

On being a mentor, Gregory Huber, May 2014

Edited Remarks (Bad jokes removed)

Thank you. I am deeply honored. I want to start by congratulating all of you who are receiving your degrees this weekend. I also want to take the time to thank the informal mentors that I know every student has—the parents, partners, friends, and fellow students who help them through those dark moments in graduate school.

I've been a Director of Graduate Studies for 3 years, which if you know anything about political science, is a little like being a parent to 4 children who speak 4 different foreign languages, some of which you don't understand.

This is great job. You get to learn when anyone is going to have a baby or gets a job offer. You also, unfortunately, learn about bad things, like when a student loses a family member or gets no job at all.

I found that figuring out the role is hard, because it is very different from advising a single student. It is about simultaneously advising about 80-100 students. I'd never done that before. So, as I'm want to do, I called up the people I knew who had done this job before and asked them what they had learned. That was the beginning. In other words, I asked people to mentor me.

So what is the job of being an effective mentor? I think, in a nutshell, in boils down to this:

You want to provide students with information that you now know, by virtue of your experience, so that they can make choices to get where they want to be.

As my students can tell you, I'm a checklist person. And so, here are my 7 most valuable pieces of advice. You are graduating, and perhaps because you now get to wear these wonderful robes, people are going to look to you for advice. Maybe this will give you a head start:

1) Wear a bicycle helmet, your hair is not your most valuable asset.

2) Everyone in graduate school is a good student or they wouldn't be here. But that doesn't mean they have any idea about how to be an academic, because it has a whole lot less to do with being a good student that you could ever imagine. So faculty members have to help students make the transition from student to researcher and teacher. This is also true in fields where you will leave the university setting and go elsewhere, so make sure your students are prepared for what they will have to do. This probably includes telling them what the job they will be asked to do entails.

3) You can't change what students want. Believe me, I've tried. But you can help them to understand the relationship between the choices they make and what they want. That doesn't mean that everyone (or anyone) will listen to you, but it is still your job to let students know the consequences of their choices when you understand them better than they do.

4) It is okay to decide you don't want to become an academic. Part of being an effective mentor is reminding students they can do something else. Those students who hear this and leave end up happy because it frees them to do something that pays much more. Other people take their PhD and go do something else, and that's great too. By reminding people that they have the option to leave the university you free them from the assumption that not wanting to be an academic, or even complete the PhD, is some sort of character flaw. Believe me, it isn't.

5) We learn by doing, and we often do the first time by copying someone who is better at what we want to do, or who at least has done it before. That's called apprenticeship. But for a student to become an apprentice, they have to ask someone else if they can work with them. This means they will have to learn to talk to their professors. Believe it or not, many students are afraid of speaking to the faculty. Consequently, they do not realize that the faculty are interested in helping them succeed, and the faculty don't know when a student is interested in working with them because the student won't say hello. So, as a mentor, try to be an academic matchmaker.

6) We have a very hard time anticipating how we will allocate our time in the future because we are very bad at figuring out that our supply of time won't increase in the future. This means you can't do everything, and so you should pick what you like, and realize you'll never be less busy. People doubt this, I've learned, and so you need to show people now what they will be asked to do in the future or they will believe they will be less busy. It also means that if you have time now, you should invest in doing things that you won't have time to do in the future. While I cannot tell you what you ought to enjoy, you should take the time to think about it and make sure to do it.

7) My memory is poor, and if I fill it with details, it crowds out creativity and happiness. If you write things down, they outlast you. As an advisor, you can write down plans for the future and share them. I've made many checklists—about going on the job market, what you ought to be doing in each year you are in a PhD program, etc.—and those checklists free me and students from remembering, reduce uncertainty about the future, and set expectations that can guide those who aren't sure what they should do now to get where they want to be. Additionally, when you write something down, if it doesn't work, people tell you, and you can improve it. So memorialize your mentoring so you don't always have to repeat it.

Thank you, and good luck.