

As a Mentor, How Do You Make Students Feel?

*People will forget most of what you tell them,
but they will never forget how you made them feel.*
- Prof. Bridget Sampson

According to Communication Studies researchers, students quickly forget more than 90% of what their professors say in classrooms. This research finding has enormous implications not only for those who teach classes but also for those who make presentations, those who work as academic advisors, those who are activists in communities, and those who raise children. But before teachers, advisors, parents, and activists despair about the difficult challenge facing them in educating others, another research finding brings hope. According to Communications Studies Professor Bridget Sampson, “People will forget most of what you tell them, but they will never forget how you made them feel.”

Professor Sampson’s statement raises intriguing questions for all mentors: As a mentor, how do you make students feel? Or, more specifically, through your interactions with students, what do students experience? When you meet with students, where do you put most of your attention: on preparing the content of the information you present to them or on reflecting on the factors that influence how students feel about their interactions with you?

EOP Director José Luis Vargas has long emphasized the necessity for all mentors who work with EOP students to be student-centered. Being student-centered means that mentors understand how students experience interactions with them. It means that they show students that they care about them. It also means that mentors are willing to make adjustments – both small and big – to better interact with students. Small adjustments are easy for mentors to make, and these small changes can have big impacts on how students experience mentoring. Consider the following examples and consider how only two or three small changes made by mentors can affect what students experience.

In different classrooms, Professor A and Professor B present the same material through an old-style lectures. Professor A lectures behind his

podium. He arrives to class precisely at the beginning of class and stops lecturing precisely at the end of class when he exits the classroom. He never smiles during his lecture. Professor B arrives to her classroom ten minutes early and chats with a few students who have also arrived early. She smiles at other students as they arrive to class. Although there is a podium in the class, she does not stand behind it. When class ends, she stays for a few minutes to talk to a few students. In which classroom do students feel more connected with the professor? Do students' feelings affect how much they learn in each classroom?

In different offices on a college campus, Advisor A and Adviser B meet with individual students for 15 minutes each to help them set up their schedule of classes for the coming semester. In Advisor A's office, she has students sit across from her large desk. During the 15-minute meeting, Advisor A talks for 12 minutes giving the student advice about which classes to take and detailed information about new university policies. In Advisor B's office, he has the student sit in a chair next to him so that both of them can look at papers on his desk. Advisor B talks for six minutes, and for the remainder of time he listens as the student talks about how he did in his classes during the past semester and challenges in his personal and family life that are affecting his academic performance. How does each student feel about the meeting with each advisor? Do the students' feelings affect what they learn from the advisor? Will these feelings influence whether the student will hold a follow-up meeting or contact the advisor for more information?

In one Peer Mentor Program helping freshmen, two peer mentors are asked to hold weekly meetings with a group of about 12 freshmen. Each meeting lasts about 30 minutes. Peer Mentor A uses the time in his meeting to present important information. He emphasizes college policies, reviews rules and regulations of the program that the freshmen are in, and expresses praise to a few students for doing well in their classes. Peer Mentor B uses her meeting as a time for students to get to know her more and to get to know each other better. She conducts an icebreaker at the beginning of the meeting. She holds a discussion, asking all participants how they are doing in classes and what challenges they are facing. She relates points from the discussion to college policies and rules and regulations in the program. From which meeting do students experience positive feelings? From which meeting do students gain the most information?

In different community groups, two activists are in charge of meetings consisting of about 15 immigrant parents. Activist A knows that the people coming to her meeting are very busy, so she begins her meeting on time and focuses on covering all the agenda points in 90 minutes. Activist B also realizes that people are busy. Even though her group has been meeting for about six months, she begins the meeting with a short activity suggested by participants on a rotating basis to help them know each other better so they can work together more effectively. Activist B also brings small snacks to her meeting. At which meeting do participants feel more comfortable? From which activist do they learn more?

The above examples point to the importance of very small things that teachers, advisors, peer mentors, and community activists can do to promote positive feelings in the people they interact with. Experienced mentors realize that these kinds of small steps can improve the quality of interactions with people they are helping, and positive feelings can lead to more opportunities for sharing knowledge. More importantly, positive feelings make people – especially students – feel more comfortable, allowing them to reconnect with mentors to follow up with questions and on things they don't quite understand.

The work of teachers, advisers, community activists, and parents becomes more powerful when they learn how to infuse mentoring into their work. And even “little moments” of mentoring can have great impacts by changing how people feel about themselves and about others.