

Mentoring at a Distance

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INTRODUCTION

Colleges and universities are adept at teaching students in the academic sense. Often what is lacking in a student's education is a thorough grasp of the "real world"—how their chosen field actually functions and operates. One way for students to gain an understanding of a particular occupation is to interact with a mentor. Mentors can offer valuable intellectual resources to students (O'Neil & Gomez, 1996). Regardless of the quality of their education, students still need the practical information that can only be provided by a working professional who can present students an awareness of the real world (O'Neil, 2001).

A mentor, however, is much, much more than a professional with unique expertise in a specific vocation. While mentors do provide career knowledge and the means for technical skill development, mentors can offer a myriad of services. They provide support, encouragement, and guidance. Mentors act as role models, teaching and nurturing students, demonstrating appropriate skills and behaviors. They are friends to students, providing them a means to network and find jobs.

Connecting students and mentors can be difficult, particularly with regard to time and place. A student's schedule may not be compatible with a mentor's calendar, making a face-to-face meeting difficult. There could be a considerable geographic distance between a student and a mentor, making an in-person visit time consuming and expensive. Technology-mediated mentoring, however, can overcome the challenges of time and distance.

MENTORS THROUGHOUT HISTORY

The concept of "mentoring" extends way back in time to Ancient Greece. Homer's epic *The Odyssey* recounts how the warrior Odysseus left his son for many years in the care of Odysseus' trusted friend, Mentor

(Brockbank & McGill, 1998; Kerry & Mayes, 1995; Wickman & Sjodin, 1997). Ever since, the word "mentor" has come to stand for a trusted, skilled, older adult who provides guidance, advice, and counsel to a (usually) younger, less experienced person.

Mentorship was once widely practiced in the arts and sciences. Today, the idea of mentoring has gone far beyond its original disciplines. Anyone, in any profession, can be a mentor.

DEFINITION OF A MENTOR

There are many different articulations of the definition of a mentor, yet they all have essentially the same meaning. The *Encarta World English Dictionary* defines a mentor as "somebody, usually older and more experienced, who provides advice and support to, and watches over and fosters the progress of, a younger, less experienced person" (1999, p. 1131). Stone (2002) defines a mentor as "someone who offers knowledge, insight, perspective, or wisdom that is especially useful to the other person" (p. 74).

"A mentor is a trusted and significant leader who works with a partner (a mentee) to help them learn things more quickly or earlier, or to learn things they otherwise might not have learned" says Lacey (2000, p. 7). Alleman (1986) believes a mentor is someone with greater expertise who counsels, teaches, guides, and develops novices. Wickman and Sjodin (1997) define a mentor as "someone who helps us learn the ways of the world, someone who has our best interests at heart" (p. 1). According to Brockbank (1994), students in higher education describe a mentor as a friend, confidante, counselor, or parent figure who is non-directive and non-judgmental.

TYPES OF MENTORING

Wickman and Sjodin (1997) have identified seven basic types of mentoring: primary, secondary, struc-

tured versus informal, active versus passive, long-term versus short-term, group, and momentary. A primary mentor is the person a mentee immediately goes to for fulfillment of any number of needs. A secondary mentor, however, may only provide specific information at a given time and not be called upon again.

A structured mentoring environment adheres to an agreed upon set of standards and protocol. It is a much more formal arrangement between mentor and student. Mentoring programs at the elementary and secondary school level tend to be extremely structured and formal, with interaction and progress supervised by a teacher or other authority figure.

Informal mentoring occurs in a more casual, relaxed way. The atmosphere is unstructured and considerably less formal. Mentoring programs at the college and university level tend to be more informal. This is most likely due to the difficulty of creating and sustaining a formally structured mentoring arrangement in a more informal and unstructured (to the degree students are not watched over by a single teacher all day, every day) college or university setting. Because of the nature of a university setting, a structured, formal type of mentoring program is not feasible. Informal mentoring programs have no strict structure, and no set standard or protocol. It is left to the students and the mentors to determine the type of relationship, amount of interaction, nature of the interaction, technology utilized during the interaction, and the length of the relationship.

Mentors can have an extremely active relationship with a student, or a more passive but no less effective association. The mentoring arrangement can be long term and develop over time, or be a short-term period of association. Mentoring can occur one-on-one or in a group setting. A mentor can even appear momentarily, in a one-time interaction, and still leave a lasting impression.

THE FUNCTION AND ROLE OF A MENTOR

Kram (1983) has identified two broad functions within mentoring: career advancement and psychosocial development. As Valentine, Gandy, and Weinback point out (cited in Cascio & Gasker, 2001, p. 283),

“The hallmark of any professional training includes the transmission of a body of specific knowledge, a repertoire of basic skills, and the acceptance of the values of the profession.” Mentors have advanced skills and expertise in certain areas, and can pass on that knowledge so the student can progress in a particular field. To foster the psychosocial well-being of a student, a mentor addresses the interpersonal aspects of the mentoring relationship, and provides psychological and emotional support while the student deals with personal life topics (Hamilton & Scandura, 2003).

The role of a mentor depends upon the type, design, and objective of the mentoring program and the needs of the student. They perform a variety of roles and tasks within each role. Mentors in an informal, passive type of arrangement may perform a different role than those in a long-term, structured relationship. The possibility of developing a long-term, more personal relationship between a student and mentor is greater when the interaction goes beyond immediate need fulfillment and more into the psychosocial realm, where friendships develop and the mentors play an active role in guiding and supporting the student.

Regardless, all mentors do operate under a variety of given assumptions regarding their role in the mentoring process. According to Brockbank and McGill (1998, p. 260), a mentor’s role is one of:

- Active and accurate listening
- Observing and reflecting back
- Exhibiting empathy
- Giving information
- Questioning
- Challenging
- Providing feedback and summarizing

Lacey (2000, p. 12) further expands on the role of mentors, noting that they will often be required to:

- Encourage the exploration of ideas
- Encourage risk taking in learning
- Listen when the mentee has a problem
- Provide appropriate and timely advice
- Provide appropriate skills training
- Assist the mentee in identifying and solving problems

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