Robert J. Sternberg is currently the Dean of the School of Arts and Sciences, Professor of Psychology, Adjunct Professor of Education, and Director of the PACE (Psychology of Abilities, Competencies and Expertise) Center at Tufts University. He is also Honorary Professor at the University of Heidelberg. His work at the PACE Center is dedicated to the advancement of theory, research, practice and policy advancing the notion of intelligence as modifiable and capable of development throughout the life span.

A member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, Dr. Sternberg’s research covers a wide range of areas, including intelligence, creativity, wisdom, leadership, love and close relationships, and hate. He is the author of over 1200 books and articles, and has won roughly two dozen awards for his scholarship. His research has taken him to five different continents, where he has studied the relationship between culture and competence.

Sternberg received his PhD from Stanford University and his BA summa cum laude and Phi Beta Kappa, with honors with exceptional distinction in psychology, from Yale University. He also has received 10 honorary doctorates. Sternberg is a past-president of the American Psychological Association (APA) and the Eastern Psychological Association (EPA), and has served on the Boards of Directors of the APA, APA Insurance Trust, and American Psychological Foundation. He is currently on the Boards of the American Association of Colleges and Universities and the Eastern Psychological Association.

How did you become interested in psychology?

As a child, I did poorly on IQ tests. I always wanted to understand why. So I decided in elementary school I wanted to study intelligence, and that is much of what I have done in my career. I actually started my formal investigation at age 13, in 7th grade. I needed to do a science project, so I chose to do a study of mental testing. I created my own test as part of the project. I found the Stanford-Binet Intelligence Test in the book, Measuring Intelligence, by Terman and Merrill, and thought it might be good practice to give the test to some classmates. The first one I gave the test to was a girl in whom I was romantically interested. I was hoping that giving her the test might help break the ice. I was wrong. Then I gave it to a classmate I had known in the Cub Scouts. He was another bad choice. He told his mother, who told the junior-high-school guid-

An Interview With Robert J. Sternberg

CHRISTOPHER KOCH

George Fox University
An interview with Robert J. Sternberg □ Christopher Koch

Who was your mentor? If you had more than one, please comment on each mentor.
I have had five terrific mentors in my life. The first was Mrs. Virginia Alexa when I was 10—in fourth grade. Before her, my teachers had thought I was stupid because I did poorly on IQ tests. My teachers had expected me to perform stupidly; I had done so; they were happy that I performed at the expected level, and I was happy that they were happy. Mrs. Alexa, in contrast, believed in me and helped me, for the first time, believe in myself. I went from being a mediocre student to being an excellent one.

The second was Endel Tulving when I was an undergraduate at Yale. I am still friends with him today, 35 years later! He taught me not to accept ideas just because others believe them. Once, we submitted a paper to Psychological Bulletin. It was rejected. Later, I needed to cite the paper, and I asked him how to cite it. He said I should cite it as “rejected by Psychological Bulletin.” I thought at the time he must be losing it— I was going to advertise my failure? But I later realized the important message underlying his suggestion. If you have unpopular ideas, others will tend, at least at first, to dislike the ideas and possibly you. You have to stick up for your ideas and be proud of them. Creativity involves defying many obstacles.

The third mentor was Gordon Bower when I was a graduate student in psychology at Stanford. He was a wonderful graduate advisor. I was interested in intelligence, which had, pretty much, nothing to do with his interests. Nevertheless, he supported me spiritually and financially and encouraged me to follow my own interests. I learned from him that a good mentor should learn as much from his or her students as the students learn from the mentor. Always allow students to pursue their own dreams, not yours. I think Gordon has had many successful students because he helped them develop and nurture their own dreams.

The fourth mentor was Wendell Garner, when I was a junior faculty member at Yale. Negotiating Yale as an assistant professor was a great challenge, and he was enormously helpful. When I was being considered for tenure, I heard that it was not going so well because my field was intelligence, and intelligence is generally considered a not very prestigious area of psychology. I went to see Garner, and told him I thought I had made a mistake in defining my work as being in intelligence.

I could have done the same work and called it something else, like “reasoning” or “problem solving.” He told me that, when I had come to Yale, my goal was to make a difference to the field of intelligence. Now I was afraid that goal might cost me my job. I was right; it might. But, he said, that is what I should study, because that is why I entered psychology in the first place. He was right. In life, one has to take risks one really believes in, and this was a risk I had to take. It ended well when I got tenure.

