

Presidential Address 2025—Mentoring Across the Professional Spectrum: Doing the Fundamental Work to Get to the Next Level

Anthony M. Rodriguez, AAIDD President 2025–2026

To introduce myself, I am a professor of education at Providence College and have taught mathematics to students across the spectrum, from elementary to high school. I like to prepare – I enjoy preparing for lessons, research, gardening, and working on projects in my garage. I dream of organizing, building, fixing, and problem-solving. I dream of making the complex simple, dynamic, and durable. I love applied mathematics, physics, logic, and, above all, teaching. In teaching, as in mentoring, you can do your best stunt work co-creating a community where the learners carry the weight of learning, and you as a mentor, create the ropes course designed to challenge them to set the rigor and build the ramp. The best mentoring spaces are teaching and learning spaces; they are dynamic, movable classrooms in the community.

In our association, the American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (AAIDD) has a high-leverage interconnected set of activities: research, policy, and practice forming a perfect triangle, a robust foundation from which we tap into our members' expertise across all work involving people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD). What I love about our space is that we see the value of everyone willing to work for this population, whether a teacher, faculty member, researcher, district support worker, dentist, physician, lawyer, judge, provider, politician, etcetera. We applaud cross-training and shun silos when we are together.

Today, I will be walking us through three sets of three ideas on how one can mentor across the professional spectrum from mentee to mentor: Grounding in good habits, principles in mentoring, and leading across the spectrum—all of these ideas apply to the work you will engage with. Whether you are a new hire, new student, old hand, or senior mentor, these all apply.

Grounded in Good Habits: Working Across the Spectrum in Times of Chaos and Plenty

First, we must engage in the right way. Over the past 25 years, in my classroom, it has not mattered who

you are or when you took my class at T'siya Elementary and Middle School, Highland or Cibola High School, the University of New Mexico, or Providence College.

Rules of Engagement

I have three rules of engagement, from which I do not deviate. I will work with you on the rest if you do these things:

On-Time, All the Time

If you can be on time every class, I will get you on a path to success.

Work Bell to Bell

We will not rest for the entirety of the class. We will have fun, and we will work.

No Cell Phones

We will focus on the present and work without distractions, which exponentially increases your uptake of information.

With these three in place as bedrock, the minds of those in the class calm, their amygdala winds down and stops firing on “doom loops.” At this point, students know that I will deal with and help them with anything else, including cursing, extreme emotions, meltdowns, and mistakes; we just keep going!

Meaningful Work: The Three Principles of Mentoring Across the Spectrum

Set the Rigor, Build the Ramp

Each time we face our work grounded in reality without fear or anger, we progress, learn something new, and slowly become our best selves. These choices to engage with challenges make for a bright future for those with IDD; they also connect, support, and energize everyone on your team.

We reclaim the term teacher-researcher as John Dewey understood it (Dewey, 1916): the school is the laboratory of education, a place of dynamic forces at play and fertile ground for both creating ideas and

testing them before he left Chicago. We must reclaim the truth that teachers are researchers; they are the ultimate creatives, processing the discoveries in real-time of 20 to 30 minds who are themselves simultaneously accessing the lesson from multiple vantage points, finding the signal through the noise. Teaching is some of the most rigorous and highly taxing work I have ever done. It integrates AAIDD's perfect prime of research, policy, and practice that can only be divisible by itself.

Mentor Them in Work They Can Get Fired Up About: Our Interests Are Our Supports

I once went on a deep dive into research on how emotion—and its pathway through the brain—can help with the uptake of new knowledge and skills, and how to use emotion to support teaching and learning higher-level mathematics for people with significant disabilities. That one single project, steeped in triggering content with advanced practices, hard-wired the learning deep in the minds of my students so they could later remember, manipulate the memory, and use it to solve problems.

I found that with moderate triggering, and in facing their fears, I could get students to use the information in class. My students would not stop talking about the applications for significant and profound triggering and would bring the idea home and tell their parents. For example, they might say to stop going to the bodega for toothpaste because it costs three times the amount per ounce as the store just a few blocks further, that the pawnshop takes them to the cleaners, or that the huckster at the state fair will sell you a hot tub for your apartment and never install it (these are real things meant to pull you toward the mathematics and give you a reason right now to learn the content). We need to bring all students into the tent and enlarge it. Best practice is to help people get fired up, acknowledge humanity, and above all, let them do work that has meaning.

