

# **MENTORING** **Doctoral Students** *in* **Higher Education**

AN INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

**Michael F. Burnett**



**A VOLUME IN INTERNATIONAL HIGHER EDUCATION**

**Mentoring Doctoral Students  
in Higher Education:  
An International Perspective**

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# **Mentoring Doctoral Students in Higher Education: An International Perspective**

BY

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# DEDICATION

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This book is dedicated to the two people who first taught me the meaning of honor, integrity, honesty, and true caring.

The first I would mention is my paternal grandfather (I called him Pa.). During the early years of my life, my dad (who had only a high school diploma) worked as much (including overtime) as he possibly could to provide for his family. Consequently, he was not there as much as he would have liked to be or as I would have liked him to be. However, I probably did not miss his presence so much because my Pa was always there. Pa taught me about the importance of having a strong work ethic, he taught me about the importance of being honest and always behaving in an honorable manner. He taught me about the true meaning of the saying “A man is only as good as his word.” He taught me all these things not by the words he said but by the example he set.

A little later, my family’s financial situation became a bit more stable, and my dad was able to spend more time with me. This is when I really got to know my dad. My dad cared about his family more than words can express, but my dad cared about everyone. Because of this he freely volunteered his time to work with boys’ church groups (mostly the RA’s – Royal Ambassadors), consequently, much of my time with my dad was with 10 to 20 other young boys. I would probably have been more jealous had it not been for my growing relationship with Pa.

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I guess the true nature of my dad's caring did not become really clear to me until I was about 17 years old. My dad had accepted a pastorate at a small church in a community located in my hometown of Spartanburg, South Carolina. This was in 1978 in the Southern United States. Racism was rampant, and a group of Black Christian men were going to White churches and attempting to go in and join the Sunday morning worship service. Whether or not they were allowed to enter they never caused a disruption. If they were allowed to join the service, they simply sat on the back pew quietly until the service ended. They then thanked the minister and left. If they were not welcomed, they just left quietly. These Christian men were met with everything from locked doors to hostile threats. One day our church was in a business meeting after the Sunday morning service, and one of the deacons brought up the issue and proposed that we needed to devise a strategy for the best way to keep these Black men out if they tried to come into our church. The words that my dad said to the church membership are inextricably burned into my brain. I remember them as if he said them yesterday. He said,

Anyone who wants to come into our church and worship with us is welcome, and the day that this is not true is the day that I am no longer your pastor!

What a testimony! We lost members over his statement, and we were a stronger and better church without them. My dad always took the position that bigotry and hatred are always wrong but nowhere more so than in the church.

These and many other examples of honor, integrity and caring are why this book is dedicated to my dad and my Pa.

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# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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There are many people that I really need to acknowledge for having helped me to reach the point that I was able to write this book.

First, of course are my Pa and Dad. I will not say much here since the book is dedicated to them.

Secondly, I must acknowledge the individuals in my life that not only taught me about what a true mentor is but showed me as well.

Dr. John Rodgers was both my undergraduate and master's degree advisor and mentor. Dr. Rodgers was one of the most honorable men that God ever placed on this Earth, and it is impossible to adequately express what his advice, his mentorship and his example meant to me. Truly, 10 years into my career in higher education, every time I was faced with a BIG decision, I would call and talk with Dr. Rodgers. Of course, he never told me what to do, but just talking with him helped me see things more clearly.

When I entered my doctoral program, I figured that people like Dr. Rodgers would be noticeably absent. However, what I found was Dr. J. David McCracken, Dr. L.H. Newcomb, and Dr. J. Robert Warmbrod.

Dr. McCracken was assigned as my major professor, and I could not have asked for a better person to fill that role. He was an honest, decent, caring man. In other words, he was honorable. He directed me through my doctoral program and helped me to avoid the "land mines" that can cause a person to experience long delays or even failure. I truly appreciate him for this. I learned MANY things about being a good doctoral advisor that I still use today.

