

## **Mentoring; women, and under-represented minorities**

**Brenda Alston-Mills and Penny Yocum**

What is mentoring?

Mentoring can be defined as a relationship developed between an individual who has more experience (mentor) with a person of less experience (mentee). This relationship is formed to provide guidance, support and instruction. Mentoring can be formal or informal in structure. An informal structure occurs naturally where as a formal structure is assigned. The latter is often what occurs within the academic system pertaining to advisors and graduate students. Mentoring can also be defined as the “general, pervasive, and ubiquitous process by which value systems, cultures, knowledge, and skills are transmitted from one generation to the next and within a generation” (Bagayoko, 1997). However mentoring is defined; one of the most important outcomes is for the mentee to be able to go into society with the ability to make positive offerings.

What is the role of a mentor?

A mentor must “play the dual role of coach and counselor; coaches giving technical advice, explaining how to do something, while counselors talk about the experience of doing it and offer emotional support as needed” (Thomas, 2001). A mentor should view the relationship as developing the mentee into a future mentor. Some of the best mentor/mentee relationships occur when the mentee sees their mentor as a person they would like to become. An academic mentor should introduce their mentee to the professional world and aid them in achieving personal, scholastic and research goals.

How do gender and race differences play a role in the mentoring process?

The “education process must include an awareness of the inherent difficulties of mentoring across race. Mentors should not hold negative stereotypes about individuals based on race and gender. Mentors must also be willing to give their mentees the benefit of the doubt” (Thomas, 2001). If these differences can not be overlooked, the mentor may not be able to see beyond the mentees weaknesses. A graduate student is dependent upon her mentor or major professor for counseling; quality of advice and information (Malcom et al., 1976).

Gender inequalities relating to education began as early as the 10th century at which time universities were established by and for men; particularly for the sons of land owners. This trend continued well into the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries while the renaissance universities continued the promotion of educating sons of wealthy upper class citizens and leaders of society. However, it was not until the 19<sup>th</sup> century that land grant universities (LGUs) were developed to educate the commoners and farmers of the communities; still predominantly being men.

However, the two fundamental ethical values of the land grant universities are the equality of opportunity and the research for the working classes; irrespective of wealth, race, or social status. Unfortunately, problems still exist in regards to gender and race; being the most important issues for this particular module.

The issues facing women and under-represented minorities in graduate education are deep-rooted in the past. Thousands of years ago, women were the prominent food gatherers and producers of material goods in society; which led them to being highly respected individuals. However, there was a gender shift that occurred and modern day notions warrant men being the principle producers (Campbell and Storo). There are numerous theories that attempt to explain this shift; most prominently being the role of women as child-bearers. However, no one theory is widely accepted. In addition, enter into the equation the topic of racial differences and how their roles played into societal issues with the United States. But, there are no clear scientific differences between the ability of women and men to function without equality in the field of education. Gender makes us different biologically, but does not imply whether one's gender can succeed in a particular field better than the other. Men attending Harvard during the 1800s compared intelligence among genders by using the analogy that men have larger brains and therefore were more intelligent than women yet women had a head large enough for the emotion of love (Takiki). While constructing the human genome, there has been no discovery of a gene related to the ability to succeed in 'science' related fields (Campbell and Storo).

It is important to note that this module addresses women and those considered minorities in the role of graduate education. Minorities can be women with ethnic, religious, gender, cultural or religious backgrounds different than the majority attending the institution of higher education.

Most gender and racial differences occur when attending a predominately white institution (PWI) such as the majority of LGUs (Arango and Levey). An unappealing, uninviting and most importantly un-accomodating setting of academia can be the initial experience with women obtaining a higher education (Trower and Chait, 2002). Casey and Plaut (2003) indicated in a recent survey "that a fair number of minorities are pursuing graduate degrees in Animal Science with the majority being Asian (47%), followed by Hispanic (34%), and Blacks (12%), and that as academic rank increased the proportion of minorities decreased. Several respondents commented that although their department has become more diverse in terms of gender the same could not be said for racial diversity. Survey respondents were asked whether they felt their department was racially diverse; pooled data indicated that 52% of respondents agreed/strongly agreed that their department was racially diverse, while 48% felt their department was not diverse."

Two main challenges that face women in graduate studies in this century are both low and high expectations by the graduate faculty and also a lack of sensitivity and appreciation of differences. Either low or high expectations of graduate students by graduate faculty can be detrimental to the educational experience and goals. Faculty may inaccurately assume that a woman will be too busy with establishing and maintaining home duties or taking care of a husband and child causing her to not be able to put 100% effort into course work and/or projects. The graduate mentor may feel that the student requires a project that is not physically or emotionally limiting for her. Women are

picked less often during lecture, or the questions asked of them are not of the same caliber as other classmates, inappropriate labeling of such terms as 'hon' and implied to be less competent than the men in the class (Arango and Levey). If minority students are picked to address a question in class, inaccurate answers are often pointed out by the professors (Alston-Mills, 2003). Minority women science students encountered condescending professors with low expectations of their students by treating them as if they had not met the same entrance requirements other students had (this was at highly selective schools (Malcom et al., 1976). This may cause students of minority to feel out of place compared to her peers.