Tough Love Requires a Measure of Grace

Many people think what they are doing is a form of tough love, and then realize midstream that something is off. I have been there. I have been too caring and not given enough structure, and as a result the person became privileged, enabled, and less than who they could be. I have also erred on the other side of this ratio, where the individual shuts down, cannot hear what I am saying and becomes less than their potential.

The sweet spot is equal proportions—toughness without love is mean and cruel, and love without expectations and accountability lowers the bar and insults their intelligence.

Love Them Enough to Tell Them the Truth: Kindness is Not Always Nice, Yet it Heals

I'm a parent of two tremendous and brave kids, artistic and soulful, stubborn like their dad. They live in my dreams and daylong internal dialogues. I worry for them and am always proud of them. I seek to bring out the best in them while showing them what discipline and dedication look like. I try all the time and fail all the time; sometimes, the light emerges, and I see not only that are they going to be ok, but that they are thriving.

When they are not, we talk, work out issues, set expectations and boundaries, and have the dreaded "Triple D": difficult dialogues with dad. A play on words and rooted in an anti-establishment response to my college's mission on difficult dialogues, where people pose as curious, pretend to listen, and then move on, having the same opinion that they had before. In my family, the Triple D is a real, vulnerable, and heart-wrenching conversation where we all empty the chamber and talk about all the issues. At the end of these conversations, we leave exhausted but united in caring for each other in productive ways, and this later becomes part of our inside jokes, "remember that time when. . .?" The difficult dialogues provide a time to re-center and return to the good things we have built as a team.

Complex in the Beginning, Simple in the End

All great things begin in complexity, and the master mentor understands this process and can make the complex simple and actionable. Simple is indeed elegant, yet the path to elegance is sometimes overwhelming. A skilled mentor can guide us, set appropriate weight for us to carry, expose us to complexity, and work with us so we do the work, discover, and learn.

My Genesis Story: Manual Labor Blazes a Path to Teaching People With Disabilities

Was it serendipity, building a disposition for doing the work to get to me the next level? Before getting to the next level of their careers, some notable figures were manual laborers. Abraham Lincoln was a logger and rail

splitter. Edward James Olmos was a furniture mover, which supported his flailing acting career until he joined the set of *Miami Vice*. Booker T. Washington worked in the fields and as a janitor at Hampton before he became a student there. Manual labor has taught me:

- How to persevere through long, monotonous days.
- How to work across differences; all sorts are hired in this space.
- How to rely on your teammate for safety and have their back.
- How my success is directly tied to yours.
- How to show up regardless of my present state of being. And most importantly,
- How monotony sparks the imagination and leaves you time to dream.

Manual labor and movement have always supported me in facing those demons; they have shaped me in ways I am forever grateful for. It is still a place where I go to work off negative energy, anger, resentment, and disappointment. Where I find my center, build, create, shape, and channel my energy. I was a junior in high school, had worked many jobs by then, and had just left a tedious role pumping gas at the local gas station. A friend told me an arborist was hiring laborers and that I would get along well. So, I applied and was invited to the back lot of a farm and told to rototill the garden. Then I was told to use the splitter and split firewood. Then I was asked if I liked working outside, and then, quite simply, I was hired. I was asked to split wood because that is the backbone of winter work. It is both monotonous and draining: splitting, loading, and delivering cords of wood in between snowfall (and plowing) and the rare clearing of lots for homes.

Manual labor trains you for monotony, for boredom, and for constantly repeating the same core actions across many different terrains and situations. It was excellent training for academic work; I was carrying a straight C-average then. Manual labor shaped me, made me stick with something well beyond the point where I wanted to go, and after every day I could go home knowing I accomplished something tangible. The process of working from 7:30 to lunch and lunch to the drive back to my car were great micro work cycles that allowed me to see day to day progress.

Years later, I found my calling in a moment of clarity. In mid-December—cold but not completely frozen ground—a recent slushy mix froze over the night before on a densely-forested lot we were hired

to clear-cut. We were running a skeleton crew, and I was sent out alone to drop trees, load the truck, and run loads to the woodlot. I was given the day to do what I could. There was a steep slope on the lot facing the road, and I began dropping trees up the hill, dicing up the tree, and taking truckloads to the wood lot.

