

## Basic Communication Course Annual

---

Volume 6

Article 11

---

1994


# The Incorporation of Mentors and Assistant Basic Course Directors (ABCDs) into the Basic Course Program: Creating a Safety Net for New Teaching Assistants

Nancy L. Buerkel-Rothfuss  
*Central Michigan University*

Donn S. Fink  
*Central Michigan University*

Charlotte A. Amaro  
*Wayne State University*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://ecommons.udayton.edu/bcca>

 Part of the [Higher Education Commons](#), [Interpersonal and Small Group Communication Commons](#), [Mass Communication Commons](#), [Other Communication Commons](#), and the [Speech and Rhetorical Studies Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Buerkel-Rothfuss, Nancy L.; Fink, Donn S.; and Amaro, Charlotte A. (1994) "The Incorporation of Mentors and Assistant Basic Course Directors (ABCDs) into the Basic Course Program: Creating a Safety Net for New Teaching Assistants," *Basic Communication Course Annual*: Vol. 6, Article 11.

Available at: <http://ecommons.udayton.edu/bcca/vol6/iss1/11>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of Communication at eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Basic Communication Course Annual by an authorized editor of eCommons. For more information, please contact [frice1@udayton.edu](mailto:frice1@udayton.edu), [mschlangen1@udayton.edu](mailto:mschlangen1@udayton.edu).

---

# The Incorporation of Mentors and Assistant Basic Course Directors (ABCDs) into the Basic Course Program: Creating a Safety Net for New Teaching Assistants

## **Cover Page Footnote**

Portions of this article were presented at different meetings of the Speech Communication Association.

# **The Incorporation of Mentors and Assistant Basic Course Directors (ABCDs) into the Basic Course Program: Creating a Safety Net For New Teaching Assistants\***

---

*Nancy L. Buerkel-Rothfuss  
Donn S. Fink  
Charlotte A. Amaro*

Graduate school can be an exhilarating and challenging experience but it also can provide frustrations and create anxiety. New teaching assistants (TAs) must manage conflicting roles of student, instructor, colleague, and competitor (just to name the most obvious), a task which may produce considerable stress. The degree to which a graduate program helps TAs to meet their needs and cope with this stress may affect TA success, both as teachers and students. Thus, TA socialization and support are important issues to be addressed by departments which employ TAs.

Research into the needs of new teachers can, by extension, be applied to TAs. For instance, Odell, Loughlin, and Ferraro (1986-1987) investigated what questions new teachers asked their support teachers during the first year of service. Support teachers reported a total of 1143 questions. The questions fell into seven categories: instructional (teaching strategies, con-

---

\* Portions of this article were presented at different meetings of the Speech Communication Association.

*Mentors and ABCDs*

tent questions), system (procedural questions), resource (gathering, distribution, or locating resources), emotional (support), managerial (time management), parental (working with parents), and disciplinary (managing students). With the possible exception of the parental category, TAs handle similar teaching issues and have similar types of questions. Thus, all seven areas should be of concern to those who attempt to train and/or socialize TAs.

Staton and Darling (1989) identified two socialization processes that TAs experience. Role socialization involves TAs learning to function in their new roles as graduate students and teachers. As graduate students, TAs face increased challenges compared to those faced as undergraduates. In addition, teaching is a novel experience that TAs must rapidly learn. Cultural socialization involves learning the norms that are particular to TAs' universities and departments. Staton and Darling (1989) also identified four functions served during these socialization processes: (a) development of a social support system, (b) information collection, (c) adjustment to rules and practices, and (d) the generation of new ideas. According to these authors, much must be accomplished in a very short amount of time if a TA is to survive the pressures of graduate school.

How TAs handle the demands of graduate school and teaching often can determine whether or not they earn a graduate degree. Providing a safety net for TAs is an essential component of any TA development program that achieves high levels of retention, productivity, satisfaction and esprit de corps. Since many basic courses rely on TAs for a majority of their staffing needs, strategies for improving the TA experience have direct relevance to those basic courses.

Support programs may take a number of forms. It may be that departmental maintenance of academic materials such as journals, yearbooks, handbooks, computerized data bases, and other publications/references can relieve stress for TAs, especially if the library facilities are inadequate. Another

*Mentors and ABCDs*

form of support may take the form of a faculty advising program. Faculty may assume responsibility for one or two TAs whom they mentor throughout the first year until the TAs select their own advisors and committee members. A third, somewhat related, tactic would be to create a mentoring system incorporating peer mentors: other TAs who have made it through at least the first year of the graduate program. These mentors serve as resource persons and sources of support for their junior colleagues. This form of support provides a safety net for the new TAs by allowing them the luxury of consulting with experienced peers who are not in direct competition with them (the mentors would already have completed the courses the TAs are taking, thus minimizing the competition for grades and academic recognition).

