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The Role Of The Campus Professional As A Moral Mentor

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No Abstract

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The Role of the Campus Professional as a Moral Mentor

As student affairs professionals, we traditionally struggle with how to bring the proper balance to our work. Our critics and we often frame this as a question of holistic practice in which we attempt to balance the educational with the recreational and the developmental with the authoritarian. These critics often focus on how issues of moral development during the college years are addressed by student development professionals, especially with regard to the spiritual and value-based frames that may arrive with students from home, religious, and social environments (National Association of Scholars, 2008). Our anxiety as student affairs professionals about our role in moral development arises in part from those critics who assert that our work is simply to reinforce classroom instruction and avoid any efforts that might be labeled moral development. Yet our students want and need this mentoring.

College students' search for meaning and purpose is widely documented (Astin, Astin, and Lindholm, 2010), and campus professionals are well situated to help them find it.

Our work takes place in a variety of settings—some informal, some structured. In each of these settings, we may find opportunity to serve as moral mentors. James Rest (1986), in his description of the four components of moral development, begins with the need for what he terms "moral sensitivity." A starting point for the practice of moral mentoring involves the realization that the diversity of our practice settings should provoke us to be particularly aware of the need for our own moral sensitivity. From wherever we presume to undertake this work, it is critical that we be clear about the meaning of the term "moral mentor," for both our own purposes and to forestall a debate on irrelevant semantics both within and external to our profession. For the purposes of this discussion, we describe the moral mentor as a professional practicing in the field of student affairs, concerned holistically with student development, of which a significant part is moral development. This professional works within the framework discussed in Chapter One of this volume, as one who is focused on moral development as an aspect of cognitive development, assisting students in meaning making and decision making, where moral actions are weighed and moral principles serve as the boundaries for those actions.

Our framework for such work is grounded in theory, experience, and professional standards including, among others, the Professional Competency Areas for Student Affairs Practitioners (American College Personnel Association and National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, 2010) and the Council for the Advancement of Standards (2011), as well as from the guidance on practice provided by various educational activities and professional statements such as the Association of American Colleges and Universities VALUE Rubrics (2010). Our purpose in this chapter is to examine how this framework informs practice and how that practice, through our various roles as campus educators, reflects our efforts to facilitate moral learning among our students. We explore the learning dynamic between mentor and mentee, including the discomfort, resistance, and retreat that may be an aspect of this learning. We conclude with some ideas for building everyday moral habits that encourage the practice of good mentoring.

The Nature of the Learning Relationship

Effective relationships that can facilitate and sustain the cognitive-structural developmental changes necessary for moral maturity are collaborative in nature. This is a concept explored in Chapter Two. Both learners and mentors must bring certain attitudes, knowledge, and skills to the encounter. The moral coach, or mentor, must "communicate and inspire hope in a student, to maintain belief and pride in the person" (Healy and Liddell, 1998, p. 41). Fundamentally, the learner must bring trust in the relationship—which allows an exploration of and a challenge to assumptions and personal truths that can stifle moral growth. In her discussion of privileged identities, Watt (2007a) suggested that learners must "develop the stamina to sit with discomfort, to continuously seek critical consciousness, and to engage in difficult dialogue" (p. 112). Each of these elements speaks to the awareness, knowledge, and skills necessary to effectively make gains in moral maturity.

Sitting with Discomfort. Consideration of one's moral growth means engaging in conversations about topics that may be uncomfortable for both the learner and the mentor. This discomfort may arise from several sources. Among these may be one's unfamiliarity with the issues involved in the situation; internal moral conflict concerning the issues involved; or unsettling emotions, such as fear, regret, or shame, resulting from examining one's role in the situation. Regardless of the source of the discomfort, learners must practice becoming comfortable with being uncomfortable, and mentors can help them find the perseverance necessary to do so.

It is through discomfort that transformative learning may occur. Developmental theorists have long acknowledged the necessity of challenge to facilitate developmental growth (Sanford, 1966). Differentiation, recognizing the dissonance between one's perspectives and new information being presented, is a prerequisite to the integration that accompanies developmental change (Sanford, 1962) and inevitably brings with it discomfort. As Parker Palmer (1993b) has argued, "an emotionally honest learning space" has the potential to "increase our ability to expose our own ignorance, to ask hard questions, to challenge the validity of what others are saying and receive similar challenges in a spirit of growth" (p. 87).

