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Mentors and Role Models: Two Approaches for Inspiration

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MENTORS AND ROLE MODELS:



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Two approaches for inspiration

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The term mentor comes from the classic Greek poem, *The Odyssey*, written by Homer in approximately 800 B.C. As the story unfolds, prior to Odysseus leaving to fight in the Trojan War, he entrusts his son, Telemachus, to his friend and advisor, Mentor. It was Mentor's duty to, "... draw forth the full potential of Telemachus."

Twenty years later, as Telemachus is about to depart on his epic journey to investigate what happened to his father, the goddess of wisdom, Athena, disguises herself as Mentor to provide Telemachus with some crucial advice.

The word mentor evolved to mean trusted adviser, friend, teacher and wise person. History offers many examples of helpful mentoring relationships: Socrates and Plato, Haydn and Beethoven and Freud and Jung. Mentoring is a fundamental form of human development where one person invests time, energy and personal know-how in assisting the growth and ability of another person.¹

Another way to express this is that a mentor requires a measure of wisdom, integrity, and a willingness for personal investment.

Today, mentorship in the dental profession continues in many different forms.

One such approach is the Mentor Program sponsored by Wisconsin Dental Association, Marquette University School of Dentistry and the Pierre Fauchard Academy.

With 172 dentists mentoring 338 students this year, the future of professional mentorship in Wisconsin looks bright.

For us to achieve this level of success and support is indicative of the rewards that both the mentor and the protégé receive through active participation in this endeavor.

The interpersonal relationship is a continuous and complex one as the mentor, in the role of a transition figure, helps to advance a protégé's personal growth and professional development; providing their vision while helping the protégé to develop his or her own.² Human relationships develop over time and the same can be said for mentorship.

It is not surprising then that the successful bonds that are forged during the early years of the dental students' professional development will often last throughout the careers and



lives of the mentors and protégés. Role models on the other hand teach primarily by example and help to shape professional identity and commitment through promoting observation and comparison. Unlike mentors, role models do not so much deliberately mold dentists in training as much as inspire them by their own conduct. Professional

achievement, personality, power, influence, lifestyle and values may all determine the influence a teacher has on a student.³

One recent study in academic medicine, as determined by students in all four years of medical education, noted that the single most important effective component of learning professionalism (92.5 percent) was through "clinical interactions—role modeling."⁴

Underestimating the influence an experienced clinician has on the mind of a developing dental student would be an incalculable error, as every interaction, attitude, or opinion expressed has a profound impact.

I would encourage every member of the WDA to participate in the Mentor Program and consider applying as an adjunct assistant professor at MUSOD.

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If you haven't considered mentoring or teaching, either of these approaches will provide you with the opportunity to impart your knowledge and clinical expertise with the next generation of dentists.

Educationally, as the only dental school in Wisconsin, we hold the distinct honor and responsibility of cultivating young professionals who will carry dentistry's torch into the future. Professionally, we are also obligated to assist our future colleagues in all aspects of their professional growth and development.

Personally, you would find no greater reward than witnessing firsthand a current or former dental student's success.

MUSOD assistant adjunct professors are

charged with a large part of this educational effort, and with the recent increase in student enrollment, we need more experienced clinicians to assist in our efforts to maintain and build upon MUSOD's strong national reputation.

Directly observing a dental student learn and grow is an affirmation of the inspirational efforts of either the dentist who acts as a mentor or the dentist who teaches and acts as a role model.

With one of life's great paradoxes being that the more you give, the more you receive, I am confident that regardless of the approach you choose, you will discover that you are the major benefactor.



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3 - Reuler JB, Nardone DA. Role modeling in medical education. *West J Med* 1994; 160:335-337.

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