

[Welcome to Column 5 of Hey Jane! This is a project of the SWS Career Development Committee. Questions and answers are generated by the committee and SWS members. Answers are compiled from several anonymous sources. All columns are archived on our committee's page on the SWS website.]

(Important addition to the last column on meeting scholars in your area of specialization: Do not be discouraged if you are sometimes, or even frequently, rebuffed. Just keep at it and you'll learn to feel sorry for people who are legends in their own minds. Just come to the SWS hospitality room and you'll feel better.)

February 21, 2004

HEY JANE!

Do I need a mentor? What would I talk to a mentor about? How do I find a mentor?

JANE SAYS:

We need mentors at all levels of our professional lives. There is always someone out there who is farther along in your areas of interest than you are and knows things to help make things smoother for you. Mentors can help with specifics on teaching, research, service, administration, and generals such as your overall career path.

Mentors do not need to be formal relationships, but can be as informal as asking a more senior colleague a question every once in a while. Mentors also do not need to be big shots, but can be anyone at any level at any institution who can offer genuine advice and experience.

\*\* What would I even ask a mentor? \*\*

Some ideas:

\* Searches and hiring: How are hiring/admission decisions made at the school? How are faculty positions argued for? What mistakes do candidates make when they visit? What impressed you most about candidates you remember?

\* Managing a career: What is it like to work in an institution where you may be the only faculty member who works on a particular topic? How difficult did you find the transition from graduate student to faculty member? Assistant professor to associate? Associate to full? What is the administrative structure like at our institution?

\* Colleagues: Have you collaborated with others? If so, how did you start the collaboration process? Are you encouraged or discouraged from doing work with others? Has this changed through the course of your career? What roles do your colleagues play in your intellectual life? Who do you speak with to get emotional/substantive/methodological support on articles, etc?

\* Teaching: What are the opportunities/challenges offered by the classes that you teach on a regular basis? What are you trying to accomplish intellectually in disciplinary courses? What are some of the instructional strategies that you deploy to reach these goals? What are your teaching strategies for large lectures? Discussions? Syllabi construction? Managing difficult students? Handling difficult material? Showing videos?

\* Autobiography as it pertains to your job: Your mentor has a personal history of her own, and this history may hold important lessons that can only be learned through a kind of personal narrative. How did you come to teach at this campus? How did you make the decision to become a sociologist? What were the constraints on you when you were up for review/tenure/defending a dissertation?

\* Questions to avoid!!

-- Gossip about other faculty members, students, etc.

-- Complaints about how hard you have it in comparison

-- Personal questions (e.g., Why did you decide not to have children? Why did you only have one child? If it is relevant and they think you could learn something from this, they'll offer the topic up for discussion themselves. It's a very personal question.)

\*\* How do I find a mentor? \*\*

Some ideas:

\* SWS has three programs available! The Professional-Needs Mentoring Program matches members with a more experienced member on a specific project the mentee needs help with (<http://newmedia.colorado.edu/~socwomen/about/mentor.html>). The Hand Program addresses the scariness of going to professional meetings for the first time by connecting new members to more experienced members (<http://newmedia.colorado.edu/~socwomen/about/hand.html>). There is also the Sister-to-Sister Program for women of color with ABS (<http://newmedia.colorado.edu/~socwomen/meetings/summersister.html>).

\* When looking for a mentor, mentees should have a clear idea of what kinds of things they want help with. If someone wants a mentor to help them publish, that's a very different kind of mentor and thus mentoring relationship than someone who offers periodic career advice.

\* Choose mentors who will have both the time and energy to help with whatever task(s) you need assistance with. It is a very different request to ask someone to read an article you're working on, then to ask someone to read your entire dissertation or book manuscript.

\* Know how to appropriately approach a potential mentor. With the Professional-Needs mentoring program we take care of that for the mentee, but in other cases the mentee should know what is appropriate to ask and what is asking too much from a particular mentor. There is a certain level of tact required. Don't ask for too much too soon or you might turn off the potential mentor. Start small. As with any relationship (friend, romantic, etc.) you have to build the relationship from the ground up before asking a lot of the person.

\* Don't overlook the valuable mentoring that can come from others at your career stage. Some of the best mentors during grad school, for examples, are other grad students.

\* Mentors can be found in your own department, in other departments at your university, in the SWS membership (winter meetings are great for meeting fellow SWSers), at regional associations, in your ASA section, at ASA sessions – anywhere that you have contact with other people in your profession. Don't discount anyone since you never know who might have a brilliant answer to your question.

CAVEAT to all professional advice: Always check with your departmental colleagues, chair, dean, etc. to find out what the norms and expectations are in your institution.

I hope this helps! Stay tuned next month for Question 6 on how to manage a mentee-mentor relationship!

-- Jane