

The Use of Mentoring to Enhance the Academic Experience

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Abstract

The purpose of the article is to discuss the use of mentoring in enhancing the academic experience. Today colleges and universities are experimenting with using mentoring as an aid in increasing student retention, graduation rates, and satisfaction with the overall educational experience. The establishment and implementation of a formal mentoring program can provide a plethora of benefits to students, faculty, and the university community. A model for a formal mentoring program, which can be used by recreation and parks curricula, is presented.

Key words: Academic advising, Mentoring, Recreation education

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Introduction

Too often faculty underestimate, or are unaware of, the importance of their role in the lives of their students. Teachers must realize that they continually influence their students in a variety of ways. Not only can faculty impart a vast amount of knowledge, in their areas of expertise, to students; but they can also impact students' psychological beings, shape their values, and influence how students view themselves and interact with the world around them (Juhasz, 1989; McQuillen, 1992). The least significant interaction to the professor may be very significant to the student. There are no neutral interactions; each interaction speaks to the relationship between the student and the teacher, either positively or negatively (Hawes, 1991; McQuillen, 1992). Self-esteem may be affected via their contacts with faculty members. The academic setting is an ideal place for human development enhancement to occur. One method of fostering a beneficial relationship between students and faculty is through a formal mentoring program (Gray, 1986).

Mentoring Relationships

The origin of the word mentor can be found in Homer's epic poem, *The Odyssey*. When Odysseus went off to fight the Trojan War, he asked his loyal friend Mentor to take responsibility for his son Telemachus' education. This education was to include the martial arts along with the physical, social, spiritual, intellectual and administrative facets of Telemachus' life (Clawson, 1980). Mentor cared for, protected and advised Telemachus. "The wise counsel, parental protection, and caring that characterized this relationship are evident in late interpretations of the term" (Sands, Parson, & Duane, 1991, p. 174).

Although on a superficial level most understand what mentoring is, no universally accepted operational definition of the word exists. As a result, "the concept is devalued, because everyone is using it loosely, without precision..." (Jacobi, 1991, p.195). Bolton (1980) saw a mentor as a personalized role model who serves "as a guide, a tutor, a coach, and confidant" (p.198). This same view was built upon by Moore and Amey (1988) in the following definition:

Mentoring is a form of professional socialization whereby a more experienced (usually older) individual acts as a guide, role model, teacher, and patron of a less experienced (often younger) protégé. The aim of the relationship is the further development and refinement of the protégé's skills, abilities, and understanding. (p. 45)

Mentoring models may be separated into informal or "happenstance" mentoring and formal mentoring. Much of the literature for the past two decades has addressed informal mentoring. This type of relationship is frequently described as "the type lucky protégés experience when they happen to be chosen by or happen to find a person with greater experience and expertise who takes a special interest in them and in helping them to promote their personal and career development" (Gray, 1986, p. 15).

Gray (1986) suggested that people who are not fortunate enough to have a mentor often experience jealousy and resentment; jealousy towards their colleagues who are fortunate enough to have a mentor, and resentment toward the organization that they feel excluded them from having one. Possibly the greatest loss resulting from this lack of mentoring is that "human potential often goes unrecognized and uncultivated" (Gray, 1986, p. 15). We believe that a formal mentoring program can offer opportunities for all students, not just a lucky few, to benefit from a mentor-protégé relationship. While informal mentoring is primarily concerned with the needs of the mentor and protégé, formal mentoring is concerned with a much larger function. Planned or formal mentoring addresses "the needs of the organization.... students, faculty, and ultimately society" (Redmond, 1990. p. 191).

Formal Mentoring

The purpose of this article is to present a formal mentoring model that may be implemented by recreation and leisure studies curricula. The establishment and imple-

mentation of a formal mentoring program can provide a plethora of benefits to students, faculty, and the university community.