The use of peers as mentors provides at least three advantages. First, as peers, the mentors can relate easily to the pressures the mentees are experiencing. Monsour and Corman (1991), in their discussion of doctoral graduate students, suggested that social support is most effective when received from peers. Second, Clemson (1987) argued that trust will be highest in mentor relationships:

The protégé must feel free to confide in the mentor, and the protégé must feel free to make mistakes in front of the mentor without fear of institutional repercussions. Department chairs, supervisors, specialists, and administrators, therefore, are not suitable candidates as mentors for student teachers, interns or beginning teachers" (p. 88).

Third, peer mentors, in combination with other departmental support, create a support-team system similar to those developed for new teachers in public school systems (Hawk, 1986-1987). Peer mentors, therefore, seem well suited to assist new TAs as they socialize both in their roles and in their specific graduate cultures.

*Mentors and ABCDs*

Staton and Darling (1989) specifically recommended the use of experienced TAs to aid in the socialization process of new TAs:

Our research suggests that such ideas as encouraging senior TAs to provide social events for new TAs, explicitly teaching new TAs how to ask questions to gain information, and providing information opportunities for them to brainstorm with one another about teaching and research could become important aspects of TA training programs (p. 21) .

Naturally, one-year Master's programs would rarely be able to adopt such a mentor model. However, programs that employ TAs for more than one year have the advantage of "carry-over" of staff. These experienced TAs can serve in at least two support capacities: TA mentors and assistant basic course directors (ABCDs). The ways in which those two roles have been filled over the past several years at Central Michigan University form the basis for this article. In particular, we will describe two possible safety nets for new TAs: peer mentors and ABCDs. The following sections trace the evolution of the two peer mentoring programs currently in place, explain the strengths and weaknesses of those programs, and provide criteria for selecting personnel.

## **THE TA MENTORING PROGRAM**

Prior to the fall 1992 semester, the mentor program consisted of a loosely organized plan which left the mentors with little direction or guidance in how to best provide assistance to new TAs. Mentors were assigned by the basic course director (BDC) as part of their TA experience. Consequently, a number of problems emerged. First, not all TAs were equally qualified to pass along helpful information, because not all TAs succeeded in the program at the same level of accomplishment. Nor were all TAs good role models for teaching

*Mentors and ABCDs*

expectations and information. Some were not effective as teachers and, consequently, were unable to pass along information about how to teach. Others resisted some of the rules and regulations associated with teaching the basic course and passed those negative attitudes along to their mentees. Still others were too stressed out from their own graduate responsibilities to take on the role of mentor for a new TA. As an overall consequence, it became clear that a more focused, deliberate mentoring program was needed if peer mentoring was to have any real impact on the basic course staff.

As such, during the spring 1992 semester, one of the assistant basic course directors polled the TA staff regarding their experiences as mentees. The survey, which was completed by 14 of the 17 new TAs that semester, provided a number of insights into the strengths and weaknesses of that approach to mentoring. In particular, the results of the survey indicated that, while there was much that was happening, much could be improved. For one thing, the mentors were taking no responsibility for initiating contact with their charges, although most of them were quite willing to provide assistance when asked. It was equally apparent that the new TAs had done very little asking. Most of the conversations between mentor and mentee tended to take the following form: "So, how's it going?" "Not bad. How are things with you?" "Fine." Thus, although pleasantries were exchanged, very little substantive information was transmitted in either direction. As would be expected, satisfaction with the mentor relationships tended to vary. Six of the TAs indicated that their mentors had been helpful overall and that their mentors were concerned with their progress. The same number felt that their mentors had expressed no concern and, as a consequence, had been not at all helpful. Whereas some mentors were described as "encouraging," "open-minded," "receptive," and "sincere," an almost equal number were described as "rude, not sociable," having a "negative attitude toward students," and "not sincere with responses." When asked to

*Mentors and ABCDs*

describe what they would do differently should they become TA mentors during the following year, the participants said that they would "be a better communicator," "have a scheduled meeting," "initiate the conversation more," and "try to understand each other better." The ABCD's suggestions were as follows: "First, have an instructional session, perhaps more than one, teaching the mentors how to execute their role, what it looks like and why their interactions are so important. Second, rather than making mentoring mandatory, ask for volunteers. TAs who have poor attitudes toward teaching or graduate school might be more harmful. Also, if one has no interest, he or she probably will not take the initiative to interact as has been expressed by some TAs on the survey."

