

Mentoring Matters

A LITTLE PUSH, GENTLE GUIDANCE AND UNIQUE OPPORTUNITIES PROPEL STUDENTS TO ACHIEVE MORE THAN THEY THOUGHT POSSIBLE

By Kim Bower-Spence



Tom Thomas, right, administered personality and career tests to help Amanda Lewis, left, confirm a communications major was a good fit for her.

PHOTO BY JASON JONES PHOTOGRAPHY

SALVATORE AGOSTA '98 WAS convinced his interest in natural history couldn't translate into a job. So as a student at Wilkes University, he needed direction to find an ordinary profession that held his interest.

Enter biology professor Mike Steele. "Mike steered me away from doing something ordinary by showing me the path to a career doing something that I would do for free," explains this northern New Jersey native. Now in the last year of a five-year doctoral program in ecology at University of Pennsylvania, he studies how different plants impact the growth, development and survival of the caterpillars that eat them. And he does that in the tropical dry forests of northwestern Costa Rica's Guanacaste Conservation Area.

One-on-one relationships with professors are common at small universities. But Paul Adams, vice president of student affairs, says Wilkes takes it further. "It's the culture of the institution. And while there are numerous and separate initiatives aimed at developing different aspects of mentoring relationships, what we're really doing is initiating and fostering that culture and taking it to a greater level. We're working to assure that everyone who wants to be engaged in such a relationship at the university has an opportunity to do so."

The challenge is to not institutionalize the natural, organic nature of the process — to not create a mechanized system but rather nurture conditions that allow relationships to evolve naturally. Notes Adams: "Education is about people learning and changing and developing, and that involves risk."

Research Boost

All faculty in the biology department run their own research programs in their own research space. Freshmen can volunteer to help with research projects. And at least five paid summer research positions are available for undergraduates, with free housing provided on campus. “We try to provide those opportunities for full-time research,” says biologist Steele. “Research defines much of our culture, and we really believe it has made for a much more dynamic and exciting atmosphere for our students and provides much more opportunity for career development.”

Many students work on two or three research projects before they get to their senior project. Notes Steele: “This is how a graduate student would learn science.” And that translates into a good number of students entering the best doctoral programs in the country.

That includes Agosta, who now studies with renowned Penn scientist Dan Janzen. Agosta credits Mike Steele’s mentorship with helping get him there. “Mike’s research program is well-designed to foster and nurture the interests of undergraduates.”

He is currently writing his dissertation, with plans to defend in May 2007. Afterward, he hopes to continue his research in tropical ecology.

Agosta adds: “Initially, undergraduates like me have only a foggy idea of what ecology is and what it means to do research.

Through his mentoring and friendship, Mike helps lift this fog, which is the first step to defining one’s goals and harnessing one’s ambition.”

Finding a Path

For Amanda Lewis ’06 of Somerset, N.J., defining that ambition was the challenge. She arrived at Wilkes undecided on a major but with a passion for dance. She met Tom Thomas, executive director of University College, when he taught a freshman foundations course. Two years later, as a junior, she looked him up, and he remembered her.

Even though Thomas wasn’t her advisor,

he took time to administer a personality test and a career test to gauge whether a communications major was a good fit.

“I was so overwhelmed in college. I didn’t know there were so many choices in my career path,” acknowledges Lewis, who works as a Relay for Life coordinator for the American Cancer Society. “He showed me the light that there was something I was good at. He just gave me that little extra push, and I was able to take it from there.”

Building confidence is a big part of the mentor’s role, Thomas asserts. “If we as mentors have confidence in someone and we point out their strengths, they’re more likely to listen because they see us as being objective.”

Beyond the Comfort Zone

Gabe LeDonne ’05 planned on a college path that would launch his career as a political reporter. He became editor of “The Beacon” and a mentee of advisor Andrea Frantz, who encouraged him to “get out of your comfort zone.”

With her prodding, this Lake Wallenpaupack, Pa., native accepted a position as a financial reporter with SNL Financial, based in central Virginia. Writing about investing and the financial services industry was foreign to this communications studies and English double-major with no business background. “I’m gaining knowledge in something that I previously had no knowledge of at all, and now I enjoy it.”

Says Frantz: “My job is to be a sounding board. I need to listen and ask questions. My job as a mentor is as coach and supporter and advisor, someone who continues to push and advocate and even challenge ideas.”

And that doesn’t stop when student dons cap and gown. “I don’t believe in false openings and false closings of education,” she says. “Relationships established with students continue because learning never ends.” LeDonne and Frantz continue to touch base almost weekly.

Bridging Generations

Adams sees mentoring efforts tying together generations of alumni. As decades pass, the value of mentoring sustains itself and has really become part of Wilkes’ fabric.