Seeking Critical Consciousness. Freire (1994) introduced the concept of critical consciousness as a vital component of liberation pedagogy. As Watt (2007a) described it, "critical consciousness is the ability to assess and take action against the social, political, and economic elements of oppression in a society" (p. 112). Moral maturity requires this consciousness because morality and ethics are fundamental to advancing community principles of equity, inclusion, and social justice. In essence, critical consciousness is about awareness raising at its root. Therefore, developing an internal moral compass informed by this consciousness requires substantive and broad knowledge about historical patterns and the current roles of power, privilege, and structural inequities in triggering moral issues in campus communities. Exposure to these complex issues may be sufficient for developing a moral sensitivity, recognizing the moral dimensions inherent in tackling social injustices. Therefore, it is of paramount importance that moral learners maintain an openness to continual discovery about self and others and correction of false or incomplete knowledge about social groups, systems, and patterns. Having a companion (or moral coach) help the learner recognize and interpret a situation as problematic is a necessary step in moral growth. This concept is explored in depth in Chapter Two.

Engaging in Difficult Dialogue. Watt (2007a) defined a difficult dialogue as "an exchange of ideas or opinions between citizens within a community that centers on an awakening of potentially conflicting views of beliefs or values about social justice issues" (p. 112). Discussions that lead to moral growth practically demand some level of discomfort and are likely to reveal conflicting points of view and values between the learner and others, including the moral mentor. As such, difficult dialogues of the type described by Watt should be anticipated. Palmer (1993a) asserted that a community embraces conflict and uses it to deepen the educational purpose of educational communities. He goes on to suggest that getting conflicting viewpoints about important issues out in the open is a mark of a healthy community. Appreciating the creative possibilities of conflict and learning how to engage them effectively is an important skill for moral learners to cultivate and practice.

Understanding Resistance and Retreat. In addition to what is required of learners and mentors, understanding resistance is also important to establishing effective moral learning relationships. When difficult dialogues arise around moral and ethical issues, retreat or resistance is a typical response. Mentors are encouraged to check their own discomfort at the door. This retreat and resistance is a common defense mechanism employed to protect one's sense of self (Watt, 2007b).

We offer four strategies for helping learners move through a difficult conversation. First, recognize resistance and retreat to prevent a conversation from spiraling out of control and beyond an effective educational intervention. Second, offer space for emotions and feelings to be identified and expressed. This is consistent with Palmer's (1993b) ideas about allowing for the whole person to be attended to, both intellectually and affectively. Third, use the person's cognitive-structural meaning making to role-model a response that is slightly more complex than the person's initial response. This strategy is commonly advocated by cognitive-structural developmental theorists to promote gains in cognitive complexity (for example, King and

Kitchener, 1994). Fourth, seek opportunities for the person to practice using the more cognitively complex and non-defensive response. Also, follow those experiences with reflection and processing to help deepen and solidify the new level of complexity and moral maturity. Through these methods, normal reactions to difficult conversations can be used to spur further moral maturity and strengthen the relationship between learner and moral mentor.

Learning brings with it responsibilities for active engagement. It is particularly important that moral learners build the capacity for handling discomfort, cultivating awareness, and developing the skills necessary to participating in challenging conversations. Nevertheless, this is only half of the learning relationship, and those serving as mentors also have unique responsibilities. We explore the role of the moral mentor next.

Role of the Mentor

The role of a moral mentor is grounded in a relationship with students. In relationships, student affairs educators or faculty members must be willing to "live out loud"—to be authentic, genuine, and evaluative without being viewed as judgmental when discussing dilemmas and decisions. At the same time, they must discern the appropriate boundaries for themselves and the students. They give testimony to the fact that the skills and understanding of moral choices are lifelong and evolving. Next we explore the literature that identifies the characteristics of moral mentors, particularly Markham's work on the morally serious person (MSP; 2007), Colby and Damon's study of moral exemplars (1992), and an exploration of ethical elders by Liddell, Cooper, Healy, and Stewart (2010).

The Morally Serious Person. Markham (2007) writes from the discipline of theology; however, the intent of his language would be familiar to student affairs professionals. He references the importance of reflection in being a morally serious person and claims that our actions spring from the ethic of care. He differentiates between behavior and thought that is constructive, not destructive, modeling the principle of "do no harm." A morally serious person "creates the disposition that appreciates the moment and prepares one to cope with the inevitable ambiguity, confusion, and sadness that all lives encounter at certain points and to different degrees of intensity" (p. 182). He goes on to discuss the seven features that distinguish a morally serious person, features that we conclude align well with the beliefs and values of student affairs practice and research.

