

## **Sliding into a Career and Finding a Home in Family Science**

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**ABSTRACT.** Here I reflect on the teaching and mentoring aspects of my long-term career as a family scientist and discuss some early experiences that framed my career and later experiences that refined my skills in these important roles. Having been privileged to work with outstanding undergraduate and graduate students during my tenure at several universities, I use their comments to summarize several key lessons learned.

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The opportunity to reflect on one's career and take stock of the contributions made is rare. When asked to participate in this special opportunity, I agreed to do so willingly, but I wondered what, if anything, I could add that others' might find useful. Because I believe that my strongest contribution to family science has been as a teacher and mentor, I have elected to address these valuable aspects of my career. So, as a good social scientist, I pursued an informal data collection effort, asking some of my former students to tell me what stood out for them in being on the receiving end of my teaching and mentoring. Here, I share both some early experiences that fueled my passion for teaching in this discipline, as well as the characteristics of my mentoring as told through comments from former students.

### **Early Experiences That Framed My Career**

I am the child of working-class parents and was a first-generation college student in the 1960's. In fact, I am one of a very few among even later generations in my family who went to college and the only one to gain doctoral training. Thus, among my family and extended family, I stand out as different. Although family members are engaged in meaningful employment (e.g., truck drivers, massage therapists, corrections officers), few had or have jobs that are career driven and all consuming, and no one pursued work in the academy.

The experience of being a first-generation college student meant that there were few expectations except to "try your best" and no guidance on careers pursuits. My parents were just pleased that instead of joining the Peace Corp immediately following high school, I succumbed to their pleading to "at least try one year of college." Much to their surprise and mine, I flourished and continued my education for the next 7 years, receiving a B. S. degree in two majors (Home Economics and Spanish [I originally thought of becoming a Spanish teacher]) and obtaining masters' and doctoral degrees. The graduate degrees should not suggest intentionality on my part in determining my future. In today's jargon, I "slid" rather than decided to go to graduate school, although I was not without some sense of direction. For example, having completed a child development practicum experience during my senior year, I was clear that I wanted to work with young children in some capacity, and this interest was solidified after a short stint overseeing a daycare center in a local migrant camp in California the summer after graduation. I am convinced that I was hired because of my fluency in Spanish rather than my knowledge of child development and early childhood education or my non-existent professional experiences beyond college. It was this brief experience and the insight gained by working with the children and their families in the camp that I attribute to setting me on the path to family science. In fact, I have fond memories of the Mexican migrant parents welcoming me (the only professional in the center who could converse in Spanish) into their homes for required home-visits at 5:00 a.m. I know that they were astonished that I was so interested in the welfare of their children that I showed up before dawn when they headed to the fields. Although I was a naive, young White woman of comparative privilege and held the revered position of teacher, I successfully communicated my appreciation of their children and their commitment to keep them at the center and out of the fields; they saw education, even at this very early point, as a key to the future.

I recall announcing to my family that I wanted to work with children and “save them from poverty.” I know that my mother simply rolled her eyes in response. However, I had no real concept of how to realize this goal. My college sweetheart and then” husband planned to pursue a doctoral degree at Indiana University, so as any good wife of the time, I applied to graduate school late and followed him in his pursuit of his goals. I had no clear goal for advancing my education, which was yet another example of my early “sliding” into an unknown future.

It was during my master’s program that I met and worked with Dr. John F. Crosby, a professor in the Department of Home Economics and whom I credit for sparking my passion in teaching and mentoring me to develop best practices. (I taught multiple discussion groups accompanying his large-lecture course on marriage and families.) Our ongoing dialogue about teaching that engages students in the learning process, strategies for effective classroom management, and methods of evaluating student learning that instilled critically thinking about content and application to their lives were all lessons well learned in those early years. Additionally, it was these early experiences in teaching undergraduates that gave me a sense of purpose and a clear goal to pursue a career in the academy, not understanding that choosing this career involved a good deal more than teaching. In fact, I reasoned that if I was going to “save” children, I needed to do so in a bigger way than teaching preschool myself or administering early childhood education programs...it was going to be in educating teachers and through this reaching more children. For this and other reasons (convenience and the likelihood of coursework completion in the remaining 12 months of my former husband’s doctoral program), I entered a doctoral program in 1972 that emphasize early childhood education and allowed me to build upon my emphasis in child and family studies from my master’s program.

