
**Categories**: Student Support, Mentoring, Professional Development.

**Summary**

In this article the author discusses the nature of mentoring as it differs from teaching, and the challenges and benefits of mentoring relationships between professors and undergraduate students. The author’s perspective on these matters is based on examinations of student evaluations of faculty members at a small liberal arts college.

According to McKinsey, while the benefits of mentoring are widely accepted in academia and the business world, several factors work against the implementation of mentorships at the higher educational level: decreased funding, cries for increased efficiency, increased reliance on adjunct faculty, and the burgeoning of online courses. Another key obstacle is “our vague understanding of just what it [mentoring] is.” Mentoring, according to McKinsey, is not the same as teaching, though academics often conflate the two. Rather, mentoring goes beyond academic/research guidance, and instead offers “life-changing inspiration and support.” In essence, mentoring focuses less on the development of the mentee as a student, and more on their evolution into a stable, successful adult.

In order to help offer guidelines for the implementation of effective mentorships, McKinsey examined the files of twelve faculty members who most consistently received praise from students for their mentoring skills. Within these files, the author argues that certain patterns or themes of successful mentoring emerge. The first of these patterns, according to McKinsey, is that good mentoring evolves through three stages. In the first, which McKinsey refers to as Mentoring-In, the guidance offered by the mentor centers on helping students orient themselves/learn the ropes of college life. As she puts it, at this stage the mentor helps the ‘step into the unknown’ and walks “with them until ‘they can stand on their own....’” In the second stage, or Mentoring Through, the focus turns towards helping students find themselves: gain confidence as students/persons, develop advanced skills, and believe in their own capabilities. In the final stage, Mentoring Onward, mentors help mentees think about life after college, and solve the dilemmas/answer the questions they are likely to have.

The second pattern of effective mentoring identified by the author relates to the phases that the relationship of mentor/mentee goes through. The first phase, defined as Connection, involves getting to know students and taking the time to help them when they reach out for assistance. According to McKinsey, one comment element of student evaluations that noted outstanding mentoring skills, was that the faculty in question seemed far more willing or interested in learning about their students and talking to them about both academic and other matters. The second phase, or Collaboration, usually involved working with professors on a one on one basis through research projects, independent studies, senior theses, or capstone projects. In this sense, the relationship between mentor and mentee becomes more individualized as the two work together in a manner that helps the student gain a sense of their own abilities. The final phase, Mutual Commitment, was often characterized by students as “friendship.” While such views might carry risks, which the author discusses later in the article, the large
sense expressed by the students was that at this stage of the relationship the mentor became someone identified with consistent and deep interest in the academic and personal well-being of the mentee, whose advice was considered “always fair and constructive.” As such, the relationship becomes one centered on trust.

The third pattern of good mentoring discerned by the author was the ways in which students differentiated mentoring from teaching. According to the students, mentors went above and beyond course duties by showing interest in students’ personal/non-academic lives. They were readily available to help students and conducted their mentorship in informal settings: public spaces at the college, in office, home settings. Additionally, in their capacity as mentors, faculty members exhibited less of a love of learning/teaching and more of a love of students. Finally, good mentors, as opposed to good teachers, helped students engage in self-reflection and guided them through that process. In all of these ways, outstanding mentors exhibited a willingness and desire to help their mentees develop in a holistic manner that included both academic growth and personal maturation.

Having identified the patterns of good mentoring, McKinsey ends the article by discussing some of the potential pitfalls of such relationships. One challenge is that mentoring can be excessively time demanding, causing faculty members to become overwhelmed. Perhaps more problematic, mentorships can produce unhealthy relationships; for example, mentoring can create dependency in the mentee. As a result, effective mentoring requires that very clear boundaries be set by both the student and the faculty member. Developing such strong personal relationships can also have negative consequences if students place too much weight on the advice or comments of their mentors. Mentors must carefully govern their counsel or risk hurting their mentees or losing their respect. Finally, to students outside of the mentoring relationship, mentoring can appear as favoritism.

Conclusions

Despite the risks noted above, McKinsey argues that the benefits of mentoring are clear. For students, mentoring not only leads to better academic performance, but also helps them navigate the challenges of college and life by developing greater confidence in themselves. Similarly, faculty identify both academic and non-academic benefits in mentoring; faculty mentors note that acting as mentors makes them better classroom teachers because it allows them to become closer to their students, and provides them with opportunity to fulfill the larger mission of their profession. Finally, McKinsey states that mentoring can and should be coached, and that in order to make mentoring the priority that it deserves to be, institutions need to find ways to support and reward mentoring.

Applications

As McKinsey notes, the benefits of faculty mentoring students would appear to be self-evident: better academic performance, greater retention, higher graduation rates, advanced preparation for the professional world/graduate school, and the development of more confident students/adults. This would seem especially true of our school/students, given the challenges that our student population faces and the opportunities presented by the low student-faculty ratio at U.D.C. It is likely that many faculty members throughout the U.D.C system already see themselves as functioning in a mentoring
role. As a result, this article may offer limited insight. Yet, it also offers so broad stroke guidelines for further developing mentoring at U.D.C., whether that occurs on an institutional basis or in a less formal manner. Ultimately, if U.D.C. views faculty-student mentorships as a valuable form of student support, it would seem necessary to offer greater professional development opportunities in this area. It would also seem to suggest the utility of rewarding those professors who engage in such activity.

Citations of Interest