Dr. L. H. Newcomb was one of the members of my general exam committee. At Ohio State at that time, a doctoral student had two committees – one for the general exam and then another committee for the dissertation. The second committee was called a writing committee, and it did not have to be the same people except for the major professor. When I went to LH to ask him to be a member of my writing committee, he told me that he did NOT believe in what I was studying, however, he said, “But I believe in YOU, so if you want me to be one the committee I will for YOU!” I called him about a year before I found a publisher for this book and asked him if he would be willing to read the book and give me feedback. He said that he had been retired for several years and that not a week went by that he did not get a request similar to mine. He said that thus far he had never accepted one. However, he said, “But if you want me to review your book I will do so because I believe in you!” How could I ever live my life without caring about people when I have these types of examples that have shown me the way through their lives.

I MUST acknowledge the contributions of Dr. J. Robert Warmbrod. Dr. Warmbrod was the other member of both my general exam committee and my writing committee. Dr. Warmbrod passed away about a year ago, and our profession lost the most influential individual that has ever worked in our field. I dare say that you could not go into any Agricultural Education program in the United States without finding the influence of Dr. Warmbrod. Dr. Warmbrod taught a sequence of research courses when I entered the program at OSU, but he moved into administration and soon ceased to teach the courses. In fact, I had the entire sequence of four courses, the last time he taught them all. The semester I was enrolled in the first research course, there were 250 students in the course. Based on the program enrollment and the students that were early in their program, the most AGED students that could have been enrolled in the course was about 25-30. Students came from all over campus to take his courses. The word was on the OSU campus that if you could not understand research when Dr. Warmbrod taught it, you might just as well quit and go home. Dr. Warmbrod was the BEST teacher I have ever had the pleasure to know. It was his influence that made me understand what I wanted to be. It was at the break midway through the second session of the first in his sequence of courses, and I was standing in the hall on the second floor of the Agricultural Administration Building at OSU when I had an epiphany. I knew at that moment that I wanted to do what Dr. Warmbrod did. I wanted to teach research and I wanted to do it as well as he did. Well, my friends and even faculty told me, don’t expect to be able to teach research right away. In most AGED programs in the nation, it is generally reserved for the “Elder Statesman” in the program. At our first faculty meeting just before the beginning of the Fall 1980 semester at LSU, we were discussing course assignments, and Dr. Charles W. (Billy) said, “I do not know what else you will be teaching this Fall, but you WILL be teaching that damned research course, because I have been teaching it and I hate it!” In good old Brer Rabbit fashion, I said, “Please don’t throw me in that briar patch,”

and I 43 years later, I am still teaching it and four other course I modeled after Dr. Warmbrod's sequence of courses at OSU. Now, I tell my students every semester that everyone who does not get to learn research from Dr. Warmbrod is being cheated. I have accepted that I will never be half the teacher that he was, but I DO keep trying! I would be happy if I could just reach the halfway point of the teacher that he was. I wish he were here to read this because I do not know if I ever told him just how much he meant to me.

Another acknowledgement that is essential is the students with whom I have worked these 43 years. I have directed 172 doctoral dissertations (one completed as recently as last Friday) and 30 master's theses. Without exception, each of these students has been truly outstanding. We had a professor in Education at one time that taught statistics to all our doctoral students, and she told me that our students were her favorite ones to teach. When I asked her why, her response pleased me but honestly did not surprise me that much. She said it was their work ethic. She said that our students were not necessarily brighter than others, but she never worried about them being successful because she knew they would work at it until they got it.

I would truly love to recognize some of my very best students by name, but I am not sure where I would stop, and you really do not want to read a list of 200 plus names. I do not know why my students ascribe so much of their success to me, but I tell them that one common flaw among all my students is that they give me WAY too much credit for their success, and they ARE successful. I have had a doctoral graduate who was 29 years old when she finished her doctorate and a student who was 62 when she finished. Let me just suffice e it to say that I do not know why such wonderful students have come my way, but I am truly thankful for each and every one of them.

