

Mel Sabella is a navigator. He makes his decisions based on the wave that's coming in.

Sabella is an advisor in Physics Education Research at Chicago State University. Though he's worked at several other institutions, for him, there's no comparison: CSU has a student-centered community feel that you just can't find anywhere else.

It was there that he met Geraldine Cochrane, a student in the Physics department who wasn't sure if she fit in. Sabella was her research advisor – but advice isn't something that he tries to offer up right away. Instead, he made Geraldine, and his other mentees, work for it.

"I try not to give advice," Sabella says. "I don't know their specific situations. Instead, I encourage problem-solving as a team." Sabella noted that, while he may guide students on projects or struggles, he guides by instruction based on his students' individual situations: where they are, and what strengths, resources, and challenges they're carrying with them.

Though Sabella and Geraldine didn't always agree on the decisions that she made, there was a constant respect between the two. "I recognize there are pieces I might be missing," Sabella admits, which is why he's always willing to hear out a student's argument and respect the thought that went into each decision. "I listen to each specific situation. I know everyone is different." Which is why, according to Sabella, it's so important to withhold judgment – regardless of whether or not you disagree with a student's decisions.

In fact, that is what Sabella cited as his key to mentoring success: listening well, to each individual student about each individual situation. "There's no cookie-cutter approach," he says. "But I want to build on the resources that these students already have."

Indeed, Sabella admits the difficulty of resisting the urge to rush in and help students who are struggling. But over the years, he has learned to respect that most of his students have the resources to do what needs to be done; what they need is the time. He understands the importance of figuring out the goals of his mentees without pushing them one way or another.

From his mentees, Sabella has learned to get to know each individual as a whole person. "You never know what's going to happen with someone," he says. "The situations are so different, and so complicated. But there's this relationship that you develop where you learn about the whole student. You really get invested." With Geraldine, he both taught and learned a great deal. "Geraldine provides a unique voice in the field of Physics Education Research," Sabella says proudly. "She makes me think about diversity issues a little more, and gives me different perspectives."

Sabella has learned to respect the CSU environment for its emphasis on community. "At other schools, students want the answers," Sabella says, citing his past employment experiences. "But at Chicago State, they didn't want it that way. They wanted me to ask questions. They're getting from Point A to Point B with just a little bit of questioning." Sabella can tell that his students see learning as a community as the best way to learn, and the best way to build confidence within themselves.

Sabella has a tip for other mentors: "Words are really important. You can say the wrong thing about someone's future. We need to listen to where our students want to go."