

Student Mentoring in Community Colleges

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The U.S. has occupied a premier position in the world in part because of its prominence in education and innovation. For the U.S. to remain a competitive leader, particularly in science and engineering, it must engage its students and prepare its next generation of professionals for global competition. This matter of great urgency will require the adoption of a variety of approaches to prepare future students to maintain U.S. eminence both educationally and economically. It is imperative that all established strategies be tested and implemented to stem the decline in this country's status in the global hierarchy.

According to a report by the President's Council of Advisors on Science and Technology (2012), the U.S. labor market is projected to grow faster in science and engineering than in any other sector in the coming years. However, non-U.S. citizens have accounted for almost all growth in STEM doctorates awarded, and a number of science and engineering disciplines are heavily populated by international students. Relying on these students to fulfill U.S. science and technology needs is becoming increasingly uncertain for many reasons, including stricter visa requirements and the possibility that students will return to their countries of origin after completing their education. A greater focus must, therefore, be placed on embracing strategies that will prepare U.S. students for the challenges they will face today and in the future.

Freeman Hrabowski III, chair of the committee that wrote *Expanding Underrepresented Minority Participation* and President of the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, said, "It's well-documented that the United States needs a strong science and technology work force to maintain global leadership and competitiveness" (The National Academies, 2010, para. 2). He added, "The minds and talents of underrepresented minorities are a great, untapped resource that the nation can no longer afford to squander. Improving STEM education of our diverse citizenry will strengthen the science and engineering work force and boost the U.S. economy" (para. 2). National efforts to strengthen U.S. science and engineering must include all Americans, especially minorities, who are the fastest growing segments of the country's population but the most underrepresented in science and technology careers. The Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (2012) projects that by the year 2022 the number of public and non-public high school graduates from minority populations will significantly increase. Van Der Werf and Sabatier (2009) predict that these trends will result in minority students outnumbering white students on college campuses as soon as 2020. According to a *Harvard Educational Review* article focused on women of color in STEM (Malcolm & Malcolm, 2011), the patterns of participation in postsecondary education are very much shaped by race and gender; underrepresented women and minorities are more heavily concentrated in community colleges. Consequently, special efforts must be taken to support these groups in the community college system. An article on STEM persistence among women and underrepresented minorities by Lorelle Espinosa (2011), Assistant Vice President for Policy Research and Strategy at American Council on Education, highlights the crucial role of undergraduate institutional faculty mentoring and peer interactions among women and minorities for their successful graduation from the community college. The recent Gallup-Purdue Index Report (2014), a study of more than 30,000 college students across the U.S. supported by the Lumina Foundation, provides insight into the relationship between students and their college experience. Students who felt supported in college because they had a mentor who encouraged them to pursue their goals and dreams, a professor who excited them about learning, and whom they felt cared about them as a person, are thriving in all areas of their well being. Therefore, it is no surprise that mentoring helps community college students to persist in the pursuit of their education goals.

The real key to a student's economic opportunity and advancement depends not only on whether the student possesses a credential, but also on whether that student actually leaves college with a rich portfolio of learning that employers seek, higher education values, and society needs. Yesterday's educators could focus on techniques that transmitted information to students, but educators of today and tomorrow are called to do much more as the competition for higher education, professional programs, and employment escalates. Students need to possess critical thinking, communication, computer literacy, networking, data analysis, and many other skills and competencies. In such a scenario, the role of a mentor cannot be underestimated. Educators who are passionate about student success will likely recognize that for students to be successful they need more than just a teacher; they need a mentor.

Defining the Mentor. A mentor is a member of the college community who is committed to student success through structured dialogue and reflection with individual students. The mentor's hindsight can become the student's foresight. The mentor is not necessarily someone a student knows well, but someone from whom the student can learn, a confidential advocate with an opportunity to transform the student's life. Mentors help students realize their dreams and assist them in acquiring skills that can be used not only in the academic arena, but also in life.

Community college can be a challenging prospect for new students, whether they enroll right out of high school or after being in the workforce for a number of years. Students at community colleges face many hurdles, and mentors can help them cross the finish line. Mentoring at the community college helps students grow into the types of learners who can succeed at a career or after transferring into a baccalaureate program or institution. Mentoring at a community college involves opening students' eyes to available opportunities, helping students discover the strengths within themselves, leading students to resources that will help them develop necessary skills, guiding them to design their own pathways to success, and demonstrating to them how they can realize their potential and achieve their dreams. A mentor can encourage students to stay in college and pursue their education until they achieve their goals. Mentoring goes beyond advising, helping students find ways and means to do what they need to reach their goals.

