

THE MENTORNET EXPERIENCE – FROM THE MENTOR’S SIDE

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Abstract —As more and more young women go to college to obtain degrees in mathematics, science and engineering, there is an increasing need for those of us already in industry and academia to mentor these young women. This is an invaluable experience and fosters learning for both the mentor and the protégé. MentorNet is an organization dedicated to finding mentors for these young women and facilitating the mentoring process.

Index Terms —mentoring experience, MentorNet, mentors

WHY BE A MENTOR?

Every year there are more and more young women starting college with their eyes on a technical degree. I was one of those wide-eyed young women once. I started my college career at a Big Ten University with around 50,000 – 60,000 undergraduate students. Needless to say, this was ever so intimidating for me. You see, at a big university like that, you get thrown into the mix and are expected to fend for yourself. It took me a few years and a change to my eventual major, but I somehow got through it unscathed, although somewhat bewildered with the entire process.

During those years I often signed up with the one mentoring program for technical students on campus. It offered to get me a mentor in my field that could “show me some of the ropes” so to speak. But I was largely unsuccessful. After a year or two, I finally gave up. There were often few mentors for the number of students signed up and rarely were there any females, let alone females in my discipline. I very much desired a mentor, as I was only the second in my family to go to college and the first to get a technical degree. I craved that connection with another mind like mine and wanted the guidance and advice of someone who had been in my shoes – a confused, overwhelmed young woman who was afraid of making the wrong choices.

HOW TO GET INVOLVED

Now fast forward to the beginning of my career at 3M: I had only been here about a month and I happened to see a link on our homepage for volunteers to be mentors with MentorNet. A light bulb went off in my head immediately and I thought, “Here is my chance to be what I never had, and always wanted, a mentor for some other young woman!” I signed up immediately and waited anxiously to hear who my protégé would be and what her name was.

MY PROTÉGÉ

Her name is Nicole and she is an intelligent, driven, vibrant young woman who is currently attending San Jose State. Like me, she was somewhat confused about what direction to take and needed someone else to guide and encourage her.

Like any other beginning to a relationship – ours started out pretty formal and general. And as time went on, and we got to know each other better, we started sharing other aspects of our personal lives - Nicole’s trip over Christmas break and my adventures in house hunting.

We mostly talked about her college life and I shared my college experiences as well. I shared the good ones and the bad ones, hoping that she could learn from some of my mistakes. And I wanted her to know that she wasn’t alone in this thing we call college. For as many people that surround you in college, sometimes it’s an awfully lonely place.

But most importantly I wanted Nicole to know that *she can do anything she wants!* I wanted her to know that I would be there to cheer her on until the very last stride across the stage at graduation. Encouragement is a powerful thing, just as discouragement can be detrimental. Sometimes all we need is encouragement, no matter whom it is from.

THE REWARDS

Nicole wasn’t the only one doing the learning – I learned a great deal too. I learned how to be a better listener and to put myself back in her shoes – as a freshman in college. I always said that I never wanted to loose touch with what it felt like to be a freshman. That was always my complaint with professors and graduate students - that they had forgotten what it was like to be on the other side of the lectern.

My experience with MentorNet has been great. It is very rewarding to hear from your protégé “...you make me feel like I can do anything...” and “Thanks to you I know that being successful is definitely in my future. Thank you.” What could be better than that?

I sincerely hope that the MentorNet program continues to unite mentors and protégés for a long time. It is a great program and gives young women all over the country the opportunity to network with and learn from professionals from all over the country.

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If your workplace or Alma Mater doesn't have a relationship with MentorNet, I sincerely encourage you to look into one. Mentoring a student doesn't take hours upon hours a week. All of my correspondence with Nicole has been via email, on my own time. Most of us type tens of emails a day – what is one more? It is such a rewarding experience for both the mentor and the protégé – and you can make such a difference in someone's life.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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