Statement on Teaching and Mentoring

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After 44 nearly years on the College faculty at NYU I have come to appreciate that teaching and mentoring constitute a compact between the instructor and the student, a compact that often extends beyond a given class and possibly for a lifetime. I am still in touch with dozens of former students and-in some cases-with their children who have followed their parents to NYU. Many of them return years later for guidance, for letters of recommendation, or for informal chats over coffee. Thus, I see teaching and mentoring as a life-long commitment to students that doesn't end at the classroom door. There are also times when I ask former students who have been successful in their careers to return to campus to address (and hopefully inspire) current undergraduates.

Teaching involves not simply transmitting information but imparting skills in accessing, organizing, and critically analyzing it. I want to enable my students to interpret and to historically contextualize current issues and intellectual challenges that confront them on an everyday basis. I also want them to make connections and interrelationships between various cultures over time and space.

In determining whether my course objectives have been met I frequently administer a 3-minute non-graded anonymous quiz at the end of a class session asking them what was most interesting in the lecture and what was confusing and needs clarification. In constructing examinations, I encourage students (and my Teaching Assistants) to suggest questions as well as overall format. Thus, there is a collective sense of 'ownership' of the course. At the beginning of each semester I try to minimize the sense of intimidation by emphasizing that we are all students, all learners. I also relate how in my youth I became a serious student of history and the experiences that fired my passion for the discipline and my commitment to the profession.

To encourage qualities of empathy and sympathy in student character development I will often employ the 'case study' approach to teaching by introducing historical 'crises' and assigning roles for each student to play. While this can add drama and excitement to a course it also forces the student actors to put themselves in the position of real people facing challenges that require collective memory and the ability to work synergistically to formulate and implement plans of action. They must also reflect on historical precedents to guide them in their collective deliberations.

In mentoring students I maintain extensive open files in the department not only on student opportunities for work and study in Africa but on graduate programs here and overseas. And in my capacity as faculty advisor to our undergraduate journal 'Historian,' I encourage my mentees as well as students in my courses to contribute honors theses and papers they have written in their various seminars. Finally, as faculty advisor to the Phi Alpha Theta National History Honor Society, I have encouraged our best students to strive for excellence and to ensure that it will be recognized and rewarded through election to the organization.