Mentoring Graduate Students

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The dictionary definition of the word *mentor* is “a wise and trusted counselor or teacher” while the origin comes from one of the great works of literature by Homer. We often mix the use of the words mentor and advisor. In academic life, the role of mentoring is beyond faculty advising which can be limited to guiding academic progress. One of the most rewarding experiences I personally have in my academic life is mentoring students. It is a professional relationship with a special personal aspect that develops, evolves and hopefully enriches academic experiences of both the mentor and the mentee. The styles of mentoring may vary and each mentoring relationship should be tailored to the student’s goals, needs, learning styles and willingness to be mentored. There are a number of great publications on being a mentor; here I would like to share my personal views and experiences.

I believe that we have the great responsibility of educating and mentoring our students and in my case preparing future engineers. Especially, the doctoral students in the graduate programs are expected to be the leaders in their fields. I see the doctoral students as individuals who are my closest students, colleagues, friends and mentees, to whom I owe my best support during their time with me. I subscribe to the belief that a university is to be a community of professors and students learning and growing together. Of particular importance to achieve this is advising and mentoring our doctoral students that we as faculty members can and should provide, which extend beyond the technical issues of specific subjects.

As faculty, we all have professional pressures, time constraints and particular goals to achieve for our academic endeavors. How does mentoring fit in this picture? Does mentoring really help us? My experience is that it helps and even more in terms of personal fulfillment and satisfaction when seeing your students succeed. I do not think that there is a single formula for being a good mentor. It requires commitments of both the mentor and mentee, requires some kind of chemistry and understanding which can help overcome the challenges and resolve difficulties. Especially for the graduate students, I would recommend my fellow faculty to be as proactive as possible from the very beginning when choosing prospective graduate student mentees. In my opinion, bringing in graduate students with whom you communicated in advance, discussed your

expectations and also explained what you can offer them is the first step towards a successful mentor-mentee relationship.

Building a research group as a supportive learning community is also a critical component in mentoring students. I enjoyed and benefited from such a group as a doctoral student some years ago with my fellow students and post-doctoral associates. Shared goals, collective efforts and fellowship help reduce pressures, increase productivity in a more enjoyable manner and develop life-long friendships. My post-doctoral students in my research group greatly help me in mentoring junior graduate students as well as undergraduate students. In addition to regular weekly meetings with my advisees and mentees, I also find it very useful to have some kind of social activities together from time to time. Each student has different personal and cultural background and such activities make the professors more approachable. While being a mentor, it might be a little challenging to provide feedback and sometimes criticism. Providing constructive criticism professionally, listening carefully and more importantly praising their good work shows that this is done to hold them to high standards in order to help them improve.

I have enjoyed the fellowship of my graduate students mentees from whom I learned a lot also. Throughout their stay as graduate students, I do my best to set examples for them to also understand the importance of social interactions as well as how to learn and live values within the academic environment that we share. I think this is very important for the graduate students to make decisions in life consistent with one’s goals and values, to recognize one’s capabilities and limitations, and to make life expectations and results match.

In my research group, my challenge for my students is to be the best that they can be with all the support that I possibly can give. While setting high standards for our mentees, we should also know that they are individuals like all of us who have their own personal lives and challenges, and they should know that we are always ready to help them whenever they need us as their mentors.

**Short Bio of Necati Catbas**

Dr. Necati Catbas is an Associate Professor and Associate Chair of the Civil, Environmental and Construction Engineering Department. His research interest is structural health monitoring with emphasis on development, integration and implementation of sensing, information and simulation technologies for civil infrastructure systems. Dr. Catbas was recognized with several teaching and research awards including UCF University Excellence in Graduate Teaching Award, Teaching Incentive Program Award and Research Incentive Award.