This description of a mentor may convey the idea that the mentor must be superhuman, well versed in academics and 21st century skills. That is definitely not the case. These overarching skills—collaboration/teamwork, written and oral communication, creativity, critical thinking/problem solving, cultural/global studies/diversity, humanities, information management, learning skills, mathematics, personal responsibility/management, and technology literacy (Wilson, Miles, Baker, & Shoenberger, 2000)—are equally important for every student, whether they transfer to a four-year college or university or pursue a career path after leaving the community college. Since many of these skills are not necessarily learned in a classroom, they may have been acquired by the student elsewhere; the role of the mentor in the community college, therefore, may be to help students document and credential such prior learning (Ehrich, Tennent, & Hansford, 2002). The mentor may be required to play several roles: role model, evaluator, analyst, and strategy planning manager (Galbraith & James, 2004). Given that mentors help students identify skills that are lacking, develop marketable skills and study skills, chart future plans, assess progress, conduct feasibility studies, and support numerous other activities, it is quite possible that a student may require more than one mentor during the journey through community college.

Why Be a Mentor? Faculty at community colleges encounter students with big dreams of improving their lives but who are faced with many challenges. Often, some of these challenges lie not in the academic abilities of students but in the lack of preparedness, the

absence of information about available opportunities, the discrimination students encounter after transfer, and the training on strategies to be successful. The primary motivation for mentoring activities should be the success of students, including giving students hope and the chance to believe in themselves. Mentors should be passionate about supporting and encouraging students to reach their full potential, and helping them improve their opportunities to become whatever they aspire to be.

At the beginning of the academic year, when students are overwhelmed with various commitments, they may ask how having a mentor, which would consume even more of their time, would be a benefit. Mentors can respond by telling them that in the United States, 75 percent of successful students have been mentored. These mentored students reached their goals, earned the degree they sought, were happier and satisfied with their work, and were highly likely to mentor others (Hicks, 2003).

Mentoring Strategies

Mentoring starts the first day the mentor walks into the classroom and meets the students. Perhaps students' perception is that it starts when they are given a word of advice, a suggestion, a networking contact, a tip on how to learn, information about a pre-professional exam, the attention of a patient listener, or other assistance students view as nonacademic. Initially, the mentor can prepare students for potential mentoring experiences by describing the mentoring relationship and communicating the success of previous students they have mentored. In the first few days of mentoring, the mentor can discuss the student's objective in taking the course, dream job, ten-year goals, and concerns about the course. The mentor should attempt to understand the student's background, personal goals, and potential challenges.

In the first few meetings, the mentor should encourage introspection and self-analysis by having students answer questions such as the following:

- What are my personal goals?
- What are my aptitudes and interests?
- What are my social and economic values?
- What would be my "best fit" profession?
- What are my concerns?
- What are the areas I may need help with?
- What do I need from a mentor now?

In the next few meetings, student and mentor discuss which strategies could be employed to help ensure success. The strategies that are adopted depend on the student's goals and willingness to work toward achieving them. With the guidance of the mentor, the student conducts a feasibility study to examine personal expectations and a timeline for completion of all the necessary requirements. The first few meetings consist of developing action steps and forming an agreement for a desired, yet realistic, outcome. Tactics that are mutually considered to be most useful for advancement are selected and prioritized, so that under a time constraint, focus can be placed on the strategies that provide maximum benefit. The plans are a work in progress. As the year progresses, the plans and strategies may be modified or dramatically altered, depending on the student's motivation and limitations. Goals, outcomes, and accomplishments are periodically reviewed together, and a critical performance evaluation is conducted to check progress. The mentor should attempt to provide frequent positive feedback and steer the student to discover any negative results. Most of all, the mentor must strive to be a good listener and find new resources and

opportunities for the student. As the student becomes more comfortable with the mentor, the mentor may choose to share some personal information with the student.

A mentor might share a personal story about how they started in their career, likes and dislikes about his or her job, advantages and disadvantages of certain career choices, personal fulfillment and professional success, and career-life balance. The mentor may also share personal strengths and weaknesses, struggles and successes, and personal choices linked to job satisfaction. Finally, the mentor should be honest with students about whether they would change anything, and if so, what they would change. This makes the relationship more relaxed as the student realizes that the mentor is not always in an enviable position.