Responsible citizenship reflects our responsibility to contribute to the community; to support, sustain, and expand the networks of support that define and make communities work. Intolerance toward discrimination reflects the need to respect all people and the principle of equality for all. Further, it requires constant reevaluation of our actions and our beliefs to ensure that we continue to examine how we live this feature. The obligation to be empirically informed is essential for the MSP to make evidence-based decisions. In the end, this feature permits us to understand the perspective of others. Disciplined reflection on the cultivation of virtue reminds us that an MSP must deliberately develop the habits and perspectives to be morally serious. Consciousness of our sociological conditioning requires that we understand consciously the culture we live in and

understand the importance of the place, language, activities, and other artifacts of that culture. Further, we need to understand that the culture is shaped by the community; in turn, the community creates the context in which we make decisions about how we live and act. An ordered interior life reminds us that it is about our thoughts as well as our actions. Thus, it is critical for the MSP to be disciplined in the care of his or her inner life. Commitment to moral conversation is a commitment to an examined life through relationship with self and others as a lifelong process. We have an obligation to continuously search for a wide range of perspectives, and this search is developed through conversation.

Although written from the perspective of a theologian, the seven features reflect principles that are familiar to student affairs professionals in their work with students. “The whole concept of the Morally Serious Person is supposed to provide the moral boundaries within which a million different lives could be lived” (Markham, 2007, p. 194).

Moral Exemplars. In Colby and Damon’s (1992) study of moral exemplars in various contexts of American life, several characteristics emerged as common. Exemplars demonstrated courage and certainty in the risks and sacrifices they took. Their courage was grounded in their certainty about their moral principles, even when faced with personal hardships. This courage led to an “unhesitating will to act” (p. 70), and exemplars felt little or no sense of loss or suffering about what they had to risk or give up to live up to their principles. A second set of characteristics that emerged for most in the study was their positivity and hopefulness—a belief in the unseen change and the manifestation of their commitments. Exemplars also demonstrated a tendency toward a balance of lasting commitment and sustained capacity for change with self-examination. The self-evaluation and reexamination was evident in many in the study.

For the moral exemplars in their study, moral commitments developed over the span of their lifetimes, with influences coming from those closely connected to the individual. Although they demonstrated an unwavering commitment to core values (frequently identified as honesty, justice, charity, and harmony), they remained open-minded and willing to learn from others, even those with whom they may disagree.

Ethical Elders. In their exploration of the role of ethical elders on campus, Liddell, Cooper, Healy, and Stewart (2010) identify strategies for successful moral mentoring, advising readers to consider these strategies as a continuum of context from the personal to the institutional. To know yourself is the first step in being an ethical elder; that is, to be self-aware and to engage in the habit of reflection—and then to help students know themselves. To know others requires that we seek out and understand others’ points of view. Coaching for growth requires that we take the time to engage in a developmental conversation with students; the outcome is not that the student is compelled by the elder’s position but that the student develops a position congruent with his or her knowledge of self. Balancing individual and community needs asks the elder to consider both the student and the community in making a decision, taking action, or facilitating the decisions of others, since respecting and valuing the community is as critical as respecting the individual. Finally, ethical elders must know their institution and be engaged in it in order to ensure that the climate and culture permit the consideration of ethical issues.

Liddell, Cooper, Healy, and Stewart (2010) go on to claim that "a necessary condition for a learner working through cognitive dissonance is trust—trust that encourages taking risks, sharing perspectives, and reflecting on deeply held beliefs" (p. 13). This trust is cultivated by patience, consistency, kindness, and confidence in the learner. Doing and being what we desire for students is a necessary beginning if we are to serve as moral mentors.

Everyday Habits for Moral Coaching

Although we often talk of models, rubrics, and inspiring ways of thinking about moral mentoring, our impact on students comes in the context of daily life. In this way, it is our everyday habits demonstrated through the example of our behavior that provide guidance to students. In every field of endeavor, there are rules, procedures, and other forms that are learned but that become effective only with practice. In schools and on campuses, we practice fire and emergency drills; we expect that this practice creates a kind of performance memory that will take over in a crisis and guide our actions in reaching safety. Markham (2007) observed, "The irony of a deeply unreflective life is that it is an unappreciated life" (p. 183). Moral habits developed through reflection and internalized through practice become a part of who we are and allow us to achieve moral congruence even when our emotions might otherwise overwhelm us.

Kidder employs the term "Ethical Fitness" in furthering this analogy (1995). In Kidder's explanation, ethical fitness is akin to physical fitness: "You reach it by giving a little effort each day . . . and, without even noticing it you're in shape" and ready for "action" (pp. 58–59). As he points out, to maintain such fitness, you must consistently exercise over time, or your ethical muscles simply lose the strength and the memory necessary to perform vital tasks. As moral mentors, we wish to develop and exercise our own moral habits and model these for our students.

