



Volume 31, No. 10 November 2000

Women mentoring women

They may not be easy to find, but women mentors appear to make all the difference in the academic careers of women graduate students.

BY MARGARET SCHLEGEL

Mentoring has become a hot topic in graduate departments these days, and women students in particular are urged to find mentors who can help them navigate their careers and guide them in successfully combining full-time careers with satisfying personal and family lives.

But where are the women mentors to lead the way?

"Most of us have not had role models for how to do this, and all of us are thinking of starting a family in the near future," says Diana Salvador, who is finishing her PsyD at Rutgers University. "As graduate students, we desperately wished we had had mentors that could have shown us how it could be done well."

"The women in leadership roles and who also have family responsibilities are the psychologists many female students want to emulate," says Carol Williams, former chair of the American Psychological Association of Graduate Students (APAGS). "But these women also seem to be the psychologists who have the least time to mentor."

Ruth Striegel-Moore, PhD, professor of psychology at Wesleyan University, sees the shortage of female mentors as a function of the contemporary role of women faculty in most psychology departments.

My mentor encouraged me to hang in there. She told me that as a professional psychologist, I would face similar personal challenges, so I needed to learn to face them while doing my graduate work. She believed I could do it, so I began to believe I could do it, too. And I did.

-- Roxanne Manning
State University of New York - Binghamton

"Universities are urged to involve female faculty members in all aspects of university life, so women are pressured to be on every committee, board and decision-making body," says Striegel-Moore. "Many of these same women are assistant professors who are working to gain tenure and have young families. There are only 24 hours in a day, and only so many students a female faculty member can responsibly take on."

She also notes that psychology has recently attracted more women than men, and these women want female mentors. These students think that female faculty have something unique to offer. All positive developments, no doubt, but also the reasons behind the imbalance between supply and demand for female mentors.

Empowering relationships

Some might argue that in psychology, female graduate students have faculty advisors and doctoral dissertation chairs. Why is it important to have mentors as well?

Mentors differ from advisers in that they provide both psychosocial functions, such as role modeling, acceptance and affirmation, as well as career functions, such as sponsorship, coaching and networking, say the experts. [Emphasis added.]

According to Lucia Gilbert, PhD, at the University of Texas at Austin, not only do female graduate students need mentors, they particularly need female mentors who can model the greater diversity in women's lives today. Her research shows that female graduate students, more than male students, rated the same-sex mentor's lifestyle and values as highly important to their own professional development.

Gilbert also stresses that female students working with female mentors may provide an important antidote to some women's socialization to please and defer to men. Rather than being in a relationship of unequal power, in female mentor-female protégé relationships, students may learn that empowering relationships mobilize the energies, resources and strengths of both people.

Salvador, while getting her master's degree at Boston University, experienced that kind of mentoring from Kathi Malley-Morrison, EdD. In this relationship, she found someone who listened respectfully to her ideas, even when she disagreed with them, who believed in her, even when others doubted her abilities, and who talked about her own real-life struggles as a psychologist and a person.

"She didn't tell me what to do," Salvador said. "She empowered me."

Roxanne Manning, now in her internship after completing coursework for her clinical doctorate at State University of New York Binghamton, said that without her first mentor she would have dropped out of graduate school.

"I went through a number of personal challenges in the first year. My father-in-law became terminally ill and moved in," she explains. "My niece and nephew had problems and needed to stay with us. I felt overwhelmed. But my mentor encouraged me to hang in there. She told me that as a professional psychologist, I would face similar personal challenges, so I needed to learn to face them while doing my graduate work. She believed I could do it, so I began to believe I could do it, too. And I did."

Manning also noted that throughout the relationship, her mentor stressed prioritizing her values and saw her as a whole person, not just as a student or future psychologist.

"She had a family and children and she helped me to see that no one could 'do it all, but that everyone could do what was most important to them," Manning says. "By helping me define what was most important to me, she helped me develop my own

definition of success. That has been incredibly important to me as I've made major decisions, such as to have a baby before beginning my internship."

Along these lines, Striegel-Moore notes that **female mentors are important in showing that professional success can be achieved in nontraditional career trajectories.**

"Many successful female psychologists have taken some time off after graduate school and started families, and their careers have blossomed after their children are in school," she says. "It's important for female graduate students to see these women and to know that success can be achieved in a number of ways."

