Feminist Mentoring in the Academy

Margaret K. Schramm

On the first day of the "Gotsch Symposium: Women and the Workplace," within arm's reach sat three mentors who profoundly affected my career at Hartwick College. Until that day I thought of them not as mentors but as friends.[1] Yet mentor me they did. Thinking about our mentorships, after the symposium, led to questions that I address in this essay: What is mentoring? How does it impact women in the academy? Can it lead women to common ground?

First, I formed a working definition of a mentor as a role model who guides, sponsors, and advises less experienced colleagues, helping them to thrive, grow, and find satisfaction in their careers. Next came research that uncovered a wealth [instead of "plethora"] of books, chapters, and articles on mentoring, many of which stress its benefits for female neophytes adjusting to, and advancing in, a male-dominated workplace, both within academe and beyond.[2] In the 1970s and 1980s, several studies noted the dearth of women available to mentor other women.[3] Even more troubling were reports of sexual improprieties that doomed some cross-gender mentorships.

I expected to read that the numbers of women in positions to mentor other women rose in the seventies, but the influx of women into the academy didn't translate into an abundance of women mentors. In some fields, like sciences and mathematics, the scarcity of senior women faculty persisted, and the entry of women into the upper ranks of college faculty and administration was glacial. Equally discouraging were articles that told of women executives too burdened by onerous workloads to find time for mentoring and told of women put off by mentees who were overly dependent, ungrateful, and unrealistic in their expectations. In turn, some protégés expressed disillusionment with mentors who had been possessive and rigid. Further, generational differences prevented some women - both novices and seasoned academics - from initiating mentorships. Several authors presented feminist critiques of mentoring, objecting to its tendency to perpetuate the status quo, especially patriarchal structures, in the academy and to be hierarchical and exclusive, therefore clashing with feminist ideals of equality and inclusiveness.[4] Ironically, just as women were poised to reap the rewards of same-sex mentorships, the very notion was discredited.

Though many studies reveal that female mentoring is fraught with pitfalls, the testimonies of women scientists in this issue of *Phoebe,* along with my own experiences and many described in the literature, point to definite benefits for academic women. The personal accounts in this article may offer lessons and reclaim mentoring in a more elastic, feminist form than its critics imagined.

I begin with a sampling of the literature that endorses female mentoring in the academy. Hall and Sandler's ground-breaking article on the subject is still relevant, though published in 1983. They argued that the guidance that "mentors

or sponsors . . . provide can be especially important to women's success in the postsecondary setting" (2), particularly when doing research, publicizing their achievements, and applying for tenure and promotion (3). In research conducted at Ohio State University between 1987 and 1988, Sands, Parsons, and Duane discovered that "faculty who served as mentors were more likely to mentor faculty of the same sex" (188). Their findings led them to define four types of mentors: "the *Friend*," "the *Career Guide*," "the *Information Source*," and "the *Intellectual Guide*" (189) and to conclude that "female respondents viewed the ideal mentor as a *Career Guide* or *Information Source*" (190). A 1997 book on women and mentoring by Carol Mullen portrays the academy as alienating for both sexes, but especially for women who are disadvantaged because "female academics do not have a long history of having grown up within academe and of having developed solid networking capabilities" (162). Mullen advocates the use of several mentors to build cross-cultural communities of women in environments that often isolate them (170-72).[5] According to Janice A. Thibodeau, a woman who has more than one mentor "avoids the pitfalls of an exclusive relationship" (5). Similarly, Sandler and Hall state that "having multiple mentors . . . expands a person's ability to develop allies and alliances" (1983, 5).

My own stories suggest that multiple mentors at different stages of a woman's career can advance and enrich it without creating an unhealthy dependency and unrealistic or rigid expectations. These mentors each bolstered my confidence and skills when I faced new challenges as a college faculty member: the first, Tom Beattie, eased my adjustment as a new college teacher; the second, Susan Kress, supported my efforts as a department chair and participant in the English profession at large; the third, Susan Gotsch, inspired and encouraged my experiments in mid-level college administration. All three mentorships were effective because they were flexible and informed by core feminist values like choice, fairness, mutuality, and a commitment to creating a humane, inclusive, and diverse workplace. Those values united us in collaborative efforts and outweighed disparities in our rank and experience. Working for common aims and problem-solving together, we never found the power differential a problem. Instead, my mentors' clout and status freed them to encourage subversive views in a mentee. Because their success in the academy had not blinded them to its shortcomings, their mentoring emboldened me not simply to conform to the status quo but to work toward, in the words of Susan Gotsch, "the evolution of the academy." I tell the stories of these mentors now to thank them and to illustrate my claims about mentoring.

