

When we think of mentoring, we often think of students in need of guidance from more experienced individuals. We think of young people, new to their field, seeking help from advisors and counselors. But what about the mentors themselves? Don't they need guidance as well?

Michelle Linster is a faculty member at Bennett College, an active researcher and mentor for students transitioning from undergraduate to graduate school.

When asked about the characteristics of a successful mentor, Linster cited the traits of a mentor that she herself had worked with as an adult: Dr. Esther Terry, the provost (and now interim president) of Bennett College. Terry had offered a helping hand, reaching out to Linster and asking her, "What do *you* need?" According to Linster, Terry had recognized the work that she was doing and the impact that her program had.

According to Linster, Terry gave constant feedback and provided clarification whenever it was requested. She was caring, and took the time to make sure that Linster understood what was being asked of her. She was open to questions and any disagreements were handled very receptively: Terry would listen to every side of an argument, explain decisions as they were finalized, and move on. It was a respectful environment, and a non-threatening one. "She let me know if there was something that I was doing that was going to have an impact on another component that I didn't know about." As a provost, Terry knew about the ripple effect that any action could have, and she passed that awareness onto Linster.

Says Linster, "I liken this to the experience of undergrad, when I was trying to get into a graduate school." As a student, Linster explains, she was blind to some challenges. She had decided that she wanted to go to Harvard, and so that's where she applied. Her mentor had something else in mind. He knew people at Yale, and recommended that she apply there as well. "I didn't appreciate that," says Linster. "I didn't consider the fact that I might not get into Harvard."

The moral of her story was that mentees don't always know what's possible, either because of their own potentials or because of the impact their mentors can have on others. She learned that as a mentee, and again working with Dr. Terry. And she tries to pass that knowledge along as a mentor.

One of the most memorable students of Linster's mentoring career was an undergraduate student who challenged Linster as a professor. The student was smart – in fact, she didn't seem to realize how smart she was. She was contented to receive her Bachelor's degree in Psychology and return home to her family. However, Linster had something else in mind for her.

Upon nearing the completion her bachelor's degree in Psychology, the student worked on a research project, and presented at local, state, and national conferences. This encouraged her to further her education and apply for graduate

school, which then encouraged her to go on to the PhD program. She has since finished her PhD, and is teaching at Bennett College. "From 18 to 30," Linster smiles, "what a change!"

Linster knows that she's a successful mentor because of stories like this one. When asked about the root causes of her success, she cites her commitment to her students. Advisors take the student where they want to go, but mentors have a vision of the students' potentials, and show them that vision. It is the mentor's job to get the students to buy into that vision and live up to their potential. Linster says it's all about "knowing what the person can produce, and moving them to that process, so they can see what they can do."

"When we accept mediocre," says Linster, "we're actually setting them up for failure. When we don't explain it thoroughly to them, why we're doing what we're doing, we're setting them up to be hostile... But if we explain why we're doing it, we have it." Linster shares her own story to show her students that success is possible. As a high school student in a low-income rural area, her mother and teachers pushed her to continue her education, and take it as far as it could go. She doesn't expect anything less of her students.

Mentoring, to Linster, is about listening. She's helped countless students work their way towards a graduate education, from a disengaged student to a student who became pregnant in the middle of the semester. Regardless of the situation, Linster listens to what the students want – not what their parents or other professors may have in mind for them. In the end, the effort is all worth it. "Thank you for standing by me," one student told her. "You saw potential when I didn't see it."

When it comes down to it, she says, "it's an understanding of where they are, and it's a constant message of where they can be, and it's reassuring them, when they don't make the mark, that the mark is still there. That they can still do it. That it's not always success."