

Expert on gesture Goldin-Meadow receives APA honor for mentoring students

The importance of mentoring graduate students was celebrated at a symposium organized to honor Susan Goldin-Meadow, a psychologist who has helped guide students to become outstanding faculty members.

Goldin-Meadow received the Mentor Award in Developmental Psychology from the American Psychological Association at its summer conference in Washington. Many of her former students from around the country who attended the symposium talked about Goldin-Meadow's influence on their work.

Recipients of the annual mentoring award are selected based on recommendations from former students who have become leaders in the field. The scholars honoring Goldin-Meadow, a UChicago faculty member since 1976, carry on her work on gesture, and a number of them continue to work with her on projects.

"Susan takes time to think through research issues with her students. She models good scientific habits and practices, and she assists students with the nuts-and-bolts of getting the work done—sharpening questions, planning analyses, outlining arguments, and interpreting data," said Martha Alibali, PhD '94, now a professor of psychology at the University of Wisconsin at Madison.

Alibali, one of five former students speaking at the symposium, praised Goldin-Meadow for encouraging student intellectual independence and pointing them toward doing important work that is publishable in top-tier journals. The others joining her were R. Breckinridge Church, PhD '87, professor of psychology at Northeastern Illinois University; Michelle Perry, PhD '87, professor of education and psychology at the University of Illinois at Urbana; Jana Iverson, PhD '96, associate professor of psychology at the University of Pittsburgh; and Spencer Kelly, PhD '99, associate professor of psychology at Colgate University.

For Goldin-Meadow, the Bearsdley Ruml Distinguished Service Professor in Psychology, hearing her former students describe her mentoring style reminded her of her own mentors while doing graduate work at the University of Pennsylvania, where she received a PhD in 1975.

"I had three exceptional mentors—Rochel Gelman, Lila Gleitman, and Henry Gleitman—and what I do as a mentor reflects my experience with them," she said. Goldin-

Meadow's mentors taught her important skills she has carried on: always understand the question you're asking, and try hard to explain your research in a way that others can understand.

"Henry always used to tell us, 'Describe what you're doing so that your grandmother can understand why you're doing it—why it's important,' " she said.

Goldin-Meadow also encourages students to look at the data "to see what it tells you. It's important to have theories, but you have to pay attention to what you're finding and where it leads you." She also tells students to make the methods fit the question, and not the other way around.

The experience of mentoring provides many opportunities to guide students, to help them decide what kind of future they want, and to help them achieve their goals, she said.

"In mentoring as well as in teaching, I've learned the importance of paying attention to students' strengths and focusing on how those strengths can be developed further," she said.

"I also think it's important to be passionate about what you do. Research can be slow and it can take years to see the results of what we do. You need the passion to help you stay with it, particularly when it's not going well," she said.

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