Mentoring Philosophy and Fostering a Culture of Scholarship

I believe that the purpose of education is to allow an individual to reach their fullest potential and to have a fuller, richer life. I am pleased that I have helped many students accomplish this through my mentorship activities at three different levels: through administering an academic program, by teaching classes, and by mentoring students in the lab and outside the classroom, each of which I discuss in turn, below. In general, my mentoring process involves two complementary processes. My goal in mentoring is to help students identify and achieve their goals in a way that they usually cannot accomplish without my assistance, and to identify and highlight common errors that hamper students’ ability to succeed academically.

At the program level, I am the Director of the Undergraduate Program in Neuroscience. As the program has grown from 26 to over 270 students, I am increasingly working with students who experience academic difficulties because they are both working and taking a heavy course load. I have seen too many applying to graduate school with weak grades in core courses like Organic Chemistry due to this problem; when they are not accepted, they have to take a remedial program. In order to prevent this, at the start of each semester, I work with my graduate student assistant to distribute an email to all of our majors that includes guidance about how to maximize the chance of acceptance into graduate school. This includes recommendations to gain research experience and to focus on graduating with better grades, even if it means taking a lighter load and graduating later. Often, the guidance involves common sense information that is obvious to those in the academic field, but areless familiar to young people just beginning their academic careers. I am planning a symposium for our majors to go over these key points this semester and hope it will be the first of an annual event. I also try to identify why students miss classes, which is often due to a family emergency, and work with them to get them back on track and cover the material.

At the teaching level, my focus is to help the students think and understand the material, not merely to memorize it. My exams include essay questions in order to ensure that students know the material at a deep level. One student wrote, “Dr. Flinn is a phenomenal instructor because of her focus on fostering student learning, understanding, and growth.... One thing that has been really helpful is teaching us how to critique literature and studies.” In order to increase their knowledge (which is a form of mentorship!), I have introduced more advanced courses. I also want students to understand that their brain controls their behavior, but that their behavior affects their brain. In one course, I require the students to keep a sleep diary to reinforce the fact that we live in a sleep-deprived society. They are often amazed at how bad their sleep patterns actually are and indicate they will change their ways. My focus is on helping student to learn and building skills that will help them thrive both in and outside of the classroom.

Outside the classroom, I understand how important it is for students to get research experience, so I make it a point to accept them into my lab wherever possible. This teaches them many things: the excitement of generating new knowledge; an appreciation of the way knowledge is acquired; a recognition that there may be uncertainty in the scientific “facts” presented to them; and, at a personal level, the need for dependability and carefulness. I encourage my lab students to apply for OSCAR Awards, and many have received them. I have had many students in the apprenticeship program, have advised students in the Psychology Honors program, and have accepted students through the accelerated MA program. Many students have been authors on posters presented at scientific meetings and, in some cases, co-authors on papers. The process of preparing these presentations and publications involves intensive work and effort on their part. In order to provide additional mentoring for students, I helped form and serve as the advisor for Students in Neuroscience; I encourage my students to attend the Society for Neuroscience and APA meetings when they are held in DC. I have been willing to take a chance on students who other faculty dismiss, who are often older students looking for a career change. In the case of one such student, Linda Maguire, who is an opera singer, her work on music therapy in dementia has led to a publication in a distinguished journal and significant media attention.

The two sentences that sum up my role as a mentor are: (1) I try to enhance the students’ experience both inside and outside the classroom in ways that help them to lead more fulfilling lives; (2) I have done this by helping them identify and work towards their goals, and by helping them avoid errors which can impede their progress. I believe that my efforts have enhanced students’ abilities to learn and succeed in the classroom, lab, and in their broader lives.