With just one semester to go before graduation, Julia Massimelli's TA came to her looking for help. She had been let go from the lab in which she had been working, and now had no project to submit before graduation. So with one semester to go, Massimelli offered the student a project and gave her a preliminary defense date. When the time came for the student to defend the project, things did not go as planned.

"It was a disaster," Massimelli recalls. "It was very disorganized, and I realized it was going to be a very big challenge to have her in shape in three months." But that didn't stop her. Instead, Massimelli kicked it into high gear and went about getting to know her student. "You can't just mentor based on principles," she says. "You have to mentor based on what you know about that person."

What Massimelli discovered was that her student was not only disorganized, but she had relatively low self-confidence. So little by little, Massimelli introduced new items to help her along. "I started to implement structure for her," she says, adding that she would create feasible deadlines that her student would be able to accomplish, "and I started focusing on positive things to bolster her self-confidence." When the student would accomplish a task or complete another section of her thesis, Massimelli was there with a congratulatory remark and verbal encouragement. "I knew she could do it," she recalls. "It was just a matter of finding a way to take out the things she was not doing right."

In the end, the hard work and support paid off. "Her thesis was phenomenal!" Massimelli says proudly. "She gave one of the best thesis presentations I've ever seen." Following the presentation, Massimelli encouraged her student to take the presentation to a conference. Once again, the young woman's self-confidence wavered, but with her mentor's support, she presented at the conference and even won an award. And now, the student is preparing for medical school.

As a mentor, Massimelli chooses to focus on her students as individuals. "Most of the mentors I had assumed that I was there because I wanted to be like them," she recalls from her own undergraduate career. "They had no idea who I was and what sort of things worked for me. I promised myself that I would never do that." Instead, she asks her students questions – lots and lots of questions. But more than simply asking questions, Massimelli actively observes and listens to what her students tell her. "It's important to know where they're coming from," she says, referring to educational, familial, and cultural backgrounds. She then makes suggestions and highlights immediate goals, based on what her students are looking to do.

Massimelli believes in helping her students become the best that they wish to be, and she does so in an environment that is open and not approachable. And when it comes to some of her colleagues' more competitive approaches to mentoring and teaching, Massimelli disagrees. "In order to be competitive, you have to believe you can do it," she says. "Sometimes minority students don't have that. They're first-generation college students. They just feel the pressure."

Though mentoring can be difficult for everyone involved, Massimelli wouldn't trade her role for anything. "It's one of those jobs that you don't get recognized for," she says with a smile, "but it's an amazing job that you can do for someone else."