

Mentoring University Students

Mellon Academic Mentoring Support Project

Cusanovich and Gilliland state that a “mentoring relationship involves professors acting as close, trusted, and experienced colleagues and guides. It is recognized that part of what is learned in graduate school is not cognitive, it is socialization to the values, practices, and attitudes of a discipline and university, it transforms the student into a colleague.”

At the graduate level, mentors are needed to offer advice and guidance in academic matters. In addition, the mentor becomes a valuable support person for the protégé. He or she can assist the protégé in finding university resources such as funding for research support, and the mentor can help the protégé in becoming a legitimate member of the department. On the importance of faculty advising and mentoring in graduate school, the graduate deans of the Association of American Universities and the Council of Graduate Schools issued the following statement:

Advice and support from mentors are among the most important factors in determining the success of students' doctoral education. Faculty advisors must assist students in choosing course work that meets their needs and interests without unnecessarily extending their programs. They should also encourage students to move on to seminars and laboratory work that will lead to dissertation topics, and define dissertation topics that are realistic in scope. Good advisors already do these things; to make sure that they happened more routinely, departments should establish explicit requirements for faculty advising.

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.

STRATEGIES

A need for mentoring programs at colleges and universities is well documented in the literature. Unfortunately, many mentoring programs are mediocre at best and are often quite ineffective, thus leading to a high rate of program dropouts. One of the major reasons why some programs fail is that faculty who become mentors often lack the basic understanding of what the mentoring process actually entails. Many understand it to be counseling or advisement, which it is in part, but mentoring goes beyond advisement. Adams recommended very specific guidelines, which he called “Effective Mentoring Techniques: A Report Card for Faculty Mentors.” What follows are some useful mentoring strategies across three categories.

1. College, Institutional, and Departmental Strategies:

- Explaining the working dynamics of both formal and informal systems within the institution. This can involve such “basics” as filling out application forms, registering for classes, getting permission to enter closed classes.
- Scheduling meetings, student receptions, or appointments with faculty and key administrators. The purpose of scheduling these events is to introduce the protégé to individuals who may serve as resources during their stay on campus.
- Informing the protégé of perceptions about departmental culture and its evolution. This sort of hard-won insight is often of great value to the student who is trying to manage a full load of classes in an unfamiliar setting.
- Advising the protégé of departmental and university politics and what pitfalls to steer clear of.
- Providing opportunities for informal discussions with department faculty. This type of dialogue helps to decrease students’ feelings of isolation and to increase the assimilation of students into the department of university culture.
- Explaining the roles of the support staff (for instance, secretaries, technicians) and necessary procedures for routine and nonroutine requests. Do not assume that protégés understand office procedures and protocols.

2. Personal Issue Strategies:

- Serving as an advocate for the protégé, especially in resolving any difficulties or conflicts that may arise.
- Providing an empathic ear to professional and/or personal problems and being ready with referrals to professional counselors, if needed.
- Devising methods to sharpen the protégé’s intellectual skills.
- Discussing issues related to students’ thesis or dissertation topics.

- Suggesting articles or authors that can expand students' research experience base.
- Providing guidance, coaching, direction, and encouragement during the research process.

3. Career Development Strategies:

- Helping students articulate and develop true career goals. These goals may be in flux as new opportunities or knowledge are revealed in classes.
- Providing feedback to the protégé regarding her or his self-assessment and long-range career goals as well as immediate needs and responsibilities.
- Explaining the necessity for attending professional meetings and conferences, and explaining the advantages of membership in professional organizations.
- Recommending that the student attend seminars emphasizing writing and “how to publish” skills. It is necessary to emphasize that good writing skills are essential for actualizing career goals.
- Inviting the protégé to observe your classroom pedagogy and instructional processes if he or she is not taking your class.
- Advising the protégé on which jobs might be most advantageous to apply for, how to properly apply for jobs, and proper behavior during interviews.
- Encourage the protégé to take teaching-related classes in preparation for entering the professoriate.

THE TRIPARTITE MODES OF STUDENT MENTORING

Mentoring may have numerous missions. Mentoring is an attempt to maximize student growth and development – academically, professionally, and otherwise. As such it must be viewed as a nurturing process in which the faculty member serves as a role model, teacher, sponsor, encourager, counselor, and friend to the students with the end goal of promoting the latter's professional and personal development. Each of these functions must be carried out within a context of a continuing, caring relationship between the mentor and protégé. The mission of mentoring requires the faculty member to perform specific roles and exhibit given behaviors. Although the roles and behaviors are varied, there are tripartite modes of mentoring that capture the sum of the requisite activities. The three modes of mentoring are academic midwifery, role molding, and frientoring.

