

DIVERSITY IN ACADEME

## Mentors Matter

**Individual achievement goes only so far**

*By Eric Rodriguez* | MAY 18, 2015

**D**an and I met up recently at Izzy's Deli, in Santa Monica. I had had a few drinks earlier in the afternoon — the pancakes I ordered with a beer for dinner could have been a giveaway, but I don't think Dan noticed my state of mind. I'm full of idiosyncrasies, so Dan must have chalked up the flapjack dinner to my being, well, different. Dan accepts me for who I am because that is a hallmark of a great mentor, and Dan is one of the best.

People like Dan don't get the thanks they deserve. The role mentors play in the success of others is critical but often neglected. I don't know why it is that the ability to overcome challenges and move forward is often framed as an individual achievement, when that is not usually the case. No matter how resilient or innovative people may be, those around them often help shape their success.

---

Diversity in Academe: First-Generation Students

Check out the rest of our special report on efforts to help this growing group of students succeed.

---

I first met Dan 10 years ago, in Malibu — a city I had previously seen only on my family's black-and-white television back home in East Los Angeles. I had made my way to Malibu when I was 20, after serving in Iraq. An officer had learned that I would be traveling to California in a matter of days and asked me to transport an award for a student at Pepperdine University, where the officer had previously taught. (The student had organized other Pepperdine undergraduates to help provide Iraqi children with school supplies.) When I arrived at the campus, I met with the officer's colleague, Dan Caldwell — a Navy veteran himself and a professor of political science at the university — who took a liking to me and, at our very first meeting, offered to mentor me.

His commitment was sincere, and he immediately began to press me almost weekly, asking me what I would do next. I had no idea. I was working as a security guard, which paid the bills and even left a little extra sometimes. Dan was convinced that I could do more.

During a phone call on one of my overnight shifts guarding a Taco Bell near the Los Angeles airport, Dan pressed me again. By that time I had concocted a wild idea of where I wanted my life to go. It was bold of me to tell Dan that my goal was to attend an elite university, given that I had barely scraped through high school and had had a few bouts with homelessness growing up. And no one in my family had ever attended college. But Dan didn't hesitate. He began to discuss with me how I could turn my idea into reality.

Dan is the one who introduced me to Brown University, where he had taught in the early 1980s. He thought it would be a good fit for me, given my interest in international relations and my status as a veteran.

But before I could even apply, I'd have to take many remedial courses at a community college, Dan explained. He didn't sugarcoat how difficult it would be — he was fair in his assessment of my strengths and weaknesses, and always gave me objective feedback, even when I didn't want to hear it. That led to disagreements, of course, but Dan was unwavering in his support and kept encouraging me, even when I made decisions contrary to his advice, decisions that often resulted in a good deal of heartache for us both. For example, I once thought it would be a good idea to take more than a full-time load of courses at the community college, and my grades suffered. I learned my lesson quickly, and the next semester I adjusted my course load and saw an immediate improvement.

But I continued to believe in Dan because he was one of the few who believed in me, even when I considered giving up on myself. Later, when I almost quit graduate school (Harvard's John F. Kennedy School of Government) because I didn't think I was smart enough to get through a few difficult courses, Dan told me it was time to take responsibility. "You're lucky to be there, and you need to stop making excuses. You're not passing because you're not working hard enough. You can work harder, and you know this, so get to it."

I'm convinced that his steadfast support — along with that of other mentors and family members — is ultimately the reason I made it through two Ivy League universities and achieved other accolades, including becoming a Brown trustee in a slot designated for younger alumni when I turned 27. I know his unwavering commitment to my success is also partly what led to my recent appointment to the Council on Foreign Relations as a term member.

**I was working as a security guard. Dan was convinced that I could do more.**

I am grateful that I am both a veteran and a college graduate, especially since so many friends from my neighborhood and from the war were not so lucky.

But that's the problem.

Knowing that there are people in my life no different from me who have not been able to achieve their potential saddens me, whether it's those who gave up on life and are no longer around, or those like my younger cousin Peter, who is perpetually in and out of correctional facilities. I wish things had played out differently for them.

While I understand there are many reasons people don't achieve their goals or fully realize their potential, the last 10 years have convinced me that mentors matter — a lot. They are a crucial bridge to success. It is just misleading to think that individual effort happens in a vacuum.

Without mentors, many achievements would simply not be possible. Mentors are not always recognized or appreciated for their efforts; even so, I hope they continue their selfless service. Personally, I know I will continue to face many more ups and downs. All of us do. We never outgrow our need for mentors. They can help us move forward through our most challenging periods.

Those times may be frustrating for our mentors as well. Giving advice only to see it dismissed can be maddening. But the opportunity to shape the course of someone's life is powerful and rewarding, and most mentors will agree that they have no regrets.

But don't take my word for it. I'm just telling you what Dan told me at Izzy's, and from the looks of it these past 10 years, he gives great advice.

*Eric Rodriguez is a trustee emeritus of Brown University and a term member at the Council on Foreign Relations. He is a recent graduate of the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University and served in Iraq from 2003 to 2004 as a reservist member of the U.S. Army.*

*This article is part of:*

**Diversity in Academe: First-Generation Students**



Copyright © 2016 The Chronicle of Higher Education