Mentoring in Higher Education

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What is Mentoring?

Mentoring fosters an enduring personal relationship between people to cultivate career knowledge, self-identity and transformation, and social and emotional support among other topics in order to help support a future colleague. It is a process embedded into higher education in order to "enhance the academic development (including development of research skills and a disciplinary identity), professional (career) development, and personal (psychosocial) development of graduate students" (Lunsford et al., 2017, p. 323). This growth can benefit both parties involved in mentoring when it is done purposefully. One reason to encourage mentorship is because of the mutual benefits provided by the relationship.

Mentors are needed in order to help students recognize the different expectations of higher education. For example, undergraduate students will usually learn and apply proficiency within a discipline whereas graduate students are expected to challenge and contribute to the knowledge base within the field (University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, n.d.). Without proper mentorship, some students would not receive the push they need to present or publish material.

It is important to be clear from the beginning about what the mentoring relationship is and can do for both faculty and students. Weinberg (2019) noted a distinction between a mentor and a friend as the value from the relationship is based on a specific outcome, namely a student's development in academics, career, and self. Additionally, a mentor cannot be all things to any mentee nor should he try; it is imperative to have other stakeholders in place for students who need crisis management or to draw upon the expertise of others (Johnston, 2007; Weinberg, 2019).

How is Mentoring Different from Advising, Coaching, and Teaching?

Advising is an academic endeavor aimed at successfully helping students navigate courses and programs of study toward graduation. While some advisers may become mentors and some mentors may advise, there is a distinction between these two roles (Johnston, 2007). Further, there is a distinction between coaching and mentoring. Coaching is a specific, performance-driven, short-term relationship forged to work toward a specific outcome such as completion of a particular project (Kent State University, 2017). Mentoring relationships, however, are usually long-term and should be driven by the mentee in pursuit of their own personal development and growth. Often, teachers of students become their mentors either by choice or assignment. However, the connection built between mentor and mentee should go beyond the traditional role of student and teacher from the classroom. The interaction as a mentor will go beyond academics and assignments, two concepts important for the teacher.

Mentoring at its heart is a relationship between a faculty member and a student in order to help both individuals learn, grow, and prosper. It is two-way communication which, when done properly, can benefit both parties involved in the process. There are important practices for mentors to include when mentoring graduate students, and there are important practices for mentees to consider when working with faculty. It is important to note, however, that successful mentoring happens when everyone recognizes the overlap between their roles and understands how each party contributes to a profitable, reciprocal relationship.
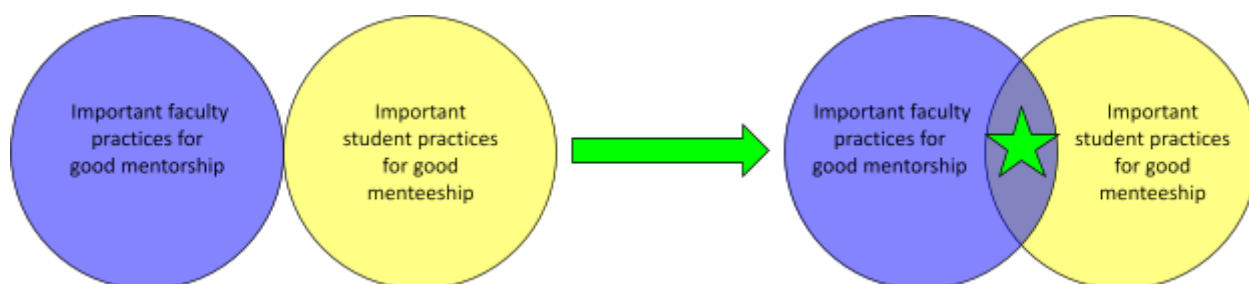
According to the University of Michigan (2018), "Effective mentoring advances the discipline because students often begin making significant contributions long before they complete their graduate degrees. Such students are more likely to have productive and distinguished careers that reflect credit on their mentors and enrich the discipline" (p. 6). Students play an integral role in their own mentoring which is distinct from other faculty-student exchanges.

