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Faculty and Student Perceptions of a Physical Therapy Academic Mentoring Program

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: Mentoring is a process and a relationship between a novice and an expert that fosters intellectual, personal and professional growth. The purposes of this article are to describe: 1) the structured academic component of a comprehensive mentoring program for students in a physical therapy program; and 2) the perceptions of faculty and students regarding this academic mentoring program. **Method:** Faculty and students completed electronic questionnaires developed specifically for each group. **Results:** Return rate was 54.50% (N=286) for students and 100% (N=18) for faculty. Overall, student positive response rates regarding the effect of the mentoring program on educational experiences, value of the program and communication with faculty mentor all exceeded 90.00%. Faculty responses revealed 88.89% agreed their mentees benefited from meeting with them regarding academic issues, 94.12% believed the mentoring program was valuable, and 82.35% thought the program was worth the time spent participating in it. **Conclusion:** Faculty mentors and student mentees perceived that students benefited from academic mentoring and that the mentoring program was valuable and worth the time spent participating in it. Other academic units may use this process as a basis for critical dialogue for developing the desired academic mentoring system for that particular academic unit.

INTRODUCTION

Mentoring has been described as a process and a relationship between a novice and an expert in a particular field that fosters intellectual, personal, and professional growth.¹⁻⁷ Kinsey defined mentorship as a long-term, close, personal, and guiding relationship.⁸ By its nature, the mentoring relationship should be dynamic and nurturing and should develop over time.⁹ Within the academic setting, mentoring assists student adjustment to college life both socially and academically.¹⁰⁻¹² The one-on-one mentoring relationship is critical, particularly in academic settings with large class sizes where individual faculty/student interactions may be depersonalized and limited due to time constraints.⁷ However, a one-on-one mentoring relationship can be a burden on faculty members as it may be time intensive, thereby competing with other responsibilities.¹³

The Program in Physical Therapy at Saint Louis University, a private Jesuit University, is a freshman-admit program with a six-year curriculum divided into a pre-professional phase (freshman, sophomore, junior) that encompasses undergraduate prerequisite courses and a professional phase (senior, professional year I, and professional year II) that encompasses the physical therapy professional courses. Faculty members begin mentoring students in the freshman year, which affords faculty members the opportunity to engage students early in their personal/professional development. Mentoring continues for the duration of the curriculum with every effort made to keep the same mentor/mentee match throughout. Our mentoring program emphasizes academic and personal/professional development of the student rather than advising on curricular choices. Professional academic advisors assume the curricular advising role at Saint Louis University.

Full-time faculty members who have been at the University for at least one year are assigned student mentees. While no formal mentor training is required, informal mentor training among faculty occurs frequently. The number of mentees assigned varies based on faculty workload and is determined by the Program Chair in collaboration with individual faculty members. Traditionally, the number of mentees assigned to an individual faculty ranges from ten to fifty. The average ratio of mentees to faculty member in 2011 was 29:1.

The goals of the comprehensive structured mentoring program are to 1) facilitate academic excellence, 2) facilitate development of personal and professional characteristics and values deemed important to the profession and Jesuit education, 3) provide a mechanism to ease transition from high school to college, 4) create a tracking mechanism that ensures the student has received academic and/ or personal/professional guidance from the faculty, 5) enhance professional socialization, 6) facilitate student retention, and 7) assist the student to become a reflective practitioner.

The academic mentoring program has existed for more than twenty years, yet no formal assessment of faculty or student perceptions of the program has been performed. Although our comprehensive mentoring program addresses professional behavior and academic performance, the purposes of this article are to describe 1) the structured academic component of a comprehensive mentoring program developed under the auspices of the Student Affairs Committee, Program in Physical Therapy, at Saint Louis University, and 2) the perceptions of faculty and students regarding this academic mentoring program.

Academic Mentoring Program

The Student Affairs Committee enhanced the existing academic mentoring program approximately five years ago. The purpose was to improve documentation of mentor/mentee discussions regarding academic performance, and to ensure that students with performances below expectations were not overlooked. This documentation provided evidence that interventions to support student success were attempted. The Student Affairs Committee developed processes and forms necessary to implement timely and efficient tracking methods for student academic performance.

Instructors in selected pre-professional phase science courses and all professional phase courses notify a designated administrative assistant regarding students who score less than 75% (C grade) on a written exam. The administrative assistant initiates an Academic Mentoring Form (Appendix A), posts it on a secure web server, and notifies mentors that a Form has been posted for their mentee. The mentor has several options: 1) decide no contact with the mentee is necessary based on a) the mentee's previous satisfactory academic performance, or b) the mentor has met numerous times with the mentee and has no further suggestions; 2) contact the mentee via email or phone call; or 3) schedule a meeting to discuss the student's performance. The mentor documents the chosen action using the Academic Mentoring Form.

If the mentor chooses to meet with the student, discussions can involve multiple topics including but not limited to 1) student perceptions of the cause(s) of the test grade; 2) student study habits; 3) mentor recommendations e.g. meeting with the professor, seeking tutoring; 4) student's response(s) to the recommendations; 5) follow-up plan. The mentor can request that the student sign the Academic Mentoring Form which is subsequently placed in the student's file. All Forms are destroyed upon student graduation.