As the day wore on, the temperature rose, softening the ground. In the afternoon, I squared up to drop a tree, cut my notch, and started on the backside as I have done hundreds, if not thousands, of times. When the saw kicked and rotated, I lost my footing, and the saw hit my leg, grabbed hold of something on me, and fell to the side, pulling me with it, sliding down the hill. I did not want to look. I saw coveralls in shreds, and my metal chaps wrapped perfectly around the saw blade. With a sigh of relief, I figured it was time to pack up, drop the truck off, and drive home. I was shaken but not processing well. I called a friend of mine, home from Georgetown, to get a drink. I told him we had much to catch up on, and that the most jacked-up thing had just happened to me.

When I arrived to pick him up his mom asked if I would join them for dinner, and I obliged. We had meatballs. I told them the story, and his mom, the director of social workers for the district, said, ‘Hey, Anthony, you ever think of working inside, at least for the winter? There is an opening at a school that I think you might understand. Maybe good until spring. If you don’t like it, you can go back to the tree company. Think about it.’

I decided to apply. I told my boss I could continue to plow driveways, I just wanted a break from tree-work for the winter, but that I would be back. I signed on with the Danbury Public Schools in Connecticut as a paraprofessional teacher at an elementary school on a hill above the city dump (which was on fire during my year there) in a self-contained district-wide program in a class where half of the students were diagnosed with IDD, and half with Emotional Disturbance. It was not an optimal mix, and I hated it. Every Friday, I questioned why I would go back on Monday. Every Monday, I realized that there was something good about the work and the teaching, and I could get to Friday. On and on. I was sure that come spring, I would leave. Then I felt like I had to stay till June to finish the year.

Then one kid, Pao—who seemed to hate school more than I did when I was his age and who never attended the extended school year—gave me a letter on the last week, all taped up with my name on it. There was a picture of me with a mustache (which I did not have at the time), red eyeballs, and smoke coming out of my ears, and it said “Mista”. I opened it,

and teared up for the first time as a teacher. My Grinch heart grew 10 times in size when I saw an extended school year form signed by his mom. I now had summer pay, and Pao and I had a lot of work to do. This signpost stuck. I never left, and decades later I am still making a living here in this work, on the Beauty Way, Hózhó (Kahn-John & Koithan, 2015), a place of great trials, meaningful work, and my eventual salvation.

Leading Across the Spectrum: Three Ideas to Get Your Team Through the Next Few Years

Hold Fast and Conserve

Hold Fast

Hold fast is a nautical command given to the crew when approaching a storm at sea. In our work, we are all supporting someone or something in this chaos; we are all needed, and must hold fast to whatever grounding specialized supports we have to stay on board and reach our destination. This is not the time to place unnecessary weight on our team. Holding fast and anchoring yourself to the team's mission and goals is enough.

Conserve

If you have more in the tank, do more, but for now, your daily work is enough. If today is the day you have more space for others, step in as much as you can. You do not have to commit to any other time but now. You can just be a good person who helps today. You can re-commit tomorrow if you would like. Just be here today.

My Calm Is Their Calm

The finest math teacher uses best practices, standards, and core skills in an artful way that draws the learner in, leaves the best parts empty like a cliffhanger, and lets the class engage in dialogue, math talks, arguments, and even strategies they invent themselves to find multiple paths to solving a problem. And, when it is time to share, the students listen to each other. As long as they got the correct answer, I have the sense of “We are all good, and heck, even if they did not get the correct answer but increased their understanding *at all*, or increased their proportion of correct problem solving from 25% to maybe 75%, we are good. That we are moving forward, the formative learning, the shaping, the practice, is all that matters. If we practice bell to bell, with no distractions, the results (our summative assessment) will take care of themselves.”

Eventually, students in my classes were not afraid of standardized tests; that was their superpower. I committed to not allowing the high stakes testing to impact my daily teaching, and my calm was their calm. I told them that tests are essential and are but one target of many for the semester, and that if they just committed to today, their test scores would take care of themselves. All they had to do was commit and get to work.

As teachers and mentors, our work is to develop a community that allows for and even celebrates errors on the learning path while embracing teamwork with an esprit de corps where we are all working toward the same goal in joy. To fill a space with the joy of being with each other and sharing the time, trust, and respect that we all have something to bring to the table, is a joy for me.

Don't Take Tea With Tyrants: Diffused Energy Is a Privilege We Do Not Have

Don't spend time with tyrants; do not be the problem. In our status quo, the most difficult person tends to win and control the culture. Make it difficult for that person to do that by making them earn a place at the table through honest work, collaborative approaches, and win-win endings. Do not heed their call. You have too much vital work to take a meeting with a timewaster.

