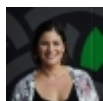


Mentorship is golden ^[1]

Submitted by Mónica Ivelisse Feliú-Mójer ^[2] on 30 October 2012 - 6:50pm



^[2]



Mentorship in action! A group of Puerto Rican scientists sharing ideas, experiences and insights at SACNAS 2012

“A mentor is somebody willing to fight for you the battles nobody else is willing to fight.” – Dr. Erika T. Camacho ^[3] (who was mentored by THE Jaime Escalante ^[4])

It could be said a good mentor is worth his or her weight in gold. A good mentor counsels, encourages, supports, guides, and listens, among many other things. Mentors can come in many shapes or forms. They can be family, friends, colleagues, teachers, professors, neighbors and even complete strangers.

Mentorship can be and should be a mutually beneficial relationship for the mentor and the mentee. It is important for the personal and professional development of both parties. At some point of our lives, each and every one of us has benefited from having a mentor (and hopefully

from being one). However, I can't think of a career in which mentorship is a key factor of success more than in science.

When it comes to becoming a scientist, mentorship is invaluable. Being a research scientist is a hands-on learning experience. There is no book or step-by-step guide on how to become a successful scientist. One learns how to be a scientist from a mentor (or rather mentors). How to plan, do and interpret experiments; write papers or grant proposals; choose your next career steps; navigate the academic and professional landscape. A good mentor can be a role model, a source of experience and insights, and someone to identify with.

Personally, the support and advice from my mentors has helped me achieve my goals; it has kept me focused and balanced. The best advice I ever got is to have multiple mentors, figure out what they do best and learn how they do it. I have been fortunate to have many excellent mentors (family, friends, professors, colleagues), and they are a constant source of inspiration.

Recently, I went to the Society for the Advancement of Chicanos/Hispanics and Native Americans in Science (SACNAS) National Conference ^[5] in Seattle, Washington. This was my first SACNAS conference and it was GREAT. The scientific quality of the talks and the poster presentations was fantastic (special shout-out to all of the undergrads). There were scientists from all fields and academic levels. What I was most impressed with was the great sense of community and culture, and the emphasis placed on the importance of mentorship and networking.

Now, I am currently writing my doctoral dissertation, which can be tedious at times, so the SACNAS Conference represented a welcomed break. But, being at SACNAS was more than that. It was inspiring, re-energizing and enlightened. As a scientist, nothing compares to the thrill of discovery and of contributing to the advancement of knowledge. However, one of the greatest opportunities that being a scientist has provided me is the opportunity to be a mentor. It is simple. Someone did it for me once (actually multiple someones and more than once), so now it's my turn to **pay it forward**.

Coming in, I knew that mentoring is at the core of SACNAS activities. However, I was in for a treat. I was able to see old friends and colleagues that I rarely get to see. I was also able to represent my country (Puerto Rico), my alma mater (*¡Vaqueros, ahí!* ^[6]), my current school (*Go Crimson!* ^[7]) and *Ciencia Puerto Rico* ^[8] (the coolest thing I've ever been a part of). At SACNAS there were a LOT of mentors. It didn't matter if they were a first-generation college student, a SACNAS Board Member, a future astronaut or a potential Nobel Prize winner. They were all equally passionate about science, education and mentorship. They were willing to talk to you, and more importantly, they were willing to listen to you and share their insights ^[9].

Someone I was really inspired by is Octavio Pierre Romero, who won the 2012 Distinguished Community College Mentor Award ^[10]. Half Mexican and half Cherokee, when Octavio got on stage, he thanked his ancestors and those who had carved the path he was walking before him. He was emotional (and so was I. I'll admit it I got teary-eyed, but then again I am a bit of a crier). Above all he was THANKFUL. Not only for the recognition, but also for the people that had helped him get where he is right now.

Mr. Romero's speech embodied the spirit of the conference. Mentors are trailblazers. They know how it is and what it takes to develop into and perform successfully as a scientist. They have faced and conquered the challenges. By way of their success and experience, they have great insight into ideas and opportunities; they can be connectors and influencers.

One of the biggest hurdles faced by underrepresented minorities in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) is the lack of role models and/or mentors they can identify with. This lack of mentors and role models with a shared background reinforces the biases and stereotypes against minorities in these fields. Mentorship is key to preventing the high attrition levels of minorities in the scientific training pipeline. Mentors can lead the way to help make STEM fields more diverse and representative. After all, the scientific enterprise is enriched by the variety of thoughts, experiences and ideas contributed by diversity.

As I am sitting on my desk, taking a little break from thesis writing (yes, I take them somewhat often, for the sake of sanity) to write this, I set my eyes on a thank you note I received from one of my mentees after the SACNAS Conference. "You have contributed to my development as a scientist and a person. You are living proof that you don't have to see or have someone close (she is in Puerto Rico, I am in Boston) to be able to call them a mentor." Now THAT is worth gold.

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