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The Privilege of Service and Mentorship

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Abstract

Dr. Robin Hardin was the recipient of the 2026 Applied Sport Management Distinguished Service and Mentorship Award. This essay incorporates his remarks from the 2026 conference where he was presented the award.

Universities and academic programs are not faceless systems comprised of course numbers, student ID numbers, and grades. They are comprised of people, and people need mentorship. That mentorship can take many different forms – offering guidance, offering support, and sometimes simply just listening. Being able to carve 30 minutes out of your day to listen to someone or share your experience is a privilege. “There is always something to do” is something I often reference to new faculty members, and that is certainly true. That can be in the form of conducting research, teaching obligations (i.e. class preparation, grading), and service obligations to the department or university. But it is also important not to lose sight of a core product of higher education and that is the education and professional preparation of students. Mentorship is a key component of both of those obligations to students.

Mentorship as an aspect of service is a privilege. Being a mentor to someone implies that they have entrusted their time, effort, career goals, and aspirations with you. That is an honor and privilege – not an obligation. I can reflect on several former doctoral students who entrusted me to be their mentor. Several had interests that aligned with my interests but were certainly not my area of expertise, e.g., fantasy sport, sport and social work, women and career mobility, sport tourism, and adaptive sport. However, each trusted me to be their mentor and advisor, and it was a leap of faith on their part. I did not take that lightly and considered it a privilege they did entrust me to be their mentor. I knew I could contribute to their research interests but was certainly not a subject matter expert, but I was willing to be of service to them through their professional development. That is something I still value – the trust someone places in me to be their advisor or mentor.

The privilege of serving as their mentor and advisor allowed me to have a small impact on their life. This impact has continued through the thousands of students they have mentored and advised. My mentorship of them has extended well beyond the University of Tennessee and into their professional lives. I can review my calendar during the past several years and see the countless meetings I have had with current students and alumni. It is certainly satisfying to know that students trust me enough to seek my guidance and counsel. It is also rather rewarding that alumni also value the relationship and experience with our program and reconnect with me to discuss their career. Mentorship is not anything new or unique; many other faculty are engaged in mentorship. However, it is a special connection when former students go on to mentor others, or when they return to share their experiences and provide guidance to our current students. The impact of mentorship of others has the potential to have a far-reaching effect as they mentor others and your mentorship has aided them in their professional development.

I need mentorship myself and often lean on people in my circle for support and guidance. It is important to think about who is in your circle, how that circle can support you, and how you can support the people in your circle. Intentionality is important regarding the development of your circle and who adds value to your life, both personally and professionally. It is also acceptable and appropriate for people to move in and out of your circle as your career and life evolves. A key component of all of this is to stop waiting for mentorship to happen and start creating it. Thus, many people who may be seeking mentorship are most likely being intentional in their professional development.

Mentorship requires effort from both the mentor and protégé, and someone reaching out for men-

torship is a beginning step in that effort. However, it is also important to note those seeking mentorship, including myself, need to be a willing protégé. That does not mean doing everything a mentor says but it does mean to be willing to be proactive in seeking mentorship, being attentive when speaking with a mentor, and being willing to act when the time comes. Many times, being a protégé consists of gathering information from more than one mentor and then making an informed decision regarding the topic at hand. It is critical that both the mentor and protégé recognize this.

The mentorship process is a cooperative relationship and is a joint effort between mentor and protégé. As the mentor, I am responsible for providing counsel, guidance, and sharing my experiences. I want to enhance their professional development by sharing my knowledge and expertise. A productive cooperative relationship requires commitment from all parties involved. Protégés must be committed to their professional development, and it is my responsibility as a mentor to foster that commitment to professional development and engage the protégé. Mentorship is not merely the transfer of information from mentor to protégé, and therefore protégés should not be passive recipients of information. Professional development and learning are not done passively but interactively. The information must be understood and comprehended. For this to take place, the protégé needs to be actively involved.

