

For Camille McKayle, mentoring relationships are the strongest when everyone involved walks away with more than they brought. Such was the case with her very first undergraduate mentee.

The student was a double major in Mathematics and Geology and was working on her senior thesis with McKayle. Her primary knowledge was in the field of geology, and McKayle, a mathematician, used her expertise to fill in any gaps along the way.

The balance, according to McKayle, was dynamic. “I felt like I was learning as much about the project as she was,” the mentor says. “She got a really good project out of it, and she really understood it.” The experience with that student, who went on to graduate school for Geology, taught McKayle quite a bit. “It reminded me that we can all learn from each other,” she says.

The mentoring experience was successful for several reasons. “Part of it was what she brought to it,” McKayle begins, “which was enthusiasm. She was very energized and wanted to learn. She really wanted to know the material. It wasn’t just about getting the thesis done. She would’ve kept going if time wasn’t an issue.” And of course, much of the credit lies with McKayle. “I was very solid in what I needed to know from the mathematics perspective, so I felt that I had a lot to offer her in knowledge,” she says. “She gained a lot of confidence.”

McKayle tries to discover and provide what her students need from a mentor-mentee relationship, but she knows that she’s not perfect. “One of my weaknesses is that I don’t say enough that things are great,” she laughs. “I look at all of the great things and say, ‘That’s fine, now here’s what you need to work on.’ Sometimes you need to be painfully honest, but I think I can work on saying ‘Atta boy’ first.”

Whatever the case, McKayle wants her mentees to feel comfortable. That’s why she prefers to have her meetings outside of her office and, if possible, outside of the school. “I believe that people are more open outside of a work environment,” she says, adding that coffee shops are great places to connect with students on a professional level and get to know their interests. It’s in a laid-back meeting that the students reveal their true selves.

McKayle recalls the story of a business major in her mathematics course who had a passion for math. She asked him if he had considered switching his major – which he hadn’t before then. “So he became a Math major and got a scholarship, and went onto graduate school in Math and got his Masters in Math,” she says. “I think someone asks you what you’re going to be when you grow up when you’re five, and that’s the track you’ve been on ever since. You don’t even know about other possibilities. People might not see themselves in that way, and sometimes it helps for someone else to mention it to them.”

“When you think about broadening participation,” says McKayle, “it’s really just about broadening options.”