We owe it to the people we lead, mentor, and care for to engage with true and humble professionals who carry real weight. In a time of privileged tyrants, we need a more earnest, pragmatic approach to work, sharing ideas, and solving problems.

Be the one who listens and does. The one who can do. The one who shows up in whatever state they are in and chooses to be the teammate and not the tyrant. The one who will hold space so another can be heard.

We may have every reason in the world to be mad, scared, and hurt. Yet now is not a boom time, a time of privilege to squander a wealth of time by pondering aimlessly. Now is the time when those who have always been most vulnerable and most marginalized are again being hunted, picked on, bullied, and having their collective chairs pulled out from under them. Rather than jockeying for positions, we can instead choose joy and egoless, meaningful work.

We are ready. We must choose action. We must step into the problem with all our energy. May the fruits of our toil and our difficult experiences fuel our upcoming work. May it be the key to our superpowers.

“¡Si Se Puede!” (*United Farm Workers, n.d.*), we are built for this.

Lessons Learned Through the Three Rules of Engagement That Guided My Teaching

On-Time, All the Time (Even at Sal’s Pizza)

I first heard of Community-Based Instruction (CBI) when I was a delivery person for Sal’s Pizza, which was run by Sal and Frankie. Both were squarely from, and identified with, Brooklyn, which was about 60 miles away due south. Oddly, both owners looked just like the characters from Sal’s Pizza in Spike Lee’s *Do the Right Thing*.

I delivered pizzas in the community, talked to everyone who came by to hang out with Sal, and watched the daily drama unfold between staff, owners, and customers. I was either the best or worst delivery person on any given day. “You’re the best, I don’t know if I can ever pay you enough”, or “What’s the matter with you. You take all day. Where you been? You know I should fire you.” And the next day, he said how sorry he was, and I was like family. I could count on nothing being the same from day to day. I learned to ride the waves, step into the chaos and not flinch, and run my mouth like everyone else to get fully involved in the back-and-forth. One recurring customer was a man who started the first CBI program in the city. I was told, “This guy pushes those kids; they work hard, they learn, and they help out the community.” Sal knew nothing about the disability community, but he knew a good program when he saw one.

Helping the community was always the pinnacle of what we were here for. Sal had his vices; he had a truly dysfunctional daily circus around him at all times, but he knew that having a job was the best thing for people. To be connected and do real work. I kept watching this teacher come in and talk about the job, the Knicks, and politics. I also saw someone who loved his job teaching people with IDD. He saw strengths, he saw potential, and he believed in his students. It would still be a while before I saw the light and came to the field, but there was but one more fencepost guiding me—one with a lot of yelling and tall tales sprinkled with love.

Work Bell to Bell (Coach Walker)

I was exposed to peers with IDD through sports. I had a coach who moved from Great Britain to the

States, who had a peculiar love for American football. He had a strong accent and a penchant for language that would be outlawed today. I learned that my coach cared when he screamed, and you knew to what degree you had made a mistake, and thus how much he cared, by how often and how impassioned the screaming became. He loved how football mirrored chess’s execution, logic, and strategy. He enjoyed that it could fully channel physicality in ways that soccer never could. He loved its grace and beauty. He often started his tirades with ‘bloody’ and ended them with comments that your effort was not worth ‘a hill of beans’ when he saw what was lacking in your execution of his plays.

Coach Walker made us all face our demons, even when he created some of them. You knew when you did right, hustled, faced the linebacker in the hole, and completed the block. He admired bravery because he saw it in his child.

Coach Walker had a son with IDD who attended our daily practices and was eternally on the sidelines. I would talk to him before practice, during one of the laps I had to run, through pushups, and during benchings where he would keep me company, echoing his dad’s words. This son was his translator, giving us the true meaning and the care behind the words from a man who could easily be misunderstood. His son made us all better. He would be frank about being fierce, not being afraid, or saying that I needed to run fast and hit people with more force. In my formative years of middle school, when my father was in prison, I was seen by both my coach and his son as a human who was worth investing in. I learned to be coached, and I realized that if I outworked the person in front of me, I could find success. “Don’t stop until the whistle.” On my longest run, you could hear him screaming in an assortment of curse words for me to run it outside, which I chose not to. The words began somewhere in the endzone when I took the ball. But I liked contact and I needed to work through my rage, so, much like Forest Gump, I ran straight ahead. His screaming continued until I broke free around the 30 yard line when the sea changed, it became a cheer, then a scream, then some British humor letting people know that it was his intent all along.