Following interpretation of the survey results, the ABCD who had collected the data met with the entire group of TAs during one of the spring (1992) staff meetings. At that time she led an open discussion which focused on the problems which befell the TAs during their first experiences with graduate school and teaching, noted how a mentor program would have resolved many of those problems, and then asked for volunteers who would be interested in becoming a mentor for one of the nine new TAs hired for the fall (1992) semester.

Based on the survey results and responses to the discussion held during the staff meeting, the basic course director asked one of the returning TAs to take charge of the mentoring program for the fall (1992) and spring (1993) semesters. The rationale for selecting a returning TA for this position, rather than assigning the role to one of the ABCDs, was that the mentor program coordinator position provided yet one more rung on the hierarchical ladder for new TAs to approach for information, guidance and support. The position created one more safety net. In addition, the many responsibilities attached to this position seemed to suggest that the role would overburden the course assistants, who already had extensive job descriptions. Although there was no reassigned



### *Mentors and ABCDs*

time or extra money attached to the position, it was believed that the experience would be attractive to a TA who was hoping eventually to seek employment in an area that would utilize this sort of experience.

Criteria for selecting a mentor program coordinator (MPC) continue to evolve. Basic considerations suggest that the MPC should be someone who (a) is a supporter of the basic course program, (b) works well with the basic course director, (c) has high credibility and is well respected by the TA staff, (d) is capable of motivating others, (e) is supportive of others, (f) would benefit personally from coordinating the program, (g) would be willing to put in the time needed to develop and supervise the program, (i) is sensitive to the interpersonal dynamics in the current staff (who is not talking with whom, who once dated whom, etc.) and (j) is looking for experiences beyond the typical teaching and research experiences of graduate school. Once the MPC was selected, the course director charged her with researching and subsequently developing a workable mentor program. Further, the BCD provided her with a list of teaching assistants who had volunteered to be mentors during the upcoming year.

The first thing the new MPC did was collect articles on mentoring in an attempt to identify the advantages to mentors and those being mentored. The expectation was that presentation of this list to both groups would add to their motivation for participation. In particular, the MPC identified the following as possible advantages to the new TAs from an article by Edlind and Haensley (1985):

- a. career and interest advancement;
- b. increase in knowledge and skills;
- c. development of talent;
- d. enhancement of self-esteem and self-confidence;
- e. development of a personal ethic or set of standards;
- f. establishment of a long-term friendship; and

*Mentors and ABCDs*

g. enhancement of creativity (p. 56).

In addition, the following were identified in the same article (Edlind & Haensley, 1985) as possible advantages to the mentors:

- a. completion of work;
- b. stimulation of ideas;
- c. establishment of a long-term friendship; and
- d. personal satisfaction ( p. 58).

According to these lists, advantages for the new TAs involve help in meeting the right people; improvement in a variety of interpersonal, academic, teaching, and thinking skills; development of personal qualities such as leadership potential; enhancement of self-esteem and confidence; and access to a role model to assist them in learning the implicit norms of the organization and accepting feedback from evaluators in the program. In short, all four functions cited by Staton and Darling (1989) appear to be satisfied for TAs. Mentoring can aid in role socialization by providing access to information about course work and teaching. Mentors also can help new TAs adapt to the specific culture in which they will work. Advantages to the mentors center around the synergy that may evolve from working with others, which translates into added creativity, motivation for the work, and development of new points of view. Additionally, mentors establish friendships and receive the personal satisfaction that comes from helping others, which may have a positive influence on their self-actualization.

Drawing from other research on the benefits of mentors, several additional advantages to the new TAs could be added to the list. For instance, Thies-Sprinthall (1986) and Huffman and Leak (1986) found that mentors helped mentees with both personal and task concerns. In terms of role socialization, mentees reported help in task areas concerning classroom management, organization, and understanding of the

*Mentors and ABCDs*

induction process. Personally, mentors provided support and encouragement (Huffman & Leak, 1986). Certainly one of the main tasks of the first weeks in a graduate program is to find one's place in the organizational system, the cultural socialization process. Effective mentors can direct new TAs to the appropriate sources of information, can advise them about communication strategies that will work for some faculty and not for others, can provide insight into the unspoken rules of the organization, and can provide guidelines by which new TAs can assess their success at becoming a functioning component of the overall system.