High expectations can be just as unfavorable. The mentor may choose to have the attitude of "let's show her how difficult this program can be for a woman" by loading her work higher than what is normally given to other students.' No beneficial 'treatment' may be given to this student.

Stereotypical issues relating to women are prevalent in many facets; from the concept of the thin Caucasian model representing the physical aspects of women in the world to the dumb blonde bimbo who sells alcoholic drinks and chicken wings to men. The media can be linked to imposing this negative stereotype on women which can be carried into the rooms of an educational institution. However, contrary to stereotypes, women from all ethnic backgrounds in modern day serve the roles of home-maker, mother, and care-taker. It is unfortunate that women still suffer the lack of respect, equal pay as men and only within the past few decades obtained voting privileges.

Lack of sensitivity examples can be abundant in respect to female graduate students and mentors. If a female graduate student becomes pregnant during her educational career, she may need to take on less projects and/or coursework along with needing time off after the baby's birth. Some women are more emotional than others and need to have issues addressed to them with greater sensitivity. Finally, if a female graduate student should be facing marital or other family issues, she may need to prioritize those issues more so than academia. Some students constantly experience loneliness, pressure to choose a traditional career, to marry, to remain in or return to the community of their youth; to fill cultural role expectations. For some women who chose to marry during school years, there were additional, sometimes more complex problems, conflicting demands and responsibilities. (Malcolm et al., 1976).

Lack of appreciation of differences can be based on religion, culture, educational and socio-economic background. Socioeconomic backgrounds may pose assumptions that students are not as intelligent as others; but the actual issues may be that the student was not properly prepared for college or does not have the level of confidence that other students may have (Massey 1992). Asian American women tend to fall into a category that is unlike other people of ethnic backgrounds. Many Americans consider these women as "unassimilable foreigners"; those that will not be fully accepted by American society. Even though Asian American women are stereotyped as having parents who demand academic excellent from their children, and in a true academic setting, they are stereotyped as the 'brainiacs', these women tend to face more struggles that other women of minority due to a "distinct set of personal, cultural, and familial values, struggling with ethnic and racial identify, and making decisions about where allegiance lies when the different cultural values conflict" (Choi, Schall and Levey).

For other women of color, whether it be Black, Latina, or Native American, they too deal with issues common to Caucasian women such as a woman not being “as quick as men” in the classroom. But, they also deal with “perceptions of what is seen” such as cultural and racial differences. It has been said that some instructors are not only sexist to these women but also think they are slower with learning material.(Malcolm et al., 1976). So, what can be done to help alleviate the situation?

The majority of people of color advance (the furthest) due to strong mentors, no matter what their ethnicity is. Those mentors are able to support the development of an individual. These mentors tend to understand the challenges brought forth towards career development and advancement of people. Mentors are responsible for being both a person who can offer technical advice and also emotional support to get the task finished. If a mentor sees part of himself/herself in the student and vice versa, the relationship will be more adept to be successful (Thomas, 2001). Individual uniqueness can enhance and direct interactions that people have together (Arango and Levey). Understanding cultural identity for each ethnicity is important. Every individual has their own strengths and weaknesses. It is imperative that the mentor focuses on the students’ strengths while aiding the weaknesses if possible. Understanding the gender differences in regards to societal roles of motherhood, caretaker of the home, maintaining equality of men. Identity of the individual person needs to be understood as much as possible by the mentor and femininity is part of the woman and needs to be flourished; not pushed towards masculinity (Alston-Mills).

What issues face these students after graduation?

Casey and Plaut (2003) surveyed members of the American Dairy Science Association and American Society for Animal Scientists about the role of “gender and race/ethnicity in hiring and promotion practices within the Animal Sciences.” The demographics for that field in 2002 indicated that out of 1490 surveys received, “survey responses represented 70% male, 30% female, 85% nonminority and 15% minority.” “The overall numbers of females and minorities in Animal Science {academic positions} are low relative to the population. The proportion of these groups in higher-ranking positions is significantly less compared with nonminority males. Salary is significantly lower for minorities, but there is no significant difference in salaries between the genders. 70% of women and 22% of men do not have children. Child rearing is a significant issue for females in terms of salary and promotion. There was also a significant difference in the perception of men, women and minorities in promotion, salary and collaboration, with women and minorities feeling a chilly climate compared to that experienced by nonminority males.” Graduate students did respond to the survey and 30% were racial minorities.

Science should be accessible to all culture and socioeconomic backgrounds. Rosenthal states that it is imperative to “bring awareness to the relationship between culture and science. In regards to women in science: science education has a goal to make science is attainable to all students; regardless of gender, culture, religion, race and that science is made attainable to people with different learning styles, interesting and relevant to everyday situations of the individuals life. There is an underlying goal in the sciences to reform it so that multicultural tones are without.

## References

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