One thing I’ve learned during college is that the best education often happens outside the classroom, when a professor becomes a mentor. I have been privileged to benefit from the counsel of renowned Catholic political thinker Michael Novak, who has been remarkably generous with his time. But my experience is hardly unique: many of my friends—at my own college and others—tell me how faculty mentors have shaped their educations and lives.

Here are five ways an academic mentor can change your life:

1. They show us the importance of flexible goals
   According to the Washington Post, only 27 percent of college graduates work in the field within which they majored. A true education shapes the whole person. Mentors show us how to use that education to be flexible in our goals, rather than rigid in our adherence to a career path. Novak’s example is instructive: After twelve years he left a Catholic seminary for New York with only his suitcases and an unfinished novel. But his initial theological training informed his political theory and made him one of the most prominent political writers of our day.

2. They remind us that careerism kills vocation
   As I near graduation—and thus the possibility of unemployment—it’s easy to slip into “careerism,” to sacrifice my ideals for a paycheck. But witnessing a professor’s genuine happiness while working in his field convincingly argues for the worth of fighting for what is noble, not just for your pocketbook. Without such examples, such a life remains abstract.

3. They help reset priorities
   During my freshman year, I took up the suggestion of a professor to enter an essay contest with a $500 prize and write on Francis Bacon and C. S. Lewis. The only problem was that I didn’t know anything about Bacon. So I asked another professor to quickly explain his thought. The professor admonished me, “Your desire to be published is coming before your desire to know.” It was a crucial reminder that undergraduate education is a time to learn and read and grow.

4. They can lead you to new opportunities
   Job opportunities often come from people, not résumés. I had the chance to speak with the political and cultural commentator Mary Eberstadt when she visited my college to give a lecture. She invited me to a luncheon in Washington, D.C., which then led to numerous job offers and writing opportunities. Scholars who care about their field often want to help students contribute to that area.

5. They teach us to value friendship most of all
   But the most important benefit from having a faculty mentor is the friendship with that particular person. Beyond the opportunities, the lessons, and the helpful admonitions, the most significant gift the mentor gives is himself. Mentors are useful, but more important, they will influence your life by their example and their witness to what truly matters.

Peter Atkinson is a 2014–15 ISI Honors Scholar and a senior at Ave Maria University.