Mentoring Narrative

I am the product of an undergraduate research program. I credit the liberal arts training, fantastic instruction, and individualized attention I received at the University of North Carolina at Asheville for providing the solid foundation upon which my professional career has been built. As a result, I am a firm believer that one of my responsibilities as a faculty member is to provide opportunities to undergraduates interested in learning about the research process so that they too have a chance to build a social science research career. These experiences are the epitome of students becoming excited about Sociology, engaged with doing Sociology, and empowered to contribute to Sociology as they themselves are originators of social science research.

I believe that students learn about research by performing research, but only if they really care about the research question. Therefore, my approach to mentoring is based on a model of facilitating student interests. Students pose their own research questions, and through my guidance, develop the appropriate action plan for answering their research questions, eventually proposing possible answers to their research questions. This takes me out of my comfort zone many times, forcing me to engage unfamiliar empirical literatures and to evaluate designs quite unlike those I employ in my own research. For example, I study gender and families exclusively using quantitative techniques, while only four of the eight undergraduate students I have mentored since joining the Sociology faculty in 2006 have used quantitative data analysis. The other four students have collected and analyzed their own qualitative data. I teach students that the research question drives the research design, and I model that by being willing to supervise and mentor students regardless of the design they employ. And while most of the projects are at least tangentially related to interpersonal relationships or gender, a few projects have exposed me to new literatures, affording the students an opportunity to teach me something, for example, about factors influencing the transition to college and the development of self-esteem.

Mentoring an undergraduate is an intense experience, as the student is developing their self-confidence and intellectual voice under your guidance. This guidance often happens through private conversation, either in person or electronically. I also see value in students being part of a learning community, where they can share ideas, support one another, and provide encouragement during a new intellectual experience. To this end I began coordinating a weekly mentoring meeting of my current students in Fall 2011, where we talk as a group about our successes and challenges, working through each together. We also discuss attendance at conferences, applying for travel grants, and graduate school. I include my graduate students, which has facilitated wonderful scaffolded mentoring moments. During these meetings I also discuss specific concerns and plans for their project with each student one-on-one.

Working independently with my own students and providing opportunities for them to share best practices is the way I work at an individual-level to foster a culture of student scholarship at Mason. Another way I work to foster a culture of student scholarship at Mason is through my service to the Assessment Subcommittee for the Students as Scholars initiative. I volunteered to join this committee out of a desire to learn how and where to create cultural change at Mason around undergraduate research and creative activities. Specifically, I want to understand faculty motivations for mentoring undergraduates and to investigate structural constraints to faculty participation. While facilitating eleven focus groups, I met fifty passionate faculty mentors and learned about successful and less than successful mentoring practices across a variety of disciplines. My task is to represent the faculty voices to the Leadership Council in hopes of working toward expanding opportunities for faculty to work with independent undergraduate scholars.

Upon reflection, I see myself mentoring my students in both the production of knowledge and in the successful completion of college. I serve as an example for undergraduate (and graduate) students on how to successfully navigate college as a first generation college student having to pay for their education through student loans because there is no other alternative. I encourage my students to think about acquiring skills that can be used regardless of the actual job that is eventually secured. I teach them how to engage in primary research, a set of skills that will serve them well regardless of whether they attend graduate school. I want my students to see their education as something that is theirs that they can shape through the many choices they can make as they engage course material in and out of the classroom.