Faculty Practices

The University of Washington (2020a) outlined three skills mentors can help develop in their mentees: oral and written communication skills, team-oriented skills, and leadership skills. While some mentor relationships are one-on-one, there is a benefit to having small group meetings or projects between multiple students in order to improve these skills. Additionally, Johnston (2007) pointed out that "No single mentor can provide all forms of mentoring a student requires. Encourage students to have multiple mentors that play different roles in their professional development." In order to best build student capacity, faculty must recognize their own experiences and how they can best help students with their knowledge but must also know where their boundaries lie for needing to point a student toward another mentor.

In order to build the three categories of skills mentioned, mentors must understand the key foundational principles of mentoring. According to the University of Hawaiʻi at Mānoa (n.d.), the basics of good mentoring requires that faculty:
- Communicate regularly with students both formally and informally to make sure they know you're available and willing to help
- Assist in explaining some of the nuances of higher education experience such as providing copies of policies and handbooks or clarifying program expectations
- Provide feedback on work that is both constructive and timely
- Encourage and support students in risk-taking, mistake recovery, and networking with others as additional resources on their journey

- Advocate for their students as colleagues and blossoming practitioners in the field by providing praise and recommendations
- Respect students, their time invested in the mentoring partnership, and the unique experiences and abilities they bring to the conversation

While a mentor's goal should always be to work with a student to his or her potential, there is some research that suggests negative effects from mentoring between different genders, ages, and cultures (Lunsford et al., 2017). Therefore, it is imperative that a mentor understand the diverse needs of students and have strategies to address them. The University of Washington (2020a) offered suggestions for combating pervasive issues in mentoring such as not allowing one student to dominate mentoring seminars, encouraging students to participate in institution events, and developing sensitivity to those whose experiences differ from one's own. Further, being versed in campus offerings and resources such as financial aid and counseling can help to direct students who may need additional help beyond the scope of the mentor (University of Hawaiʻi at Mānoa, 2019). Overall, faculty mentors who are open and approachable may find greater success with students as they push for learners to experiment with new techniques, further their abilities, and share their ideas (University of Michigan, 2018).

Since the responsibility for cultivating the next generation of scholars and researchers can sometimes fall to a successful mentor, it is imperative for faculty to acknowledge their own faults and limitations as well as attempt to do all they can for their mentees during the relationship. In fact, using some of one's own negative experiences as learning opportunities for students is one way to help guide them through mistakes they may make (Hammer, 2018). The University of Michigan (2018) also recommended to use personal experiences as a mentee to guide the type of mentor someone wants to be; considering some of the benefits of the mentoring relationships with role models could help you develop your own style of mentorship.

Hammer (2018) suggested that one of the best ways to improve the mentor-mentee relationship is to begin by having students assess themselves. Students should be able to articulate their own strengths, weaknesses, and professional aspirations which can help to guide the direction of the partnership. It might even be helpful to have students begin with an assessment such as the Myers-Briggs or CliftonStrengths (Hammer, 2018). This type of expectation could be utilized across a department in order to match mentees with appropriate mentors as well. In fact, departments that develop a shared vision and policies for mentoring may see greater success as everyone works to establish and maintain effective mentoring practices (University of Washington, 2020a).

Overall, most of the research and published guidebooks for faculty agree that mentoring relationships are important for all who are involved. The faculty mentor can make purposeful moves to improve their practices and thus the growth of students. Mentors should focus on increasing the abilities of students in a well-rounded way while still recognizing that other networking needs to take place to fill any gaps in an instructor's own skills and knowledge base. Successful mentors should seek to know their mentees well so they can provide respectful support, guidance, criticism, and assistance throughout the graduate learning process and beyond.

Mentee Responsibilities

If it is the mentor's responsibility to help develop a graduate student during their studies, it is the job of the mentee to receive and request help in order to improve. Often, students need time to learn to advocate strongly for themselves, yet Lunsford and Baker (2016) recommend contacting a new mentor early and often during the beginning of a program. Further, it is stressed that it is the student's responsibility to "schedule the meeting to discuss what you need and/or expect from the mentorship" (Lunsford & Baker, 2016, p. 7). Everyone involved in graduate programs - from instructors to students - are busy and meetings can be lost or forgotten over time. It is in the students' best interest to contact their mentor in order to schedule time together especially since it is the student's personal and professional growth being discussed and enhanced.

