First-Hand Perspectives from a Mentor-Protégé Pair

BILL ATWELL AND DAVID R. LINEBACK

Mentoring undoubtedly has the ability to impact a career and can be essential to your success. The AACC International Mentoring Program is run by the Professional Development Panel and overseen by Mentoring Program Chair Bill Atwell. The program connects younger members of the association with experienced grain scientists. Atwell enthusiastically started the program six years ago, being a long-time proponent of mentoring and has since helped facilitate more than 60 mentor/protégé pairings.

To understand Atwell’s interest for the program and discover how just one person can change a career, one has to look no further than the long-time relationship between Atwell and his mentor, David Lineback. Here, Atwell and Lineback share their personal story of how mentoring has affected their careers and lives.

Atwell: Mentored by a Natural

Dave and I go back a long way. I was just finishing up my M.S. degree in chemistry, and my father, who was a food broker, had recommended that I go to Kansas State University (KSU) and get a degree in something called cereal chemistry. He said if I got into the food industry that I’d never starve. I’m a few pounds overweight now so my father gave me good advice. However, when I first inquired about the KSU grain science program in November 1974, I didn’t realize that I was corresponding with a man who would also have a profound effect on my life.

I came to KSU from New York in January 1976, and Dr. Lineback (as I called him back then) helped me adjust and adapt to the department. The mentoring had begun. He was my major professor for about six months when he came into the lab and told me he was going to Penn State University (PSU). I had two options. I could go with him or I could stay at KSU. Well I had just moved from New York to Kansas and another move just didn’t make sense for my wife and me, so I stayed. I was fortunate to be able to continue my graduate career under the guidance of another outstanding scientist, Carl Hoseney. My contact with Dave from then on was through letters (yes, we wrote letters back then), phone calls, being together at the AACC Intl. Annual Meeting, and later, e-mails. There was little direct contact beyond the annual meetings. This did not inhibit us at all from developing a deep and rich relationship that continues to the present day.

A Life-Long Correspondence

We corresponded throughout my stay in the KSU graduate program, usually concerning scientific publications. We discussed science and we discussed it in depth. He was always encouraging and always genuinely interested in what I thought, what I was doing, and what my plans were. Upon graduation, I sent him my thesis and in it I acknowledged his influence on me as a scientist. I received a letter not long after, thanking me for the thesis, congratulating me on my new-found industrial position, and giving me some sound advice about adjusting from academia to industry. His role as a mentor was not to end at graduation.

When you are a “first timer,” a meeting as large as our annual meeting can be quite intimidating. I went to my first one in 1979, and he was there to introduce me to people and help me find my way around. He encouraged me to chair a session and I did so at the meeting in Chicago in September 1980. Dave encouraged me with this first step in my AACC Intl. experience and he has encouraged me with all of my AACC Intl. activities since, including very personally developing positions I held on the Board of Directors.

Giving Back

If you have been on the receiving end of such a beneficial relationship it seems you should give something back. Years ago, I helped establish a mentoring program between Pillsbury and the University of Minnesota. I found that mentoring a student was a highly gratifying experience. In 2005, the AACC Intl. Board of Directors requested the establishment of a mentoring program, and the Professional Development Panel responded. When I spoke to the first class of mentors and protégés, I talked about a special person in my life, Dave, and related many of the experiences I discussed above. The principles that he used to mentor me are as relevant today as they were when we met. In the meeting, we talked about the new concept of “e-mentoring,” where meaningful, mutually beneficial relationships can be established and maintained despite distance. It didn’t seem so new to me. Dave mentored me from afar and he did it without all of our now common electronic communication devices.

On May 24, 2010, Dave sent me an e-mail concerning the AACC Intl. Mentoring Program, again encouraging me and complimenting me on my involvement with it. In it he stated that “I have never considered myself a mentor…” I shook my head and chuckled in confusion when I read it. He is the mentor who all


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other mentors should emulate, and I let him know that. I suspect
the reason he doesn’t realize he is such a good mentor is because
it comes so easily to him. He never learned to mentor or took a
class in mentoring. He never even thought about it. He just did it,
and I am a better man as a result. I was mentored by a natural.

Lineback on Mentoring

Since the establishment of the AACC Intl. Mentoring Pro-
gram, led by Bill, I have followed this with great interest and
have questioned him about its progress on several occasions. I
never heard of mentoring when I was in graduate school or in the
early part of my professional career. Mentoring existed, of
course, but it was not designated as such. This AACC Intl. effort
establishes an identity, higher visibility, and a more formal role
for mentoring, increasing the accessibility for young profession-
als into a relationship that has been shown to have significant
career benefits.

What is a mentor? Is it one who cares, listens, encourages,
shares experiences, viewpoints, observations, and offers some
suggestions for guidance. I have had individuals whom I con-
sider mentors, who were probably completely unaware of their
functioning in this role. Individuals may have more than one
mentor over the course of their career, depending on how this
relationship is defined. Except in situations, such as the AACC
Intl. Mentoring program, only the individual being mentored
knows who his or her mentors are or have been.

I have often thought about becoming involved in the program
but, being unsure of my ability to be a mentor, have not done so.
Mentioning this to Bill recently, led to this joint effort when he
disagreed with that comment.