Several additional advantages for experienced TAs also seem apparent. Working closely with a junior TA could build self-esteem for the mentor, increasing his or her overall confidence (and success) as a teacher and as a graduate student. Plus, when a person explains an idea or concept to someone else, that information becomes clearer to the presenter. Thus, helping a new TA handle stress, negotiate the ins and outs of meeting faculty and creating a committee, write effective lesson plans, deal with students, and balance the many dialectical tensions associated with graduate school enhances those skills for the experienced TA (Thies-Sprinthall, 1986). Sometimes just talking through a problem with someone else presents new solutions that otherwise would not be discovered. Similarly, such problem-solving could lead the experienced TA to be less certain about what he or she heretofore believed to be the "right" way to do things. Teaching others can be a learning experience. (For additional reading on the value of mentors, see Blackburn, Chapman, & Cameron, 1981; Clemson, 1987; Ganser, 1991; Gehrke, 1988; Gehrke & Kay, 1984; Moore, 1982; Noller & Frey, 1983; Parkay, 1988; and Torrance, 1984).

At the first mentor meeting held in late summer, the mentor program coordinator provided a list of the incoming TAs to the prospective mentor staff and asked if there were any individual preferences or problems she should take into

*Mentors and ABCDs*

consideration when assigning mentor pairs. Since many of the TAs graduated from the same undergraduate program, previous romantic relationships which had soured precluded some mentors from working effectively with certain TAs. Based on this information, the MPC paired the mentors with mentees such that no discernible problems were identified.

The fall (1992) semester had nine new TAs coming on board, 12 TAs returning for one semester, and three TAs (excluding the ABCDs) returning for a full school year. Of the 12 one-semester TAs, six had volunteered to be mentors. The three TAs returning for the full year also volunteered. Because six of the mentors would be leaving the program in December, the BCD and MPC decided to develop a team approach to assigning mentors. It was decided that each new TA would be assigned an individual mentor; some of those mentors would be in the program for the entire year and others would be leaving after the first semester. Groups of three mentors and three new TAs were created by combining dyads such that each six-person group was comprised of one TA who would be a mentor for a year, two who would be leaving in December and three new TAs. As such, each of the new TAs would receive one-on-one attention from one mentor for the first semester, the most critical transition period for new TAs. The following semester would involve one mentor providing for three new TAs, ensuring that in January 1993 some TAs wouldn't go mentorless.

Experienced TAs who volunteered to be mentors were contacted by mail over the summer and asked to attend a short workshop on campus prior to meeting the new TAs at an off-campus team-building session to be held for the entire basic course teaching staff. During the mentor workshop, the MPC led an open discussion which provided the new mentors with the opportunity to share their opinions of and experiences with the mentor program. Three guiding principles evolved during that discussion. First, the new mentors agreed that the voluntary nature of the program would ensure that

*Mentors and ABCDs*

those who did participate as mentors would in theory be more apt to actually make themselves available when needed by their mentees than those who were forced to participate as mentors. This first assertion was based on the fact that some of the TAs hadn't received any guidance or moral support from their mentors. Second, the mentors felt that the "horror stories" of graduate school should not be shared with the new TAs until they had sufficient time to adjust to the environment. The prevailing consensus was that such information would only serve to intimidate, rather than integrate, the new staff. Third, the mentors voiced a preference for open rather than forced get-togethers or assigned meeting times, based on the rationale that a forced get together suggests artificiality and forced friendship. The importance of a voluntary and spontaneous relationship between mentor and mentee is reinforced by the literature (see, for example, Clemson, 1987). As a result, after the first meeting with their mentees (which occurred at a lake in an informal, social setting) no further mentor-mentee events were scheduled.

Some mentor-mentee pairs were a better match than others. According to informal reports made to the course director during the fall semester, some dyads met frequently in their offices to share ideas, problem-solve and do whatever was needed to help the new TA acclimate. Other dyads encountered personality conflicts early on and, as a result, tended to spend less time together. In those cases, the mentee generally sought out the services of one of the assistant course directors. New TAs also formed support networks among themselves, with those who had received valuable information from their mentors passing that information along to new TAs who had not established the same level of relationship with their mentors. Some of the dyads developed solid friendships. At least one mentor dyad resulted in a romantic relationship later in the year. (While romantic relationships are not specifically frowned upon, they can cause problems if they deteriorate.)

