

Sink or Swim

At one point or another, we have all been thrown into a situation for which we were not prepared. We floundered, and reached out for guidance and support. And if we were lucky, we found someone to help keep us afloat.

When Charlene Gray was drowning as an undergraduate student in the field of biology, it was because of self-doubt. She hadn't tested well, and that was impacting her self-confidence levels. Robert Warren, her professor, reached out to her. He invited her to work in the lab, and spoke with her about her career and her future. "She flourished after that," says Warren.

When Warren takes on a student as a mentee, it's not all sunshine and butterflies. "I like to see them fail," he admits. Warren allows his students to struggle in a sink-or-swim environment. Many students are able to fight their way back to the surface, and are stronger for it. Those who don't quite make it there get thrown a life raft by Warren, and are then taken under his wing to learn from their past failures and discomforts.

These students are often struggling academically, and are looking for help to get back on top of their game. Like Charlene, they may have had their confidence impacted by poor grades or negative feedback. Part of what they need, according to Warren, is recognition. He tells his students, "You are special for what you accomplish, and not for what others tell you." But that does not stop him from giving constructive criticism.

"I give honest feedback," Warren says, "and tell them not to take it personally." Because while he is there to support his students, he is also there to help them improve. "You don't want me to write you a letter of support," Warren laughs. He is an honest individual, and does not tend to sugar-coat his feedback.

Regardless of his blunt honesty, students continue to come to Warren for anything and everything. "I created a hub within my laboratory," he says. "Students see the hub as a place to hang out, socialize, do homework, and engage in peer-to-peer learning." And for Warren, nothing could be better. He has created a community where students feel at home, and experience a connection to institution.

As a mentor, Warren attributes several characteristics to his success. He respects his students, and is not afraid to create expectations and show his belief in their abilities. He discusses possible mentoring strategies with his colleagues, and finds role models for his mentees. But most importantly, Warren follows his intuition.

"With Charlene, I just had this sense that she needed affirmation," Warren recalls. "She smiled and lit up when I provided the first few rounds of feedback." Once he had that insight, Warren was able to continue providing positive feedback, and help

Charlene regain her self-confidence in the field. In fact, she is now pursuing a future in medical school.

So what is it that he has taken away from his experiences thus far? "We can be jaded from having worked with students in the past," Warren says of mentors. "But we cannot let past experiences carry over to other students."