As I hurried to complete the doctoral degree and took my first job ABD (something I counseled against as I later mentored students), I was hired as a new faculty by a California university catering to commuter students, teaching a 4:4 semester load consisting of six unique preparations. I recall that first year as one in which I stayed one lecture ahead of the students and had to face classes where the majority were older than me at 24. They had no idea how much I learned from them, although they thought learning was all in the other direction. Unknowingly, they were my willing guinea pigs, as I worked to find meaningful ways to connect them with the class content. Because I maintained relationships with several of them over time, they shared with me that these connections resulted, in part, from my expressions of concern for their learning, holding them to high expectations while convincing them of their competence, and igniting their excitement about the theories, ideas, and research that could be applied to their everyday lives. I believe that much of my teaching ability was honed in those first four years, as I actively sought feedback from students and peers and engaged in a good deal of self-reflection with the goal of constantly improving what I did and how I did it – something that continued to mark my efforts over my career.

As the saying goes, “You’ve come a long way, baby.” Now 43 years later, I realize that “sliding” into the decision to go to graduate school and taking that first job at a teaching university set the stage for my making deliberate choices later. Such choices often included changing my university affiliation to pursue new experiences that would foster my growth and development and challenge me in new ways. Having been on the faculty of six different HDFS

departments in six universities (four of which did not offer doctoral training) with unique academic cultures, there were notable lessons learned that helped to mold me as a family scientist, teacher, and mentor. For example, my move to Washington State University (WSU) in 1978 resulted in finding a second academic home outside my own department among the faculty “up the hill” in sociology. They welcomed me into their daily morning coffee sessions where we engaged in critical dialogue about ideas and theories, and I sought mentorship from well-known scholars for my budding research program on remarriage and my practice interest in educating fathering as parents. Through these relationships, I took my first steps in becoming a scholar and mentor of graduate students. At WSU I learned how to collaborate well (thank you, Dr. Marilyn Ihinger-Tallman), reaching out and learning from those (including graduate students) who had different expertise and skills (e.g., Drs. Viktor Gecas, Don Dillman). This resulted in my growing confidence as a professional that marked a career of connecting with many others both within and outside of family science who graciously shared their insights and expertise. These early years also helped to honor my insatiable curiosity and excitement about learning, strong work ethic (thanks to my very hardworking stepfather), and caring spirit and willingness to give of my time, energy, and resources, all the while trusting that there would incredible pay offs that would not come in the form of fame or fortune.

From WSU, I would move on to the University of Kentucky for 3 short years, a move that resulted in what I now see as a “slide in disguise,” because I let my ego cloud my thinking. I learned in short order that I had not made the best choice, got much clearer about the kind of departmental/university culture I wanted, permanently terminated any continued interest in early childhood education to focus exclusively on family science, and began the search for a university that would provide a better fit professionally. I found that fit in Colorado State University where an early mentor from my master’s program, Dr. Jerry Bigner, was also on the faculty, so I had an immediate support system, making the move even more attractive. Although I continued to mentor master’s level students, valuable lessons were learned through teaching and supervising undergraduate students in the required practicum sequence. Among other things, I learned that:

1. Undergraduates are drawn to HDFS because it “feels right,” but they have no clue about how to translate their knowledge into skills attractive to employers unless their interest is child care or early childhood education. My role, then, was to expose them to world of possibilities (and this was before the time of CFLEs).
2. They did not know how to make informed choices for building a future, so I helped them link their knowledge to employment possibilities and understand the advantages of their degree compared to other more commonly understood degrees in psychology, sociology, and social work. In this way, they learned to communicate effectively when asked questions by prospective employers like, “So, what is an HDFS major? “What can you offer that is different from a student in social work?”
3. They did not envision themselves as competent professionals serving children and families, so my role was too educate them about professionalism. This included addressing issues of appropriate dress and self-presentation, the value of team work, and the importance of demonstrating characteristics of “good” employees (e.g., timeliness,

dependability, effective communication, strong work ethic) and enthusiastic, passionate workers. Of course, this also meant that I had to serve as a role model of such traits in class and in visits to their placement site. I often admonished them that evidence of their success with these issues started in their courses before graduation.