Finally, there are checklists and inventories available to students who may not know what they want from a relationship of this type. Identifying desired and ideal mentor behaviors in the working alliance could be an important first step to choosing, keeping, and changing mentors (Rose, 2003; Schlosser & Gelso, 2001). The University of Michigan (2015) suggests asking yourself certain questions in order to determine what is needed from the mentor relationship in order to best decide if a particular faculty member can meet those needs:

- What are my objectives in entering graduate school?
- What type of training do I desire?
- What are my strengths?
- What skills do I need to develop?
- What kinds of research or creative projects will engage me?
- How much independent versus team work do I want to do ?
- What type of career do I want to pursue? (p. 5)

In finding out what is truly needed from a mentorship, it will better serve all parties involved because the relationship will be built on common ground and a better personality fit.

Since a large portion of the relationship is to build students' growth and goals, it is important to establish and communicate those goals throughout a program. A mentor will not only help to achieve them but can help revise them as needed when things change. Moreover, mentors can help with research, presentations, publications, grant writing, and pedagogy (University of Michigan, 2015). Because of this increased engagement in the field, it can help not only with personal confidence but also with networking and employment opportunities.

In order to make the most of meetings with a mentor, students should be prepared with an agenda of topics they wish to cover during the conversation. Since time may be limited, the University of Michigan (2015) suggests prioritizing those topics so the most important items are covered and discussed first. When asking for feedback about work, students often want a balance of positive and negative aspects. As a student seeking guidance, it is important to be clear about what is needed or feelings of doubt, worry, or frustration may result which has an impact on the mentoring relationship as a whole (University of Washington, 2020b).

While the hope is that your working relationship with a faculty member is always successful, the reality is that problems may arise over time. When issues emerge, it can be important to take a step back to determine the root cause of the problem: is it a lack of clear communication between mentor and mentee? Is it that you're asking a mentor to help with something that is beyond their knowledge base? Or is it something else entirely. The University of Michigan (2020) stated that the best way to solve these

differences is to make an in-person meeting with the mentor directly to talk about the issue. Of course, all institutions have other avenues that can be used should a solution not appear during this conversation. They will also have a process for escalating a problem in order to change mentors.

The mentoring relationship is an important one during graduate school, but it is a reciprocal relationship. For as much as students gain, so do faculty. However, Lunsford and Baker (2016) noted that most people develop their ideas of what successful mentoring looks like while in graduate school. Especially if a student's goal is to stay in academia, the chances are that students will one day become faculty and mentor the next generation for the cycle to continue. Having a positive experience as a student will provide personal experiences to draw on later with one's own mentees, and if a student doesn't become a traditional mentor, there are still other avenues where that enduring relationship can benefit everyone.

The Common Ground of Mentorship

Understanding the role of mentorship from both the faculty and student perspective is essential, however, there is an equally salient common ground where the responsibilities overlap. Since the relationship is only successful as two-way reciprocity, recognizing the critical principles involved from both sides is imperative. The main ideas from both practices are communication, collaboration, critical thinking, and creativity. Traditionally thought of as "soft skills," these principles are valuable outcomes that all students need for life (Claxton et al., 2016). Trilling et al. (2009) categorized these four skills as "learning and innovation skills" for how we create and work together yet noted there are a myriad of other skills such as media literacy, flexibility, and accountability that need to be cultivated in a 21st century learner. While there are arguably many other skills that can fall into the overlap of mentor and mentee responsibilities, this section will only address the four C's for learners.