- Faculty involved in a formal mentoring program can benefit in the following ways:
- obtain a better evaluation of students' academic performance which can be helpful in the advising process;
 - opportunity for increased informal contact with students that may lead to more relaxed relationships that can be a welcome alternative to the professor's traditional responsibility of grading and providing professional, objective references;
 - pride in the fact that the faculty member made a difference in a student's (and future professional colleague's) life;
 - increased familiarity with students' career potential that will assist in the writing of references and making recommendations; and
 - feeling more confident about the students who graduate and become the faculty member's professional associates in the career field.

A formal mentoring program can also provide an opportunity for students to receive a number of benefits such as:

- enhancement of self esteem and achievement (Juhsz, 1989; McQuillen, 1992);
- an increase in academic success as measured by higher retention and graduation rates;
- opportunities for learning experiences outside of the classroom;
- opportunity for informal interaction with faculty; and
- increased encouragement for professional involvement.

While the primary concern of a formal mentoring program is to benefit the students and faculty involved, university and college administrators need to recognize the positive impact the university or college may experience from such a program. A number of benefits obtained by the academic institution from a formal mentoring program may include:

- an increase in retention of students;
- the development of stronger alumni ties;
- an increase in academic success which can lead to higher graduation rates;
- good public relations as well as faculty service recognition if a component of the mentoring program extends into the surrounding community; and
- opportunities for outside funding to develop and/or support on-going mentoring plans.

While the benefits to students, faculty and the university are important, a critical need exists to recognize the challenges to the development and implementation of a formal mentoring program. Such a program must take into consideration heavy faculty workloads, tight fiscal budgets, high student-faculty ratios, and the expectations universities and colleges have of their faculty. In addition, the institution's faculty policy on reappointment, promotion, and tenure (RPT) must be considered when making adjustments to faculty responsibilities. Gray and Gray (1985) developed a formal mentoring program that contained the following four essential functions:

1. Identify and match mentors with protégés;
2. Train mentors and protégés;

3. Monitor mentoring process and retrain if necessary; and
4. Evaluate the results and get recommendations for improving functions 1,2, and 3.

A successful mentoring program model can be created to incorporate the Grays' guidelines. The following section will provide a practical application of this process.

Formal Mentoring Model for Use in Recreation and Leisure Studies

Higher education and the recreation and leisure area of study present numerous opportunities for faculty to develop strong student-teacher (mentor/protégé) relationships. A natural mentoring link is formed when a student declares a major in a specific area of study. Often students are assigned to a departmental advisor based on their preferred career choice and the background of the faculty member. This situation provides the opportunity for a mentoring relationship to be formed and for faculty to assume the role required of a mentor. In a formal mentoring program, the mentor is responsible for going beyond the prescriptive function of identifying courses for a student to take to meet graduation requirements. Rather, the mentor now assumes the role of supporter and guide; one who helps transform the protégé into an active learner who is intellectually curious, morally sensitive and a critical thinker. At a time when many recreation and leisure programs are being reorganized or downsized, one might ask how a mentoring approach will best utilize those valuable faculty resources of time and energy? A mentoring approach has the potential to aid in the recruitment and retention of students, increase academic success which can lead to higher graduation rates, and increase satisfaction a student has about his/her educational experience. By using faculty resources through a redefinition of responsibilities which adhere to RPT guidelines, a mentoring approach can be beneficial to all involved. Figure 1 is a model which may act as a guide for recreation and leisure curricula in developing a formal mentoring program.

Figure 1. Formal mentoring program model

Step 1: DETERMINE INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT

- Determine administrative support for the mentoring concept.
- Ascertain whether participation in the mentoring program will contribute to positive tenure/promotion/merit decisions.
- Determine provisions for financial aid.

Step 2: DETERMINE FEASIBILITY WITHIN THE DEPARTMENT

- Introduce concept of mentoring to faculty by providing an information session.
- Solicit assistance from department developing mentoring proposal.

Step 3: IDENTIFY MENTORS

- Establish level of faculty involvement.
- Decide whether retired faculty will be utilized as mentors.

