packages, among other things).² As a result of these factors and others, today's college administrators, staff, and faculty have begun to encounter a new generation of low-income and underrepresented minority students who may be the first in their families to attend college and who bring with them a range of experiences quite different from those with which the institution and many of its representatives have long been familiar.

Although more diverse students attend college now than ever before, there remain persistent gaps in outcomes between students whom institutions of higher education have long welcomed and those whom they only recently have.³ And though many colleges and universities are currently ramping up efforts to ensure the success of so-called diverse students, these initiatives may not always be visible to, or inclusive of, faculty, especially given the "administrative silo-ing" common within institutions of higher education. When institutions do broach faculty engagement

¹ Statista, "Number of college students in the U.S. 1965-2027," [statista.com, https://www.statista.com/statistics/183995/us-college-enrollment-and-projections-in-public-and-private-institutions/](https://www.statista.com/statistics/183995/us-college-enrollment-and-projections-in-public-and-private-institutions/) (accessed August 22, 2018).

² Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, "Today's College Students," [postsecondary.gatesfoundation.org, https://postsecondary.gatesfoundation.org/what-were-learning/todays-college-students/](https://postsecondary.gatesfoundation.org/what-were-learning/todays-college-students/) (accessed October 8, 2018).

³ These differences in outcome include lower completion rates, lengthier time to graduation, and the accumulation of more student debt along the way – all trends that are accentuated among low-income students of color. And this is to say nothing of the qualitative difference in student experience that underrepresented minority students often face at predominantly white institutions as opposed to minority-serving institutions. See *Race and Ethnicity as a Barrier to Opportunity: A Blueprint for Higher Education Equity* (Washington D.C.: Young Invincibles, 2017), accessed October 8, 2018, <https://younginvincibles.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Higher-Education-Equity.pdf>.

with diverse students, it is often through inclusive teaching workshops led by campus pedagogy centers. Though learning best practices for teaching diverse undergraduates is indeed important for today's educators, the narrow focus on classroom interaction is unduly limiting. It neglects the profound impact that faculty mentorship can have on undergraduates and graduates who may be unfamiliar with the inner workings of academic life and who regularly face institutional messages about their lack of belonging, if not worse.

The benefits of mentorship, especially for women and minority students, have been carefully documented over the last few decades. Faculty now have their pick of excellent mentoring guides⁴ and several institutions, including the University of Michigan and the University of Arizona, even provide free online guides with tips on how to mentor diverse students and junior faculty, respectively.⁵ As a rule, formal mentorship programs serve as the backbone of national initiatives aimed at increasing the representation of women and minorities in the academy, such as the Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellowship Program, which supports underrepresented minority undergraduates interested in graduate school in order to diversify the professoriate, or the National Center for Faculty Development and Diversity (NCFDD), which promotes the advancement of early career scholars. In short, mentorship is widely considered a touchstone for successful outcomes among underrepresented populations in the academy.

So what is “mentorship”? Here I define mentorship as the profusion of relationships, contacts, and networks that comprise the support system contributing not only to the way students advance through college but, frankly, the way individuals advance through life. Through these relationships, students gain access to information and opportunities that allow them to move successfully and confidently through their college years and beyond. It is important to highlight that mentorship formalizes networks of support that replicate the informal networks from which so-called traditional students often benefit. As such, mentorship programs of all varieties for all manner of individuals simply render visible the naturalized social systems that *always already* contribute to the success of some and extend access to those systems to a new generation so that they, too, have the opportunity to succeed.

For underrepresented students, learning about mentorship – its goals and purposes as well as how to ask for it and from whom – can be profoundly eye-opening. As a former university

⁴ For example, W. Brad Johnson, *On Being a Mentor: A Guide for Higher Education Faculty* (New York: Psychology Press, 2015), second edition; W. Brad Johnson and Charles R. Ridley, *The Elements of Mentoring: 75 Practices of Master Mentors* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2018), third edition; Susan L. Phillipps and Susan T. Dennison, *Faculty Mentoring: A Practical Manual for Mentors, Mentees, Administrators, and Faculty Developers* (Virginia: Stylus Publishing, 2015). Leonard Cassuto has also produced a fantastic book for faculty with plenty of advice on advising graduate students. See *The Graduate School Mess: What Caused It and How We Can Fix It* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).