Effective communication sets a sturdy foundation for a meaningful mentoring relationship. It is important for both sides to reach out to the other to form a stable working relationship. It is not solely the mentor's responsibility to communicate with the mentee nor should it be exclusively the other way around either. When both sides communicate about projects, feedback, problems, and progress it demonstrates a desire to continue the partnership as well as a commitment to success. Faculty can appear detached and uncaring if they never reach out to students (University of Michigan, 2018). Conversely, students can appear disengaged and apathetic about their own growth by not taking initiative and making first contacts (Lunsford & Baker, 2016). In addition to strengthening the mentor-mentee association, positive communication can also help to build a network of professionals by sharing ideas and knowledge. Since one mentor cannot usually meet all the needs of an individual, communicating about colleagues can contribute to greater success. Overall, developing better communication will likely happen through the work of the next principle.

Collaborative work is one of the benefits of having and being a mentor in higher education. Researching, publishing, and presenting together is one way to not only engage with the theoretical concepts in the field as a nascent researcher, but it keeps veteran faculty up to date on changing policies and requirements in authentic applications. By working together, mentors demonstrate that everyone is a lifelong learner and it is acceptable to not have all the answers along the way; the modeled process of problem-solving is one way to achieve success when presented with barriers (Nawabi, 2019). Further, a mentor can serve as a bridge between two other collaborators who may bring diverse perspectives to a

project (Love, 2020). In collaborating, mentors and mentees can increase their leadership skills, teamwork abilities, and communication with distinct personalities. Further, the final two principles can be embedded into the collaborative work of mentoring.

Both critical thinking and creativity are enhanced when individuals work in pairs or teams toward a common goal as everyone brings their own set of unique experiences and perspectives to the conversation. Whether mentorship work is centered on personal or professional goals, each side can enhance the other when it comes to pushing beyond convergent thinking and challenging the status quo. Additionally, there are times when aspirations are too lofty for the task at hand and having a second person to reign in big-picture ideas into something more mainstream helps to complete projects on realistic deadlines. Trilling et al. (2009) noted that "using knowledge as it is being learned--applying skills like critical thinking, problem solving, and creativity to the content knowledge--increases motivation and improves learning outcomes" (p. 50). Therefore it can be important to dive into the process of learning together rather than spending time discussing these principles in isolation. Specifically, challenging lines of thought and reasoning of arguments can help students build critical thinking while pushing for an open-ended *what if* will foster creativity (University of Nebraska-Lincoln, n.d.).

There are boundaries for the mentor-mentee relationship that should be adhered to by both parties involved. It is important to establish those boundaries both individually and together in order to uphold ethical and professional standards (Lunsford & Baker, 2016). So long as all members of a mentoring partnership, group, and network understand the limitations as well as possibilities unlocked, everyone can improve these soft skills. Claxton et al. (2016) noted, however, that while developing skills can be technically taught, there is often an opportunity for it to grow through the natural learning process. It is challenging to explicitly teach these types of skills just as they are relatively impossible to master (Claxton et al., 2016). It is important to note that building communication and collaboration into the partnership is relatively easy compared to fewer mentors who actively seek ways to build the creativity and creative thinking of their students (Millers, 2016). Mentees can benefit greatly if all four areas are regularly built into meetings purposefully rather than expecting that the other two will "follow along" as by-products of the first two.

Kereluik et al. (2013) referred to these four skills as "meta knowledge" which is knowledge of the process of working with all other knowledge based on facts and literacies. All learners - mentors and students alike - need these abilities as they cognitively involve themselves with new learning, processes, and problems. These competencies will help them regardless of subject matter and research direction because they allow for global learning opportunities (Love, 2020). As Stauffer (2020) noted, "The four C's of 21st Century skills let students create a whole that's greater than the sum of its parts" (How Do the Four C's Work Together? section).

Mentoring Environments

Since successful mentoring hinges on regular meetings and conversations, it is important to keep the lines of communication open. When a student is on campus, stopping by a faculty's office is more easily done than when a student is enrolled in an online class. Utilizing email, phone calls, and video conferencing is an important aspect to developing an effective mentoring relationship. Varying the types and locations of meetings offered can also be helpful for students especially when a relationship is new because it can be less intimidating to be part of a small group instead of one-on-one conversation.