The first stage of such development must be awareness of what values we wish to reflect in our everyday actions and then to constantly reinforce them in practice. Obviously, if we seek to influence wise and ethical choices among our students and colleagues in the face of moral dilemmas—moral challenges that have no clear and absolute answers and that test our value set—we must first understand and practice our own form of moral habit building and the principles on which it is based.

The moral compass is a metaphor for how we understand our moral true north. Based on consciously developed beliefs, values, and principles that we hold personally and professionally, in practice this compass should guide our actions as persons of integrity. Important to the use of a moral compass is Rest's (1986) sense of moral sensitivity and moral judgment: We must be alert to dilemmas and committed to careful judgment as we seek to take the moral course of action. How do we assist our students in doing the same?

The balancing of strengths and weaknesses is a critical part of our daily practice and defines how well we perform as moral actors and mentors. But a balanced response to the moral challenges of our environment, tempering bias with objective knowledge and founded on a core of moral principles, leads to a successful moral development practice. Such development informs us as to when and on what moral basis to take a stand and when or if to alter such stands in order to

meet new dilemmas. From this balance come opportunities for continued moral development throughout our life journey.

These are foundational concepts in the journey of a moral mentor. To build on this foundation, we must develop tools and abilities that will aid in moral mentoring with our students. These abilities are sometimes called helping skills, but whatever we call them, they are essential to the intentional practice of the moral mentor. First among these is openness: the ability to perceive the role of the "other" and to have empathy for where that individual stands. It is sharply different from sympathy, which is a more emotional response. It is a conscious effort to maintain an openness of mind without premature judgment. We find empathy, in part, by listening with discernment for the stories of others—without reaching premature judgments or conclusions about the best course of action or, in the case of the moral mentor, without offering guidance before we fully understand the story and moral dilemma before us.

As a mentor, our first obligation is not to offer an answer for the student but to offer the student questions by engaging in thoughtful dialogue and by our own example. It is imperative that we recognize the relevant morally complex dilemmas inherent in choices and decisions. We must be open to the range of possible solutions, the costs or benefits to ourselves and to others, and evaluate possible solutions in light of our moral understanding of these choices. We then choose to act or advise in light of these considerations without regard to our own benefit. Although consequences and our fear of them are reasonable concerns in choosing moral action, we must realize that all actions have consequences and that some, as with moral choices, will be more or less desirable in given situations.

In choosing among alternatives, the moral mentor acknowledges the expectations of others for certain outcomes. We may or may not be able to satisfy these expectations, but our awareness of them is an important component in evaluating the best dilemma resolution. This point leads us to a final moral habit—the ability to "break set," or to judge, which expectations, which rules, do not meet the needs of this dilemma and must therefore be sacrificed in order to reach satisfactory resolution. Kitchener's discussion (1985) of defined moral rules as opposed to the ethical principles of "respecting autonomy, doing no harm, benefiting others and being just" (p. 19) makes this case succinctly: On occasion, specific rules may conflict with one another while principles offer less specificity and a broader range of moral thinking about larger aims. Our choices, our mentoring, are then informed by what Gustafson (1981) has called "informed intuition":

> The final discernment is an informed intuition; it is not the conclusion of a formally logical argument, a strict deduction from a single moral principle, or an absolutely certain result from the exercises of human "reason" alone. There is a final moment of perception that sees the parts in relation to a whole, expresses sensibilities as well as reasoning, and is made in the conditions of human finitude. In complex circumstances, it is not without risk [p. 338].

Everyday moral habits come largely from the foundations, tools, and abilities we discussed. But it is the combination of these into an informed intuition that enables student affairs professionals to be sensitive to moral dilemmas facing themselves and their students. Referring once again to Rest (1986), this sensitivity and judgment lead to the next stages of moral mentoring, motivation, and action. Our willingness to practice those ideals that we espouse, to bring our moral "talk" to actions, is the final distinguishing mark of a moral mentor.

Conclusion

Student affairs professionals have the opportunity to serve as moral mentors for their students. Doing this requires that we understand that one of the fundamental purposes in a college education is for students to find their purpose in life. We argue that perhaps our most sacred duty is to engage in the meaning-making process with students. When called to guide students in this important quest, we are asked to show up with authenticity with students, because the process of discovering purpose comes in the relationship between the mentor and the student. These noble principles need to be lived every day.

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