Reflections on the Pleasures of Mentoring Young Scholars
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As I observed once to a colleague who’d asked about how one becomes a mentor, mentoring is not a role one plays but rather a way one engages authentically with a student’s scholarly aspirations. Even at that, I believe, one can’t claim to be a mentor unless the student with whom one is working feels s/he is being mentored. So let me explain what I mean by that and how “mentoring” happens for me. I work with a student one-on-one, beyond or outside of the classroom, because there’s something about the student’s interests and research ambitions that spark my own interest. Often this spark involves investigating issues around diversity at Mason and topics that tap into the diversity work I’ve been doing since I arrived at Mason over twenty years ago. When I work closely with a student, whether s/he is researching diverse student writers, instructors’ teaching-with-writing practices (as some writing fellows have done), or gender identities and sexual orientation, I think of myself as a co-researcher or as someone who’s traveling alongside the student to guide the research, and always as someone who learns as much as she teaches. I’m pleased when students think of me as a mentor, but, for me, what’s been most rewarding is to have accompanied them on their scholarly journey.

That journey has often begun when students who’ve been in my Writing Ethnography course ask me if they might continue their research with me once the class is over. My answer is always that I’ll try to find a way to make that happen, whether by supporting their application for a research apprenticeship or, in a couple of cases, as their thesis director. Within the past several years, for example, I guided student researchers on IRB-approved studies of returning women students, the China 1-2-1 program, and the LGBT community at Mason. Two of my writing ethnography students applied to become research apprentices on the collaborative Valuing Written Accents project I initiated to investigate second language students’ experiences with academic writing. I’ve invited each of these students to join the Diversity Research Group, comprised of faculty and staff across the university, and to present their work as part of the Ethnography of Diversity at Mason project.

Many times, I’ve met the students who subsequently joined me as research apprentices through the Peer Tutoring in Writing across the Disciplines course I developed in 1999. I knew even then that, as the writing center director, I wanted to find a way to engage undergraduates in the scholarship on academic writing and tutoring writing. I subsequently created the Writing Fellows initiative to give peer tutors a deeper experience of engaging in conversations about writing with teachers and fellow student writers across the disciplines. In regular meetings with me and in a final reflective paper, the fellows explore what they’ve discovered about disciplinary writing, students’ writing processes, and themselves as writers.

Helping students to understand that it is possible to engage deeply in research and writing is the most rewarding part, for me, of being a teacher and a mentor, particularly when I can draw on the network of cross-university relationships I’ve established over the years to help these students achieve their learning and writing goals. To teach the whole student, whether inside or outside of the classroom, is to teach them to engage with the whole university—the teachers and subject matter they’ll encounter across the curriculum, the activities and programs sponsored by University Life, and the diverse students and college-life issues they’ll encounter as participants in a full university experience.