
Reflections on Mentoring

Mary Crossley and Ross D. Silverman

Introduction

Merriam Webster defines “mentor” as “someone who teaches or gives help and advice to a less experienced and often younger person.”¹ This definition implicitly suggests that the primary benefits in a mentoring relationship flow in one direction, from the mentor to the person being mentored. That may be the case in most mentoring relationships. In this instance, though, serving as mentors as part of the faculty fellowship program² offered tremendous opportunities for professional and personal growth for both of us, even as we sought to provide help and advice to the fellows whom we mentored. In these reflections, we describe our experience and offer thoughts on lessons learned about mentoring, individuals’ roles in institutional changes, our own professional growth, and some implications for legal and interprofessional education.

The Mentors’ Roles: What We Did

When Charity Scott first called with an invitation to serve as a mentor in the faculty fellowship program, one of us was reminded of a quotation often attributed to Theodore Roosevelt: “Whenever you are asked if you can do a job, tell ‘em, ‘Certainly I can!’ Then get busy and find out how to do it.”³ Being familiar with Charity’s experience and success in program devel-

opment, combined with the conviction that building successful models for teaching public health law is a worthy goal, persuaded us that this project was worthy of an investment of our time and energy over the next eighteen months. Little did we know, though, the range of things we would be called on to do.

Five mentors were chosen for this program: ourselves, James G. Hodge, Jr., of the Sandra Day O’Connor College of Law; Kathleen Hoke of the University of Maryland School of Law; and Leslie E. Wolf of Georgia State University College of Law. Our formal “job description” included: reviewing applications for the fellowship program; participating in the planning of the program and its pedagogical centerpiece, the ten-day summer institute in Park City, Utah; attending and participating in the summer institute; and providing guidance to and accountability for the two faculty fellows who would be assigned to each of us during the following academic year as they refined and implemented their projects.

The ten-day retreat in Park City marked the formal kickoff of the fellowship program. However, the planning undertaken in the months leading up to the retreat by the program leadership team and the mentors foreshadowed the program’s character. Creativity and deliberateness are not typically portrayed as going

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hand in hand. But the planning process led by Charity married intentionality and creativity, and it modeled for everyone involved the power of that combination. The group consistently focused not only on ensuring the quality and variety of information, interactions, experiences, and resources the fellows would receive during the institute, but also on how experiences during the ten days could foster fellows' skills as teachers, program creators, leaders, and change agents. Even in the planning stage, the importance of reflection emerged as a dominant theme, so that the fellows,

ing forms for in-class group projects, ways to engage students in research, structures for evaluating student learning and developing online content, and opportunities for experiential learning through interacting with area hospitals, social service organizations, and health departments. We examined ourselves as teachers, learners, and professional colleagues, gaining greater understanding of our personality styles, our personal strengths,⁴ and our preferred approaches to addressing conflicts. We heard perspectives from leaders in public health law practice and academia.

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We formally and informally interacted with our assigned fellows and the leadership from their institutions, allowing us to gain insight into the institutional expectations being shouldered by the fellows, as well as the terrain across which they would be attempting to navigate in the coming year. We engaged in service and were pushed beyond our comfort zones in various ways. By the end of the ten days together, these shared experiences helped close bonds of trust and respect to form among all participants. A high level of enthusiasm for the fellows' projects prevailed.

who would be blazing new curricular trails with their projects, would be equipped with questions to reflect on as they developed and implemented their projects.

The result of these planning efforts — the ten-day retreat in Park City — was a uniquely powerful and valuable professional development experience for each of us. Given the program's title, the absence of much formal discussion of public health law content was notable. There was little debate over core concepts, cases, or the latest (or most seminal) events affecting the field. To our minds, this absence worked, as it left space for discussions and experiences that the fellows would not likely have access to at more traditional, topic-centered conferences.

These discussions and experiences focused on equipping fellows to successfully create and implement new curricular offerings, grooming them as leaders in growing the field of public health law education, and building a community of practice. And, because the mentors participated fully in all the activities at the summer institute, we grew in these ways as well. We explored an array of teaching models — includ-

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But all good things must come to an end, and so everyone returned to their home institutions for the academic year. As mentors, we continued to check in with our assigned fellows regarding their progress in implementing their projects. These check-ins, whether by phone, email, or Skype, were where much of the help and advice typically associated with mentoring occurred. Mentors served as sounding boards on issues ranging from syllabus design and the challenges of scheduling cross-listed courses (on the more mundane end of the spectrum) to weathering the

stresses of law school mergers (on the more unusual end). And we continued to check in with the program leaders and the other mentors as well, which provided us mentors the support and accountability that we were providing our fellows.

