

The Role of Mentors in Our Personal and Professional Lives

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This pilot study examined the approaches and expectations regarding personal and professional balance among nine student affairs officers. The focus of the exercise was to determine lessons about balance obtained from professionals who have been mentored or are mentoring younger staff. Demographic variables were also examined to determine how they affected the relationships between the main variables.

In the student affairs profession, we often hear the term mentor. We use mentoring programs to prepare younger student leaders for their work in a variety of leadership roles. Panhellenic associations use mentors in preparing less experienced sorority members to be council officers. A senior resident assistant (RA) may serve as a mentor for a first-year RA. Senior student government officers might serve as mentors for newly elected first-time senators.

In Greek mythology, “to Odysseus, his son’s education was so important that he sought the help of a person he could trust with his own life- his friend Mentor.” (Schwartz & Bryan, 1998). The act of mentoring can be considered a part of higher education’s version of professional development. Many new professionals seek out mentors; however, their personal and professional development is influenced by many activities and opportunities during their careers (Schwartz & Bryan, 1998). Cooper and Miller (1998) asserted that perhaps mentors are really personal influencers, and these personal influencers are people who have helped others develop a sense of who they are, personally and professionally, and how they view themselves as student affairs practitioners. Personal influencers are those people with whom we have worked or spent professional time, or who provided us with supervision or mentoring. They may be institutional colleagues or professional colleagues through various organizations and associations. These are people with whom we may have developed a close working interpersonal relationship (Cooper & Miller, 1998).

Many student affairs positions require work beyond the traditional 40 hours per week. In some instances entire weekends are devoted to work-related activities (Hirt, Kirk, McGuire, Mount, & Nelson-Hensely, 2003). Because of

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the long hours and non-traditional work schedules, it is often hard for some in the field to reach a personal and professional balance. Cutler (2003) investigated stated identity development in student affairs professionals, and she reported that striking a balance in student affairs was a constant battle and one in which many pressures inhibited successful mastery of establishing a balance. Also, she stated that for some professionals imbalance was based on their own inability to say no or set limits.

Methodology

This article focuses on the lessons learned from mentors in student affairs. Specifically, this study investigated the importance of balance in personal and professional lives as communicated from a mentor in the field. Participants were asked to describe how they did or did not portray balance to a protégé. The author utilized a simple qualitative evaluation (Patton, 1990) of selected current members of the Southern Association for College Student Affairs officers.

A brief protocol of six questions was prepared by the author and tested using face validity. The protocol was sent to each participant via electronic mail as well as the United States Postal Service. As recommended by Patton (1990) as a part of qualitative research projects, follow up telephone interviews were conducted to clarify responses. The nine participants for this study were four women and five men from nine different institutions. Specifically, the participants were (a) chief student affairs officer at a major land grant institution (CSO I), (b) chief student affairs officer from a mid- size regional university (CSO II), (c) chief student affairs officer from small private liberal arts institution (CSO III), (d) chief student affairs officer from a second private liberal arts institution (CSO IV), (e) chief student affairs officer from a third private liberal arts institution (CSO V), (f) director of student life from a major land grant institution (DSL), (g) director of housing and residence life at a large land grant institution (DHR), (h) assistant dean of students from a major land grant institution (ASD), and (i) dean of students from a small private liberal arts college (DOS).

Data were obtained from participants as they responded to the protocol of questions. For simplification and ease of presentation, each question is presented and key responses are presented in the results section.

Results

All nine respondents indicated that they had some type of mentoring during their student affairs careers, and all nine respondents indicated that they were in some type of entry level or mid-management position when they became protégés. Nearly all reported that their mentors were vice presidents, assistant

vice presidents, other mid to upper level administrators, or major professors in a graduate preparation program.

Question One: What characteristics define a mentor?

There were a variety of responses obtained when participants were asked to define the characteristics that made protégés feel that a person had served as a mentor.

CSO I said that her mentor “shared with me the in’s and out’s of the university. He shared the inside scoop of how things really worked. His expectations were so high, I learned so much that it is hard to put down on paper.” CSO III said that both of her mentors “were accessible to me. Both encouraged me to think before I acted on a decision. Both allowed me to take ownership of events and responsibilities. They offered praise and constructive criticism.”

CSO V shared, “My mentor’s practical knowledge was down to earth, and he shared examples as he taught an important viewpoint of the practicalities of our profession.” DSL said that his mentors “were good listeners, experienced professionals, and cared about me as a person.” DHR indicated that her mentor was a “listener, was willing to give specific feedback, was interested in my progress and ultimate career goal success, was willing to give me opportunities to grow and advance, was a personal friend who gave me unconditional acceptance.” DOS reported, “my mentor included me in decisions, discussed with me my successes and mistakes, had a good sense of humor, didn’t get stressed about things so this taught me to try to enjoy the tough times as much as the fun times.”

