Mentoring Statement

Three decades ago family escaped from Vietnam, with a dream of a better life in the United States of America (USA). They had heard that America is the land of opportunity, and wanted me to have the freedom to pursue it. Our journey to the USA was half the battle. Once here, it was overwhelming and difficult then we had imagined. Especially, as the first in my family to go to college, it was hard to navigate through the system in order to direction and opportunities that were available to me. I had a deep desire to help people, but was not sure how best to pursue it. It was not until the mentorship I had received at the University of Florida that I was able to turn that desire into action.

My first exposure to structured mentorship was through the Career Resource Center’s Gator Launch program in 2005. As a mentee of Mr. George Gibbs at the Alachua County Health Department, I was exposed to a wide range public health opportunities, from being trained to provide HIV/AIDS testing and counseling to attending disaster training courses with veteran public officials. Through these opportunities and his mentorship, Mr. Gibbs was recognized as Mentor of the Year by the Gator Launch program, and through my hard work, he had successfully nominated me as Mentee of the Year. Armed with knowledge of what public health can do, I was eager to learn more about this field.

Though, it was not until I met Dr. Parker Small, Professor Emeritus and Dr. J. Glenn Morris, Professor and Director of the Emerging Pathogens Institute in 2009, that I was able to turn my desire into a career. Through their mentorship, I have played a key role in developing, implementing, and evaluating the nationally recognized School-Located Influenza Vaccination (SLIV) program in Alachua County, Florida, while completing my Master’s Degree in Public Health and now as a doctoral student studying influenza. The SLIV program is spearheaded by the Health Department, Public School System, and UF, which provides influenza vaccine to all school-age children. As the coordinator, I oversaw 900 volunteers, 30 community organizations (e.g. Black Nurses Association, United Way), and more than 30,000 immunizations. With the program, I have helped obtain $1.8 million in funding. And with my mentors’ guidance, I have been independently awarded $150,000 in research funding. More recently, I have been selected as one of three pre-doctoral students to receive a training fellowship from the Clinical and Translational Institute here are UF. This prestigious fellowship protects my time for research, and also allows me to mentor students.

Looking back at my academic career, none of these amazing opportunities would have been possible without strong mentorship. My mentors have possessed many wonderful qualities, of which I try to emulate and incorporate into my mentoring philosophy.

- Listen
  - Understand what their short and long term goals are (medical field or research)
  - Discuss potential opportunities that may help them accomplish these goals
- Facilitate
  - Provide opportunities (such as research projects or public health projects to be involved in)
  - Explain how their project fits in the “big picture”
  - Discuss and guide how they can accomplish their project
  - Step aside and allow them to “learn by doing”
  - Be given the tools to be successful
- Encourage / Support
  - Titrate responsibilities so they can be successful (and for them to gain self-confidence)
  - If the project does not work out, discuss why and possible solutions
Since 2009, I had the opportunity to mentor a diverse group of students: from high school seniors, undergraduates pursuing Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) or Social, Behavioral and Economic degrees (SBE) and masters’ level students in Public Health. This group encompasses: students that are first in their families to attend college, minorities in the STEM/SBE field, and students who are want to learn more about public health research. Aside from being a part of the Control Flu SLIV program, my mentees serve as research assistants. They meet with me separately to discuss their individual research projects and as a group. These group meetings provides them the opportunity to practice presenting research, learn how to read and discuss research papers, and how to interpret data with their peers and more senior students.

The 2013/14 academic year was especially rewarding. One of my mentees, Eduardo graduated with a Bachelor of Science in Health Sciences – with an honors thesis on a project stemmed from my dissertation. In two short years, Eduardo has written his very first manuscript that is being submitted to the Journal of Pediatrics, with him as first author and me as second. Further, he has successfully presented our research at several local meetings. Currently, Eduardo is in Ethiopia gaining global health experience before pursuing his Masters in Public Health next year. In addition, my three other mentees (two pre-med and one pre-public health) have successfully presented our research, and are now working on finishing up their projects for publication. My MPH student graduated after finishing up her special project with me and others at the Emerging Pathogens Institute. Many of my undergraduate mentees are pursuing advanced degrees in public health and medicine. My graduate mentees are working at the Centers for Disease and Control and Prevention and local public health agencies.

Aside from helping my students grow professionally, I have been blessed to be a part of their development in an intangible way (as my mentors have also). Many of my mentees struggle with traditional obstacles that many students face, such as finding a career path they are passionate about, and being confident in their ability to succeed. Additionally, how to meet the expectations their parents have placed on them, and probably even worse – the unreachable expectations they place on themselves. Helping them go through these issues or finding resources have motivated me to help more students (who were like me). I had always wondered how I could ever repay my mentors for their boundless patience, guidance, and confidence in me. It was not until I had mentees of my own, that I understood how extremely rewarding it can be to watch someone grow. This is my gift back to my mentors, and hope that my mentees will see the same rewards.