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[Home](#) > [News, Events & Media](#) > [Recent News](#) > [2012 Doctoral Mentoring Award Goes to Psychologist Karen Suyemoto](#)

2012 Doctoral Mentoring Award Goes to Psychologist Karen Suyemoto

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Alexander McAdams and Jim Mortenson



While the Doctoral Mentoring Award is largely meant for faculty members who helpfully guide students with coursework selection, research projects, and overall program counsel, the work that Associate Professor of Psychology and Asian American Studies Karen Suyemoto does exceed those expectations.

“Mentoring is not just about research or a publication or training a professional,” she says. “It is a relationship, and I have the privilege and honor of contributing to the development of a person, as well as a professional who will contribute to the world.”

When asked to describe her role and effectiveness as a mentor, Suyemoto hesitates and explains, “The best reporters of my mentoring are my students.”

Indeed, with glowing recommendations from both former and current mentees, her work is a contribution that her students find personally and professionally rewarding.

“Karen is incredibly dedicated to her students, and like the best of ‘academic parents’ [she] is both warm and demanding,” says UMass Boston alumna Stephanie Day, who graduated with her PhD in December 2010. “While she has high expectations of her students, her expectations of herself are even higher. I was constantly amazed by the time and energy she put into mentoring me — including reviewing my research, discussing my professional development, and writing letters of recommendation.”

Suyemoto, who has been with UMass Boston since 2000, is also the associate director of Asian American studies at UMass Boston, and during any given semester she mentors 4-6 doctoral students and 1-3 undergraduates. Her dual roles in clinical psychology and Asian American studies often intersect because clinical cultural psychology, she says, allows for an opportunity to incorporate “inter-disciplinary perspectives” into research.

When mentoring students on research endeavors, she encourages them to pinpoint their passions and direct those passions into making social and cultural differences.

“For me, research is not abstract,” she says. “It is a means to contribute to justice, a way to contribute to personal and social healing.”

Suyemoto says she encourages her students to consider what exactly it means to be a psychologist as they complete their doctoral studies because her understanding is that “clinical psychology is more than a focus on mental health and the individual. It is also a

commitment to social and racial justice.”

This approach to research is reflective in Suyemoto’s own teaching and research. Most of her research focuses on Asian American race and ethnicity, the way individuals and communities contribute to resisting oppression, and how they create an identity. Another research path includes her study of what she calls “the colloquial meanings of race and identity,” which, she says, is essentially the question: What do people process when they read about race or racism?

In addition to the work she does with the students whom she advises, she mentors students of color at the university. Her mentoring extends to members of professional organizations in clinical psychology who can benefit from professional development guidance related to being a psychologist of color.

“Mentoring is more to me than what I do for my particular students,” she says. “There are issues that emerge for what it means to be a psychologist of color,” and Suyemoto says that she helps students resolve and make sense of these issues that may arise in the classroom or in the field. Likewise, she is also available to provide students with information regarding specialized conferences, organizations, and funding opportunities.

As for the award, it all comes back to her mentees, Suyemoto explains.

“My students are amazing,” she says. “What makes this award most meaningful for me is that my students and colleagues thought enough to recommend me for it.”

Tags: **asian american identity**, **doctoral mentoring award**, **psychologist of color**