Other psychologists, such as Beverly Greene, PhD, don't believe that the gender of the mentor is critical. The important point is to have a mentor. Greene, professor of psychology at St. John's University in New York, who won two APA Div. 12 (Clinical) awards for mentoring this year (one for the clinical psychology of women and one for ethnic minority psychology), had a male and a female mentor and stated both were significant in furthering her career.

Her male mentor, William Johnson, PhD, helped her develop a culturally sensitive model of psychodynamic clinical practice, a model that still guides her work today. Her female mentor, Dorothy Gartner, PhD, encouraged her to develop her teaching skills and urged her to write and publish, which ultimately led to her career in academia. Without this push, Greene says she would never have considered an academic career.

Recent research also suggests that a mentor's gender may not matter. Faith-Anne Dohm, PhD, of Fairfield University, recently surveyed women in clinical psychology with regard to whether they continued to do research after getting their doctorate. She found that those who had research mentors during graduate school were twice as likely to do research after getting their degree than those who did not have mentors. In her study, the gender of the mentor did not make a difference in whether the protégé went on to do research.

Carol Williams, now APA's associate executive director for the American Psychological Association of Graduate Students, also did research on mentoring and found that gender does make a difference to female students.

"Women can have good and supportive mentoring relationships with men; however, women want mentoring relationships with women as well--and female students want women mentors who are willing to expose more of their personal sides," she explains.

Her research, not yet published, also supports claims that female mentors in academia may be hard to find.

Finding a mentor

One of the most difficult parts of the mentoring relationship is finding the right person. First, you have to know what you need. Career guru Richard Bolles suggests making a list of what it takes to succeed in your chosen profession--knowledge,

skills, personality traits, experience, etc.--then subtract what you already have. Next, look for a person who has the remaining attributes and go after that person as a mentor. That formula assumes there is a large pool to choose from.

But even so, the "going after" is a bit nebulous. Many psychologists believe that the best relationships seem to just happen "naturally." A conversation begins, you have more conversations and pretty soon, you realize you have a mentor.

Manning found her mentor accidentally. She literally bumped into her in her first week in graduate school when she was lost in the maze of offices in the psychology department. Manning went into the wrong office, and she and her mentor simply began talking. Manning thinks that the psychologist sensed that Manning was lost in more ways than one, and took her under her wing.

"She wasn't even in the clinical program," Manning says, "But I've learned that that doesn't always make a difference. So, I'd urge students not to limit themselves to their specialty areas when it comes to looking for a mentor."

Saira John, a counseling psychology student at the University of Memphis who has completed all but her dissertation, never did find a mentor in graduate school.

"The faculty members whom I was most interested in were too busy to take on another student," she says. "But I kept looking, because I knew it was important. **The students who had a mentor seemed to have an edge over other students. They presented at national conferences. They met influential people in specialty areas. They seemed to have more direction and got through the program faster.** [Emphasis added.] I don't think they received any special favors. The personal and professional relationship with their mentor just seemed to motivate them to work harder."

Striegel-Moore advises students to think of the mentoring relationship in terms of mutuality--give-and-take. Before approaching someone you think you'd like to have a relationship with, think of what you have to offer. It may just be enthusiasm for that person's research and a willingness to contribute to it. Ask if the psychologist has lab meetings that you could sit in on to learn more about his or her research. Even if the topic of the research isn't exactly what you are interested in, you can learn a lot about the research process that will be transferable, she says.

She stresses that if the first person you approach is not receptive, you should move on to others. In fact, she says, it may be a mistake to think of mentoring in terms of one person--it puts too much pressure on a single relationship. A mentoring network, she says, in which a series of relationships meets different needs may be a more realistic way of looking at mentoring for female graduate students in psychology.

Manning agrees. In addition to the faculty member who first mentored her, she found mentors in her field placements, who provided different kinds of career guidance. She suggests that if students are having difficulty finding faculty mentors, that they ask their graduate programs for lists of others who have gotten their graduate degrees from the program and find out if they are still in the community. If they are, she advises, call them up and strike up a conversation about their strategies for succeeding in graduate school and about what they are doing now. They may be willing to help you along, she says. As a result of her positive

experiences with mentors, she has started a mentoring program for undergraduate students.

Manning is now specifically looking for someone who will mentor her as she writes about her research and attempts to get published. She is up front about her goals when she talks with potential mentors and also about what she has to offer in return. From the student lost in the psychology department to the focused and confident intern and new mother, Manning has clearly found her way. And she would be the first to tell you that mentors played no small part in her journey.

Margaret Schlegel is a freelance writer in Falls Church, Va.