When I began teaching English at Hartwick College in the early 80s, there was a chill in the air, which I later saw described by Hall and Sandler (1986). But the chill's effect on me was muted, thanks to the mentoring of the Chair of English and Theatre Arts, Thomas C. Beattie. At a time when senior women colleagues were few, I was fortunate that he embodied qualities of an

ideal mentor - integrity, patience, intelligence, and empathy - and the feminist values of fairness and diversity. With unstinting generosity, he encouraged my research and course development, modeled effective teaching and campus leadership, and advised me of ways to succeed in the classroom and on committees. As a staunch feminist, he endorsed my scholarship on women's literature and my work with the new Gender Issues Committee and the Women's Network. He swiftly defended me when a senior colleague charged me with corrupting his thesis advisee with feminist notions. Indeed, Tom acted as what Roberta T. Anderson and Pauline Ramey call a "Step-ahead Mentor . . . who is able to pave the way, protect, or give valuable guidance to the protégé" (184).

What he couldn't possibly do, however, was counsel me from the position of someone marginalized by his gender. In addition, my own insecurities as a young woman driven to prove her strength, sometimes prevented me from telling Tom about my brushes with campus sexism. For example, I didn't confide in him my discomfort when two jocular colleagues announced that a female job candidate was just hired, having "passed the couch test." Nor did I tell him about how, on separate occasions, two senior male faculty members stopped me in the hall to inquire about my new "Women and Fiction" course-- Hartwick's first women's literature course. Both asked the exact same question, "When are you going to teach a course on men and fiction?" I might have been less reticent with a female mentor, who would have had first-hand experience with sexism and gender anxiety. To her I might have occasionally vented my frustration at meetings when my idea was overlooked only to be embraced moments later when a man proposed it. As scholars of mentoring confirm, "what works for a man in a particular setting won't necessarily work for a woman" (Kram 113). And even the best of male mentors, like Tom, has never experienced a woman's sense of being invisible at times. As Carolyn S. Duff says of women, "You need to be mentored by women who will recognize and understand you as you will identify with and understand them" (xiv).

Therefore, it never occurred to me to ask Tom for advice about how to balance the parenting of two small children and demands of the job. A graduate school friend had once warned me that motherhood could preclude "tenurehood," so I kept the struggle to myself. Only when the English department hired a young mother, much later, did I wake up and support her plea that department meetings not be scheduled during dinner hours. Our experience confirms the position of authors Jeruchim and Shapiro, who persuasively argue that women want "a female perspective on surviving and thriving in a predominantly male work environment" (192).

That perspective came with my next two mentors. First, I met Susan Kress, Professor of English and English Department Chair at Skidmore College, at a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) conference in Myrtle Beach. We were both attracted to the program, for the keynote speakers--Sandra

Gilbert, Susan Gubar, and Henry Louis Gates--addressed feminism and multiculturalism in literature. Since it was my first solo conference, I remember feeling isolated.

After the opening panel, Susan Kress approached me, introduced herself, and struck up a conversation about gender and race in literature, topics the panelists had addressed. Susan listened to my ideas for "Women and Fiction" with such warmth and encouragement that I voiced my insecurities about teaching feminist theory. In response Susan, as she would often do in the future, offered practical advice. "Read Carol Gilligan's book, *In a Different Voice*," she suggested. That tip enriched not only my teaching but my scholarship, too.

Having a mentor from another institution served me well when I became department chair. In workshops, seminars, and conventions, from Toronto to Florida, I shared dilemmas with her, we brainstormed together, and I came away with useful strategies. During our walks and talks, Susan exemplified what Anderson and Ramey describe as "the mentor as a counselor [who] advises, listens actively, provides empathic support, and encourages problem solving" (186). Sharing her own frustrations and dilemmas, she fostered mutuality in our interactions, treating me as an equal yet imparting insights gleaned from her years at the helm. Often, she acted as a sounding board for my new ideas and a resource who directed me to the right people when she couldn't answer my questions.