*Mentors and ABCDs*

When asked for her general impressions of the mentor program, the MPC provided the following comments:

- a. She recommended more follow-up if possible to ensure that mentors and mentees were benefiting from the arrangement.
- b. She wondered about the choice of MPC for the next year and suggested selecting an experienced TA who is respected, academically and socially liked, and one who is on campus enough to be familiar with the daily interactions of the TAs.
- c. She agreed that the course assistants should not be in charge of the mentor program, because the MPC provides yet another rung on the hierarchical ladder for the TAs to rely on when dealing with the academic organizational structure.
- d. She provided the following definition of a good mentor: one who is "caring, empathetic, comfortable with many roles — teaching and student workload — who can keep up and yet be willing to devote the time to others, who is interested in helping, and who is not cynical about being here during the third semester...(knowing they will soon be without jobs, office space, or classes to teach)."

In sum, her feeling was that any attempt to make the TAs' tasks of completing their graduate studies and teaching the basic course more effective and personally rewarding is well worth the effort. Further, the outlay of time far outweighs the outlay of funds. Finally, anything that takes stress off is worthwhile, because graduate school is one stress-filled experience.

The MPC's perceptions were shared by others in the program. At year's end, mentoring experiences were shared both informally in conversation with the course director and formally in a staff meeting. The feedback provided helped us

*Mentors and ABCDs*

develop the mentor selection considerations presented in Table 1.

Table 1  
Questions to Consider when Selecting TA Mentors

1. Have these TAs done well as teachers? As graduate students? Have they managed the stresses of being both a graduate student and a teacher successfully? Are they aware of the skills/habits/routines they possess that have allowed them to succeed? Could they nurture those abilities in the new TAs?
2. Do these TAs have extra time to devote to helping a new graduate student? Will this additional responsibility jeopardize their ability to complete their own graduate programs?
3. Do these TAs' philosophies of teaching fit with your expectations as the supervisor? If not, can you accept the differences?
4. Do these TAs enjoy what they are doing? Do they value the graduate program? Their experiences so far? Will they enthusiastically endorse the program to the new TAs or will they present a cynical and/or pessimistic picture of the department? Do these TAs hold grudges against you or any other faculty member in the department? If so, can they be objective in their description of the program and faculty?
5. Do these individuals have the time and energy to devote to new TAs? Are they motivated to help others? Are they willing to share their expertise? If needed, will they take the initiative to locate information or handle other requests for their mentees? Would they be willing to attend training sessions or participate in other activities designed to improve their ability as mentors?
6. Do these individuals have effective interpersonal skills? Can they empathize well with others? Do they have a real desire to help others? Are they mature enough to provide support for others?

*Mentors and ABCDs*

7. Will these TAs be role models that you can endorse? Do they agree with you about the expectations that you have for TAs in your department — or will they undermine your efforts in one or more areas (e.g., dress code, office hours, class preparation, relationships with students, etc.)?
8. Have these TAs taken advantage of a wide range of opportunities offered in the department and/or institution (e.g., served on student committees, conducted original research with faculty, team-taught other courses with faculty, assumed consulting responsibilities, etc.)?
9. Do these individuals understand the "politics" of the department and the institution? Will they know where to send new TAs for information and/or assistance with problems? Do they understand how to get the information they need and will they take the initiative to do so?
10. Do these TAs see the value of being a mentor? Do they see personal outcomes that will accrue from accepting this role?
11. Will these TAs make the new TAs feel valued and welcome? Will they take the initiative to check on their mentee's progress — beyond the obvious "How's it going?"
12. Do these TAs welcome an opportunity to work with people from other backgrounds? Do they have prejudices that would interfere with their ability to be effective in this role?
13. Do they WANT to be mentors? Do their reasons include benefits for both themselves and for the people they will mentor?