Comments from students consistently showed that they took heed of the intended lessons and valued the learning experience.

As a result of all that was involved in these experiences, I became skilled at assessing a student's strengths and weakness and sharing those observations with him/her in such a way to engender trust in my judgment. I was direct in my communication and took care in crafting what I said and how I said it. Feedback from students consistently demonstrated that they knew that I was invested in them succeeding in whatever they chose to pursue even when it was not my desired choice for them.

### **Later Equally Important Experiences**

It was my move to the University of North Carolina, Greensboro in 1991 that gave me the opportunity to develop my skills in mentoring doctoral students. Here I took on the serious matter of educating more advanced students in the research enterprise and preparing them for their future careers often as academics. Although I was committed to training master's students well, these efforts did not require the same level of effort on my part, as I saw that their success was less of a reflection my abilities and more a reflection of the program overall. However, doctoral training demanded a more intentional approach of challenging them to become independent and critical thinkers by providing multiple learning opportunities as collaborators and then initiators of projects. This required me to assume a secondary position where I experienced the pleasure that comes from in seeing others achieve. It also required a deeper commitment to preparing the next generation of scholars in such a way that it was evident in their achievements rather than my achievements.

My career in the academy came to a close at Florida State University after 10 years of serving as chair – this was another move that resulted from intentional decisions to take on new challenges, continue to hone both my skills as a teacher and research scholar, and have more opportunities to mentor other young faculty, something I had engaged in informally for many years. In these many ways, FSU afforded me opportunities to continue to affect the next generation of professionals.

### **Key Lessons Learned**

In reflecting on these many years of my career, I am cognizant that the teaching and mentoring aspects have brought me the greatest pleasure. I measure my success in the students with whom I have had the true privilege of working – in their competitiveness in the securing employment that they, as individuals, value, their ability to do solid empirical work, their achievement of tenure and promotion, and their contributions to “paying it forward.” Also, my success is evident in many other young scholars at other universities whose careers I followed

with much interest and who sought my counsel. Because I think of myself as someone with valuable skills but not a great scholar, I am extremely proud of the legacy I offer family science through these students, many who went on to mentored other students. In fact, I recall the first time I was proudly introduced to one of my “professional grandchildren.”

The lessons and values I intended to impart through these aspects of my career in family science are evident in the comments that follow from those who have been the recipients of both my teaching and mentoring efforts.

### **1. Hold clearly articulated and high expectations.**

Because I strongly believe that individuals can achieve great things when expected to do so, I consistently expected students to perform beyond what they thought was possible. However, this required an understanding of both the implicit and explicit “rules” inherent in any context, if one was to chart a course that lead to success. For me, the only way to do this was to communicate to students exactly what I expected in our collaborations, often evident in short- and long-term goal setting exercises, and then to explore strategies with them that would help them be successful.

“What stands out for me is your clear expectations that we *can* do excellent, uncompromising work...that students are highly capable and that it simply requires good teaching and excellent focus and effort on the part of the student to acquire knowledge and skills...So, we in effect, see ourselves and label ourselves as strong, skilled scholars and work to make that label a reality.”

“You seem to push me to as hard as I can go. You implore me to work harder and better, never letting me settle for less than I am capable of.”

“You are passionate about our field and good research and your high standards were passed on and motivate me to do better and to hold my own students to that same standard even though it’s not easy for them (or me).”

