
**Categories:** Student Services, Mentoring

**Summary**

In this article the authors attempt to critically review the extensive literature on mentoring in higher education. They do so, in part, in order to reframe the discussion of mentoring and to update the way the academy defines it. Finally, they propose a theoretical framework for mentoring undergraduates.

The authors begin their review by looking at the various definitions and characteristics of mentoring elucidated in the recent scholarly literature. A brief examination of the literature reveals over fifty divergent definitions of mentoring. These myriad definitions illustrate a central problem in the practice of mentoring: the inability to agree upon a unified conceptual understanding of mentoring. What can be gleaned from these various definitions, however, are some commonalities: mentorships focus on the growth and accomplishments of individual students and include several forms of assistance; mentorship involves several forms of support, including help with professional and personal development; mentoring relationships are personal and reciprocal; mentorships progress through various stages of development that define the changing nature of the relationship between mentor and mentee; and, mentorships can take place within formal or informal frameworks, and can develop “naturally” or through institutionally arranged mechanisms. Most of the studies attempting to define mentoring have examined the relationship on the undergraduate level, with an increasing body of literature looking at specific groups of undergraduates: first generation college students, women, minorities, at-risk students, etc. In contrast, the literature is almost devoid of studies focusing on community college students. Additionally, there is a basic dichotomy within the nature of these studies. Of the studies focused on a quantitative approach, the majority used non-experimental models, and had one or more methodological concerns. Those studies that utilized a qualitative approach largely focused on adding to our understanding of mentor/mentee experiences, and how they might inform a valid definition of the relationship. In summarizing this section of the literature, the authors note that several concerns remain. One is that a truly unified definition of mentoring continues to elude us, despite these common elements. The second is that much of the work on mentoring suffers from a variety of methodological problems.

A second broad body of the extent literature centers on attempts to “develop and test theory that explains the roles, characteristics, and functions involved in...” mentoring. To a large extent, these studies adopt one of three perspectives. The first of these perspectives look at mentoring from a developmental psychology perspective, in which mentors function as teacher, sponsor, host/guide, exemplar, and counselor. The mentor’s most important job within this model is to “support and facilitate the realization of the mentee’s dreams.” The second framework looks at mentoring from the business perspective. Here, the two main functions of the mentor are to aid in the professional and psychological development of the mentee. The third modeling looks at mentoring from the academic perspective. Studies that have looked at mentoring within higher education have, as noted in the paragraph above, added a great deal of insight into the experiences of a wide range of specific groups of students. They continue to suffer, however, from a lack of a theoretically valid conceptualization of mentoring and limited quantitative data.
After offering a broad summary of the extent literature, the authors turn their attention to proposing a potential theoretical framework for mentoring. Drawing on much of the literature that they have examined, the authors posit a framework based on “four major domains or latent variables” of mentoring: psychological and emotional support; goal setting and career evaluation; academic/intellectual support aimed at advancing a mentee’s knowledge within a chosen field; and specification of a role model. In the first domain mentors provide moral support by listening to their mentees, helping them to identify problems and offering encouragement, and establish supportive relationships based on mutual understanding and trust. In the second domain, mentors provide an array of services intended to further the mentees’ academic and career goals. Amongst these services are exploration of interests, abilities, and ideals, stimulation of critical thinking as it pertains to thinking about the mentees’ futures, guiding reflective practices, offering suggestions about current and future plans, respectfully challenging mentees to reflect on their decisions and actions, and facilitating, in whatever ways possible, the mentees’ dreams. The third domain requires that mentors help mentees advanced their knowledge within their chosen fields both within and outside of the classroom. In this case of the latter, mentors nominate mentees for awards or positions, take credit or blame for their development, intervene with external forces when necessary or useful, and serve as sponsors within the field. Finally, in the fourth domain of mentoring, mentors serve as role models. They do so by allowing mentees to get to know them, and in so doing allow their students to learn from their past and present actions, achievements, and failures.

The authors conclude the article by making recommendations for future research. Key among their suggestions is for continued efforts to develop a unified definition of mentoring based on a conceptually valid theoretical basis. They also call for research on the specific programmatic activities and characteristics that should be included in a comprehensive mentoring experience. Lastly, the authors contend that future investigations of mentoring need to be based on methodologically rigorous foundations, and must move beyond “small, narrow samples.”

Applications

For anyone interest in further investigation into mentoring at the college level, this article provides a broad base of potential sources. Though it was written over a decade ago, it covers a broad expanse of the relevant literature, including a considerable number of studies particular relevant to U.D.C., and offers thoughtful summarization and analysis. Less useful perhaps is the authors’ framework for conceptualizing a mentoring program. While their model offers some thoughtful perspective on how to define mentoring and the roles that mentors play, their work in this regard is less detailed than other, more recent studies.

Citations of Interest