## **ABCDs AS PART OF THE OVERALL SAFETY NET**

The second support group in place at CMU consists of experienced TAs who are selected to assist the BCD. These



*Mentors and ABCDs*

individuals are selected based on answers posed in Table 2. The role of the assistant basic course director has been very loosely defined in the past, although there are several specific administrative tasks assigned to the role: to (a) coordinate the videotaping of all SDA 101 students; (b) coordinate the comparison of speech outlines to identify plagiarism and other forms of academic dishonesty; (c) assist the BCD in teaching SDA 795, the TA training course; and (d) serve as a support person for both the course director and the TAs teaching in the program. The last task is the one that has been the most ambiguous. The BCD must balance the need to maintain a professional distance between herself and her staff with the need to provide close, personal leadership for them. To do so, the role of the ABCD was created. These individuals serve as the "first line" of feedback when all is not going well. For example, if a TA cancels class for capricious reasons, the ABCD can offer friendly advice to that individual about why that behavior is not acceptable for the basic course program. The BCD need not get involved in this process. Should the TA choose to disregard that advice, the course director retains the ability to step in and stop the behavior. Should the cancellation of class be based on a lack of information, an impression that there were no rules precluding such behavior, or an honest assumption that an alternative assignment would compensate for the cancellation (but one which had not been made known to the BCD), informal feedback from the ABCD could serve as a nonthreatening indication that a rule had been broken. As a result, the TA could correct the behavior and would be saved some embarrassment in the process. Similarly, assistants can issue gentle warnings to TAs who, for whatever reason, choose to disregard expectations associated with the basic course. By reminding TAs that such behavior is unacceptable, the ABCDs may change the TAs' behaviors before the course director becomes involved. ABCDs also can motivate the TAs. If the ABCDs model positive teaching behaviors and positive attitudes toward the program,

Table 2  
Questions to Consider when Selecting  
Assistant Basic Course Directors

1. Have these TAs done well as teachers? As graduate students? Are they making significant progress toward completing their own graduate programs? Do they set high standards for themselves and others? Are they aware of the skills/habits/routines they possess that have allowed them to succeed? Could they nurture those abilities in the new TAs?
2. Do these TAs' philosophies of teaching fit with your expectations as the supervisor? If not, can you accept the differences? Do they present teaching as a set of choices and trade-offs, or do they tend to believe they know the "right" way of doing things? Are they interested in (and have they read) the research on communication in the classroom?
3. Do these individuals have the time and energy to devote to new TAs? Will they be accessible to new TAs a large portion of the week or will they expect to hold office hours and leave? Will the additional time it takes to handle these responsibilities jeopardize their own success as graduate students?
4. Are they motivated to help others? Are they willing to share their expertise or would they prefer to remain the "stars" of your department?
5. Do these individuals have considerable interpersonal communication ability? Can they give constructive feedback? Can they be assertive, when needed? Can they empathize well with others, even those who may be less mature, less motivated, less academically skilled? Can they resist gossip and, instead, look for the facts? Can they interact with you openly and honestly?
6. Can they view problems and events from a variety of perspectives? Do they demonstrate an appreciation for the opinions of others? Do they try to take a problem solving approach to differences or do they try to "win" arguments?

*Mentors and ABCDs*

7. Are these TAs tolerant of people from diverse backgrounds? Do they have prejudices that would interfere with their ability to handle this role? Are they sensitive to language and/or examples that might offend or exclude specific groups of students? Do they work well with people from different age groups, cultural groups, ethnic backgrounds, religions, etc.?
8. Will these TAs be role models that you can endorse? Do they agree with you about the expectations that you have for TAs in your department — or will they undermine your efforts in one or more areas (e.g., dress code, office hours, class preparation, relationships with students, etc.)?
9. Do these TAs demonstrate leadership ability? Does their style of directing and/or leadership fit with (and/or complement) your own style? Are these individuals likely to empower others — or merely remain directors in the group? Can they share responsibilities? Delegate authority to others?
10. Have these TAs evolved either as opinion leaders or social support people in their own class of graduate students? Are these people that other TAs look up to? Are their opinions valued by others?
11. Do these individuals accept constructive feedback well — especially from you? Do they value your opinion? Do they demonstrate an obvious desire to learn and improve as students and teachers? Would they be willing to attend workshops, seminars or other training sessions to improve their skills as assistant basic course directors?
12. Have these TAs taken advantage of a wide range of opportunities offered in the department and/or institution (e.g., served on student committees, conducted original research with faculty, team-taught other courses with faculty, presented at conferences, assumed consulting responsibilities, etc.)? Do they see the value of this new responsibility?
13. Do these individuals understand the "politics" of the department and the institution? Will they know where to send new TAs for information and/or assistance with problems? Do they understand how to get the information they need