Part of the mentorship process as well is recognizing different types of personalities and learning styles. Both the mentor and protégé need to be aware of this. We live in the world of sports so the mentor-coach analogy is certainly relevant and one in which all of us can relate. Different athletes need to be coached differently. Regardless, it is also important for both the mentor and protégé to be coachable. The mentor may need to modify their approach to mentorship, and the protégé needs to be willing to adapt to different mentoring styles as well.

When we talk about the privilege of service, we are really talking about stewardship – of people, of ideas, the future of our institutions, and the future of our profession. Service asks us to show up not because we have to do so, but because we are able; not because it is visible, but because it matters. If we approach service with care, humility, and intention, we affirm that academia at its best is not just about the knowledge we produce, but about the communities we sustain and the legacy we choose to leave behind. Ultimately, the privilege of service and mentorship is the chance to leave our academic and professional spaces better than we found them. Everyone can be of service to others.

At the end of the day, it is not about what you have accomplished. It is about who you have lifted up, and who you have positively impacted. Be an encourager – lift people up. You can change someone's life by being kind and being of service to them. You may be the one person who gives someone hope. Most faculty can recall students who seemed to be without any sort of direction. Encouraging them to make a phone call or send an email or arrange a meeting with someone can have a tremendous impact on their life. Those interactions may have led them to a volunteer opportunity, then an internship, then a full-time position, and they have since ascended in their profession.

That is your legacy.

I also want to provide several items that I have found to be key components of the professional

development of students that I have used throughout my mentoring experiences. These are many of the core values I use and reference when mentoring students and other young professionals.

Reliable – Professionals are dependable and keep their commitments. They do what they say they will do and do not overpromise. Professionals respond promptly and follow through on their commitments in a timely manner. It's always important to clarify any areas of uncertainty to ensure there are no mistaken assumptions or surprises. Punctuality is a key aspect of this professional characteristic, and people often perceive those who are on time as responsible, reliable, and professional. Having these qualities can strengthen a person's reputation. Arriving on time shows respect for others' time. Time is a person's most valuable commodity, and being on time shows you place value on them.

Ethical behavior – Embodying professionalism also means to be committed to doing the right thing. Honesty, open disclosure, transparency, and sincerity are all characteristics of ethical behavior. Individuals can adopt a personal code of conduct to guide their decisions and behavior. A personal code of conduct is a set of guiding principles and standards that define your values and how you choose to make decisions. Your personal code of conduct also guides how you choose to interact with others, and how you hold yourself accountable.

Organized – Professionals keep a neat and functional workspace and are organized so that they can easily find items when they need them. Professionals are prepared for meetings and are prepared to be attentive in meetings. This would also entail any sort of participation in meetings such as providing updates on topics or giving presentations. Effective time management directly shapes how efficient and productive a day can be. Managing time well improves the quality of work as well as reduces stress.

Accountable – Just as a professional accepts credit for having completed a task or achieved a goal, they also are accountable for their actions when they may fall short. They take responsibility for any mistakes that they make and take whatever steps necessary to resolve any consequences from mistakes. They are accountable and expect accountability from others. It is much easier to overcome a mistake or error when it is recognized, and actions are taken to rectify the situation.

Professional demeanor – Professionals should be attentive to the importance of separating their personal life from their professional life. This is not to say that your personal life should be discounted but be aware of possible conflicts that may arise when your professional life and personal life intersect.

Positive attitude – It is important to maintain a positive, can-do attitude. A positive attitude will improve overall performance and increase the likelihood of a positive outcome. It may also have an impact on the attitudes of peers and colleagues. Related to this is to treat others with respect. It is imperative to treat peers and colleagues how you would expect to be treated. Focus on being someone others want to have in their professional environment and want to be a part of their team. Ask yourself, “Am I somebody others want to be around?”

Poise – It is important to understand the importance of maintaining composure and staying calm in all situations. By remaining calm, even during challenging moments, others can rely on you to be rational and display sound judgment. Be sure to demonstrate calmness, confidence, and to stay calm

during times of heightened pressure. One aspect of poise is maintaining positive body language. It is important to maintain good posture, make eye contact when communicating, and help establish a professional presence.

