

## FIELD NOTES

School of Civil and Environmental Engineering

Georgia Institute of Technology

Ep. 6: Who Needs a Mentor? (You Do!)

<THEME MUSIC>

JIMMY MITCHELL: For me personally, it's refreshing to take a step back and think about somebody else. And quite often, you can help those people and you can also learn a little bit about yourself.

JOSHUA STEWART: Mentoring — we've all heard how valuable it is. But how does it work, and is it right for you? Stories of mentoring ... it's Field Notes.

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STEWART: Welcome to a new episode of Field Notes, the podcast of ideas and conversations from the School of Civil and Environmental Engineering at Georgia Tech. I'm Joshua Stewart.

You don't have to dig very deeply into career advice books or websites or blogs to find some version of this suggestion: Find a mentor! And, in fact, that advice was the subject of an interview I did back in my former life as a public radio host and reporter with a guy here in Atlanta named Brandon Smith. He's made a career curing what he calls workplace dysfunction — all the stuff that keeps our working lives and careers from being positive, healthy experiences. Here's just a taste of what he had to say about mentors in an interview that originally aired on GPB radio:

BRANDON SMITH: So, you can have a mentor that is specific to your career, but you can also have a life mentor. You can have someone that has lived a life that you really admire.

STEWART: What are they doing for you?

SMITH: They're, first of all, being very real and honest with you. So they're giving you honest feedback. Second, they're helping guide you through some of the landmines in their life or career, so giving you some very practical advice. And third, they see in you things that you don't see yourself. Now, they may have things they say to you at times, which you come away thinking, 'Wow, that was hard to hear.' But overall, you should know that they really care about you and want to see you succeed.

STEWART: So that's where the Georgia Tech connection comes into this conversation.

One of the things we've heard over the years from our alumni and the School's External Advisory Board is that they wanted a formal way to help guide some of our students in their

education and early careers. To, as Brandon Smith put it, see them succeed. So, last year, we created a new mentoring program to connect students with alumni and industry professionals. We call it GOLD — Growing Opportunities for Learning and Discovery.

We wanted to check in on some of those relationships and see how mentoring plays out in the real world. And so the first call I made was to one of the very first students to jump in and request a mentor, Varun Elaprolu, a graduate student studying construction.

Varun ended up matched with Jimmy Mitchell, a 2005 civil engineering alum who's now the sustainability manager for construction firm Skanska. Interestingly, Varun worked for four years as an engineer before grad school and had helped young students who were thinking about engineering careers. So he already knew that he would benefit from finding a mentor.

VARUN ELAPROLU: I used to feel like it's a kind of good work in mentoring and that even I was also gaining knowledge by mentoring them. And then after coming to the U.S., it's like a whole new country, whole new city, and the way how things work in the U.S. is completely different to how things were back in India. So I thought maybe I should have someone with whom you know I can ask questions related to career and then who is well experienced in this field who can guide me through it.

STEWART: It's interesting. So you were really on the other side and so you kind of knew what to expect from this relationship.

ELAPROLU: Yes.

STEWART: What were you thinking that it was going to be like?

ELAPROLU: I thought it would be like some kind of like formal, where we talk over the phone for a couple of minutes or for five minutes like once every two or three months. People who are in the industry are usually busy with their work during the week days and weekends with the family, so I was not having a lot of expectations. I thought let's give it to try .

STEWART: And I'm gonna guess it did not play out quite that way.

ELAPROLU: Yeah, yeah, it was quite surprising.

STEWART: You wanted somebody specifically in construction?

ELAPROLU: Actually, I met Jimmy during the career fair in September 2017. And you know I asked him like a million questions and he answered them very patiently. And he was very much enthusiastic in talking to me and to any other student. After that career fair, Eric Marks gave a form and then that day he asked us to fill out, like, write some name of the companies from where you want to have your mentor from. Then I wrote, just I want Jimmy Mitchell, otherwise I don't want any other mentor.

STEWART: Jimmy, why did you want to then take that conversation and really become a mentor and sort of deepen that relationship?

JIMMY MITCHELL: Yes so, perspective. I learn a lot from my mentor-protégé relationships. And honestly, you know, we work hard, and we have our heads down nonstop for our clients — our tasks and our billable hours. And for me, personally, it's refreshing to take a step back and think about somebody else. Quite often, you can help those people and then you can also learn a little bit about yourself as well. So you know it's one of those things, sometimes you get out what you put in. And I keep wanting to put it in, and I'm willing to explore that through time.

STEWART: How do you guys approach this relationship?