What We Learned as Mentors (and Why It Might Matter)

For each of us, participating in the fellowship program contributed to significant professional growth and enhanced insight into the challenges and opportunities facing higher education, and particularly legal education. Although these lessons overlap, we divide them into four primary categories.

... About Being Mentors

The five mentors entered the program with diverse mentoring experiences. All of us had some kind of leadership or advising experience where we had been called on to help “bring along” students or more junior colleagues, and most of us had some experience that equipped us to advise our fellows about important concepts like how to navigate institutional policies and politics to get approval for new school initiatives and courses. The diversity of our experiences in more sustained or formal mentoring, though, was notable. One mentor could not point to anyone who had mentored her on a sustained basis, while others recounted how influential their mentors were in their professional development. None of us, though, professed to having been trained in being a mentor prior to this experience.

Formal training in how to serve effectively as a mentor generally is not offered to law, medical, or public health faculty; mentorship opportunities arise more as a result of achieving longevity in the field. In many ways, senior faculty service as a mentor can be a lot like being a parent: you know how you were raised by your parents (or senior colleagues or personal mentors) and the types of things you would and would not emulate in what you learned from them along the way. Perhaps you have friends who preceded you in such parenting/mentoring experiences from whose successes and foibles you could learn. But professional growth in law school and then in law academia is not structured the same way as, say, development in a Ph.D. program, in which a Dissertation Chair is formally assigned to aid in and guide a candidate’s professional development.

The mentoring training we received prior to the summer institute, and the ongoing discussions among the mentors and program leaders of how to be effective mentors, were helpful. Also enlightening was the group debriefing of the mentors at the conclusion of the fellowship program. As from the beginning, we

were able to share openly and learn from one another’s experiences. It was one of those situations, though, that led us to wish there were some way to capture and share the benefit of the collective experience so that we could have used it while we were still serving. Of course, this is the nature of learning from experience.

That said, it has led us both to conclude that it would be highly valuable for law schools and other academic environments to develop formal mentor training programs for their senior faculty, as a way to aid the growth of junior colleagues as well as the programs we serve. Formally recognizing and nurturing effective mentoring might also help serve as a corrective to prevalent models of law faculty members as “free agents” whose professional fortunes rise or fall based solely on their own talent and initiative who thus may feel little sense of institutional investment.

.... About Individuals’ Roles in Institutional Growth and Change

Tolstoy wrote: “Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.”⁵ The same might be said of law schools, with the caveat that the current challenges facing legal education mean that few law schools today would be deemed “happy.” Collectively as mentors, we had ringside seats for viewing how ten faculty members’ initiatives to pursue an innovative public health law offering played out at a range of law and other professional schools. It was fascinating to witness the ways that schools embraced, facilitated, and sometimes undermined these initiatives. But because each school was distinctive in its particular configuration of ambitions, politics, and challenges, it is difficult to draw general lessons about how to manage growth and change in professional schools, beyond the cliché truism that “change is hard.”

Nonetheless, we learned a good deal from our experience as mentors about the value of mentoring relationships and membership in a community of practice for individuals who seek to drive change at an institution. No matter how hard we tried as mentors, participation in the fellowship program did not give fellows a magic wand capable of fixing the problems they faced as a result of bureaucratic labyrinths, demanding deans, faculty politics, or declining enrollment. But it helped equip them to offer the strongest, best-designed course possible, and the community of practice that resulted provided fellows with moral support and generous intellectual partners who helped them face their own distinctive challenges.

... About Ourselves as Professionals

A common refrain among the mentors in our final reports and end-of-program debriefing was how much

each of us learned and grew from participating in the fellowship program. Part of the learning, certainly, flowed from functioning as a mentor, as described above. But for each of us, the greatest growth came from participating in all the activities and experiences at the summer institute. Like the fellows, we learned about ourselves, about best practices in course design and teaching, about how public health law plays out in the real world, and about the importance of reflection. One of us (Ross) learned that, because his greatest strengths lay in the analytical, ideation, and deliberative realms, he could best advance his goals by finding collaborators with complementary strengths, like achieving and activating.⁶ Acting on that insight helped bring about one of the most productive years he has had as an academic. The other of us (Mary) relied heavily on the ideas generated in the summer institute's teaching workshop and the teaching techniques shared by mentors and fellows in designing a new course she taught the semester following the summer institute. And pushing past a fear of heights to take part in the high-ropes-course with another mentor as a partner (thank you, Leslie!) reminded her how empowering it can be to push past fear to take on a challenge. As a result, she will be teaching her first online course in early 2016...knowing that her colleagues in this community of practice will provide a "safety harness" of sorts!