Question Two: Did your mentor demonstrate balance in his or her personal and professional life?

When respondents were asked if the mentor demonstrated a balance in personal and professional life, they reported a range of responses. CSO I said that her mentor was a

workaholic and I became one too. That would be seen perhaps as a negative today but back then, it was good for me. His work always came first; thus, influencing my work ethics to this day. But, I am happy to say that in the last 10 years, I have put my family first and my balance has become quite different than my earlier years.

CSO III reported that both of her mentors “created a balance by setting personal and professional limits. Both allowed me to find a life outside of work.” CSO IV reported that his mentor “demonstrated balance by having a family with four children, and he was a devout church person. He always made time for family and church.” CSO V responded that both mentors showed him

that both aspects of your life must be balanced. Many times the two become so interwoven that it is difficult to make them separate. On any campus, students, faculty and other staff look at what you do when you are not working to see if your lifestyle reflects your work style.

DSL said that his mentors “valued their family life and their avocations and made time for them even though they spent an inordinate time at work and on campus. They loved their jobs but clearly had other interests.” DHR reported that her mentor

put time in above and beyond the call of duty on the job, but left the office to spend time with family and friends at a reasonable hour, made it a point to attend conferences and be involved professionally, took days off for vacation and personal business, maintained outside interests, delegated responsibility and authority.

DOS said that all “three of his mentors had a somewhat difficult time managing personal life. It takes balance and all three had to work at it. One was married, and two have never married.”

Question Three: Do you believe it is important to demonstrate balance in your life as you role-model for young professionals?

This question asked participants if they believed that demonstrating balance between their personal and professional lives is important as they engage in mentoring younger professionals in the field. CSO I said,

I honestly say to younger professionals that they should not get in my track and am now comfortable and have been comfortable for years telling folks that you have to balance and your highest priority should be your heavenly being (assuming it exists for most), then family, then you, and then work!!! No, I do not always practice what I preach, but I do preach this. I have changed “in my old age!”

CSO III reported that she “doesn’t believe one should be all consumed by a career. It is great to have a job you love, but it is just as important to have an outlet.” CSO IV said that “persons who have key leadership positions set the tone for their staff. We must walk the talk or lack of integrity will undermine all that we say and do.” CSO V reported,

Without question, although increasingly I find that young professionals come into our profession without the same commitment of earlier days. Many see it strictly as a means to an end to support that personal life and don’t ever intend to worry with balance. They keep their lives and their personal and professional goals very separate.

DSL believed that

balance is crucial to personal health and happiness. Work is one – and only one—of several tasks (Adler called them challenges) that we have to perform. I have to have balance in my life to stay sane. I think that modeling is the most effective way to teach the concept for young professionals.

DHR reported that the

job doesn't get any easier, especially as you move up in the field. The complexity and demands will always be there. You have to know what priorities to set, how your time needs to be spent, etc. You don't really learn that balance is important until you have been in the field for several years. As younger professionals, we try so hard to make a great first impression as an employee and demonstrate a strong work ethic, almost to our detriment. The maturing professional who is in the job for the long haul develops a distinction between what's urgent vs. what's important, where to draw the line and that the work will still be there the next day. Most things, unless it's a major crisis, can wait until the next day or so. In the final analysis, no one is worried about your balance except you, it must be an individual priority!

DOS stated that

balance is very important. As I mentor younger professionals I will say to them that you must find time to do things with family and friends. Work is important. You are making an impact on students' lives, even if you don't realize it at the time. You just have to decide that whatever the scope of job entails, you will pick and choose the "extras" so that you are not living every minute of your life around your job.

Question Four: Is it possible for student affairs professionals to achieve balance?

When asked if it is possible to balance a personal and professional life while working as a student affairs professional, participants gave a variety of responses. CSO I said, "Yes, but it can be difficult. You truly have to be a great time manager and have to have good delegation skills and great supportive staff." CSO V said, "Sure, no different from anything else – it is simply finding and living balance. DSL reported, "It's a challenge, as I have mentioned. It's like a sponge that will absolutely soak up every bit of the time and energy you're willing to give it." DHR said,

Yes, but our profession will always be 24/7. If you have a problem with the hours, you need to pick a different profession. We will never completely escape our responsibilities and our obligation to respond when

needed. That is all part of it, no matter what level you are on and how many years you have been in the profession. Having a good staff around you helps soften this 24/7 issue.

DOS reported,

It is hard. I have friends that have been able to do things such as vacations, special trips, etc., that would not have been possible due to my schedule. Don't misunderstand, I have been able to do fun things outside of work, but the special times away are hard to schedule. With my work hours and special weekend activities, I will have to slow down if my wife and I want kids and to make sure I don't die of a heart attack before 50.

Question Five: What advice would you give new professionals regarding achieving and maintaining balance?