⁵ Rackham Graduate School, *How to Mentor Graduate Students: A Guide for Faculty*, (Michigan: University of Michigan, 2018), accessed October 1, 2018, <https://www.rackham.umich.edu/downloads/publications/Fmentoring.pdf>; University of Arizona, “Mentoring Resources,” [diversity.arizona.edu](https://diversity.arizona.edu/mentoring-resources), <https://diversity.arizona.edu/mentoring-resources> (accessed October 1, 2018).

administrator and now higher education diversity consultant, I often lead “Mentorship 101” workshops for undergraduate and graduate students. In these workshops, I include a “mentorship mapping” activity based on NCFDD and Harvard Business Review models to allow students to see the wide range of faculty, staff, peers, friends, and family members who contribute to their personal success. This activity has multiple advantages. First, it helps students see themselves as embedded in a large web of social relations and thereby disrupts the wrong-headed notion that success is a product solely of the individual and his or her efforts. In fact, it is a group effort, the product of the institutional and interpersonal support an individual can call on at any given moment. Second, the physical mapping of networks and the ensuing discussion runs counter to what many underrepresented students are told almost from the moment they arrive on campus – namely, that they are somehow in *particular need* of mentorship. In part, this articulation owes to the sort of “deficit model” approach that can underlie programmatic efforts on behalf of underrepresented students – that is, an approach emphasizing what students “lack” and how they can be “remedied” rather than on what students contribute and how they can enrich the community.

Once mentorship has been reframed as something that *everyone* needs – that is, as run-of-the-mill rather than remedial – the real and more difficult questions begin to come into focus: Who gets mentorship and why? Who knows to ask for it and why? Who is afraid to ask for it and why? Above all, how does the articulation of mentorship as a need for some but not all function, consciously or otherwise, to protect systems of privilege and power to the benefit of some and to the exclusion of others? And whose responsibility is it to dismantle that system? To frame the matter thusly is to ask difficult questions; the supreme challenge is to resist falling back on easy answers, chief among them that we all get along with some people more readily than others and that’s simply all there is to it. As ample social science research tells us, who we are “drawn to” and who we feel “comfortable with” is the product of education and upbringing, where we lived and where we grew up; in short, it is the product of our class and race, our gender and sexuality, our linguistic and cultural identities.⁶ And these identities are endowed with more or less privilege depending on the context. At the end of the day, then, the everyday politics of affinity – natural though they may seem – unfold in deeply hierarchical settings, facilitating access to opportunities for some and not others.

In the fields of French and Francophone history, these politics of affinity influence your everyday realities, from who thinks to take your courses and major in French history, to who imagines that going to graduate school or earning a PhD is even a remote possibility for them. Faculty mentorship can be the deciding factor between who makes it through graduate school and who doesn’t, who joins the ranks of the professoriate and who doesn’t, who gets past the grueling tenure process and who doesn’t. While I believe in the importance of these very human dimensions, I would also appeal to your scholarly instincts: once new individuals are brought into the fold, their presence and experiences shape what scholarship is written, what perspectives are opened up in our fields and sub-fields. Faculty mentorship, in other words, has the potential to reshape whose stories are told, and how. Now more than ever, we live in a world in which that is very much to be desired, and the perils of ignoring that responsibility are only too apparent.

⁶ Mahzarin R. Banaji and Anthony G. Greenwald, *Blindspot: Hidden Biases of Good People* (New York: Random House, 2013).

If any of the above sounds appealing to you, you could of course dig into the mentorship guides and resources referenced above, or sign up to serve as a faculty mentor through the new mentorship program recently launched by the Western Society of French History, or simply gain familiarity with your campus's teaching and learning centers. But if there's one guiding principle you take away, let it be this: endeavor to approach everyday interactions with students and junior colleagues – in the classroom, in office hours, in the hallways of your department – the same way you would when writing a book, a lecture, or a talk. That is, remember that, after years – perhaps even a lifetime – of immersion in your field, you know more than your audience does about your subject and so you must invite them into that world. Similarly, after a lifetime in academia, you necessarily know more about how college, graduate school, and your profession work than novices do and they, too, would benefit from an invitation into those worlds. Welcome them, as you would your readers. Be clear and transparent about what it takes to succeed, about the norms and expectations of college life and academia, more generally. In such moments, you will send a signal about how you choose to use your power and privilege to chip away at deeply-ingrained social, cultural, and institutional barriers that some face in academic settings.

Nimisha Barton
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