



Open Forum on Broadening Participation in STEM (OFBP)

Mentoring: Revised - by Shirley Malcom

Reflecting On Our Roots is a series of essays outlining some of the historical context of the field of broadening participation. The essays were originally published in the NSF INCLUDES Open Forum group on Trellis, and are now located in the new Open Forum on Broadening Participation microsite. Shirley Malcom is the Senior Advisor and Director of SEA Change at the American Association for the Advancement of Science and co-PI on NSF grant 1748345 which supports the NSF Open Forum on Broadening Participation in STEM.

In 1997 the National Academies published, ADVISER, TEACHER, ROLE MODEL, FRIEND: ON BEING A MENTOR TO STUDENTS IN SCIENCE AND ENGINEERING, described as a guide offering “helpful advice on how teachers, administrators, and career advisers in science and engineering can become better mentors to their students.” The guide was further described as starting “with the premise that a successful mentor guides students in a variety of ways: by helping them get the most from their educational experience, by introducing them to and making them comfortable with a specific disciplinary culture, and by offering assistance with the search for suitable employment.”

While still useful, some of the guidance, now almost 25 years old, felt a bit dated. But other aspects remain unfulfilled such as the recommendation that “institutions incorporate mentoring and advising effectiveness in the criteria used for appraisals of faculty performance, including evaluations for the purposes of promotion and tenure.”

If we reframe this very personal act of mentoring within today's focus on the need for institutional transformation, the choice of language used in the report makes sense. The guidance being provided to those who would mentor acknowledged the circumstances around the need to prepare (fix) the mentees for the realities of the existing system. For example, there is language about socializing mentees to the discipline as well as the reality that faculty time spent in mentoring was time away from research, largely accepted as their primary role, the thing for which they would be recognized and rewarded.



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One of the roles noted for mentors was that of helping mentees navigate the system. Lack of transparency and feedback often presents challenges to mentors and mentees alike- trying to explain and/or process procedures, policies and practices that may seem idiosyncratic, opaque, dated and that are often inequitable.

The guide touches on other areas that are under considerable discussion today, such as mentoring students from diverse student populations, and noting the occurrence of abuse of power by advisers such as in cases of harassment. More recent Academies reports on mentoring and harassment have offered valuable insights on these topics.

But rather than look at the issues one at a time they should be considered in the context of an institutional landscape. What does mentoring look like in a transforming institutional setting? Can the interpersonal actions ever be considered without looking at the institutional context of what is valued, rewarded and supported?

Reference: National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. 1997. Adviser, Teacher, Role Model, Friend: On Being a Mentor to Students in Science and Engineering. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/5789>.