

Amy McMillan is always on the lookout for “that thing.” It could be anything: taking meticulous notes, enthusiasm for the subject area, intrinsic motivation, or a general engagement. Whatever it is, “that thing” makes a student stand out from the crowd.

And that is exactly what she found in Sandra Apenteng. A very good student on track to enter the medical profession, Sandra was from Ghana and did not know who to talk to about her future. McMillan, Sandra’s professor in an introductory course, saw that she had “that thing” almost immediately. Sandra was enthusiastic and hard working, and effusive. “Just the sweetest kid,” McMillan recalls. So she asked Sandra to work with her in the lab.

“Had I not picked her out of a crowd, she would never have approached anybody,” McMillan says. Sandra was thrilled to be doing research, even though she knew nothing about it. It was the learning that motivated her, and she ended up being a great researcher. “The mentoring experience was not challenging,” recalls McMillan. “It’s just recognizing that I’d opened up doors for her.” And opening those doors proved to be just what Sandra needed: she was later accepted into the Connecticut School of Medicine.

Sandra was just one of McMillan’s mentees. Some of them were great students, and some of them didn’t perform so well in the classroom. But the ones that she chooses to work in her lab are those who catch her eye, regardless of grades or status. You guessed it: they all have “that thing.”

“I don’t see color. I don’t see much,” says McMillan. “I see the person. I don’t even see that they flunked out of my class.” What matters to her is who each student is, underneath the exterior. “You have to really let the student be the student,” she reflects. “Let them be the person they are. And that’s actually much more challenging than it sounds.” McMillan also notes the importance of being flexible. “Every student is a different person,” she says. “You’ve got to realize that your style may have to be modified.”

Of her mentoring technique, McMillan notes, “I don’t like to pry, but I listen. And I let them make mistakes. You can’t sit there and hover and expect them to do everything right. That’s not how we learned. I made every mistake in the book.” Her emphasis on the importance of failure stems from her belief that, without being allowed to fail, we will never perform at our full potential. “How can anyone perform at their optimum if they’re worried they’re going to make a mistake?”

In fact, McMillan’s belief in failure is so strong that she shares her own failures with her students. “Usually I share with them at least one major mistake I’ve made. I’ve made many,” she laughs, “so I can usually pick one that is appropriate.” McMillan tries to create an interactive and engaging environment, complete with peer-to-peer learning between students. It is also integral that the environment be non-threatening. “Humility is important,” she says. “You’re not always going to do it perfectly, and I’m okay with that.”

To her fellow mentors, McMillan has a piece of advice: “Don’t let other experiences influence you, other than teaching you how to be better at it. You have to ask. You have to advocate. You have to be involved.”