Since the mentoring relationship is a way to develop soft skills, the use of virtual communication platforms actually enhance the need for proper written and oral communication. The process of mentoring itself can build other skills that employees need such as listening, receiving feedback, and empathy (Francis, 2017). Additionally, Miller (2016) found that mentoring can be more successful if the environments are semi-structured and structured settings. This means that having connected moments beyond the hecticness of a traditional day can benefit the mentor-mentee relationship. Seeing mentors in different environments can help students to see them as real people rather than always being a professor as well as offering an off-site location to discuss important situations that might not otherwise be communicated openly and honestly if in a campus-based environment (Miller, 2016).

Online/Blended Meetings

Students who are learning through online and blended courses will already need extra support for success. These students may need assistance with time management, persistence, self-care, personalized motivation, or feeling part of a community; all of which have been shown to be highly important in the online world (Lehman & Conceição, 2014). Mentors can utilize beginning stages of a relationship to demystify school as well as offering support for these success indicators. Helping students to be successful in their online or blended courses is a good first step for building a mentoring partnership which can then launch into other collaborative work and projects over time. The first few virtual meetings can also be a time to establish the clear goals of the working relationship and explain to students what will come in the process of their program. Knowing and understanding expectations is one way for students to realize greater success, and mentoring can be the right support for retention.

Utilizing technology as a way to connect regardless of time and space is a huge benefit of online mentoring yet there are some challenges and drawbacks as well. Frank (n.d.) noted these possible barriers:

- Lack of chemistry due to not being in physical proximity and having difficulty reading body language and facial cues
- Recognition of different time zones which may impact the ability to connect live or may require non-standard hours of communication
- Disruptive or failing technology which can prevent immediate communication in the anticipated form

All of these barriers can be adjusted for and overcome with some careful planning between the mentor and mentee.

Best Practice in Mentoring

Many of the practices suggested to instructors when teaching online courses can be applied to mentoring scenarios as well: building relationships, making topics and work student-centered, providing regular feedback, and clarifying and organizing information and expectations (Lehman & Conceição, 2014). Helping students to build personalized goals, develop intrinsic motivators, and create differentiated, interest-driven projects can help students to feel connected not only to their courses and learning but to their mentors for guiding the way. Nawabi (2019) declared the various roles of mentors as being confidante, cheerleaders, collaborator, and coach. As a coach and collaborator, mentors can bring expertise to the table during projects while they serve as a guide and contributor. As a cheerleader and

confidante, mentors offer a sympathetic, understanding ear for support and encouragement. Recognizing the ways these four titles converge and diverge from one another will help build a better mentoring process for all involved. It may even be helpful to identify which role is expected during various meetings and discussions so that everyone is on the same page regarding the expectations. Further, recognizing that not every conversation must have an agenda is beneficial for the world of online mentoring (Frank, n.d.). Some check-ins can be done as quick communications in asynchronous or informal forms rather than always having to find common time to sit down together.

Reflective Practice as an Effective Tool

Ragins and Kram (2007) recognized a paradigm shift in that mentoring is a continuum where some relationships thrive and others wither. Research in this area will continue to find elements of the mentoring process that can help reciprocity and prosperity but can also show how one's own reflective practices can be an effective tool for improvement. Taking an honest approach to understanding the progress of a mentoring relationship can help a mentor to recognize when expectations need to shift. Further, spending time learning about diversity and various issues important to students can help to not only increase one's knowledge on the topics, but can benefit a mentoring relationship as well by minimizing problems. Faculty members should reflect and learn about how age, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, disabilities, and socioeconomic background can impact mentoring relationships both from a perspective of unity and one of fallacy or misunderstanding (University of Washington, 2020a).

Summary for the Future

Increasingly, higher education institutions are offering online or hybrid courses where students are not regularly available on campus for face-to-face meetings with mentors. While the basics of mentoring are present regardless of the environment, faculty and students need to be cognizant of the change in the effort to work together successfully through virtual platforms. Everyone needs to understand and define their role within the relationship in order to see success. Further, while sometimes distressing, it is important to recognize when a pairing is wrong or outgrows its usefulness in order to help everyone move on appropriately (Ragins & Kram, 2007; University of Michigan, 2020). Working together, mentoring holds the possibility to benefit everyone involved for generations to come.

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