The fifth mentor has been Jamshed Bharucha, Provost at Tufts, during my two years as Dean of the School of Arts and Sciences at Tufts. First, he was willing to take a chance on hiring me. Second, since I have started at Tufts, he has been an incredible mentor. Much of being an academic administrator is counter-intuitive, and administration is very hard to negotiate without good mentoring. For example, he taught me that the hardest thing in administration is not having good ideas, but getting buy-in for those ideas from all relevant stakeholders. If one leaves out even one group of stakeholders, that group may end up opposing the idea just because the members were never consulted. He also taught me that, sometimes, when people get what they want, they are disappointed rather than happy about it. The thrill may have been in the challenge, not in actually having the challenge succeed.

How much of your academic lineage or "family tree" do you know?
I know my whole lineage back all the way to Wilhelm Wundt! This is a very useful thing to know, because it helps you see your place in the evolving history of the discipline.

Do you have any advice for maximizing one's graduate school experience?
Yes. First, follow your own passions. There is always going to be a lot of pressure to do this, that, or the other thing because it is the "in" thing, or because your advisor does it, or because it is where the funding is at the moment. In the end, you will do your best work if you pursue your own dreams, not other people's dreams, or other people's dreams for you.
Second, find a great mentor. If you don’t have a good mentor, change. Graduate school is much more about mentorship than about taking courses. Having great mentorship can make all the difference, as it did to me. Whatever I have achieved has been in large part because of the mentors I describe above, and others like them.

What is your source or inspiration for research ideas? All my ideas come from failures in my own life. I try to understand why I failed at something, and that is the basis of the theory and later empirical work. I started studying intelligence because I did poorly on IQ tests; creativity when I, at one point, felt I had run out of ideas; wisdom when I gave a student really foolish advice; love when a relationship I was in was going badly; hate when I wanted to understand why half my family was killed by the Nazis during World War II; and leadership because when I was 11 I lost the election for the elementary-school student-council vice-presidency to Ted and I could not quite figure out why.

Do you have any tips for developing a successful research program? The main tip I have is to seek ideas in problems that interest you. The great thing about psychology is that, everyday, things happen in people’s lives that are puzzling. Research in psychology helps us understand why they happen. The lesser tip is to make sure that, when you have ideas, you understand that good ideas don’t sell themselves. You have to sell them—to mentors, other psychologists, laypeople, whomever. You need to be prepared to show why what you do is important. Do not assume others will see it unless you show them!

What is psychology’s biggest problem today? Psychology’s biggest problem today is disunity. Scientists are under-appreciative of practitioners, and vice versa. Often, even within science or practice, people of different viewpoints are intolerant of each other’s views. We hurt ourselves when we squabble and bicker. For example, practitioners give us a chance to show how our science can be used and for our science to do good. Moreover, most students who study psychology are interested in practice. Were there no practice, scientists would have few students. At the same time, without science, practice would be vacuous. Psychological practice would have no more to offer than do all the amateur psychologists of the world who believe they are experts in human behavior. Thus, science thus gives practice its content, and practice gives science much of its personal and societal impact and many of its students.

Where is psychology as a field headed? I am concerned about where psychology as a field is headed. Biological approaches have much to offer, but so do other approaches. I am concerned that we are becoming reductionist, and thereby losing some of our soul. When I was young, what attracted me to the field was that great psychologists asked big questions. They were people who made a difference not just to the field, but to the world. For example, over the years, great psychologists from Alfred Binet to Gordon Allport to Amos Tversky asked big questions. I’m concerned that the methods are getting more precise, but in the process, the questions are getting smaller.

What will be the most important areas of psychological research in the future? Areas are not important in themselves, I believe. It is great psychologists who make the areas important. If you have good ideas, you can make an area important to the field. It is better to follow your passions than to follow trends in areas.

What is the biggest area(s) of application for the psychology? There are many big areas of application. I do not think there is one biggest one. Certainly, how to use psychology to help achieve world peace is fundamental. Another fundamental one is how to use psychology to help people realize the importance of preserving the environment—before it is too late. For me, a big area of application is how we can use psychology to make a difference in how testing of intelligence, achievement, and related areas is done. Testing has been controlled commercially rather than scientifically, and I think we have paid a price for the commercial rather than scientific control of the field. When there is commercial control, the main goal is to maximize the bottom line rather than to do what is best for those who take the tests, or for the society that has come to be stratified in large part by people’s test scores. All societies stratify themselves in one way or another. There is no best way to do it. If we are going to use tests, at least we should use tests that measure broader skills—creativity, practical and emotional intelligence, wisdom—and not just the narrow memory and analytical skills current tests assess.