At the May 2015 celebration closing the fellowship program, one of the mentors shared a *New York Times* op-ed piece written by David Brooks⁷ about the importance of adult friendships and how experiences like the one we shared at the summer institute provide fertile soil for the growth of enduring bonds. We heartily endorse that sentiment, but also offer our own slightly different reflection. For the mentors, participating in the fellowship program gave us the chance to share whatever wisdom we might have gained from years of experience. That we expected. But we did not expect how much it also gave us, along with the fellows, a chance to know ourselves better, a push to stretch in new directions, and the enthusiasm and confidence to take on new challenges. To return to a point made at the beginning of this essay, the benefits for more senior faculty from serving as a mentor in a fellowship program like this can be just as great as those received by the fellows, although they are somewhat different.

... About Legal and Interprofessional Education

We are at an inflection point in legal education. Law schools are being asked by students, alums, as well as the employment markets into which our students will enter, to reexamine what is taught within schools,

as well as how it is taught.⁸ Expectations about the knowledge and skills that graduates of law schools (and other professional schools) should develop are shifting and rising. Some are questioning how long the law school experience itself should be. This period of flux presents a valuable opportunity for great innovation both in teaching within law schools, and in teaching law students alongside professionals from other disciplines like public health, medicine, nursing, business, and social work.

At the same time, little infrastructure currently exists for formally assessing how well we are educating and training the next generation of lawyers, or their development of both the technical and critical thinking skills and the knowledge base needed to succeed in the future marketplace. At best, we may receive some indirect and informal feedback from the employers who hire our graduates, or through metrics like bar passage rates.

Participating in this fellowship program prompted us to question whether we — either as a discipline (public health law) or as a broader field (legal education) — should do more to assess *both* teaching effectiveness as a core competency of being a law professor *and* how and what our students learn. We have concluded that we should do more to infuse law teaching and interprofessional educational programs (like those developed by our program fellows) with formal opportunities to assess the effectiveness of these curricula using the principles of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning.⁹

Development of Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) infrastructures within our law schools and interprofessional education programs will help us develop best practices for our education programs. Such infrastructure development would demonstrate that our field values innovations and effectiveness in teaching highly. SoTL initiatives in law schools also would give faculty members who develop novel public health law courses and programs more opportunities to produce research valuable both to their professional development and for promotion and tenure decisions. At institutions like Indiana University, while peer assessments and student evaluations are valued in determining the quality of one's teaching, the *only* way a faculty member can demonstrate excellence in their teaching is through the scholarly dissemination of knowledge about teaching, preferably in peer-reviewed publications.¹⁰

Law schools may not wish to formally educate every one of their faculty in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, but it would be worthwhile for them to consider developing the resources within their schools (or within the offices of their associate deans of faculty

research and development and/or education) so that they can assess their educational programs, and so that more formal, replicable, and comparable assessment of student knowledge and skill development can take place across institutions. Such assessments might also allow us to better gauge whether and how teaching innovations add value to the careers of our programs' alumni one, five, or ten years after graduation.

Conclusion

Before signing on as mentors, neither of us could have predicted how profound the fellowship program's impact on us would be. Being able to contribute in some way to the development of the program and to the success of our fellows' projects was tremendously satisfying, and our own individual growth was meaningful. As the fellowship program drew to a close, we both agreed that it was among the most rewarding experiences we have had as educators and academics in the field of public health law.

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4. T. Rath, *StrengthsFinder 2.0* (New York: Gallup Press, 2007).
5. L. Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*, trans. C. Garnett (New York: Quality Paperback Book Club, 1991); at 1.
6. Ross's particular strengths are among the 34 strengths identified in Rath, *supra* note 4. All of the fellows and mentors took the strengths self-assessment before the summer institute to identify their top five strengths, and we had the opportunity there to discuss our individual (and different) strengths and the how personal strengths can be used (or overused) in professional life.
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