In between our meetings, I phoned or e-mailed Susan for advice, but neither of us imposed unrealistic demands on the other. Her distance from my institution lent freshness and plausibility to her suggestions, and her success as a teacher, scholar, and college leader inspired me. Though assiduous herself in all three roles, Susan also epitomized a feminist's mentor's concern with the total well-being and professional development of a novice. On the eve of my first sabbatical she cautioned me that one purpose of this time was personal renewal. Years later, over a convention lunch, she noticed my stress and suggested cutting back. Such concern meant more coming from someone far from Hartwick's halls. Later, when I had decided not to apply for a deanship, she listened to my reasons and shared the epigram she coined for such occasions: "The lack of administrative ambition can be a great liberator for other ambitions."

While concerned about her mentee's workloads, Susan, nevertheless, sponsors them for projects, in particular, those of the Modern Language Association (MLA). In 1996 she asked if she could nominate me for a three-year term on that organization's board of the Association of Departments of English (ADE). At first I demurred, but she saw in me a potential I had overlooked. She exemplifies the female mentor Lily Segerman-Peck characterizes as one who, "knowing that women have been conditioned to expect their achievement to be lower rather than higher, knowing that women are not used to being urged to go that little bit further, will consciously and actively challenge their mentees to go

beyond their comfort zone . . . so that they have an opportunity of achieving more than they originally thought possible" (114). Susan did that by encouraging me to facilitate ADE discussions on diversity in hiring and gender issues for chairs. Topics that first connected us now cemented our mentorship.

Shared feminist goals also drew me to Susan Gotsch, who transformed the college into a more humane, inclusive workplace. She became my role model on the June day in 1993, when she first set foot on campus to begin a day of interviews for the position of Dean of Academic Affairs. As a member of the search committee, I was her escort. So, together we descended and ascended our steep campus hillside, our rapport growing as we talked. Before long, Susan's sure footing became apparent, and not just on cement steps.

My respect for her deepened as she told about her success in diversifying faculty at other colleges. While her record was remarkable, it was her candor that humbled me. No other interviewee had been as frank in answering the old question: "Tell us about your weakness or a mistake you've made." Previous candidates had bared their workaholic souls and confessed to manias for perfection. But not Susan. Hers was an unvarnished tale of failure--a sociology course she taught while a dean. "It was a disaster," she told a packed auditorium. Such unflinching honesty meant that this was a dean who would own her mistakes and care deeply about student learning, a dean we could trust. On occasion, her gift for candid self-disclosure would narrow the gap between her rank and that of her mentees.

Observing Susan taught me about courageous feminist leadership. When she started at Hartwick, backlash was in full swing; the chilly climate for women had become a deep freeze. Sexist paranoia at that time was captured by one senior colleague's lament: "Women are taking over!" And so they were. When Susan arrived, women chairs were few. Before she left, nearly half of all chairs were women. She guided both male and female chairs in their curricular reforms and job searches, to enhance diversity and gender balance on campus. She transformed monthly chairs meetings from information-sharing sessions into discussions and debates on controversial issues related to her goals of building a fairer, more inclusive and humane workplace. With her support, women chairs were less apt to suffer from "feelings of isolation and disconnectedness" that Linda K. Johnsrud's research on academic women revealed (53).

Susan sponsored mentors for positions that allowed them to test administrative waters. Appointing me coordinator of a portfolio project, she suggested that I create faculty circles devoted to what Wheeler and Wheeler call "group mentoring" (96) and many other authors call "co-mentoring." Donna L. Wiseman explains how, in "a mentoring atmosphere," "groups of caring, nurturing individuals can come together to encourage the individual personal and professional growth of all those participating in the process" (198). Under Susan's leadership at Hartwick, mentoring circles united senior and junior faculty

as together we developed portfolios documenting our goals in teaching, scholarship, and service, and we helped each other balance the three spheres.

Later, when I began to lose that balance, Susan gave me a wake-up call. I had complained that chairing a job search and developing a new course left little time for research. "You have to do scholarship to be a good teacher," Susan said. Of course, she was right—scholarship feeds teaching. And constructive criticism is part of good mentoring. A mentor, as Susan Dundan states, "is critical without being destructive, without taking away hope. She gives you a shot in the arm to go further" (qtd. in Duff 49). In that spirit, Susan suggested that I write conference papers about the portfolio project and collaboration across disciplines. "Advice on how to balance teaching, research and other responsibilities and set professional priorities" is an important benefit of mentoring, according to Sandler and Hall (1983, 3).

Of course, mentoring exacerbated Susan's workload and intensified resentment among some faculty. Amy Saltzman's interviews of female executives reveal that many avoid mentoring other women for fear of ruining their own careers in a male-dominated workplace. Saltzman quotes Belle Rose Regins, from Marquette University, on the reasons why men feel threatened by female mentoring: "There's still this attitude . . . that if there's two women talking together in a room they must be plotting a revolution" (50). Nevertheless, Susan persevered in her mentoring of both men and women, outlasting most of her detractors.

