Mentoring System: A New Approach in Education

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ABSTRACT

Advice and support from mentors are among the most important factors in determining the success of students' doctoral education. Like any interpersonal relationship, the one between mentor and student will evolve over time, with its attendant share of adjustments. The fact that today's students come from an increasingly diverse backgrounds may add a layer of complexity, but it's more likely to enrich than confound the relationship. The actual role of the faculty or staff mentor is one of nurturing and providing support for a student during the difficult transition period. The mentor must also serve as a resource who will answer many questions, trivial or complex, that the student might pose. Most important, the mentor must serve as a positive role model. Mentoring is important, not only because of the knowledge and skills students can learn from mentors, but also because mentoring provides professional socialization and personal support to facilitate success in graduate school and beyond. Quality mentoring greatly enhances students' chances for success. Research shows that students who experience good mentoring also have a greater chance of securing academic tenure-track positions, or greater career advancement potential. The present paper highlights the need of a mentor as well as the responsibilities of a teacher as a mentor.

Keywords: Doctoral education, complexity, mentoring, tenure-track

Mentoring is the presence of a caring individual who provides a young person with support, advice, friendship, reinforcement and constructive role-modelling over time. Mentoring is about building relationships.

Mentoring is a professional activity, a trusted relationship, a meaningful commitment. Mentoring is a valuing, transforming relationship in which the mentor is actively invested in and aware of the responsibilities he or she assumes for shaping the protégé's knowledge, perceptions, and behaviors.

The origins of mentoring can be traced back to ancient Greece as a technique to impart to young men important social, spiritual, and personal values. Mentoring as we know it today is loosely modeled on the historical craftsman/apprentice relationship, where young people learned a trade by shadowing the master artisan. In the mid-70s, corporate America redefined mentoring as a career development strategy.

Mentoring relationships range from loosely defined, informal collegial associations in which a mentee learns

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by observation and example to structured, formal agreements between expert and novice co-mentors where each develops professionally through the two-way transfer of experience and perspective. Whether the relationship is deemed formal or informal, the goal of mentoring is to provide career advice as well as both professional and personal enrichment.

In other words mentoring means helping and supporting people to "manage their own learning in order to maximize their professional potential, develop their skills, improve their performance, and become the person they want to be."

Effective mentoring seeks to provide supportive and congenial by establishing a trusting relationship between student and mentor that:

- [ ] focuses on the needs of the student
- [ ] models and fosters caring and supportive relationships to increase – self confidence, awareness and management of behaviour – positive attitudes towards assisting others
- [ ] develops active community partnerships
- [ ] recognises that some students may become dependent
- [ ] considers other interventions that may be in place.

Entering into a mentoring arrangement requires planning in advance and a careful consideration of the teacher's other commitments. Teachers must remain aware of the differing roles of mentor and teacher and ensure that the two remain separate.

Need of a Mentor

Far from being an optional extra, or a task to be attended as time permits, mentoring is as essential to a faculty member's success as teaching, research and publication are, and for the same reasons: it benefits both students and mentors as it advances the discipline, ensuring the quality and commitment of the next generation of scholars.

Mentoring benefits students because:

- [ ] It supports their advancement in research activity, conference presentations, publication, pedagogical skill, and grant-writing.

- [ ] Students are less likely to feel ambushed by potential bumps in the road, having been alerted to them, and provided resources for dealing with stressful or difficult periods in their graduate careers.

- [ ] The experiences and networks their mentors help them to accrue may improve the students' prospects of securing professional placement.

- [ ] The knowledge that someone is committed to their progress, someone who can give them solid advice and be their advocate, can help to lower stress and build confidence.

- [ ] Constructive interaction with a mentor and participation in collective activities he or she arranges promote engagement in the field.

Responsibilities of Teacher as a Mentor

The mentor's responsibilities extend well beyond helping students learn what's entailed in the research and writing components of graduate school. First and foremost, mentors socialize students into the culture of the discipline, clarifying and reinforcing – principally by example – what's expected of a professional scholar.

- [ ] **Model professional responsibility:** It is crucial that the mentor consciously act with integrity in every aspect of his or her work as teacher, researcher and author. Students must see that their mentors recognize and avoid conflicts of interest, collect and use data responsibly, fairly award authorship credit, cite source materials appropriately, use research funds ethically, and treat animal or human research subjects properly. This list is not meant to be exhaustive: never compromising the standards that bestow validity on the discipline is not a suggested guideline but essential to the profession.