When does the mentoring relationship end? Almost never. In many cases, students stay in touch with their mentors and do not hesitate to send an email, call, or stop by—even years after leaving campus—to ask an opinion on the selection between two jobs or the choice between different schools, or to update the mentors about their present occupation or other topics of common interest. Mentees usually experience long-term benefits from mentoring (Canton & James, 1999). Some former students metamorphose into friends or junior colleagues, while some mentoring relationships fade as graduates move to a distant place (Ambrose, 2010). If the mentoring process was productive and benefitted the student, it logically follows that the lessons learned from the mentorship could reap benefits throughout life even if the mentoring relationship evolved into another phase (Kram, 1983).

Interview Skills. Students at community colleges sometimes lack self-confidence, oral and written communication skills, and presentation skills. A significant portion of the mentoring program should be spent on developing these interrelated skills outside of the curriculum and the classroom. Working on written communication skills can lead to practicing oral communication skills. Providing concise, constructive feedback; making students explain a topic to a group; and fostering peer questions and peer suggestions may lead to improved presentation skills and enhanced self-confidence. These skills, in turn, boost interviewing abilities.

Writing Skills. For a student who decides to work on writing skills, a good place to start is with a report such as a science lab report. Consider the following scenario:

- Step 1: The mentor discusses the outline and expectations for the report with the student and provides a sample of a good lab report.
- Step 2: The student brings in the written report and takes note of the mentor's suggestions for improvement.
- Step 3: The student returns with an improved report and the mentor advises another revision.
- Step 4: After reviewing the second revision, the mentor suggests that the student present the report either in poster format or as a PowerPoint presentation.
- Step 5: If the student agrees, they begin working on oral communication skills.
- Step 6: The mentor records the student's presentation for later observation and self-assessment.
- Step 7: The mentor encourages the student to present to other students and to be willing to receive questions from them, in preparation for a real-life presentation.

Résumé Writing. Many students leave the writing of their résumé and cover letter to the end of the college experience, when it gets little attention. An exceptional academic performance, adorned by extracurricular activities, awards, and other accomplishments, is often marred by a poorly written cover letter or a rapidly prepared, shabby résumé. At the

beginning of the mentoring program, the mentor should talk to the student about the need for a sterling résumé prior to the completion of any application.

- Step 1: The mentor asks the student to prepare a résumé for review. The mentor describes the elements of a good résumé and shows the student examples of strong résumés.
- Step 2: Based on sample résumés of successful people, the mentor recommends that the student prepare one current résumé and a second résumé with the education, skills, and experiences the student would eventually need to be successful in gaining admission to the program of their choice.
- Step 3: The mentor suggests that the student critically examine his or her résumé at least once a month. The student is asked to continuously update his or her résumé and to consider ways to make it distinctive and outstanding. The mentor also encourages the student to brainstorm activities that will enhance weaker areas of the résumé.
- Step 4: The mentor advises the student to practice writing cover letters and, if necessary, connects the student with experts.

Peer Mentoring. Peer mentoring is the mentoring of a student by a senior student, an alumnus, or a fellow classmate who shares some common attributes or circumstances but who also possesses additional experience in acquiring skills or knowledge about how to be successful. Peer mentors can serve as a resource, sounding board, role model, helping hand, and referral service. They can give advice on coursework, classes, extracurricular activities, professional examination preparation, undergraduate research opportunities, professional protocol, achievable milestones, and reasonable timelines. Peer mentors can provide real-life experiences, connections with other successful students, support, and encouragement because they have been through it and emerged successful. Alumni can be a great source of mentors; they can share personal stories of their academic journeys and the role that mentoring played as they progressed toward their educational goal.

Peer mentors gain new skills and recognition in exchange for time donated to mentoring. When a mentor explains that peer mentoring can lead to enhanced leadership, communication, interpersonal, organizational, and time management skills, as well as a more comprehensive knowledge of the subject that will help them in pre-professional exams, most are willing to help. Additional incentives may include a certificate for the amount of volunteer hours spent in mentoring and/or an added value item on their résumé. Students who have been peer mentors often return to ask if they can mentor new students. Peer mentors provide support in classroom learning and the overall development of the students they mentor, and these two factors are interlinked in student engagement and overall success in and beyond college.

There is no doubt that peer mentoring benefits peer mentors and the students they serve. Peer mentoring increases student engagement, success, self-confidence, and self-esteem. It helps students make connections with other students and improves their time-management, communication, and networking skills; it also enhances students' ability to frame questions and seek answers. With all these positive outcomes, peer mentoring is surely a win-win situation.

