

Checo Colon-Gaud approaches mentoring like a father, an older brother, and a fun uncle, all rolled into one. So when one of his graduating undergraduate students decided to take a semester off and visit South America before graduate school, Colon-Gaud had mixed feelings about it.

"In my mind I was thinking, that's great!" he recalls. "But as a parental figure, I told him he was on track, and to make sure he came back and stayed on track. It was a little scary." The student's parents even reached out to Colon-Gaud, asking if there was anything he could do to persuade their son not to go. But that didn't feel right to the mentor.

"I told him to go and chase his dragon," says Colon-Gaud. And that's exactly what he did. But to everyone's surprise, the young man returned early from his travels. "He missed the work," Colon-Gaud laughs. "He missed the research. It all worked out in the end." The student's parents even wrote a thank you letter, recalls Colon-Gaud, thanking him for letting their son realize that he could go and chase the dragon. According to Colon-Gaud, "You don't always realize the impact of what you say." Now, as a result of Colon-Gaud's influence, the young man is a research scientist leading the Department in Aquatic Invertebrate Studies. "He's living the dream," says Colon-Gaud proudly. "He's actually doing it!"

Colon-Gaud sees a lot of himself in his mentees: coming from different backgrounds and not having the greatest grades, but having the drive. "People gave me opportunities that opened doors," he says, "and I try to do the same. Broadening participation is important to me because I'm a product of it." Colon-Gaud gives his students the freedom to be themselves, and treats them like people – not just numbers in the classroom or the lab. "I try to be personable with them," he says, emphasizing the importance of acknowledging the good work that his students are doing. "I want them to feel that they're just as integral to the lab as I want to be."

From the beginning of the mentoring relationship, Colon-Gaud tries to get his students involved. "The journey has got to be personalized for each of them," he says. "They can't all get to that mountain at the same time." And so, Colon-Gaud begins with a hands-on approach, and transitions into cruise control throughout his time with the students.

Colon-Gaud encourages a relaxed, family-oriented environment in his lab. His office is filled with color and the occasional Bob Marley poster, and he requires music to be playing in the lab when his students are performing tedious tasks. "It's high-energy," he says, "but not overly intense." To encourage the family feel, Colon-Gaud invites his students over for dinner and encourages them to really get to know one another.

Colon-Gaud hopes that mentoring will soon get the attention it deserves. "I really wish we had the opportunity to work with every student until their cup was entirely full," he says, citing the importance of support from universities and fellow faculty.

According to Colon-Gaud, it is important to engage students with all faculty members, and encourage them to work hard for their opportunities – regardless of accent, nationality, or representation. And as mentors, Colon-Gaud recommends simply being excited about your field of study, and igniting that passion in your students. “I tell my students, if you can go out and put your hands in the water and your feet in the mud, there’s definitely a career for you in Aquatic Science.”