No Cell Phones (Be Present/Tree Work)

Before my boss of a Northeastern tree company got sober, I was standing on the ground. I had just

completed one of my better jobs shaping a 50-foot maple tree. I was looking up at my work, feeling a sense of accomplishment. Then, I heard my name and a barrage of curse words faintly through my ear protection. As I spun around to face the noise, I had less than a second to react to a tree falling in my direction. I was able to move about a foot to my right before the tree came down on my left shoulder; a glancing blow with an object weighing more than a ton tore my trapezius through my socket and threw me away from the tree.

At first, the response was a beer thrown in my direction to ice the shoulder, followed by a lot of yelling and my eventual X-rays and formal medical care. As a 20-year-old, I had no health insurance. My boss, who paid us in cash, did not have it for us, so he had to pay out of pocket, ruining his morning as well. Miraculously, the impact tore everything clean, a muscle and stretched tendons, and dislocated and deeply bruised bones, but nothing was broken. I took a week off, which I had never done before, and then I returned to work to do as much as possible the next week while healing. I could not afford to not work. I had seen chainsaw injuries, climbing injuries, and broken bones, so I showed up well before being cleared by a doctor, because that is what you do in manual labor. You do not have the privilege of healing.

Our manual workers today do this well beyond their twenties; some do it until they pass away. I know that no amount of work I do now can compare to that, yet it is this attitude that I still channel today. I relive it, not in a trauma response, but in who I am in my DNA. No one can outwork me if I choose never to stop. I will commit to keeping those I work closely with around at the end of my shift safe and intact.

Conclusion

In closing, I am ready:

- To seek the truth wherever it leads me.
- To support the disenfranchised, the vulnerable, and those who are treated in a deficit-oriented and discriminatory way and do good work for its own sake.
- To be strong for others and to find healing for the broken parts of my being.
- To be the dreamer, be the one who first sets foot on this land and sees a future that is worth

the effort, the discrimination—and, oh yes, the taxes and inflated rents.

- To be free at all costs and to support their neighborhood, their “Barrio”, and seek redemption in every field that spans miles in the distance.

The fields that nourish our country run for miles in every direction, full of lettuce, or strawberries, or even the avocado trees which replaced the great orange and lemon groves of my youth. There is great soul—and great souls—in those fields, full of life and willing to do the work, much like our marginalized communities. It is time to see them for who they are: our great generators and the best parts of ourselves. Stand next to them, listen, and support their fight, because the finest part of our country as Americans is when we stand with the outsider, the oppressed, the invaded, and the one who knocks and is in need.

We have much work to do and much to be thankful for. I am beaming and full of hope that all of you are here with me and for our community. I commend you for all the people struggling now and still choosing to face the atrocities with love, resistance, and support. I salute those who can empower, elevate, and empathize with an open heart. Your work is the most meaningful and important.

A transformation is taking place right now. As we see from afar in Los Angeles, a community that would be righteous to be angry instead shows up at a protest to dance, sing, and express who they are as a community. It is their joy to show up, to be both serious and have fun—hosting a peaceful, proactive party that keeps on dancing. I pledge that every one of my classes will include some form of movement to optimize brain function, so today we will end with a sensory integration, a brain break, and some dancing.

References

- Dewey, J. (1916). *Democracy and Education, An introduction to the philosophy of education*, MacMillan.
- Kahn-John, M., & Koithan, M. (2015). Living in health, harmony, and beauty: The Diné (Navajo) Hózhó wellness philosophy. *Global advances in health and medicine*, 4(3), 24–30.
- United Farm Workers (n.d) The history of *jsi se puede!* United Farm Workers. <https://ufw.org/research/history/history-si-se-puede/>

I want to thank Marc Sessler, Maggie Nygren, Karen Kramer, and Zach Gordon for their editorial prowess and thoughtful feedback in finding the signal through the noise in this speech. Thank you to all the mentors in my career who have pushed me to realize my potential and made this work meaningful and exciting.

Author:

Anthony M. Rodriguez, Providence College.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Anthony M. Rodriguez, Providence College, 320, Harkins Hall, 1 Cunningham Square, Providence, RI 02918 (email: rodriguez@providence.edu).