Quotes from Abigail’s Letter:

Before embarking upon my first year of graduate school in Fall 2007, Abigail began to put her mentoring skills to work during the recruitment process in the Spring. Always willing to lend a helping hand and offer sagacious advice, she sent me an extremely detailed email informing me of her personal experiences as a graduate student here at IU Sociology. This was no run-of-the-mill email with general information from an unengaged student. In fact, the email was quite thoughtful, informative, and honest. She gave me reviews of professors with which she had previously worked, mentioned courses she particularly enjoyed, and provided a very complex exegesis of her research interests. Instead of feeling overwhelmed by this personal outpouring, her warm response was a strong indicator of the collegiality prevalent amongst the graduate students at IU.

She has always encouraged me not to be discouraged by bad feedback, and has always sought to motivate me with a “try again” attitude—no matter how large or small my issue may be. She has taught me the value of connecting with faculty as much as possible, whether it be at a talk/seminar, attending lunches with visiting scholars, or by serving on a committee in the department. In encouraging me to do so, she showed me that there are places in which I can contribute, and that my ideas and insights are valuable. I cannot place words on how much her tireless prodding and advice have meant to me.

Besides graduate school “life” advice, Abigail has also been there to help out with the more mundane academic concerns as well. She has offered to read Master’s drafts, critique presentations, edit tables, and decode the cryptic code that is STATA output. Tirelessly responding to panicking emails at 3 am, the advice she has given has always been to make me a better scholar. From her I have received “mini stats-lessons” and suggestions to better my regression models and subsequent findings, even when she has her own work to attend to. I have learned a lot about how to make my research better on account of her input, and my tables have never looked more immaculate on the part of her scrutiny.

And this is something she has done. Rather than let me “wander in the abyss,” she has given me that harsh advice that has reeled me in and forced me to get my act together. On my end of things, there have been times where I have been particularly hard-headed, and have not taken her advice. And most of the time, I can say that I should have listened to her. But rather than greet me with an “I-told-you-so,” I have been greeted with the same willingness to help me, as though I had never messed up.

The advice and mentoring, of course, did not end after I became a first year graduate student. Abigail spent countless hours with me (among other first-year graduate students) discussing my research interests, recommending thousands of sociology articles and books we could read in our “spare time,” sending along information about fellowships and funding opportunities, and hanging out eating hot garlic wings at Buffalouie’s on Tuesdays after class.
After accepting my invitation to come to IU, I found that Abigail was interested in my academic future and was happy to offer any information that she had acquired. This was most evident to me when Abigail accompanied me on a drive from Bloomington, IN to Atlanta, GA. During at least five of the nine hours that it took to drive to our destination, Abigail offered advice about how to navigate through my first year of graduate school and beyond. She told me about the importance of attending job talks, symposiums and colloquia and encouraged me to attend them and she also pushed me to verbalize my own ideas about sociological quandaries.

Abigail has not ceased to be a great mentor. Earlier this year she read drafts of several essays that I had written. With track changes she edited the documents and included VERY comprehensive comments to help me make my thoughts clearer and stronger. Because Abigail can often be found in the SISR, she is always available to give advice. If she isn’t in the SISR, I can send her an email and within a few hours she will respond to a question via email.

I could say so much more about her, but as time does not permit me to, I hope that Abigail will be considered for the graduate student mentor award. In addition to her commitment to her own academic work, she has a vested interest in the upcoming graduate students in this department. After attending a mock presentation of my M.A. recently, she wrote in an email:

“I just wanted to begin this email by thanking you for inviting me to your preparation for NCSA. It was a joy to hear about the work you two are doing, and I look forward to your continued contributions to the department, to sociology, and to race research. I know that the M.A. is a tough process (I spent three years on mine) and that you are in the middle of a whole host of things, but I wanted to lend my assistance/guidance/general body of knowledge to you in dealing with the analytical challenges your research imposes upon you... So, if you have any doubts, concerns, questions, etc., please feel free to use my brain.”

This excerpt captures her zeal and personal investment in her colleagues’ academic development as future scholars in the professoriate. It is with high esteem that I nominate Abigail Sewell for Graduate Student Mentor of the Year.