This question asked what advice participants would give to younger professionals as they try to balance their personal and professional lives. CSO II said that he would "encourage them to reflect upon their choices that they make in each area and to ask how they are benefiting from those choices in terms of time allocated between their personal and professional lives." CSO III said, "Take time for yourself. Find things you enjoy to do away from home." CSO IV stated, "Determine what is important both personally and professionally. Gauge that against what those who supervise you consider to be important. Strike the necessary balance to get the job done but have time for renewal." DSL stated,

Plan to work your butt off when you start out. It's sort of like being a pledge, it is typically going to be the younger folks with more energy and time. But don't let it consume you. Have a life outside of work. Put your family first. There's nothing you can – or should – do that will impact the lives of students the way that you will impact your spouse and children. Make time for what Covey (1989) calls "sharpening the saw" — things that renew you. Make time for these things; don't wait to have time for them!

DHR said, "Learn who you are, inside and out, know your values, personal interests, priorities, etc. and make sure they are factored into your job, schedule, etc." ASD said, "Set limits with your students and staff on when you are willing to work late, attend meetings, and work weekends. Work with your colleagues and trade off responsibilities, with each other to support time away from the office." DOS shared,

Make time for yourself! Look at your work calendar and plan in advance around that. Cherish the special times with your family and friends. It is o.k. to say "no" every now and then (as long as you are saying yes most of

the time and working to exceed expectations in your job). It will still be there on Monday morning.

Question Six: What final comments would you share regarding achieving and maintaining balance?

The final question asked participants for any final thoughts or comments. CSO II stated,

I think it is important to mentor young professionals in an attempt to improve our profession and the contribution they make to the profession of student personnel work. Being a mentor involves being a mentor through example as well as through the verbal advice that is given along the way.

CSO IV said,

I did not choose to have a mentor. A friendship turned into it, and there was probably a reciprocal mentoring. As younger professionals develop more confidence and competence in the job related responsibilities the balancing becomes easier. At first they may be overwhelmed but so are young couples with their first child.

DHR reported,

It is ultimately one day at a time. If you are not taking care of yourself to sustain the energy level needed in this profession, you are doing yourself a disservice. You must take care of yourself in all aspects of wellness. Learn what it takes for you to feel balanced and ready to roll on a daily basis. No one can determine that except you. If all you have is the job, you don't have a life! No one will celebrate how many hours you have worked and stayed at your desk or computer after the workday ends at your funeral. I have yet to see or hear about that happening. If anything, they will say, "I wish he or she had relaxed and enjoyed life more so I could have known them better."

ASD shared,

I like to think sometimes you can involve your students and work in your hobbies. If you have a student who runs all the time take a run together to relax and discuss business. Play golf together, or go to an event together. This allows the students to see who your really are.

DOS shared, "I would love to attend a conference (AFA, ASJA, SACSA, NASPA) where this topic was offered and professionals could give advice for new to mid/level professionals about how to balance and what has been successful for their lives/careers."

Conclusions and Discussion

Participants provided insight into the experiences they shared with a mentor(s) and highlighted how those individuals influenced their careers. Interestingly all participants recognized the importance of balance and reported they were taught the importance of balance from a mentor, but some participants reported that despite being taught about balance they were not very successful in being a good role model for young professionals. Most participants insisted that balance is critical and that newcomers to the profession should prepare themselves for balance, in and out of the work place. As one participant stated, with age came a belief that more balance is necessary, in particular the dedication to faith, family, and individual interests.

This article reflects the idea that balance is something that student affairs professionals think about, but it is not viewed as essential for our happiness and our long-term success in assisting and advising students. As the dean of students suggested, "Perhaps it is time to devote more attention to the balance of our personal and professional lives at upcoming conferences, in the formal training of younger professionals, and in our daily actions."

Despite the comments shared from professionals in our field and the lessons that I have learned from my mentor, there are signs that perhaps some in higher education and students affairs are not achieving balance between their outside lives and the academy. Some individuals are leaving the profession because they feel their personal lives are suffering. Fogg (2003) stated that

despite the widespread notion that academe is one of the most family friendly environments, anecdotal evidence suggests that many female scholars are not finding the time and flexibility they would like for other priorities. Those include raising children, caring for sick and aging parents, and accommodating a spouse's job. Some female professors and staff are finding that the 60-hour week often required of higher education professionals leaves little left over for a satisfying family life. As a result they are leaving, many after devoting grueling years to reach the most-coveted goal of their careers. (p. A-10)

The results of this pilot study indicate that there is a need for additional studies on balance of the personal and professional lives of student affairs administrators. Research could investigate if the practice of learning balance from a mentor occurs at different levels or if there are any major differences attributed to department. Another area for research would be examining if student affairs professionals suffer any greater losses in balance than other members or the college and university community. Research is needed to determine if there is a lack of balance between the personal and professional

lives of student affairs professional versus athletic coaches, faculty members, upper level administrators, and possibly other institutional workers.

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