### **2. Help students learn how to think; learn by doing.**

Because education cannot provide all the desired answers, my goal was to help students learn to how to find out. Rather than telling them what statistical procedure is best suited for their research question or doing the analysis for them, I expected them to “figure it out”, being constantly present to challenge their thinking so they gained confidence in their understanding and offering a clear, concise rationale.

“You never imposed your (personal as well as empirical and theoretical) beliefs on me, and instead always pushed me to explore all possible explanations and opinions in relation to my research questions.”

“You served as the guardrails and certainly scaffolded, but allowed – expected even –that we find our own ways; push ourselves to “figure it out”; make mistakes; learn from them, and learn to be self-reliant. This approach leads to confidence when we launch.”

“...you implore me to consider the implications of every decision and challenge me to make sound choices at every turn.”

“You definitely foster independence in your students, and encouraged us to think about and tackle things on our own as much as possible (with appropriate guidance and support). You were definitely not going to do things for us.”

### **3. Adapt to the needs and personality of the individual student.**

Although I avoided micromanaging students (students often commented that they appreciated this) or pushing them way beyond their comfort zones, I also understood that what worked with one student might not be helpful to another student’s success. Thus, I adapted my approach to fit the student, even when such adaptations were not easy for me. In fact, I have been known to micromanage when needed as in the case of weekly Skype session with a student (ABD and living out of state) to assure that progress was made even when this approach did not fit for me.

“I learned from you that good mentoring requires adapting to each student’s uniqueness. This requires listening openly, observing objectively, and evaluating fairly. By no means did this ever involve lowering expectations and standards! You found ways to help me, and each student you mentored, rise to the occasion in our own way.”

“You were definitely a fan of trial by fire. I will never forget my first that as a TCRM discussant...and my co-discussant was Jetse Sprey. Great experience, but holy cow I was terrified going into it.”

“I would say in grad school you really ‘hovered’ over me. I felt like there was nothing I could do without discussing it and exploring it with you. I felt very much watched and monitored...You helped me to develop a much better standard for my work in general. I don’t have much tolerance for something done half way. I probably would NEVER have developed that skill with your monitoring of my work. It was quite annoying, but necessary.”

### **4. Be honest and direct.**

I personally have valued honest and direct communication from others even when what was shared was less than positive. Because I always found such truth to be helpful personally and professionally, I worked to model this same type of communication with students.

“...you were direct and overt, which was simultaneously terrifying and comforting -- I knew you would tell me the truth and that is was because you wanted me to be the best I could be.”

“I find your mentoring to be very straight-forward. Your no-nonsense approach is obviously backed by a real concern for my well-being and that of my family which is evidence by your concern for and generosity towards us.”

“I had to develop a thick skin for constructive criticism. Early on my papers often came back to me (from you) dripping with green or blue ink. (This was not something that many faculty did.) I would be amazed by how you could edit my writing to be more concise and clear.”

“You always said what you meant and meant what you said consistently. That was something anyone, especially me, needed to see. Hypocrisy in mentorship only leads to lazy professionals.”

“Like you, I have counseled students out of the program and in other directions. It is important that mentors be honest (and kind) with their students so that they know their strengths in order to establish achievable expectations.”

##### **5. Provide support, warmth, and kindness to engender a passion for learning.**

In the context of holding high expectations, communicating in an honest and direct manner and challenging students to be independent learners, support and kindness go a long way in helping students feel empowered and confident.

“...when I most need it, you assure me by letting me know of your faith in me and providing me with a sense of optimism about the end result of this hard work.”

“Probably first and foremost, you were (and are) always available to your students, at any time, about anything, from anywhere, pretty much forever. You’ll always drop everything for us...to know that we were that important and that much of priority, knowing how many plates and hats you always were juggling at any given time.”

“...we always felt 100% that you truly cared about us. Your warmth and kindness were expressed so consistently and in so many ways. Your positive energy lights up a room – and all those in it.”

“I always felt like you would have my back and advocate for me and the challenges your presented with were for my own good. I felt you were very supportive.”

