

## Mentoring

Facilitated by Luke Auburn

**Luke Auburn:** You're listening to the RIT Professional Development podcast series; I'm your host Luke Auburn. I recently spoke with 13 RIT faculty and staff members from various levels and backgrounds about their experiences with professional development, and they shared their stories about what worked for them and how they got to where they are today. While their career paths, fields of expertise and perspectives were all unique, there was a common thread between most of the people I spoke with: they credited their mentors with much of their success.

Positive mentorship experiences can be a critical part of professional development. Warren Bennis, a pioneer of leadership studies, advised those concerned about advancing their careers to "make sure you have someone in your life from whom you can get reflective feedback."

Dr. Sandy Johnson, RIT's senior vice president for student affairs, believes that mentors can take many shapes and forms.

**Dr. Sandy Johnson:** So I've had both. You know, I've had teachers from classes, I've had, you know, supervisors, certainly. Other times it's been a colleague who's kind of gone off and done other things, and I call them for you know, as a sounding board and a trusted colleague. So, you know, when I think of mentors, it doesn't mean that somebody had to shepherd me through, you know, five years of this or that. It's somebody that you trust in your network, that will be honest with you, usually that has some level of expertise in a particular area. Or really knows you well and will help you kind of sort out some of your thinking. So you know, some of my mentors now have gone on to different kinds of careers. Some have retired, you know, but you maintain a connection to them, because you've learned from them, you know? And what you want to do is you always want to be giving back. You almost feel like an obligation to update them as to what's going on with you. So I think it changes, and I think that that's the beauty of having that good, supportive professional network.

**Luke Auburn:** Some of the people I spoke with had several different mentors along the way throughout their careers, while others formed special bonds with specific individuals. Dr.

Watters, RIT's Senior Vice President for Finance and Administration, credited a mentor who helped propel him early in his life.

**Dr. Watters:** My mentor at the University of Pittsburgh, Mr. Dutton, I think probably had the greatest influence, because he caught me early on in grad school and gave me some great career advice. Mentored me along the way and then ultimately gave me my first real administrative finance job, and then just literally killed me with throwing me into complex things with very little safety net. And it was sink or swim and if you really were you know drinking from a fire house come back and see him, and he would put a plug in for a while.

But having had that kind of exposure to very big complex institutional finance issues was invaluable training for me. I started out dealing with offshore insurance companies in the medical malpractice arena, pit them for companies and then I was involved with him in the running of those companies so I got to see international operations. I got to see investments internationally, risk mitigation, risk enterprise, and then eventually I took over internal aspects of the university under him. But his thing always was for me was putting me in a position to try and make money. He wanted me to be the guy that evaluated money opportunities and to just look at ways to make money. And so I've always been predisposed to think that way and that's probably solely attributed to him and his mentorship.

**Luke Auburn:** Another person who met his most crucial influence as a student was Danny Maffia, a lecturer who teaches various courses in the American Sign Language/English Interpretation Department.

**Danny Maffia:** So there's an interpreter-- an interpreter researcher and educator that I really look up to. Her name is Robin Dean. She's a mentor of mine and she's very well known in our profession. She's well known for a lot of her work in her research. And so when I first met her, I first met her when I was a student, and when I met her she said to me you're going to be our next professional organization's president. And when she said that to me I, you know, at the time I thought-- I was shocked, first of all, that she was even talking to me, one, which is dorky now, especially because we're good friends. But I think that really-- her belief in me really is what inspired me to work hard. And she has always been there as a mentor for me since, you know, the very beginning. She was on my thesis committee. I turned to her for everything.

What's funny is we were both hired on as faculty at the same time. She's in a tenure-track position and I'm a lecturer but we-- It was, kind of, funny that we both were hired at the same time. I don't know, it's just-- It was kind of-- It was just an interesting trajectory for us both. She, while I was getting my master's degree she was getting her PhD in Scotland. And it just so happened that, you know, the positions opened, the lecturer and the tenure-track and we both got it at the same time. It's just an interesting way how things, kind of, come full circle.

But definitely she was the one who was in support. She was the one who had told me about the master's degree that I applied to. She has given me opportunities where I'm able to this summer I'll be traveling to Australia to work with Australian sign language interpreters and be presenting around the country there. And it was because of her networks and her belief and her educating me and cultivating me as a professional, I think was the biggest push.

**Luke Auburn:** If you haven't found your mentor just yet, don't panic. Dr. Gerry Buckley, President of NTID says there are plenty of opportunities at the university to connect with mentors.

**Dr. Gerry Buckley:** Take advantage of the resources here at RIT. We just -- we have a marvelous array of resources at RIT and here at NTID. Take advantage of it. Use those resources. Talk to your peers. Identify mentor and older faculty members, that person, and ask for help, support, and assistance because people here are very committed to helping the professional growth of everyone. So I just think there is a sea of opportunities. When someone says, Oh, I can't find something; it's probably because they're not looking enough. There really are people throughout the campus, throughout the university who are committed to supporting the professional growth of individuals.

So my advice really to faculty here is really also very special. Our standards are rising for faculty development. Research and scholarship is a new area. It's not necessarily new for the university but it's an enhanced emphasis. So faculty have to be more focused in their careers on the scholarly part of their portfolio, the research part of their portfolio, and balancing that with teaching excellence that's required of everyone. And so my advice to people is really be very mindful in the faculty area of what you were hired to do and what the expectations are, and then make sure you seek out the appropriate mentoring and guidance to satisfy those expectations.

**Luke Auburn:** Not all mentors have to be older or more tenured. Lynn Wild, Assistant Provost for Teaching and Learning Services, sees value in what she calls “reverse mentoring.”

**Lynn Wild:** With technology being infused in all our roles, it’s up to us to keep, to keep ahead of things and to keep current. And to have a curiosity. I think once you think you know everything, you’re probably dead [laughter]. You know, because there’s always something to learn. And we do reverse mentoring, too. So a younger person like you has a lot that you could teach someone like me. Plus, of course, the web is fantastic. Hot water and the web are two things I couldn’t live without [laughter]. So, you know, I think for all of us, that’s how we stay fresh, current, and are able to advance, move, and enjoy our lives, really.

**Luke Auburn:** You can even take a collaborative approach to mentorship with your peers and those who report to you, according to Sophia Maggelakis, Dean of RIT’s College of Science.

**Sophia Maggelakis:** I’m very blessed to have a very good leadership team and we meet every week. We discuss challenges and what we have to work with, our projects. And we also meet once a month over some refreshments. And we choose to read various articles that are related to leadership and professional development, and we discuss them and try to connect what we’ve learned with our everyday experiences and see how this, what we read, can help us with the various cases that we’re dealing with. And also, it creates a relaxant environment where those who have difficulties like we just said earlier, well, how do you find mentors? I see that group as my mentoring group and they see it as their mentoring group. So, we are mentors for each other. So, they share best practices on how they dealt with a particular case and others learn from it. So, that’s how we go about it discussing and in reading these articles and trying to learn from each other.

**Luke Auburn:** So if you haven’t already, seek out mentors who can help you find your career path or act as a mentor to those who can use your guidance. And remember the words of New York Times bestselling author Marshall Goldsmith: “If you want to improve your performance at almost anything, your odds of success improve considerably the moment you enlist someone to help you.” This concludes another edition of the RIT Professional Development podcast series. For more information on how you can develop your career, visit [rit.edu/cpd](http://rit.edu/cpd).