Focused – Recognize the importance of maintaining focus to improve the quality of work and be as efficient as possible. It is easy to get distracted but stay on course and strive for achievement. It is valuable to not only set goals but also share them with others. That mentor relationship may help achieve those goals.

Good communicator – It is critical to have good communication skills. This means that they not only can effectively and efficiently convey messages to others but also that they can actively listen to and understand what others are telling them. A key component of this is to use professional language by minimizing the use of slang and avoid using inappropriate language in a professional setting. It is also prudent to be aware of language in informal settings and maintain decorum. Be sure to speak clearly and confidently. Stuttering and mumbling can be natural side effects of nervousness, so it is acceptable to pause and gather your thoughts. Another element of communication is nonverbal communication, i.e., body language. Body language is someone's way of communicating without the use of spoken words. It is the combination of facial expressions, gestures, and movements that convey what is going on in someone's mind. Communication does not stop when a person stops speaking – communicating nonverbally continues when a person is silent. Also, take every chance you can to practice communicating.

Writing skills – An aspect of communication skills is good writing skills. It is imperative to have good writing skills so messages can be conveyed in an understandable and efficient manner. Written communication encompasses everything from e-mail to documents prepared for the professional environment to scholarly research. E-mail is often the first impression someone has of you, so it is critical to present yourself in a professional manner in that first interaction with a person. Good writing skills can help you convey information in a more comprehensive, informative, clear, and direct way. You need to ensure that you are not attaching your name to a document that is poorly written. People notice small things, such as a misspelling, poor grammar, and incorrect punctuation. Poor writing skills can reduce credibility among your peers and co-workers. The opposite of that is good writing skills can increase your credibility and enhance your professional acumen. Good writing skills can help you stand out from your colleagues as they can highlight your professional commitment and skills.

Soft skills – Soft skills are essential and a personal attribute that allows someone to interact effectively with others. Soft skills include things like leadership, critical thinking, and people skills. Being able to actively engage in conversations with others is a key component of professional development. Another element of soft skills is showing gratitude. Gratitude can be in the form of verbal thank you, but even more impactful is the hand-written thank you note. Handwritten thank you notes are amongst the most appreciated and valued of social and business etiquette but are becoming a lost art. Take the time to write and send a thank you note. Taking the time to write a thank you note, a note of congratulations, or a note of encouragement can have a positive impact on the recipient. Take the time to show your gratitude as well as to offer support and encouragement.

First Impressions – Related to soft skills, is the importance of making a good first impression. This sets the standard for how others will view you. Factors that influence the development of a first impression are punctuality, appropriate dress, positive attitude, eye contact, attentiveness, and self-confidence. Be engaged in the conversation or meeting whether that be from contributing to the conversation or being an active listener.

These are several of the strategies and guidance that I offer students and other emerging professionals in their professional development. It is also important to acknowledge mastery of knowledge in a subject area or years of experience does not necessarily translate into being a good mentor. It is also important to be an effective communicator in all three phases – writing, speaking, and listening. I continually seek ways to become a more effective communicator and mentor. It is important not to become complacent but continually work to be a better mentor. I would also mention to those who are mentors or protégés – never forget the person who gave you chance when all you had to offer was a positive attitude and willingness to learn. Reflect on that when someone is seeking your mentorship or counsel.

I would also want to acknowledge people who helped provide guidance to me. Dr. Joy DeSensi, who was a past recipient of this award, and Dr. Buck Jones who was instrumental in the establishment of the sport management program at Tennessee. Both took the time and interest to help me guide me through the early part of the career until I found my professional footing. Each was a willing mentor. I did not know it at the time, but they were extremely influential in my professional development. I am forever grateful for that and will continue to pay it forward.

I will reference a few comments by legendary Tennessee women's basketball coach Pat Summitt, who was a graduate of my home department at Tennessee. She was noted for saying "You win life with people." That is certainly the case in providing mentorship and being of service to others. She also is noted for saying "Individual success is a myth. No one succeeds all by themselves." Those are certainly relevant to the concepts of service and mentorship. It is important to recognize what a privilege it is to be a service to others and provide mentorship to others.