Collectors, Nightlights, and Allies, Oh My!

White Mentors in the Academy

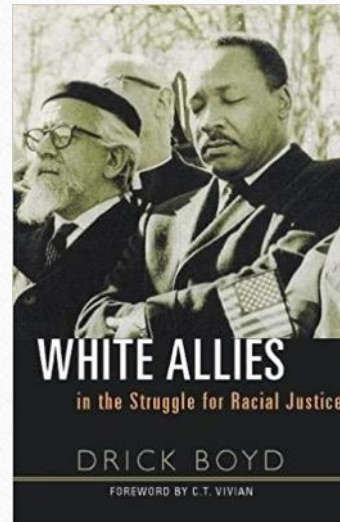Marisela Martinez-Cola, JD/PhD
Utah State University
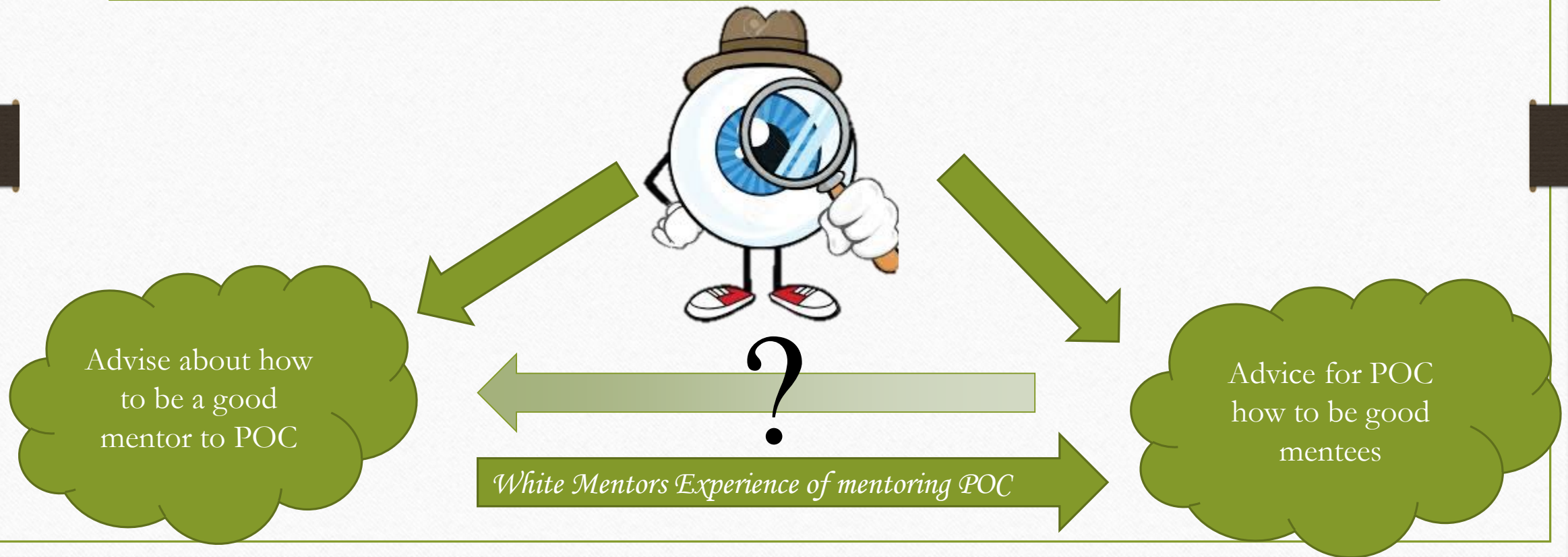
The Genesis of the Article

What should we look for in a mentor?

- We were in a rarified space when only POC are in the room.

- A space where I could get "real."

Gap in the Literature

Advise about how to be a good mentor to POC

?

White Mentors Experience of mentoring POC

Advice for POC how to be good mentees

Collectors

- Mentors who "collect" or assemble a "cadre" of people of color that they have decided to help;

- They have determined that we are "worth the investment."

- Collectors will "trot'" you out to events

- Ask you to represent the organization at some diversity or recruiting event

- Appoint you to serve on "diversity committee" to help them figure out a solution to a problem they created for themselves.

- It feels like your purpose is to assuage their guilt or publicly demonstrate their commitment to diversity

- Often *unintentional* in their condescension

- Not bad people

- Genuine in their desire to help but misguided

- Their value lies in knowing where the resources are and how to access them

Karen the Collector

- Ran a program designed to help Latinx students
- Transformative experience in a Latin American country
- Spoke Spanish
- Invite students to events but never introduce them to anyone
- "My little Latino students"

Nightlights

- Mentors who understand the challenges inherent at HWIs or PWS

- Help POC navigate the unknown and unforeseeable curves and twists of these spaces

- Figuratively "provide light in dark, unfamiliar spaces"

- Do not necessarily relate or understand, but they do acknowledge the existence of systemic racism

- Briefly step in when you need assistance navigating a complicated situation by using their privilege, social capital, and cultural capital

- Help make the invisible visible

Mr. Walsh

- Low-key approach

- Didn't try to "rescue me"

- Didn't try to turn this into a "teachable moment" for students to appreciate difference

- Didn't talk to me afterwards to see if I was "okay."

- Used his popularity (social capital) to turn my weird into cool

Four scenarios to "nightlight"

1. Intervening in a meeting when a POC becomes "the representative" for all POC

   "We are all smart people here. I recommend we all conduct research on this topic and then come back and revisit this discussion."

2. Nominating a POC for a committee or task that is NOT related to race/difference

3. Take a moment to read a colleague's work and talk about it, drop a note of appreciation, or mention it in a professional setting

   "You made me sound really smart the other day!"

4. Take a moment to learn about a situation before making conclusions

   "Why do you say sheese and jellow?"

Ally

- Least likely to encounter
- Make meaningful connections without asserting equality (e.g., first-generation status, working/blue collar, childhood in communities where they were the minority, have some other marginalized identity).
- Invite mentees to conferences and introduce them to important individuals in the field
- Likely co-author or invite them on a project for their expertise and an opportunity to shine
- Can take criticism/feedback and recover quickly from a disagreement
- NEVER ask POC to make them feel better about a situation
- Build trust with consistency and humility
- Challenges me intellectually and pushes me beyond my best

Alison the Ally

"Oh yeah sure! It has nothing to do with the fact that you have a f***ing JD and PhD, are more published than he is, have a fascinating research project that you worked your a** off to complete, and were awarded a Mellon Fellowship to teach at one of the most prestigious colleges in the country.

Yeah, sure, it's because you're Hispanic."

Final thoughts

- These are not static categories with clear lines

- One persons Ally may be another's Nightlight

- All Allies are also Nightlights but not all Nightlights are necessarily Allies

- A Collector is never an Ally, but they often think they are an Ally.

- Please don't use this talk to ask the POC in your life which category you represent…..If you must ask, you are probably a Collector.