I remember having a lot of questions about what I should be doing, where I should focus my strengths, or how I could improve upon my weaknesses when I was an undergraduate. I was quite unsure about how to set myself up for a successful career while in college and much less sure about what steps I should take after college. I wish I had someone help me figure out all these things when I was younger - I would like to think I would have gotten here faster or, at least, taken a less rocky road. Now that I am in a place in my life where I know what I want and I know how to get accomplish it, I feel it is my responsibility to help guide others. This is why I put myself in my students’ shoes and speak to them as a colleague with the knowledge of all the things I wish I had someone tell me when I was an undergraduate. My mentoring philosophy is quite simple: to pull yourself up with one hand and help the next person up with the other.

I had to overcome some difficult obstacles to get where I am today. I emigrated to the US without speaking much English. My parents never saw the value of higher education because of their economic background and pushed me to get a job rather than further schooling. My high school counselor actually told me “Not all people are meant to go to college” during the meeting that is supposed to setup your career aspirations and future goals. That was a heavy blow. Nevertheless, I joined the National Guard to put myself through college soon after that, completing two Bachelor degrees and joining the US Army as an active duty Military Intelligence Officer, while completing a Master’s degree along the way. I find myself currently about a year away from completing my PhD in Political Science and becoming a college professor. I wonder what ever happened to that guidance counselor?

It all began when Professor Sheldon Simon asked me to be his Junior Fellow during my last semester at Arizona State University. Until then, I had changed majors twice and still had little clue what I wanted to do with political science. I was good at analyzing complex social systems with a critical eye and political science came naturally to me, but I didn't know how to translate that into a successful career. Participating in a seminar series on the cutting-edge of political science with the Junior Fellows Program and performing primary research that resulted in the publication of an article really opened my eyes and planted the seed of what would be my future career.

My transcripts were quite unfocused and somewhat weak until my last two years of college, so I decided to supplement my formal education with some “real” world experience by joining the US Army full-time in the wake of 9/11. I hoped this experience would prepare me for a possible career with the government in any one of the agencies dealing with international relations - the field I excelled in during college. I completed a Master’s degree in Political Science at the University of Louisville, attending full-time and working as a graduate assistant during my last year-and-a-half of active duty service, to improve my academic record and prepare myself for further graduate work.

These are the two major life experiences that most shaped my mentoring philosophy. As a college student that didn’t really know what to do with his life until it was a bit late, I learned to really appreciate the conversations I had with the professors involved with the Junior Fellows and the simple but sound career guidance they offered. As an officer in the military, I learned to
always take care of my soldiers as family, to see every mission from their various perspectives, and approach all problems with an open mind and the knowledge most situations requires an innovative solution. Whether it is my soldiers’ lives or my students’ career, I put myself in their shoes and make their problem my own.

One outstanding student asked me about possible research opportunities at the University of Florida last Spring semester, after not being able to find any on her own. As it turns out, there were none. She was quite disheartened about the prospects of applying for competitive internships and graduate programs without having any significant research experience. Her struggle reminded me that I owe much to those who helped me get where I am today.

I founded the Junior Fellows Program at the Department of Political Science to provide meaningful research experiences, insights into the profession of political science, and the ability to work closely with a faculty member or an advanced (ABD) graduate student in their current research project. The program is designed for advanced juniors and seniors wishing to gain the experience that will prepare them to succeed in their senior thesis work and/or stand out as they apply for research opportunities and advanced degrees. Junior Fellows have a hands-on experience with the innovative research performed at the Department of Political Science and gain valuable professional insight by working closely with their supervisor on a weekly-basis, attending a seminar series exploring the diversity of methods and approaches, and participating in a capstone research presentation workshop. I serve as the Junior Fellows Program director, beyond my duties as graduate teaching assistant to the department, to coordinate the matching of Junior Fellows with supervisors and their research projects, oversee the conduct of the various internal workshops, and manage the Junior Fellows exposure to professionalization events within and beyond the scope of political science.

Nine outstanding students currently participate in the Junior Fellows Program and I have mentored another five through their various stages of their career. Two have been admitted to top graduate programs in political science and law. The three others have gained valuable experiences through prestigious internships in DC or overseas and will be applying to graduate programs focusing on international development and international relations in the coming year. Another two are currently applying for various summer programs, taking the GRE, and participating in the Junior Fellows Program in preparation for graduate school - one of these being my own Junior Fellow. I thought about these successes when filling out the “career accomplishments” section of the application for this mentoring award and had a nice moment reflecting about the trajectory I have taken so far off the course I was set upon when I was younger. I know these students will also look back one day to extend a hand to next person as they pull themselves up with the other.

I don’t know if I have achieved enough to deserve this award but it certainly seems I might be able to do more good by it than by not applying for it. Receiving it will certainly increase the visibility of the Junior Fellows Program and the importance of becoming involved in mentoring undergraduate students within my department. I hope this award will allow me to organize a yearly workshop for graduate teaching assistants to explore this very important and highly formative dimension of their interaction with undergraduates. We have so many exceptional undergraduates in the Department of Political Science and they truly want to change the world. We simply owe them more.