

Embracing Mentoring



By Elaine Tagliareni

M in Faculty Relationships

My views toward nursing have definitely changed. I know now that nurses are critical thinkers. I understand that nursing giving nursing care means using evidence and basing decisions on knowledge. I did not know any of this when I first entered nursing school. But working with faculty mentors, I am not the person I was when I entered the program two years ago. I see the world of nursing so differently and I want to be and do so much more than when I entered the program. The future has so many possibilities.

These words were written by a student in an associate degree nursing program as she prepared for graduation. The graduate speaks of gaining new perspectives and sharing a new vision of nursing – new ideas that were formed through a strong faculty-student mentoring relationship. Mentors help students cultivate confidence and begin to see themselves in new ways. Mentors are individuals who realize untapped potential. And having a mentor can make the ultimate difference in finding and embracing new opportunities within a supportive learning environment.

The idea of mentoring is as old as mankind. The concept was introduced in Ancient Greece, and it was institutionalized during the Middle Ages. In Greek mythology, Mentor was the trusted friend of Odysseus. When Odysseus left for the Trojan War, he placed Mentor in charge of his son and his palace. Subsequently, Athena, disguised as Mentor, guides Odysseus's son in search of his father. Throughout literature *mentor* became a common noun meaning “wise counselor.” It is an appropriate name for such a person because it probably meant “adviser” in Greek and comes from an Indo-European root meaning “to think” (Oxford English Dictionary, 1989).

What is Mentoring?

What, then, constitutes the essence of a mentoring relationship? What is it about a mentoring relationship that assists students to balance the uncertainties of new learning, to reconsider ways of knowing and doing with a new and fresh outlook? According to Stephen Brookfield (1994), participation in critical conversations within learning communities creates a sense of academic integration and successful academic performance. He referred to the need for faculty to help students become aware of their taken-for-granted assumptions and he considered the development of trust an essential factor in a mentoring relationship. Furthermore, the development of educational conversations through mentoring has



Faculty-student mentoring relationships that build trust offer the possibility that students begin to consider new ways to pursue their goals.

been heralded as a way to help students come to terms with important issues that have personal meaning, as a way to improve self-esteem and achievement (Guinier, Fine, and Balin, 1997, Vance and Olsen, 1998).

Faculty-student mentoring relationships that build trust offer the possibility that students begin to consider new ways to pursue their goals. Through mentoring relationships, students are nurtured to develop concrete strategies to sort out the complexities, dilemmas, and stressful life experiences that can often be seen as barriers to academic progression within nursing and to career advancement.

The challenge inherent in developing mentoring relationships with faculty rests with the initiation of conversations that flow in both directions, so that students and faculty engage in active and reciprocal dialogue within the context of a mentoring relationship. In this way, both student and mentor come to a new understanding. For one student, this new understanding was a commitment to lifelong learning and career advancement in order to more fully embrace the professional role:

*“When you get your BSN”...
Not if—when. I was constantly told by my mentor that I would*

be continuing my education. Wherever my classmates were when we started the program -- precent high school grad, LPN, artist -- we wouldn't be stopping at RN. The RN is the open doorway. My faculty mentors kept encouraging me to study and grow and take on new responsibilities, and then go on to get the education I needed for the roles I wanted to fill: BSN, MSN, NP. [They would say], “When you get your BSN, you'll. . . .” So many possibilities.

Starting a Mentoring Relationship

Here are some tips for starting a mentoring relationship:

1. Ask a faculty member to serve as your mentor, to guide you in your decision making and to be available to you while you are in school. Many students say they have faculty mentors, but the faculty members do not know that the students see them in this role. It is important to ask. And it is also important to understand that the faculty member may not have time to be your mentor. Accept the faculty member's decision and consider other options.
2. Prepare for your first meeting with your mentor. Think about:
 - Your goals.
 - Your background. (What has brought you to this place?)
 - What you hope to gain from the relationship.
 - What you have to offer to the relationship and to your mentor.
 - Questions for your mentor, including questions about the lessons learned in your mentor's career.
3. Share your expectations as well as your appreciation with your mentor. Mentors also want to have a successful and productive mentoree relationship. Explain the impact the relationship has had on your current and future success.

Throughout my career, I have made it a lifelong commitment to grow professionally with mentors at my side –

trusted colleagues who “have my back,” individuals who have guided me in making career decisions, helping me to choose new opportunities, urging me to move out of my comfort zone and take on new roles and challenges. I doubt that I would have directed a national project in nursing education to integrate gerontology into nursing curricula, for example, if a trusted mentor had not pushed me, slowly and carefully, to accept the position. If that had not happened, many future opportunities would have been lost to me.

When I considered running for president of the National League for Nursing, I contacted trusted colleagues and mentors who offered encouragement, new insights, and asked tough questions. Their wise counsel and mutual sharing of perspectives helped me structure my thinking and consider options in new ways. I urge you to find a mentor, or two, as you pursue academic progression within the nursing profession and take on the myriad roles and opportunities that await you throughout your nursing career. ☺

references

- Brookfield, S. (1994). Tales from the dark side: a phenomenography of adult critical reflection. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 13(3), 203-216.
- Guinier, L., Fine, M., & Balin, J. (1997). *Becoming Gentlemen*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- The Oxford English Dictionary (2nd ed.). (1989). Oxford, England: Clarendon Press.
- Vance, C. and Olson, R. K. (Eds). (1998). *The Mentor Connection in Nursing*. New York: Springer Publishing Company, Inc.



Elaine Tagliareni, PhD, RN, is president of the National League for Nursing. She is currently a professor of nursing and the Independence Foundation Chair in Community Health Nursing Education at Community College of Philadelphia.