

A Path to Wisdom: Examining the Multi-Faceted Mentoring Journey

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In healthcare, mentoring matters. It helps professionals develop needed skills and confidence, encourages career advancement, promotes ongoing learning and relationship building, and provides multidisciplinary collaboration and engagement. The role of the mentor is multi-faceted, but guiding protégés in professionalism while administering wisdom is paramount to their responsibilities.

My mentoring efforts are focused on professional identity formation and socialization into a community of practice. The importance of positive role models and the identification of negative role models is core to professional identity formation. When mentoring, consider these principles of professional identity formation in mentoring conversations.⁴

Medical educators are charged with designing standardized and personalized curricula for guiding, supporting, and challenging learners on the developmental professional identity pathway, including the process of socialization.⁵ Key drivers of professional identity formation include experiential and reflective processes, guided reflection, formative feedback, personal narratives, the integral role of relationships and role models, and candid

discussion within a safe community of learners.⁵ In my own professional identity formation as an educator of health professionals, some of my most gratifying moments are serving as a mentor for others. Reflection, supporting professional identity formation, and mentorship are the “fertilizer” of supportive relationships.⁵ I see mentorship as a professional responsibility to help others with their professional identity formation, career development, and, most importantly, career satisfaction. As I am helping others on their journey, I am also nourishing my own professional identity journey. This is the true gift of paying it forward! If you do not have a favorite definition to describe your role as a mentor, consider adopting one as you prepare to provide the fertilizer for supportive mentoring relationships. Model vulnerability and fallibility to create a safe space that encourages honest conversations as an advisor, mentor, or sponsor.

Daloz (1999) speaks powerfully and metaphysically about the mentor:

“...It is more than passing interest that the original Mentor was inhabited by Athena. Clearly, the mentor is concerned with transmission of wisdom. How, then, do mentors



transmit wisdom? Most often, it seems, they take us on a journey. In this aspect of their work, mentors are guides. They lead us along the journey of our lives. We trust them because they have been there before. They embody our hopes, cast light on the way ahead, interpret arcane signs, warn us of lurking dangers, and point out unexpected delights along the way. There is a certain luminosity about them, and they often pose as magicians in tales of transformation.¹

Making the Daloz definition of mentoring come alive requires relationship-building with your mentee, and it is important to understand your role clearly. Personal beliefs of mentors shape their mentoring style and influence the goals and purpose of mentoring, the possible activities associated with it, the focus of the mentoring relationship, and the strategies mentors choose to enact these beliefs in practice. A new area to explore is “patients as mentors” to guide learners (and maybe faculty too) to construct their professional identity and support the exploration of and commitment to the professional values society expects of physicians.⁷

Thibault, in his closing essay as president of the esteemed Macy Foundation, Humanism in Medicine, states: “Each of us has our own touchstone for humanism—an experience, a role model, an inspirational writing.”⁹ Have a goal to interweave humanism in all relationships with mentees. Draw on that humanism touchstone and make it more real in our daily lives.

To end, I will quote, with gratitude, one of my valued mentors who has taught me so much about professionalism and humanism, William Branch (2011). “Seeking wisdom should become embedded in the culture of medicine.” Mentorship is a path to wisdom. Choose wisdom and accept, as Bill Branch states, that “The pathway to wisdom is a crooked one.”¹⁰ Accept this challenge and have a fulfilling career in all medical education roles you have or will acquire and bring a mentee on your journey.

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