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on Mentoring of Graduate Students

Last year, The Oceanography Society started a mentoring program to provide guidance to graduate students on how to survive graduate school and find a satisfying career pathway. Academic “elders” paired with co-mentors from industry and government conduct monthly teleconferences with small groups of students. Susan Lozier initiated this TOS program following her term as president, building on her experience with the Mentoring Physical Oceanography Women to Increase Retention (MPOWIR) program (<http://mpowir.org>), which addresses some of the “leaky pipeline” issues for women in physical oceanography. (You can read more about MPOWIR and its positive impact on the field as a whole in previous issues of *Oceanography*, e.g., Lozier 2005, 2009; Coles et al., 2011; Clem et al., 2014.)

Using MPOWIR as model, TOS began its own prototype program with two mixed-gender mentoring groups whose members span all the fields of ocean science and technology and are drawn from a wide range of universities across the United States. In the future, we hope to expand the program internationally. By combining participants from many institutions, we hope to foster networks of young scientists who will build the future of ocean sciences. As one of the participating members, here I share some early results of this experiment.

The initial premise of the TOS program is that the mentors will provide sage advice to the graduate students about career pathways, among other topics. Certainly, we’ve done some of that. We have had some interesting discussions about networking, and have read some practical guidebooks on productive networking. We’ve talked a bit about writing and speaking and how to use storytelling techniques to get a message across. We’ve addressed time management, and of course we’ve talked about concerns regarding finding satisfying employment after graduate school. But it is also true that the students are mentoring the mentors, teaching us about what they need. It is far too easy for academic faculty to forget what it was like to be a graduate student, but hearing the students’ concerns is enlightening. While a graduate school experience can be good if an advisor is patient, fair, thoughtful, and responsive to students, not every advisor provides students with the training necessary for future success as a faculty member, such as how to deal with graduate students or how to teach effectively.

Some universities now have mentoring programs, but certainly not all. I recently reviewed the web pages of most of the oceanographic programs in the United States and a few abroad, and found several programs that have senior faculty serve as

mentors for junior faculty. These programs are a great start, but these same pages offer relatively little about best practices in mentoring graduate students, or training the students to become future mentors. Despite promotion and tenure dossiers that require applicants to write about their philosophy of education related to teaching and mentoring, these web pages lack any statements about institutional philosophies or practices. This is odd.

There is no single way to be a good mentor—we all have unique strengths and personalities that we bring to the task—but some attention paid to this most important (most joyful, most frustrating, and most rewarding) faculty task will go a long way toward improving our programs. For faculty members who might like to start exploring some of these general mentoring issues, I recommend the *MPOWIR Handbook* (Clem et al., 2016). Within TOS, we plan to build on our prototype program. Over the next few years, we anticipate producing some general materials on best practices in mentoring of graduate students. I hope that our institutions will use, adapt, or build on these guidelines. As we develop TOS guidelines for mentoring in ocean sciences, I welcome input from faculty members and programs that have addressed mentoring issues. Perhaps a start in shining a light on mentoring would be for TOS to initiate some mechanisms to reward high-quality mentoring; my own institution has a student-administered award for mentoring that is one of the highest honors a faculty member can receive.

For me, participating in the TOS mentoring program is reassuring in that it reinforces my view that the future of ocean sciences will be in great hands as the young generation of students and early career scientists steps up and takes the reins. I look forward to learning more as the TOS program continues.


Alan C. Mix, TOS President

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