

José Manautou is a special kind of mentor. Like most others in his field, he loves to help students succeed, and he goes out of his way to find the best opportunities for them. But what sets Manautou apart from the rest is this: he mentors because he was mentored.

As an undergraduate student in a pharmacy program, Manautou was a hard-working individual, trying to complete his bachelor's degree. But along the way, he met faculty members who saw a potential for him beyond that degree. They recognized his talents and nurtured him, encouraging him to put a career on hold and seek out more educational opportunities.

As a minority student from Puerto Rico, Manautou received scholarships that allowed him to continue his education. Because of the mentors present in his life, he went on to become the first PhD in his family.

Now, as a mentor himself at the University of Connecticut, Manautou is trying to pass on what he learned from his experiences. Since his arrival at UConn, he has started a program that allows him to bring in pharmacy students from Puerto Rico to do lab research at the university in the summer. The first of those mentees has since returned to UConn to pursue a PhD, and is now a Senior Toxicologist at Proctor & Gamble. "It's interesting," says Manautou, "to see how you have such a profound influence on the personal and professional trajectory of the person you mentored."

When asked about the qualities that make him an effective mentor, Manautou cited his own background. Manautou wants his mentees to look at him, a Puerto Rican man, and think, "If he made it, I think there's hope and an opportunity for me to be like he is." It doesn't hurt, he adds, "being a former mentee and understanding what the needs of the students are."

According to Manautou, his PhD students are like family. The mentor-mentee relationship is not one that disappears after the diploma is received. He teaches them about his field of science, of course, but also how to network, how to contribute to the scientific community, and how to deal with and overcome adversities. But most importantly, says Manautou, "I give them a lot of independence and freedom. I'm not a micromanager. They have the opportunity to explore things themselves."

Manautou admits that his mentoring process is an evolving one. What started off as a guidance of students from the start to the finish of a project has turned into a hierarchy of assistance. Newer students get one-on-one time, and lots of help. More experienced students are often present in the lab, helping those who are struggling and looking to Manautou for approval and guidance. But no matter what level the student, Manautou's door is always open.

"It will be very rare that I will say, 'Come back tomorrow, I can't deal with this right now,'" he says. "I had the luxury of [a mentor] who would stop whatever he was doing to tend my needs. And I think that gives you the level of comfort, having somebody that feels that your issue is so important that he needs to stop what he is doing at the moment. And that stays with you. You just take the best from the people that trained you, hoping that you integrate that into the way that you deal with your own students."

And so far, it seems to be working. One of Manautou's PhD trainees began working in the Pharmacy field at Rutgers College, and is training to become a mentor. That will begin the third generation of this mentoring chain: what you learned from one mentor, you apply as a mentor.

So what qualities make a productive mentor? The answer, for Manautou, is simple: compassion and caring, and a safe environment. "People that receive that gift [of mentoring]; they know what it is, and when they're in a position of giving back, they do it, and they do it with passion."

Looking back, it seems as though Manautou wouldn't change his experiences for anything. "I trained in science," he says, "but you have to be an expert in finances, you have to be a psychologist, you have to be an administrator, you have to be a lot of things that you have little training in... and when you're training students, there's a lot that you learn about human nature."

"It's something that we need to do," Manautou concludes, "and we need to be passionate about it. We have a responsibility to train the next generation of scientists... and we have an obligation to ensure that we have a diverse force of scientists working. So do the work with conviction, and do it with passion. Be passionate about it."