Step 4: PROVIDE TRAINING FOR MENTORS

- Establish training for all mentors with structured meeting times for updated information dissemination.
- Use campus resources found in Academic and Student Affairs Divisions.
- Provide additional training as necessary.

Step 5: IDENTIFY WAYS FOR MENTORS AND STUDENTS TO INTERACT

- Academic advising appointments.
- Programs (i.e.: featured speakers).
- Research projects.
- Informal get-togethers.

Step 6: EVALUATION OF MENTORING PROGRAM

- Provide regular formative and summative (semesterly and annually) evaluation.
- Determine program effect on retention, graduation rates, and job placement.
- Solicit feedback from mentors, students, and project director.
- Share results with administration, prospective students and faculty members, campus community, and alumni.

Institutional Support

To be successful, a mentoring program must have the support of the department chair, the appropriate dean, the provost, and even the chancellor or president of the university or college. Financial resources and academic flexibility may be required, so the commitment to promote the idea from key individuals is important. For example, since a program supervisor or director is critical to a mentoring program's success, a reassignment of departmental duties, financial recognition and even academic recognition (tenure track activity) for that individual may be necessary. Top-down support and recognition of the value of a mentoring program is the first step toward achieving success.

The Identification of Mentors

Most faculty members are expected to provide academic advising for students assigned to them. This link is established between the faculty and students through departmental procedures. Academic advising is part of mentoring, but the concept and responsibilities of mentoring go beyond this basic premise. To institute a mentoring program, the selection of mentors is critical. Will all faculty be expected to embrace the mentoring philosophy and accept the resulting responsibilities? Or will the department identify individuals who serve as a resource to all students? If all faculty members support the idea that they are to foster the intellectual and social transformation of students, then the idea of formal mentoring has already taken root and can find a place to prosper.

Current faculty are usually the key components in a mentoring program. They are also the ones with the most demands on their time. They have classes to teach, committees to serve on and research to pursue. How can a faculty member, already experiencing anxiety over responsibilities in addition to new stresses related to the RPT process, be expected to participate in or benefit from a formal mentoring program? Two suggestions can be made: include the mentoring responsibilities as part of university service and of the faculty workload. For example, a faculty member would be assigned a 3 credit hour release to serve as a mentor, or the mentoring could be part of a teaching overload which would necessitate financial compensation. If they can appreciate that a mentoring approach is merely an enhancement of what they already provide students, then widespread support for such a program could be generated.

In addition to current faculty, retired faculty can be a valuable resource in mentoring. Some of these retired individuals may not want to return to the classroom but still wish to stay involved with the institution. They are people with infinite knowledge and contacts, years of educational and professional experience, and are willing to share this with students. They are a unique source of energy and experience that can complement an overworked department.

When matching mentors and protégés, research suggests that people with similar attitudes who have ready access to each other tend to make the best match (Huling-Austin et al, 1985; Tanner & Ebers, 1985). Even though personality characteristics are important in matching mentors and protégés, mentor behaviors appear to be even more important than any match based solely on personality. What the mentor does for and with the protégé determines how receptive the protégé is to the mentor's help (Alleman, 1982). There are a variety of ways a department can identify mentors; the key is that it can be done, usually within the parameters of an already established departmental approach.

Training for Mentors

The mentor is one who serves as an intellectual model and sponsor and who will focus his/her attention on the abilities, hopes, and potential of each student. Essentially, a mentor boosts self-esteem, shares a student's dreams and visions, supports a student's educational and career goals, provides counsel, advice and support, gives feedback on a student's progress and teaches by example. Mentors also introduce students to the educational or corporate structure and help them to deal with its politics and players. A formal mentoring program can provide faculty with the training that will help them achieve these goals with their protégés.