Alumni play a vital role in peer mentoring. They are often willing to visit a class once a semester to talk about their experiences in the class. They may also share a day in their life, an invaluable description to the students as they hear how alumni learned to be successful in this and other courses. If the alumni have gained admittance to a transfer institution or other program, they explain the steps they took to increase the likelihood of acceptance: the test-prep materials they used and other strategies they employed to

prepare for the admissions process. If the alumni have joined the workforce, they offer insights and tips into the hiring process such as rehearsal details for the interview and the interview experience itself. Students in the class will often request contact information from alumni and continue networking beyond the class session. Alumni may offer shadowing opportunities at their workplace or university, introduce students to supervisors or academic advisors, or donate or sell used prep materials for a fraction of their original cost.

Peer mentoring can be one of the most successful mentoring strategies. After the first exam, students who were less successful than they had hoped may ask a faculty member how to improve their grade. In addition to suggesting study-skills acquisition and time management, faculty may also recommend that those students find a peer mentor, discuss the peer mentoring process, and suggest students who may be able to act as peer mentors.

Since it is impossible to be physically present in places that peer mentoring is conducted—a coffee shop at midnight, a Skype call in the library over the weekend—faculty may establish an honor code for reporting time spent mentoring, but also note that mentored students should experience improved grades, reach certain pre-set targets, or demonstrate some other type of improvement or accomplishment in order for a peer mentor to get credit.

Networking. In today's world, networking is considered essential for academic and professional success. Networking involves developing relationships, nurturing collaborators, and building partnerships. Networking, a reciprocal and ongoing process, involves sharing information; it is not just about who students know but also who knows the students and what they can do for each other. In education, networking builds a student's base of contacts for future reference and provides supportive scaffolding as that student explores and pursues career goals.

Networking is often one of the most challenging tasks for community college students. The connections that immigrants, underrepresented minorities, and first-generation students can make may be limited, and this is an area in which the mentor can help students. Interestingly, though, publications on mentoring typically omit networking as one of the strategies for student success.

In classical education theories on mentoring (Schunk & Mullen, 2013; Mansson & Myers, 2012; Wilbanks, 2014; Allen, Eby, O'Brien, & Lentz, 2008), networking is not considered a skill that can be taught and shared. However, for current students it is an invaluable asset that must be acquired and honed. Therefore, a priority for mentors must be assisting students to make connections that will guide them on the path of success.

To help students with networking, mentors can share the following advice:

- Start networking now. Do not wait until you need an internship or a job.
- Prepare a list of questions based on information that you want to find out from a contact.
- Talk to classmates, neighbors, relatives, friend, and friends of friends in a professional manner. This means that you talk to them about what you like to do, what career you want to pursue, where you would like to be employed, and so on.
- When you are establishing contact with someone, tell them about yourself, but decide prior to the conversation what information and how much you want to share.
- If someone shares valuable information with you, send them a thank you note as soon as possible.
- Use index cards to maintain a list of your contacts. If they provide you with a business card, staple it to the index card. Write down the date you met them and a brief

summary of your conversation with them. This is for future reference so that you do not repeat what you said to them.

- Keep in touch with old and new contacts. This does not have to be an expensive chore. Send an email greeting at least once a year. Make a LISTSERV of all contact names and email addresses.
- Your networking contacts can be your friends, but they should be people who can help you and challenge you to be better. They are more than just another drinking buddy or workout partner; they are also ambitious, like you. They are not afraid to call you out, to tell you when you've talked long enough about an idea and need to take action toward making the idea a reality. They practice interview questions with you; they are interested in self-development, yours and theirs, and they love talking to people who want to improve their lives. When you are with them, you do not have to hide the scholarly books you read or apologize for the online courses you follow.
- Connections are everywhere. Find them at the local science fair or poetry festival, meetings of professional organizations, information sessions at higher education institutions, job fairs, events at local museums and libraries, in the halls and student centers of the institutions you would like to attend, at conferences and workshops, and even among faculty of other departments at your own institution.

Mentoring is a reciprocal, positive learning process that keeps students committed to their education and provides educators and administrators with increased confidence and a sense of fulfillment. Overall, the organization benefits from improved recruitment and retention efforts, motivation of senior students and faculty, and increased productivity.

The mentoring relationship is beneficial to everyone involved. For the mentor, the benefits may take the form of personal fulfillment coming from the transference of expertise, opportunities to translate values and strategies into actions, expansion of networking in the community, increased influence on the next generation, and, finally, satisfaction with a job well done. For students, the benefits can lead to completion of a postsecondary credential and improved education and career opportunities. For the community college, mentoring relationships can strengthen the institution; positively impact retention, advancement, and graduation; uncover latent talent and leverage that talent across the organization; and increase communication within the organization—all leading to a strong, vibrant community.

Resources

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