

For Carla Restrepo at the University of Puerto Rico, successful mentoring is all about observation.

It may be something that she picked up from her own mentor. When she was working toward her Masters degree, Restrepo went through a very difficult and sad time in her life. Her mentor was keen enough to notice her acting differently and advised that she seek counseling. “She was still there for me,” Restrepo says, and that had an impact on her.

So when she noticed that a PhD student of hers was struggling with her writing – including drawing checkmarks backwards – as well as emotionally insecure, Restrepo suggested that the young woman work with her on a Masters degree instead of a PhD. Although this was a step backward, the student was ultimately grateful. “She completed her Masters successfully under my mentorship,” says Restrepo, adding that patience and support played key roles in the success of the mentoring relationship. “Just facing the problems that were there, and for her to accept them, really helped us through.”

Restrepo describes herself as direct, consistent, and straightforward. She holds weekly lab meetings with her students where she goes over basic tools and communication skills, such as how to put together a curriculum vita. These meetings are integral, she says, to keeping the students in her lab on the right path.

As much as she connects to her mentees as a group, her relationship with each student is different. “It becomes very personalized,” Restrepo says. “I set deadlines and goals with each student, and tell them there are many ways to reach those goals.” But if there is something that has to be done in order to achieve a milestone, Restrepo is sure to tell them. “I’m extremely direct and honest with my students,” she says, “and I want them to be the same with me.”

To keep her students motivated, Restrepo keeps an open lab with art on the walls and natural lighting. At the door is posted an inspirational poem about the journey and the destination. The lab is organized, with small cubicles available for students who want to work more closely or privately. This environment allows for a greater spirit of collaboration between students.

Restrepo believes that students need to see themselves as a part of a broader community outside of their cultures. “When I went to Stanford for my Postdoc it was a shock,” she recalls. “For the first time in my life, I was aware of how I looked.” Growing up in Colombia, that had never before been an issue: she was surrounded by individuals who had similar skin tones, hair colors, and body types. But once she was back in the states, she felt as though she stuck out from the crowd, and truly identified as a minority student. “There needs to be more exchange between Puerto Rican students and mainland students,” she affirms. “Students better informed about cultural differences may have greater chances to achieve their potentials. My students want to make that difference.”