ELAPROLU: First, usually mentor and mentee usually meet over coffee for half an hour and then they just talk and then they are done for the day or something like that. But Jimmy actually first took me to his Lifecycle Building [Center]. They do sustainability stuff: They collect all the material which people are thinking of throwing, and then they and then they are going to sell it or something like that. And he took me to that place. It's like very interesting, you know. In that way you interact with that person and then you get to know like what else he is doing apart from his, you know, work. And then like that, he invited me to one of this evening where they had a party or a get-together or something like that. And then he invited me. He didn't have to do that. Still he invited me there for networking or something like that. And then I went there, and then in between we met over breakfast, and then I talked to him about my internship, because it's, my internship, it's kind of a little bit different from what a conventional civil engineer do. So I thought I should talk to him. Then I talked to him, and he said it's a good field, you can

STEWART: Even as you were considering whether it was the right internship.?

ELAPROLU: Yeah.

STEWART: It's interesting because, forgive the analogy here, but it sounds a little bit like dating right? Like don't just go for coffee but have something to do, something else that you can sort of being engaged in together and then through that, you get to learn a little bit more and it sort of opens up avenues of conversation.

MITCHELL: My approach with it is to get to know folks. Maybe one, is to try to be a little funny, and I like the Waffle House breakfast. I love going to Waffle House for breakfast.

STEWART: Right here on campus? Are you going to the one on campus?

MITCHELL: Right here in Tech Square. You know and then I get them over to that, Varun over to that warehouse. And it's fun. Varun's very capable, and I try to expand that message some

with, you know, we're Georgia Tech, we have a lot of expectations. We can do things with our talents more than just our careers. Oh by the way when you do those things, quite often it also helps your careers.

STEWART: When you have these conversations are you sort of setting out to talk about a particular thing or accomplish something, or is it really more of a casual sort of interaction?

MITCHELL: Yeah, I try to keep it casual and then they'll let you know what they want. And then try to listen and then adjust according to that game plan. I don't know how that worked out for you, Varun.

ELAPROLU: For me there was no set agenda with Jimmy. I just go and then we talk, because he talks and I talk. So it's like there was a rapport between us. It's like, he always start the conversation talking about his present project, Living Building Challenge, I always talk about like how things are going — my job and stuff like that. So there wasn't like set agenda whenever I meet Jimmy.

STEWART: Why is it, do you think, this relationship has worked as well as it has?

ELAPROLU: He's enthusiastic in you know talking to his mentee, and he is very much enthusiastic in sharing his knowledge. And then you know he would like to see someone successful like him. With respect to me, it's like I always look up to people who are, you know, very well, they have done a lot and lot of different things. He's not, he did not like go to like 8 to 5 work did some conventional type of work or something like that. He is doing the Living Building Challenge, which is one of the first Living Building Challenge buildings in the Southeast United States. He's a project manager of that building. Apart from that work, he is, whatever he's doing. It's like kind of unique. It's like I got connected to that. You know, when you see a person like that, you always feel that you're trying to achieve, you know, follow the path.

STEWART: Does this relationship continue, I guess? Either officially or unofficially?

ELAPROLU: Yeah, from my side.

MITCHELL: Yeah, it is we're connected and still doing things together.

STEWART: Jimmy Mitchell and Varun Elaprolu, one of the very first pairs matched through our GOLD mentoring program. Thanks so much to both of you!

ELAPROLU: Thank you.

MITCHELL: Thanks for having us. Great.

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STEWART: Another pair of the early adopters, if you will, of our mentoring initiative is Mary Shinnners and Schayne Fox. Mary finished her civil engineering bachelor's in 2014 and her master's a year later — giving her a fresh view of the transition to work from college.

MARY SHINNERS: When you're in school it's easier to relate to people who are have just recently finished, so I thought I could be a good resource for people you know on the job search or trying to figure out what aspects of civil engineering they might like or want to go into. And I know mentorship was a huge, huge reason why I'm still in structural, so I just felt like I wanted to pay it forward. And you know this was a really good avenue to do that.

STEWART: And so, it sounds like you had a mentor while you were in school.

SHINNERS: I had several. So when I was in school, my mentors were pretty much from when I had my co-op. So when I started working, you know there's people that just kind of naturally take on that role. And there were a few for me. And then when I got into my more specialized structural classes later on in school, I'd say my mentors were primarily my professors, but I still had those people out in the real world looking out for me. And that was tremendous.

STEWART: You said that it really kept you in the structural engineering. Your mentors did. How did, what did you mean by that?