Bill has outlined the flow of our relation-
ship in his comments (above). I will
comment on it from my perspective. His
initial inquiry about a Ph.D. program in
the area of cereal science (cereal chem-
istry) in the Department of Grain Sci-
ences and Industry at KSU was forwarded to me as the assistant depart-
ment head for instruction. During the
course of this and subsequent correspon-
dence, in which I shared my observa-
tions of the opportunities at KSU and
in cereal science as a future career, it be-
came apparent to me that we were deal-
ing with a highly qualified candidate
with a high degree of maturity and un-
derstanding of his future goals. This led
me to offer him an assistantship in my
research group, which he accepted.

As time approached for his enroll-
ment, we successfully dealt with the
normal issues of such a transition, in-
cluding campus housing and its avail-
ability. After his arrival in January 1976,
we had many discussions covering a range of subjects that one
would expect from a new arrival and student in the department
with some focus on what he wanted to do in the future. Much of
our time was spent discussing the research he was to undertake
involving one aspect of the work in our laboratory on starch
structure and functionality in foods. Bill was impressive in his
enthusiasm, rapidly learning about this area of starch science
(carbohydrate chemistry) and the specific project, breadth of
understanding, and people skills. During all of this and subse-
quently, I frequently shared my experiences and professional
activities in the field as we discussed the research and potential
career development and opportunities. He rapidly began to exert
leadership in our laboratory group.

Unfortunately for me, we did not get to work together as long
as anticipated. I left KSU in August 1976 for a position at PSU.
This worked to his benefit when he then had the opportunity to
complete his Ph.D. program with Hoseney, one of the truly great
individuals and scientists in the cereals field.

We maintained close contact during the completion of his
Ph.D. program, primarily exchanging letters concerning aspects
of the research and its progress. Bill showed a high degree of
initiative and was impressive in the progress he made with an
investigation of amylopectin structure in wheat starch.

From Professor to Colleague to Friend

Bill and I have maintained contact throughout the years since
then. Normally this involved seeing each other at the AACC Intl.
(which AACC) Annual Meetings and being involved in association
activities. Our discussions have continued over the years and
have covered a wide range of subjects/areas with both of us shar-
ing experiences and observations about our careers. Bill thought-
fully shared his Ph.D. thesis with me. When he accepted his first
position (Pillsbury), it was an opportunity to offer congratula-
tions and to share some observations and comments.

It was then time to begin to encourage Bill to become involved
in AACC Intl., because I knew how much it meant to me and still
does both in terms of career experiences and the individuals in-
volved with the organization. The opportunity for Bill to chair a
session at an annual meeting then occurred to me. As expected,
he did an admirable job and has continued to do so in many

There’s Still Time to Join the
2010 Mentoring Program

Looking for a mentor, or want to share your
experience? Attend the Mentoring Kick-Off
Event at the 2010 Annual Meeting on Sunday
from 4 to 5 p.m. and ask to be paired. If
you are not able to attend the meeting,
visit www.aaccnet.org/membership/
mentor and fill out a protégé or
mentor form. Your match will be
assigned after the annual meeting.
other AACC Intl. activities, culminating in becoming president of the association. Throughout these years and even today, many thoughts, opinions, comments, and suggestions have been and continue to be exchanged. It was easy to recommend him for committees and activities in AACC Intl. due to his outgoing nature, professionalism, work ethic, breadth of knowledge, clearly demonstrated leadership capabilities, recognition in the field, and accomplishments. These qualities continue to be his “trademark” and a benefit to AACC Intl. and his colleagues.

Lessons Learned

Bill taught me to relax (a bit) and to enjoy life. Some of you may remember that he used to attend the opening session of the AACC Intl. Annual Meeting dressed casually (to say the best). He made certain I saw him, since he knew it would provoke a comment from me. When one recognizes the truly outstanding performance and capability of Bill, dress at the opening session is immaterial. When I was president of AACC Intl., Bill (he blamed Janine) made certain that I was selected to be on stage by the entertainer for the evening function. Both of them knew just how much I would “enjoy” this opportunity to be featured in front of a group.

It is difficult for me to say that I served as a mentor to Bill. Only he can say this. Did we share concerns, observations, suggestions, and viewpoints? We certainly did. It has been and continues to be a wonderful relationship, transitioning from professor (major advisor, for awhile) to colleague to friend. I learned as much or more from him than I could give.

If this is being a mentor, it was a privilege and still is. Watching individuals such as Bill develop families, successful careers, professional involvement, and leadership skills makes having a career as an academic most worthwhile.

Bill Atwell has 31 years of experience in the food industry. He is currently employed as a research fellow and the technical leader of the bakery category in Cargill’s Global Food Technology Group. As an active member of AACC Intl., Atwell has served as president, director, Carbohydrate Division chair, Northwest Section chair, and Foundation Board chair, and currently serves as Scientific Advisory Panel chair and chair of the Aleurone Task Force. Atwell can be reached at Bill_Atwell@cargill.com.

David R. Lineback is a carbohydrate chemist and food scientist with extensive academic experience. He has served as director of the Joint Institute for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition (JIFSAN), University of Maryland, and dean of the College of Agriculture, University of Idaho. He served as department head at the Departments of Food Science at North Carolina State University and the Pennsylvania State University and served on the faculty at Kansas State University and the University of Nebraska. He served as president of AACC Intl. (1983–1984), IFT (1992–1993), the Council of Agricultural Science and Technology (1998–1999), and the International Union of Food Science and Technology (2006–2008). His research interests encompassed carbohydrate and cereal chemistry with an emphasis on starch structure, properties, and functionality in foods, and enzymes involved in starch degradation/hydrolysis. Current interests include food safety, including issues such as acrylamide in foods. Lineback can be reached at lineback@umd.edu.

A Siemer ad appeared here in the printed version of the journal.