Academic Midwifery

Academic midwifery is the way in which faculty assist their students in producing new ideas and scholarly insights. It is related to the official instructional and advising responsibilities of a professor, but advances to a role of mentoring. Mentors must bring to life the sleeping potential within their students that without

assistance would otherwise be wasted. Although absent from the literature on professional duties or on mentoring, one of greatest responsibilities is the care of the intellectual soul of our students. Mentors must assist students in giving birth to intellectual ideas, research methodologies, and professional practices that are transformative. Mentoring is not about teaching students how to do but aiding them as they find their own way.

A good academic midwife is a mentor who is respectful of oppositional ideas, committed to the intellectual and professional development of the student, and adaptive to different and nontraditional techniques and approaches. The mentor who is engaged in academic midwifery must be available when students are having intellectual “contractions.” He or she must be encouraging of student interests, proactive in his or her mentoring role, and nurturing of newly born thoughts or ideas produced by his or her students. The good mentor must be a coach who guides the student through the intellectual birthing process and delivers them safely into the professional arena.

Role Molding

Role molding differs from academic midwifery in that the focus shifts from the theoretical, abstract, and cognitive to the practical, pragmatic, and applied. Role modeling suggests that one serves as a symbolic figure of what is possible or aspired. Conversely, role molding is the active engagement of faculty in shaping the lives of their students into the academic and social shapes or patterns the students desire. At this juncture, it is necessary to offer a warning. Faculty must be leery of trying to mold students into what they wish their students to be. Under role molding, the mentor is to aid the student in carving out his or her niche. This is extremely difficult in academic research.

The role molder is to teach through confirming and questioning the usefulness and appropriateness of protégé activities, maintaining a focus on the student’s desired career goal or research outcome.

Mentors must also be sponsors. In sponsoring students or protégés, a faculty person protects them from unnecessary activities, supports them in their career endeavors, and promotes their successes. Sponsorship is extremely important in publishing research and securing professional employment.

Frientoring

The last mode in the mentoring tripartite is frientoring, the unique nexus between mentoring and friendship. As such, it is the frientoring function of mentoring relationships that is the most complex. This complexity is generated by the asymmetrical nature of the mentor-protégé relationship. Traditionally, friendly interactions between faculty and students have been discouraged because the

positionality of faculty as superior partners and students as inferior partners raises ethical questions for many academics. Hence, out-of-class friendships between faculty and students are discouraged. However, discouraging out-of-class relationships between faculty and students runs contrary to the idea of mentoring. In particular, mentoring graduate students requires friendly relationships between faculty and students.

Frientering addresses the asymmetrical nature of mentor-protégé relationships by establishing a collegial tier in which each party can contribute as equals. In frientering, the faculty members provide guidance and wisdom, and the student provides respect and a modicum of reverence to the interactions. The faculty member is not a dictator, but a colleague. The faculty member or mentor is *primus inter pares*. Frientering allows both participants to feel as though they are giving of themselves and simultaneously receiving intellectual and emotional reinforcement. Frientering allows a safe place where students can be free agents in their intellectual pursuits and yet be guided through the presence of a mentor. Frientering gives voice and value to protégé thoughts and interests.

THE SPECIAL CASE OF GRADUATE STUDENTS

The academic environment at the graduate level presents its own unique case of mentoring. Rather than contributing to the life-long development of a protégé or the career advancement of a potential executive, the academic mentor apprentices the protégé to the skills and habits of mind needed to succeed in a totally new arena. Lyons believed that academic mentoring, especially in graduate school, is different than corporate mentoring:

While mentoring can lead to success in business and the professions, having a mentor is absolutely essential for success in graduate school. Graduate school mentors and their protégés share a comradeship of such extraordinary intensity that it transcends the normal teacher-student relationship.

Three activities contribute to the academic mentoring relationship. First, academic mentors educate their protégés in a particular subject or skill, serving as masters to developing apprentices. Second, academic mentors, as role models, orient their protégés to the ethics, values, and protocols of a given profession or discipline. Third, academic mentors provide psychological support for their protégés, recognizing the rigors of graduate study and applauding success while building self-esteem and confidence.

The difference between mentoring and advising also makes mentoring a muddier concept in academic circles. As Lipschutz has argued:



Mentoring graduate students goes beyond merely advising them. Mentorship means behaving in ways that indicate respect for students as sources of ideas and insights (coauthoring papers with them is one way of demonstrating this respect in fields where jointly authored papers are appropriate), offering students timely and constructive responses to their work, modeling the values of the discipline for them, and demonstrating a concern for their professional welfare (for example, by helping them to obtain academic positions). In short, mentorship means coming to treat students as colleagues, not as apprentices.

Mentoring is a process that extends beyond the mere transmission of subject matter, maneuvering of systems, or provision of support. 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.

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