- [ ] **Encourage the effective use of time:** Work with the student on developing schedules and meeting benchmarks. Share techniques and practices that have been useful for others but don't insist there is only one way. Rather, help them blaze their own trail and devise a plan that keeps them on it. For many students, the shift from the highly structured nature of undergraduate education to the self-direction

that is expected in graduate school presents a significant challenge.

- ❐ **Oversee professional development**: Activities that have become second nature to you need to be made explicit to students, such as faculty governance and service, directing a lab, procuring grants, managing budgets, and being able to explain your research to anyone outside your discipline. Mentors help their students become full-fledged members of a profession and not just researchers.

- ❐ **Assist with finding other mentors**: One size doesn't fit all, and one mentor can't provide all the guidance and support that every student needs. Introduce students to faculty, emeriti, alumni, staff and other graduate students who have complementary interests. Effective mentoring is a community effort.

Guidelines for Effective Mentoring

Following are some of the general guidelines which must be kept into mind by the teacher as a mentor while mentoring his students.

- ❐ **Strive for mutual benefits:** The relationship should be defined from the beginning as mutually beneficial. Each participant has committed to the relationship by choice. Each should openly share his or her goals for the relationship and work collaboratively to help achieve them.

- ❐ **Agree on confidentiality:** Maintaining an environment of confidentiality is a critical component in building trust between the participants. Without a mutually understood ability to speak freely as the situation warrants, the relationship is unlikely to reach its full potential.

- ❐ **Commit to honesty:** The participants should be willing to candidly share what they expect to gain from the relationship and their vision for getting there. They should be prepared to offer frank feedback as appropriate, even if the feedback is critical.

- ❐ **Listen and learn:** Mutual benefit and honesty can only be achieved when both members feel their viewpoints are heard and respected. Mentors, especially, need to remember that the relationship is not primarily about them. Co-mentors should not be intimidated or made to feel their views are not valued.

- ❐ **Build a working partnership:** Consider structuring a working partnership that includes project consultation or active collaborations rooted in the common ground of shared professional goals. These collaborations can lead to discoveries about each participant's preferred working style, daily obligations, and professional aspirations.

- ❐ **Lead by example:** Actions create the most lasting impression.

- ❐ **Be flexible:** It might help for a mentoring relationship to have defined goals, but the process may be as important—or more so—than the goals.

- ❐ **Parent involvement:** Parents must be informed about the purpose of the program, the anticipated outcomes and their children's progress. They must be provided with the opportunity to discuss their children's mentoring program with the supervisor. If possible, parents should meet their child's mentor. Their consent must be obtained before a student is included in the program. Parents also have the right to withdraw their children from mentoring arrangements should they so wish.

- ❐ **Community involvement:** Consultation with the broader school community is also essential. It is important that key school community groups, including parent groups are made aware of the rationale for mentoring and informed of how the program will be implemented in the school. Commitment to any program depends on the demonstrated outcomes of the program. Providing the school community with evidence that mentoring produces positive results and responding to concerns they may have about the nature of mentoring will assist in ensuring support for the program.

Supporting and Supervising Mentors

Debriefing and the provision of feedback to mentors after each session is critical to the success of the mentoring process. All mentors need feedback and support sessions with their designated supervisor to prevent over-involvement with the students and to pre-empt problems. Mentors need to know that the school appreciates their work and that it is providing a benefit to the student. A trained supervisor is needed to support and monitor the mentoring program. The supervisor must be available to resolve interpersonal problems, manage grievances, and deal with premature closure of the mentoring relationship. They may also need to arrange new mentors if a relationship cannot continue. Feedback sessions may be used to provide resources to ensure the mentoring sessions proceed positively and to provide praise for achievements as appropriate. The supervisor should be provided with adequate time, within the program budget, to maintain records for the information of the principal and to ensure continuity for new supervisors. A record should be kept of feedback sessions and must include any issues raised by the mentor and how the issue was dealt with. Any significant issues or feedback in relation to the mentoring arrangement that are raised by members of the school community, including staff and parents, should also be recorded. Records must be stored securely. If issues relate to child protection matters they must be referred immediately to the principal for information and action as required.

Conclusion

Effective mentoring is good for mentors, good for students, and good for the discipline. You're probably already doing much of what's been discussed in the preceding sections: supporting your students in their challenges as well as their successes, assisting their navigation of the unfamiliar waters of a doctoral program, and providing a model of commitment, productivity and professional responsibility. In most cases, the system works well: students make informed choices regarding faculty with whom they work; faculty serve as effective mentors and foster the learning and professional development of graduate students. During the graduate experience, students are then guided toward becoming independent creators of knowledge or users of research, prepared to be colleagues with their mentors as they complete the degree program and move on to the next phase of professional life.

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