Resources are readily available within the university setting for mentor training. Mentors can receive help with active listening skills, how and where to refer students when problems arise beyond their areas of expertise, and updates on what is currently happening in their field in terms of job opportunities for graduates. The Counseling Office and Career Planning Center can provide this information which should decrease faculty anxiety about dealing with these types of issues. There are a variety of resource people in both the academic and student services areas most willing to help with training. Mentors need to have the necessary tools in order to do what is expected of them. Clear

program guidelines, proper training and manuals will make for successful program implementation.

Ways to Mentor Within the Department

The easiest and most formal way in which mentoring can take place is in the academic advising component. A mentor can advise about the courses to be taken, the potential for practica and internships, career decisions and academic performance and progress. During these times the mentor frequently has a tremendous impact on the student's actions and decisions. This is also a time when personal concerns may be shared by the student that enables the mentor to provide encouragement, referral and assistance. A student can see that the mentor is an individual who genuinely cares about their proteges and their success. During these interactions, trust can be established between the mentor and protégé.

Mentors also have the opportunity to involve students (both undergraduate and graduate) in their scholarly endeavors. This opportunity provides the student with an excellent learning experience by working with a faculty member throughout the research process, including the publication of results. An added benefit to this relationship is that this experience may help to alleviate many of the fears students have about the research process. How many faculty had a mentor during their masters or doctoral programs who took them under his/her wing and guided, coached, encouraged and supported them while they developed academic skills? How many had that undergraduate or graduate teacher who demonstrated daily what effective teaching meant? How many had neither, but wish they had?

Recreation and leisure faculty mentors can assist students in preparing for a future in the field. As mentors, they can talk to students about the responsibilities they have to the profession upon graduation. They can encourage students to seek membership in professional associations, to attend professional conferences and can assist students in becoming active in the associations. Mentors can foster their protégés' professional opportunities by providing recommendations for jobs and preparing them for the demands of the field. Students benefit from having a faculty person who knows them well and has helped them to understand how the corporate structure works. A mentor realizes that this student is a future peer within the academic or professional environment and works to prepare him/her for that role.

Other ways that mentors can interact with their protégés is through structured activities. The program director could arrange for formal presentations that relate to the curriculum or professional field. Mentors would bring their protégés to these programs which would allow for interaction on a collegial level. It would also provide an opportunity for academic stimulation and debate. Financial support could be provided by the institution for mentors who wish to invite students to share a meal or meet in the cafeteria over coffee. These informal interactions are as critical to the mentoring relationship as the more formalized activities. There are many unique ways to bring students and mentors together to experience the positive outcomes of a mentoring relationship. Recreation and leisure departments must look to what they already offer and enhance those experiences.

Evaluation

As stated earlier in this article, evaluation is extremely important to the mentoring program. The program director should solicit information from both faculty and student participants. A semesterly evaluation during the first two years of the program would be helpful in determining program success. New mentors should receive semesterly evaluations for two years as well. Any program should allow for changes in mentor-protégé assignments. In order for the individuals involved to feel that the relationship is working, there must be a basis of mutual trust. If either member of the mentoring relationship feels it is not working, the program should have flexibility in reassigning participants.

Evaluation results can be beneficial in promoting the program to prospective students, in procuring continuing institutional support and in identifying financial support. The identification of faculty satisfaction and areas for additional training can also be completed.

Summary

Mentoring has taken on a new prominence in higher education over the last several years (Allen, 1988; Erkut et al, 1984; Johnson, 1989; Redmon, 1990). Mentoring can assist in providing a learning environment that is open, communicative, diverse, sensitive and nurturing. However, the opportunity to have a mentor is not equally available to all students. Development of a formal mentoring program can provide many more students with access to mentors that they might not otherwise have. Although the ultimate beneficiary of a formalized mentoring program should be the students, we must remember that both faculty and the university profit from enhanced relationships with students. While some faculty may experience initial anxiety over the requirements of a formal mentoring program, the outcome from participation in such a program should alleviate these fears. The integration of mentoring with traditional faculty responsibilities provides the needed structure and role definition for participating faculty and a solid foundation upon which to build a justification for the desired interaction between faculty and the students.

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