*Mentors and ABCDs*

- and will they take the initiative to do so? Are they comfortable interacting with faculty and others in positions of authority?
14. Do these individuals work well with you? Do they work well with each other? Will their strengths and weaknesses balance each other? Do they add skills to the mix that compensate for your weaknesses and/or allow you to devote time and energy to other tasks?
  15. Can these people work independently, with minimal supervision from you? Will they be comfortable doing so? Can they stay on a schedule? Meet deadlines without constant reminders?
  16. Have these people developed relationships with other faculty? With others in the department? In the institution?
  17. Are these TAs "sold" on the program? Can they be enthusiastic advocates of the course and its policies? Do they love what they're teaching?
  18. Can these individuals handle confidences? Are they mature enough to hear (and keep confidential) information that would not generally be made public? Can they handle switching from student to assistant basic course director without stress? Will they be able to maintain a professional distance between themselves and other TAs, when needed?
  19. Are these people trustworthy? Responsible? Can they be entrusted with large sums of money, equipment, building keys, etc.?
  20. Do these TAs understand departmental and institutional policies and procedures (registration procedures, policies regulating grievances, etc.).
  21. Do they have a positive attitude toward students? Do they understand the make-up of the student population at your institution?
  22. Do they WANT the job? Why? Do their reasons for wanting the job include positive outcomes for everyone: the TAs themselves, the rest of the teaching staff, the students, and you? Or do they want the job because of the implied power and prestige associated with it?

*Mentors and ABCDs*

other TAs may incorporate those attitudes into their own personal realities about teaching the basic course. Finally, assistants can assure new TAs that the BCD is, indeed, approachable and interested in the welfare of the teaching staff.

Specifically, the ABCD role involves being mentors to the graduate students teaching the basic course. ABCDs are not assigned a specific mentee; they are requested to serve as mentors to all of them. Thus, the assistants attempt to provide help for both academic and personal issues, serving as resource persons and confidantes when the need arises. They answer questions and provide whatever assistance they can with regard to both graduate school classes and teaching. They try to define the position such that the TAs can place their trust in them and know that confidential information will not be passed along. Of course, the ABCDs also make it clear that there will be times when the BCD must be involved in decision-making and let it be known in advance what sorts of information cannot be kept from her indefinitely. When information that is difficult to disclose must be shared with the course director, the ABCDs try to provide strategies for doing so. As a former ABCD described his role, we "support them, direct them, and, if they need it, we're there to hold their hands."

Most importantly, the ABCDs and BCD must function as a team. The assistants provide alternative viewpoints and the course director is there to remind these two TAs that all situations can be seen from a variety of perspectives and that every decision is a trade-off. A former ABCD described the relationship among the two ABCDs and the BCD as "a marriage with three people." Within a three-way marriage, one benefit is that, when one is up and one is down, the participants can help each other get back up. However, there is a certain amount of frustration in a 3-way marriage; at some point in time, one person can be out of touch temporarily and jealousies or frustrations may result. A second metaphor

*Mentors and ABCDs*

would be that the assistants and the course director function as a team: when something needs to be accomplished, they problem-solve how to reach that goal; when one of them is in need of support, the other two provide it; when one of them deserves recognition, the other two are quick to recognize the accomplishment; when one of them simply cannot meet an obligation, the other two fill the gap.

Overall, past experiences at this institution suggest that the inclusion of ABCDs and mentors in the basic course program adds to the overall effectiveness of the basic course. Considerations that must be taken into account by the BCD and/or the department prior to incorporating these individuals into a basic course system include the following:

- a. Clarify the role of the ABCD (establish the parameters, broad though they may be; establish evaluation criteria; provide information about expectations, time frame for completing tasks, sources of information and assistance, and the specific tasks and amount of authority associated with the position).
- b. Create a recognition program for the mentors. Departmental funds are not likely to be available to compensate mentors, and previous research suggests that intangible rewards are most often sought by mentors. "Time spent with protégés, opportunities to be recognized and commended for their assistance, certificates of appreciation and other forms of honoring mentors' contributions are creative alternatives to 'merit pay'" (Clemson, 1987, p. 87).
- c. Extend the mentor role to include more task-oriented group projects that focus on both teaching and academic pursuits (The role of the mentor could extend beyond social or emotional support person to academic support person. For instance, groups of mentors could develop research projects with incoming TAs who profess interest in a particular area).

### *Mentors and ABCDs*

- d. Consider what method will be used for discouraging prospective mentor volunteers not perceived as beneficial to the program. Possible strategies for limiting participation from these TAs include thanking the prospective mentors for their interest but recommending that, because of circumstances (such as time constraints, locale, prior commitments, etc.), alternative methods of involvement might be better. Direct rejection of a volunteer may be harmful and should be used only in those cases when a TA's negative attitude or noncompliant behavior is known to all staff members.

