Mentoring: Some Ethical Considerations

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Keywords: mentor, advisor, role model, voluntary, ethical duty, collective responsibility, department, research group, laxity, scarcity, transmission, ethical standards

ABSTRACT: To counter confusion about the term ‘mentor’, and address concerns about the scarcity of mentoring, I argue for an “honorific” definition, according to which a mentor is virtuous like a saint or hero. Given the unbounded commitment of mentors, mentoring relationships must be voluntary. In contrast, the role of advisor can be specified, mandated, and monitored. I argue that departments and research groups have a moral responsibility to devise a system of roles and structures to meet graduate students’ and postdoctoral fellows’ needs for information and advice.

INTRODUCTION

It is striking how frequently specialists on graduate science education claim that mentors and mentoring are crucial to the success of graduate students in their studies and in establishing careers in science. This claim is striking for two reasons. One is that there is confusion about the use of the term ‘mentor’. After reviewing the literature of recent decades, two leading scholars of graduate science education, Judith Swazey and Melissa Anderson, concluded that “there is little consensus in the literature, especially from field to field, about what a mentor is and what mentoring entails.” \(^1\) The second reason is that there has been very little systematic investigation of mentoring.\(^1\) The terms ‘mentor’ and ‘mentoring’ seem to have gained currency in recent years, in the period in which concern for misconduct in science has arisen. Indeed, many contend that mentoring is crucial to the transmission of ethical standards governing research, as well as to students’ progress through their graduate studies and the early years of career-building. It is not surprising, therefore, that much of the discussion of mentoring dwells on the scarcity of mentors in science education and the consequent threat to the transmission of ethical standards.

An earlier version of this paper was presented at a conference sponsored by the National Science Foundation on Mentoring and Research Values: Students as Vital Human Resources, Chicago, March 1995.

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Some writers appear to believe that in the past there were healthy and robust practices of mentoring. Perhaps, for some fields, their claims can be supported by evidence that goes beyond individual recollections and anecdotes. However, in the research for their essay on the state of our knowledge about mentoring, Swazey and Anderson did not find a core of validated findings concerning mentoring. Instead, they report that the literature offered a tangle of definitions that contributed to generating confusion and conflict among “descriptions, commentaries, and research-based findings.” Observers agree that “there is a good deal of conflict and confusion among graduate students about what they can and should expect from their mentors.”

In view of the confused state of the discussion and the importance attributed to mentoring, it is imperative to make clear what a mentor is and to assess the prospects for reducing the scarcity of mentoring once we properly understand the term. That assessment may suggest rethinking the management of graduate training, giving emphasis to guidance and supports for graduate students that can and should be institutionalized, and explicitly recognizing what can be left to the happenstance of informal relationships.

DEFINING MENTORING

The first task is to clarify the definition of mentoring. For this purpose, it will be useful to look back to the origin of the term in antiquity. It derives from a proper name in the Odyssey, that of Odysseus’s trusted counselor, whose guise the goddess Athena assumed when she took on the role of guardian and teacher of Odysseus’s son, Telemachus. In the long absence of Odysseus, who had gone off to the Trojan war, Telemachus would thus have the benefit of parent-like guidance. As unwelcome suitors vying for Penelope, his mother, invaded his home and helped themselves to food and drink, he would have need of a father-surrogate. To make his way in a dangerous world as he grew older and embarked on adult enterprises, this young person would not be left to his own devices.

It illuminates the use of the term ‘mentor’ in graduate science education to notice that it traces back to a particular person and an intimate, personal relationship. Several features of the relationship between Mentor and Telemachus deserve emphasis. First, it is like the parent-child relationship; an older, experienced person provides guidance and support to a younger, inexperienced person. Second, it is a long-term relationship, resting on a strong personal commitment on the part of the mentor. Third, the person mentored finds himself in an unfamiliar situation, fraught with obstacles and dangers. Fourth is the part played by Athena, which adds an interesting complication. The relevance of all these features will become evident in the discussion that follows.

Perhaps traceable to the ancient story, there is a popular notion of a mentor that fleshes out a “traditional” definition. It is the notion of “someone who serves as a career role model and who actively advises, guides, and promotes another’s career and training.” According to this notion, the mentor is, first, an exemplar, a living demonstration of how one pursues work in the field. By embodying the standards of responsible conduct, the mentor transmits the ethics of the profession as well as other...