

The power of mentoring

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How my experiences with math conferences ended up helping a variety of young trans folks

Most trans folks undergo gender transition when they're young. That's a fairly broad observation, but one that makes sense to me: if you were assigned the wrong gender at birth, then you tend to do something about it as soon as you reasonably can. However, a few of us didn't quite do it then and left it until later in life, which gives us a bit of a different perspective. For one thing, we aren't dealing with teenage angst at the same time as gender angst (both were quite enough on their own for me!). For another, we've had the chance to build up a few helpful life skills. Not least among those, in my opinion, is networking.

One of the core manifestations of privilege in academia is the ability to find mentors. Having someone more senior to show you the ropes can be a huge shortcut. Conversely, if your PhD supervisor isn't on your side, it's a much harder road to success. Even if your relationship with your supervisor is excellent, you can't just coast along under their wing; you also need letters of reference from a variety of more senior academics for fellowships, job applications, grants, etc. Networking in academia isn't just a formal matter of introductions; it often goes hand-in-hand with social connections and building friendships.

By the nature of our status as social beings, humans tend to form bonds with people similar to themselves. People tend to gravitate to those with the same backgrounds or interests or hometown or whatever. This isn't a universal rule, but it does happen quite a lot. Without any malice, it can easily just fall out that more senior academics tend to make connections with students and postdocs who are more similar to them than not. These are how systems tend to reproduce themselves and why it's critical to have formal programs that interrupt this tendency. Without explicitly getting people outside their comfort zones, it's all too easy for everyone to fall into self-similar groups, which can really hurt marginalised folks. One way to do that is to provide mentoring from unexpected places.

As an academic, I've long been interested in the process of mentoring. I'm co-chair of the mentoring taskforce for the Society for Mathematical Biology because I long ago identified that their mentoring program was a really good way to form connections between junior and senior people from a wide variety of backgrounds. We match individuals at the annual meeting and create group mentoring opportunities for small clusters of people at different career stages throughout the year. I've also mentored quite a few students through other programs or just because they sought me out.

All of which is to say, I was a pretty experienced mentor... and that was before I transitioned. When I first transitioned, my boyfriend (who was director of Planned Parenthood and knew a thing or two about these things) said "You'll be mentoring people in no time." I pushed back, saying "But I have no idea what I'm doing!" To which he replied "Doesn't matter. You have mentoring skills, and you're an older trans woman. That combination is incredibly rare."

Well, it turned out he was entirely right. I was floundering around in my new gender expression, but I did know how mentoring worked. At first, I didn't have a whole lot of information to share, but I did know how to make these connections and give some basic advice. Over time, I started to feel more confident in my gender expression, so that made my mentoring more useful.

Having realised I had some skills to offer, I signed up for some more formal mentoring options. I found a group who were looking for mentors for girls in STEM and desperately needed some mentors for trans girls. Which was a rewarding experience, although many of them had to preface it with "If you talk to my parents, you have to use a different name for me, because I'm not out to them." This was something I hadn't had to face, not having transitioned at that sort of age.

Sometimes these connections were just short term, and sometimes they turned into opportunities for research. One high-school student reached out looking for the kind of mentoring that the conference didn't provide, so I decided to take her on myself... and she was fantastic, producing research in a way that was indistinguishable from my graduate students. I had another high-school student say "I thought I had to choose between being trans and being an engineer. Meeting you made me realise I could be both." Excuse me, there appears to be something in my eye...

Mentoring is one of those things that a lot of academics overlook or only do haphazardly, when the opportunity falls into their lap. Conversely, students, postdocs and junior academics are often in quite desperate need of mentors and don't always know where to find them. This problem gets thornier the more the people move away from the white, male, cisgender, heterosexual archetype. The good news is that these skills are transportable: the nouns may change, but mentoring in one aspect of life can be excellent training for mentoring in wildly different aspects of life.

Whether the issue is finding the right career, dealing with a complicated supervisor or trying to learn the intricacies of makeup for the first time ("Foundation sounds like a pretty fundamental thing, so that should go on first, right? No?"), it turns out that I'm very good at reaching a hand down the ladder to help pull people up. And I've always been very clear that there's a price to this: they too must reach down sometime in the future and help pull the next person up. This is how we make a better world.

Stacey Smith? is a professor of disease modelling at the University of Ottawa, where she was the first employee to undergo gender transition (but won't be the last). Her mentoring skills in yet another area of academia led her to write a book on academic writing because she was sick of all the poorly written journal articles out there. Check out "How to Write & Edit Your Scientific Article" from World Scientific.