Mentors could be assigned to mentees according to research interests (which would involve contacting the incoming TAs during the summer to see if they have a preferred area of interest and, if not, assigning them to a project with a more general focus). Such an opportunity could provide practical experience through which incoming TAs could compare and evaluate their skills to identify strengths and weaknesses. Working with experienced graduate students in a mentor relationship could reassure new TAs that their skills are adequate for the tasks ahead.

Of course, attention to the relationship among the course director, the assistants and the mentors is essential. When the ABCDs and mentors have a solid working relationship with the BCD and can relax when in the course director's presence, then the new TAs will receive the message that the requirements and responsibilities of being a TA and graduate student can be satisfied, achieved, and enjoyed.

## CONCLUSION

Overall, both mentors and ABCDs have the potential to add much to a basic course system. Having the opportunity to interact with experienced TAs who are genuinely interested

*Mentors and ABCDs*

in and willing to pass along what they have learned about the academic system to newcomers can smooth the transition to graduate school for those new TAs. On the down side, mentors who are unqualified and/or unmotivated to handle the job can do considerable damage. Likewise, there are positives and negatives involved in incorporating assistants into the basic course system. When the ABCDs complement the course director and can work together with that individual as a team, much can be accomplished. Although the ABCDs' close relationship with "the boss" may cause some new TAs to wonder whether or not they can be trusted not to rush to the course director with confidences, reports of repeated interactions in which trust has been built filter quickly through the ranks of the teaching staff. Assistants who know when problems can be solved at their level and who are able to help TAs see when assistance from the BCD is desirable can do much to build solid relationships among the various components of the teaching staff. They also can help TAs to solve problems when they are still small. When the assistants have a good relationship with the course director, they are seen as credible sources of information about what is and what is not acceptable. Alternatively, when the assistants appear to be intimidated by the course director or appear not to value his or her input, their influence on new TAs can be detrimental. Consequently, as is the case in most organizations, building positive relationships among staff members appears to be the main overall key to success.

## REFERENCES

- Clemson, R. L. (1987). Mentorship in teaching. *Action in Teacher Education*, 9(3), 85-90.
- Blackburn, R. T., Chapman, D. W., & Cameron, S. M. (1981). "Cloning" in academe; mentorship and academic careers. *Research in Higher Education*, 15(4), 315-327.



*Mentors and ABCDs*

- Edlind, E. P., & Haensley, P. A. (1985). Gifts of mentorship. *The Gifted Child Quarterly*, 29(2), 55-60.
- Ganser, R. (April, 1991). *Matching beginning teachers and mentors: Perceptions of participants in a state-mandated mentoring program*. Paper presented at the annual conference of the Mentoring Association, Chicago.
- Gehrke, N. (1988). Toward a definition of mentoring. *Theory into Practice*, 27, 190-194.
- Gehrke, N. J., & Kay, R. S. (1984). The socialization of beginning teachers through mentor-protégé relationships. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 35(3), 21-24.
- Hawk, P. (1986-1987). Beginning teacher programs: Benefits for the experienced educator. *Action in Teacher Education*, 8(4), 59-63.
- Huffman, G., & Leak, S. (1986). Beginning teachers' perceptions of mentors. *Journal of Teacher Education*. 37(1) 22-25.
- Monsour, M., & Corman, S. (1991). Social and task functions of the dissertation partner: One way of avoiding terminal ABC status. *Communication Education*. 40, 180-186.
- Moore, K. M. (1982). The role of mentors in developing leaders for academe. *Educational Record*, 63(1), 23-28.
- Noller, R B., & Frey, B. R. (1983). *Mentoring: An annotated bibliography*. Buffalo, NY: Bearly Ltd.
- Odell, S. J., Loughlin, C. E., & Ferraro, D. P. (1986-1987). Functional approach to identification of new teacher needs in an induction context. *Action in Teacher Education*, 8(4), 51-57.
- Parkay, F. W. (1988). Reflections of a protégé. *Theory into practice*, 27, 195-200.

*Mentors and ABCDs*

- Staton, A. Q., & Darling, A. L. (1989). Socialization of teaching assistants, *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, 39, 15-22.
- Thies-Sprinthall, L. (1986). A collaborative approach for mentor training: A working model. *Journal of Teacher Education*. 37(6), 13-20.
- Torrance, E. P. (1984). *Mentor relationships: How they aid creative achievement, endure, change, and die*. Buffalo, NY: Bearly Ltd.