“Dr. Kay always seemed to be truly interested in my research project. After meeting with her, I left excited and my anxieties, due to research inexperience, were quieted.”

“Your help and attention clearly have gone beyond the normal “official” role. Your honesty, your open door and your enthusiastic willingness to help have been exceedingly rare in my experiences.”

“You had a strong balance between nurturing and kindness and direct and specific. Although the faint at heart were scared of you, the longer we worked together, the clearer that became. I don’t really need the nurturing approach, but I find it quite helpful.”

## **6. Model expected and desirable behaviors.**

I learned early on that good teachers and mentors model desirable behaviors. Thus, my career was guided by the principle of not asking other to do that which I am unwilling to do whether I was working with faculty, students, or other colleagues. This meant that my actions had to show what it meant to be an engaged scholar, so I continued to make research presentations at conferences (almost always with graduate students as coauthors), write grants, and publish the results of these efforts, as well as work across disciplines in linking research to practice. In teaching seminars or being a guest lecturer in a course taught by a graduate student, I was extremely intentional, as I understood that my behavior would serve as a model to them in developing their teaching styles. Also, knowing that students put much work into writing assignments, my commitment was to provide comprehensive feedback on their work, often commenting “You’ll get more feedback from me than you ever wanted.”

“Read everything there is on the subject” is something you would not only direct students to do, but you practiced it and modeled it for us.”

“...similar to an authoritative parent. You modeled the characteristics of a successful academic but were not overbearing about teaching and demanding.”

“She expects hard work but is an excellent mentor for students because she sets a strong example of being a hard worker. This quality influences her students to be hard workers, set short and long-term work related goals, and not be afraid to accept formidable challenges.”

“You’ve truly showed me how to be a dedicated scholar, and I hope to emulate for others your wonderful example of hard work and passion in the pursuit of knowledge.”

“You were a powerful role model. You never asked of me what you aren’t willing to do yourself. That carries so much weight in learning how to become a great scholar.”

“You created a graduate school experience that closely mirrored the real experience in the academic world. I don’t feel like I am out of my league because of the preparation you gave us.”

## **7. Be intentional in networking and collaboration.**

My days at WSU fostered my belief in the importance of networking and building meaningful professional relationships with those whose work I respected and who I tried to emulate. In fact, one such person called me the “Queen of networking,” a label that I consider complimentary. Throughout my career I reached across disciplinary boundaries to connect with other scholars out of admiration and the realization that they possessed expertise I lacked. The rewards from these connections taught me to encourage students to intentionally reach out to those who shared similar interests but who were more skilled or had different skills, and I worked to foster these connections where possible.

“You went out of your way to network us and introduce us to the people who it would be helpful to us to know and collaborate with, and to help us foster relationships with them...I think that’s invaluable in academia.”

“I remember you insisting that I join you in the lobby bar (at NCFR annual meeting), knowing I didn’t drink, and assuring me that it was about being present and introduced to known scholars who gathered there after sessions – a first step in networking.”

“You constantly encouraged me to reach out to other scholars at professional meetings which was hard given my lack of confidence, but this encouragement has proven valuable as I built collaborative relationships I did not think possible.”

The outcomes of these teaching and mentoring strategies are best summarized by a former student: “This approach leads to confidence when we launch. We are self-starters. We generate ideas; we are leaders. We are not intimidated by others. We engage in scholarly debate. “I would argue that...” was and still is a common opener for me.”

Today I find myself able to make choices about my future which are no longer tied to the academic calendar and the university culture and less tied to the needs of others. As I make the transition to a new life full of different choices, I am most proud of having been recognized by my colleagues for my contribution to family science by proudly holding the title of Fellow in the National Council on Family Relations (NCFR) and by the students who are now colleagues, as well as other colleagues in many different places with whom I have been blessed to work. Receiving the 2012 Felix Berardo Mentoring Award from NCFR was a true highlight of these many years, because it represents what I value most about my professional life. It amazes me that I have been incredibly privileged by this career, to work in this content area and most importantly to touch the lives of so many by simply touching the lives of many fewer.

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