Because she mentored so many faculty, Susan couldn't be accused of being exclusive but she did risk embarrassment. Wickman and Sjodin say it well: "You incur increased visibility after becoming someone's mentor, and it reflects on you if your protégé fails" (150). Susan's detractors may have concluded that a few mentees let her down when we swerved from her career path. But Susan never imposed her choices on us. Rather, she affirmed our decisions, remaining a staunch advocate of the feminist ideal of choice. When I left administration and returned to full-time teaching, she respected my decision and gained a friend for life.

My research on mentoring and personal experience suggest that it can enrich women's careers in the academy. But there are no guarantees. It won't work for all women in all institutions. Campus climate, institutional ecology, and individual preferences determine what types of networking will succeed. To steal a quotation from Bernice Sandler, "mentoring can be important, but it is not necessarily essential" (1993, B3). Yet, mentoring of many faculty, including me, confirm Cooper and her coauthors' argument that women, working together in mentorships and friendships, can "transform the academy into a welcoming place" (3). If women approach mentoring with common aims and realistic, flexible expectations, it can foster alliances, collaboration, and professional growth among women, perhaps even lead us to common ground. If, on that common

ground, we work in pairs and in groups toward feminist goals of equity and diversity, together we might eventually reform the academy.[6]

END NOTES

1. John Stansell notes that "mentors may be very effective even when they may not consciously see themselves in a mentoring role.

2. Summaries of literature articulating the advantages of mentoring for men and women appear in articles by Burke, et al.; Perna; Stalker; Thompson; and Wickman. Authors who argue that discrimination and sexism in the academy mean that women faculty have a greater need of mentoring than men include Maack and Passet; Wickman and Sjodin; and Wright and Wright.

3. A shortage of women in positions to mentor in the academy has been reported in studies by Braun; Burke, et al.; Hall and Sandler (1983); Jeruchim and Shapiro; Johnsrud; Noe; Sands, et al.; Thompson; Woodd; Wright and Wright.

4. Benda Powell criticizes mentoring that requires that "the individual adapt her needs and goals to those of the institution" (5). She argues that academics need to "create a space in which they can do more than mimic and internalize the culture's norms and practices" (5). Powell's analysis raises important questions about the liabilities of traditional mentoring, which too often "molds `unformed' individuals into productive contributors to the culture as it exists" (4). Joyce Stalker echoes some of Powell's objections and poses new ones: "From a feminist's point of view, there is a major problem with the traditional conceptualization of mentoring . . . . It is androcentric, that is, it has a male bias and orientation. It expresses this in several ways: in its construction of research designs, in its avoidance of the problematics of men mentoring women and in its underlying assumption that women mentors act as producers and reproducers of the patriarchal academe" (365). The mentoring stories in my essay lack the conservative aims that Powell and Stalker decry. Therefore, my examples offer hope that mentors may inspire and encourage constructive criticism of the academy rather than promote conformity to its norms.

5. Similarly, Janice Patterson and her co-authors argue that mentoring may alleviate "the loneliness and confusion that can derail women and people of color in higher education" (1). According to Fred Cordova and his co-authors, minorities of both sexes "may need additional mentoring" because of their heightened sense of isolation and alienation in the academy (16). In Breda Murphy Bova's "in-depth interviews" of African American women, she found that "all placed a high value on the mentorship relationship and the positive effect it had on their career development" (5).

6. My optimism is shared by Linda K. Johnsrud who, in 1994, wrote that a mentoring program for women at the University of Hawaii was "not merely serving the status quo but rather challenging the traditional norms and culture of the university" (61). Her conclusion implies that program may create common ground for women academics, for she says, "the fact that this program is of value to both junior and senior women indicates the potential for building a strong women's community within the university—a community that can counter the isolation felt by so many women" (61).

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I am grateful to Hartwick College librarians, especially Dawn Baker, Peter Rieseler, and Susan Stevens, and to family members, friends, and students for their help in writing this article: Thomas C. Beattie, Margaret Breen, Susanne Dao, Marilyn Dunn, Susan Gotsch, Paula Holleran, Evelyn Kennenwood, Susan Kress, Elizabeth Mirarchi, Melaina Mirarchi, Michael Mirarchi, Allan Schramm, Shelley Wallace, and Emily Wolek.