SHINNERS: Really what I mean by that is, when I first started I didn't know anything. And so it's really easy, you know my whole life, I was used to being pretty good at school — you know as a lot of Georgia Tech students are — so when I got to that point in my life where I had no idea what I was doing and didn't know who to ask, I had people kind of just swoop in that I was working with and help me with that. And so once I started to learn more, I started to like it more. But on a completely different end of the spectrum, I don't necessarily have the cookie-cutter engineer personality and so that was something I struggled with. I always thought that engineers were supposed to be rigid and engineers were supposed to be serious, and I just had a hard time believing early on in my career that people were going to accept this bubbly, young, excited, enthusiastic, young woman into the field. And pretty much on day maybe day four, day five of working, there was an engineer who came back to work with almost my same personality, and she was killin' it. Everybody respected her. Everybody knew that she was the person to go to if you had any sort of question. And she really took me in, she taught me a lot of stuff early on that I really needed to know technically and just personally, how to be professional and how to carry yourself and how to just talk to other people. I remember meeting her and being like, hey like I don't have to be any sort of way I can just be smart and I can just be a good engineer, and that's OK. I don't have to change who I am. So that was pretty big for me early on.

STEWART: Schayne, what were you looking for when you decided you wanted to mentor?

SCHAYNE FOX: For me it's like nice to have someone that is kind of relatable. I think it's great to have someone to ask questions about. I can ask my boss questions, but I'm not going to be like, oh yes, so at what point in your college career did you take this exam? Or like what were you thinking around this time? Because it's been a while for them you know. And I just like I wanted to be able to ask real questions to someone who has been through the same experience as me pretty recently. And I didn't realize that Mary was like graduated as recently as she has. And that's like also pretty cool because we just kind of, the first time we met, we were just like chatting like for like two hours.

STEWART: I mean what has this been like for the two of you?

FOX: Well we just met like this summer, so it hasn't been too long. We met up once, but we e-mail a lot. She sends me articles. We're actually meeting after this today.

STEWART: I'm glad that we could facilitate that latest mentoring experience. [Laughter] What do you talk about? What are the things that, you know, do you come with an agenda or is it looser than?

FOX: I'm a free spirit, generally. I just kind of ask what I've been thinking, because I get stressed out pretty easily. And recently I've been thinking about exams and when I need to be taking them. So Mary's the first person I thought about asking about that stuff, because like at my job, people are like P.E.s and like you're an E.I.T., engineer in training? And I was like oh I wonder what that is when I saw your e-mails. And I was like googling stuff, and I was like that's cool. I guess that's what I'll need to, my first step like out into the world as an engineer needs to be like an E.I.T. I need to be taking these exams in order to do it. And I was like oh I'll just ask her.

STEWART: So you were matched last summer. How long does this does this go on? Have you sort of thought about what happens over the next year or however long?

SHINNERS: Not really. I mean, in my experience at least, the best way to have a mentoring experience is just let it happen naturally. And so you know if Schayne wants to ask me questions for a long time throughout her career, I think that's like going to be awesome. But if she's ready to move on to another person to get mentoring from in the next year or two, like, that works too. It just kind of, you just got to, you kind of have to like feel it out.

FOX: The mentorship can be what you may get. And I don't intend on like never talking to you again type of deal. Like oh, our year's up. Peace. I'm out. Because like when you find someone that you enjoy talking to and like you want to learn from, and you know you can learn from, there's great benefit in that.

STEWART: For a professionals — something that's definitely worth ... ? It is an investment of your time.

SHINNERS: Yes, it is. So I benefitted severely from having lots of really great mentors early on in my career and still have a ton. And so for me, it's kind of like paying it forward to the next generation of engineers, helping somebody who needs help early on in their career and getting them the information they need so that they're not as lost as you know they can be, because you were once there yourself.

STEWART: Mary Shinnners is an assistant project manager at P.E.S. Structural Engineers. She graduated in 2015. And Schayne Fox is a fourth-year student studying civil engineering and interested in structural engineering. Great to talk to you both. Thank you so much.

FOX: Thank you.

SHINNERS: Thank you.

STEWART: Convinced about this mentoring thing? You can sign up to be a mentor or to be matched with one on our website, <https://ce.gatech.edu/mentoring>. There's also a contact there in case you have questions about the program.

If you want to know more about Brandon Smith, who we heard at the top of the program, visit <http://theworkplacetherapist.com>.

And that's it. We're done this go-round on Field Notes. We always appreciate your ideas and feedback. Send an email to [communications@ce.gatech.edu](mailto:communications@ce.gatech.edu). You can also keep up with us all the time across the Interwebs on Twitter, Instagram, Facebook and LinkedIn. Find us at CEEatGT on all of those platforms. CEEatGT. Thanks for spending some time with us on Field Notes. I'm Joshua Stewart. We'll see you next time.

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