I would also be remiss if I did not acknowledge my wife (Ann) and my three daughters (Kara, Lauren, and Hope) for their patience and understanding with having to share my caring and concern for them the way I did with my dad. I wish there had been a Pa here to fill in the holes. I do love each of them more than I can express with mere words, and I fear that there have been times when they perceived reasons to doubt that. Please know that I love each of you beyond words, and I could not have been successful without your love and support.

Thank you.

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# PREFACE

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Before I begin telling you about the lessons that I have learned while working as a doctoral advisor, I should probably tell you just a little about myself and a few of my experiences that may qualify me to say some things about doctoral advising and mentorship.

I was born in 1951, which of course tells you that I have at least had the opportunity to have had a lot of experience. Early in my academic career, I heard a highly respected high school principal from Washington State make the comment that when examining the experience of the teachers you are supervising, you must distinguish a teacher who has 25 years of experience from one who has one year of experience 25 times over. I have not been able to recall or locate his name or I would give him appropriate credit for this comment; but, in any case, I do not claim it as original with me. This comment caused me to carefully examine my career and the things that I had learned from my experiences thus far. One very important aspect of this is to learn from the mistakes that you make, but I think it also means to learn from the successes you have. I promised myself that from that point I would try to learn something from all my doctoral advising experiences, and I think I can truthfully say that I have accomplished this purpose. But I digress, so let me get back to telling you a little about my background.

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I grew up in Spartanburg, South Carolina in the 1950s and 60s. This is actually about two-thirds correct. My home in Spartanburg was rather typical of that time. It was multi-generational since my maternal Grandmother came to live with us before I was born, and she brought with her my mother's nephew. My cousin lived with us until he was grown, and my grandmother lived with us until a severe stroke forced her into a nursing home. My Dad had a high school diploma and was a veteran of World War II. Actually, he did not see fighting, but he was stationed in Japan in the occupation forces after the atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki which led to Japan's surrender. In the first six or seven years of my life, my Dad worked in the rail yards for the Southern Railway Company, and he loved his work. The railroad companies went through some very difficult times in the mid to late 1950s, and my Dad often found that his work was in another town at least and often in another state. Additionally, on occasions he went through periods when there was no work in Spartanburg and because of this he was temporarily laid off. My Mother was adamant that she would not move from Spartanburg, and so after a brief time in Kentucky, followed by six months without work my Dad sought other employment. He found a job with the United States Postal Service and spent the rest of his working life as a postal clerk. He hated the job from the day he started it to the day he retired from it some 30 years later. I remember as a small child overhearing a conversation between my parents about my dad returning to the Railroad when they called him back. My Dad clearly wanted to go, but my Mother said (very nearly if not a quote) "Do what you want, but I can remember Doris [my younger sister] crying because we did not have money to give her a mayonnaise sandwich." My Dad never looked back. Not only this, but he accepted as many hours of overtime as possible to provide us with the things we needed and wanted. Consequently, my Dad was not around a lot in my younger years.

The other third of my young life was spent with my paternal grandparents. They lived on a small farm in a tiny town called Moore, South Carolina just outside of Spartanburg, and they (especially my grandfather) ingrained in me many of the values that I still live by today. My Grandfather was of the period when a man's word was his bond, and if he shook hands on something, he considered that to be as binding as any legal contract in the world. I will share one story that exemplifies the kind of person who taught me much of my early values.

This happened when I was about 16 years old, and I was getting ready to go to my grandparents' farm for the weekend. My Grandfather called me and asked me to stop at the feed store and pick up a bag of horse feed. I did not realize until I was in the store that I did not have enough money to pay for the feed, and the man in the store that knew me was not working that afternoon. I learned later that the man who helped me was the owner of the store. I told the man my situation and told him that I had my checkbook, but I did not have the cash to pay for the feed. I asked if he would take my check. He said, "that depends—Who are you?" I told him my name and that my Grandfather (Weldon Burnett), was the one who asked