Take Brian Summers ’90 and Beth Ann Horn ’08. “Having a mentor, somebody to lean on, is so important,” explains Summers, Skillman, N.J., who serves as chief operating officer of Construction Financial Management Association. Fellow Wilkes alumnus Jason Griggs recruited him to participate in a Sidhu School of Business and Leadership program that pairs sophomores with alumni mentors. Summers and Horn corresponded via email over an eight-week period in spring 2006.



Junior Beth Horn reworked her resume and focused her marketing ambitions as a result of e-mail communications with alumni mentor Brian Summers. PHOTO BY EARL AND SEDOR



Mary Waldorf, left, teaches communication and team building while belaying for students like Michael Lewis, right, in UCOM's Recreation and Athletic Center. PHOTO BY EARL & SEDOR

Horn, of Roseland, N.J., credits Summers with helping her focus her career interests. She hadn't realized that within marketing, her chosen concentration, she could go into promotion or research. She's already updated her resume to reflect Summers' suggestion that she highlight how her employers to date had benefited from her efforts.

"I'm more focused now, so I'm more confident about what I'm going to do in the future," reports Horn, who's never met Summers in person.

Summers benefited from the discussions too, picking up ideas he'll use in mentoring his own staff, and in establishing a mentoring program to groom his association members for leadership. And Horn's determination reminds him to "prepare a little more for things I don't see. There's more for me out there, and I'd better be prepared."

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– Salvatore Agosta '98

Student to Student

The nurturing culture permeates right down to students. Upperclassmen often help and encourage classmates through programs like E-mentoring (see fall 2006 issue) and the Writing Center.

Matt Zebrowski '06 benefited both from mentoring and serving as a mentor to others. An English major now studying linguistics at Temple University, he began working in the Wilkes Writing Center as a freshman. He served several semesters as a writing fellow, coaching fellow students who needed extra help in English 101 and 120.

"If education is done right, it is mentoring," reasons Zebrowski, who comes from a family of teachers in Laffin, Pa. "I don't really see the two as distinct."

Zebrowski and Patrick Austin '07 are developing an online writing center based on MySpace.com to expand consulting services and allow students to direct papers to tutors best able to help them. A mentoring mini grant allowed English professor and Writing Center Director Chad Stanley to take the two students to a writing conference at University of Illinois, where they presented the concept.

Says Stanley: "I love the mentoring culture at Wilkes. It's wonderful to see it being funded and supported."

Grants and mini-grants augment and encourage mentoring at Wilkes University. Among projects funded are:

- Scholarly research projects in biology. The program funds paid summer research positions for undergraduates.
- Sidhu School of Business and Leadership mentors. All sophomores studying business have opportunity to pair with alumni mentors.
- Writing mentors and writing associates programs. Students are paid to coach and assist fellow students with writing assignments.
- Mini-grants to promote travel to conferences such as an October 2006 Chicago Writing Center Conference at University of Illinois and a national clinical competition for pharmacy students.

To learn how you can help nurture the mentoring culture at Wilkes University, contact (800) WILKES-U ext. 4130 or alumni@wilkes.edu. Summers invites anyone with questions to contact him at bsummers@patmedia.net.

Climbing Higher

Mentorship sometimes happens in surprising places. Michael Lewis, a junior mechanical engineering major and a cadet with the Air Force Reserve Officer Training Corps Detachment 752 on campus, names Mary Waldorf '01, coordinator of student development, as his mentor. "Mary is my advisor for the National Society of Leadership and Success and a co-belayer for the Wilkes rock wall." For those unfamiliar with climbing, a belayer is the person who secures the ropes to ensure climbers don't fall very far if they slip.

Waldorf headed the project to bring a rock wall and ropes course to the Recreation and Athletic Center in the University Center on Main (UCOM). She says it adds an experiential adventure component to leadership training — and an opportunity for mentoring. "At Wilkes, our doors are always open to the students. This mentality gives us, the faculty and staff, the opportunity to learn as much from students like Mike as they can learn from us."

Adds Lewis: "Mary inspires me with her optimistic view on life and positive attitude. Although she has a very busy job at Wilkes University, she always finds time for students. She serves as a constant reminder to me of the motto 'Mission first, people always.'"

Can't Be Contrived

Thomas asserts that the most important factor in a mentoring relationship is respect. "I truly don't believe that it is a contrived or artificial relationship. I don't think it's something you can set out to become."

He says: "Oftentimes when someone assigns us to that mentoring role, it is not because we have done more than we would for any other student. These are the kinds of relationships we want to develop with all our students."

Concludes Adams: "Every encounter — no matter with whom — is a moment of truth and frames our future encounters and relationships."

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— Amanda Lewis '06