

Wisconsin–Madison in 2015, Sydney Nguyen knew that she would need to find a group off-campus for socializing. She participated in a roller-derby camp during the summer after her first year, and loved it. She finds support and encouragement from her teammates, both on and off the track, and the sport's aggressive tactics gives her an outlet for frustrations. Practising and perfecting a difficult move lets Nguyen feel successful even if the week's lab work hasn't gone well.

Supervisors can support healthy work-life balance by fostering conversations about well-being and by being a good role model. Tammy Steeves, a conservation geneticist at the University of Canterbury in Christchurch, New Zealand, sets clear expectations in her group for taking time off. She encourages supportive lab interactions over competition, and says that this style helps young scientists to admit when they are struggling with balance. Her group has a simple motto: "Everyone here is smart and kind — don't distinguish yourself by being otherwise."

Steeves, who is also a postgraduate coordinator for the School of Biological Sciences at Canterbury, emphasizes to students the importance of managing their well-being and incorporating self-care. She's found that an easy way for international students (and herself) to visit family abroad each year is to tack extra time on to conference travels. She and one of her students reached an agreement this year that he could telecommute temporarily from the United States, where he has family and friends, while analysing and writing up his data. Her mentoring style, she says, helps students to feel comfortable about proposing such arrangements.

Many young scientists say that they value efficiency in their work more than total time put in — a key part of self-awareness that prevents burn-out. Wang says that colleagues may find her staring out her fifth-floor window with a cup of tea when she needs to decompress and recall the bigger picture. "I'm working with patient samples, and those are patients with cancer," she says.

Aside from their own mental health and well-being, researchers who take care to avoid burn-out and reset their minds and bodies regularly might see better returns in their data, too. "The science we generate is richer," says Steeves. "Lots of people come to the science table from different places, and we all need to take care of their well-being to keep them there." ■

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## COLUMN

# A mentor's acid test

Mutual respect, guidance and support are key to a fruitful relationship with trainees, says **W. Larry Kenney**.

I've mentored PhD students for 30-plus years, guiding 24 of them through a research-intensive doctoral programme with their integrity and sense of humour intact. And I've learnt some lessons along the way.

**Give your graduate students responsibility, power and credit.** Good students are resourceful and insightful. Teach them that it's OK to give wrong answers, because that steers the discussion in the right direction. Each student in my lab takes primary responsibility for one or more projects, beginning as early as their second semester. That sense of ownership breeds both attention to detail and focused progress towards the success of the project.

**Modern-day science is a team sport.** Foster strong teaching–learning relationships among all members of your research team. Senior PhD students help mentor junior colleagues, and postdocs help mentor senior PhD students. To foster these interactions, we create multilevel research teams for each project.

**Only mutual respect can create a true team mentality.** I think every student inherently wants to do the right thing and be a valued contributor and — given the opportunity — will rise to the occasion. My students know that if they do their jobs with a sense of pride and integrity, I will always support them.

**Help your students to feel valued** Each PhD student comes in with unique knowledge, quirks, skills and abilities. It makes no sense to treat them all equally. However, it is vitally important to treat them all fairly.

**Create the right culture** Your career path should serve as the roadmap for your students' burgeoning development as young scientists. Your positive accomplishments become their professional goals.

**Help your students to develop professionally.** Get them to professional meetings as often as possible, and introduce them to the big names in your field. Teach them to write grant

proposals with realistic budgets and to review manuscripts; most importantly, challenge them to think and reason under pressure.

**Seek and deserve allegiance.** Little is more off-putting than going to a professional conference and hearing students complain about their graduate programme, university or mentor. It reflects poorly on them and on their mentor. If you hope for loyalty and trust from your students, make sure that you deserve it.

**Evaluate prospective mentees' character, motivation and work ethic.** Simply being a good judge of people is one of a mentor's most important traits. Applicant statements that say, "I am extremely interested in your research area and am also considering marine biology and maybe taxidermy," tell me that the student isn't ready for directed doctoral studies. I also rely heavily on input from my current team about an applicant's potential fit.

**If you can't laugh with your students, find another job.** I love academia because of my relationships and interactions with my PhD students and postdocs. They love to share stories about me, and I laugh harder than they do because I don't mind them seeing me as fallible and, well, because they are darned funny. My students know that my joking about our mutual missteps in an open and appropriate way is a sign of caring.

**Retreat to advance.** As my lab has grown, integration, planning, organization and project staffing has become more challenging. Some years ago we began having an annual lab retreat: 2–3 days off-site where we combine science, fun and team-building. We return with proposed meeting abstracts, publications and grant proposals, and a renewed sense of camaraderie.

Enjoy the journey. ■

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