METHOD

Questionnaire

In order to assess faculty and students' perceptions of the comprehensive mentoring program, the Student Affairs Committee developed a faculty questionnaire and a student questionnaire. A 4-point Likert-type scale was used that included strongly disagree, disagree, agree and strongly agree. A not applicable choice was provided and spaces for comments were included. Face and content validity were established via a panel of experts in health care education and student focus groups. Construct validity was achieved through careful consideration of the current literature related to academic mentoring programs in the health sciences. The Institutional Review Board at Saint Louis University approved the study.

Participants

The questionnaires were administered electronically to 18 faculty members and 524 physical therapist students. A reminder to complete the questionnaire was sent to both faculty and student via email one week after the initial distribution. Return of the questionnaire indicated consent of the participants.

Results

Return rate was 54.5% (N=286) for students and 100% (N=18) for faculty. Response rates in the tables vary since not all respondents answered every question or chose not applicable. There was minimal difference in the response rate between the Pre-professional Phase cohort (53.82%) and the Professional Phase cohort (55.85%) (Table 1). For purposes of data analysis, the response categories were collapsed into agree or disagree. Overall student positive response rates regarding the effect of the mentoring program on educational experiences, value of the program, and communication with faculty mentor all exceeded 90.00% (Table 2).

Table 1. Overall Questionnaire Response by Class

Academic Year	Percent of Total Respondents (N=286)	Response Rate
Freshman (N=108)	20.98% (N=60)	55.55% (60/108)
Sophomore (N=111)	19.93% (N=57)	51.35% (57/111)
Junior (N=82)	15.73% (N=45)	54.88% (45/82)
Senior (N=76)	17.13% (N=49)	64.47% (49/76)
Professional Year I (N=79)	14.68% (N=42)	53.16% (42/79)
Professional Year II (N=67)	11.54% (N=33)	49.25% (33/67)

Table 2. Student Overall Ratings of Mentoring Program

Item	Overall Strongly Agree/ Agree Response	Pre-Professional Phase Strongly Agree/ Agree Response	Professional Phase Strongly Agree/ Agree Response
1. I believe the mentoring program helps me make the most of my educational experiences.	91.64% (252/275)	93.51% (144/154)	89.26% (108/121)
2. I believe the mentoring program is valuable.	94.46% (256/271)	94.00% (141/150)	95.04% (115/121)
3. I communicate with my faculty mentor when necessary.	96.31% (261/271)	97.33% (146/150)	95.04% (115/121)

Of the 286 students who responded to the questionnaire, 32.52% (N= 93) indicated they were contacted by their mentor regarding poor academic performance. Our analysis only includes questions related to the perceptions of students and faculty members regarding the academic mentoring component of our comprehensive mentoring program (Appendix B). Of these, 93 students, over 80.00%, appreciated contact from their mentor, perceived they benefited from the contact, and perceived the mentoring process as worth the time spent participating in it. Over 80% stated that their mentor referred them to academic resources e.g., tutoring, disabilities services, writing center (Table 3).

Table 3. Perceptions of Students Contacted by their Mentor Regarding Academic Issues

Item	Overall Positive Responses	Pre-Professional Phase Positive Responses	Professional Phase Positive Responses
1. I appreciated contact from my mentor	91.40% (85/93)	93.10% (27/29)	90.63% (58/64)
2. I benefited from the contact from my mentor.	82.80% (77/93)	89.66% (26/29)	79.69% (51/64)
3. My mentor referred me to academic resources.	80.43% (74/92)	86.21% (25/29)	77.78% (49/63)
4. The academic mentoring process is worth the time spent participating in it.	89.25% (83/93)	86.21% (25/29)	90.63% (58/64)

Faculty responses indicated that 88.89% agreed that their mentees benefited from meeting with them regarding academic issues. The majority of faculty members believed the mentoring program was valuable (94.12%), and the program was worth the time they spent participating in it (82.35%). Most faculty members thought their mentees believed the mentoring program was valuable (Table 4).

Table 4. Faculty Perceptions of Mentor Contact Regarding Academic Issues

Item	Overall Positive Responses
1. I think my mentees benefited from meeting with me regarding academic issues.	88.89% (16/18)
2. The mentoring program [overall] is valuable.	94.12% (16/17)
3. The mentoring program [overall] is worth the time I spend participating in it.	82.35% (14/17)
4. I think my mentees believe the mentoring program is valuable.	88.23% (15/17)

DISCUSSION

One of roles of the faculty mentor is to establish a relationship with the mentee that enhances the student's academic success.¹⁴ Our results support that students overwhelmingly perceived that they benefited academically from contact with their faculty mentor. One student wrote, "I went through some hard academic times with my second mentor, and she was extremely helpful in guiding me in the right direction. This includes valuable insight into material and reviewing better study tactics to succeed. I owe my success in that semester to her help."

Fruith and Wary-Lake suggested that college teacher-mentors who provide educational support play an important role in college success.¹⁵ Usmani et al indicated 59% of mentors in a medical school mentoring program reported good academic improvement in their mentees.¹⁶ Our results support that both students and faculty perceive that students benefited from meeting with their faculty mentors regarding academic issues. A student commented, "When I was having a tough time last semester, my faculty mentor met with me, comforted me, helped me to find the resources, and pushed me to work to the best of my ability to succeed. As simple as it sounds, she told me that she had faith in me and that meant the world to me. Knowing that she wanted me to succeed was such a nice and comforting feel!" Another student wrote, "It is also nice to have that check there when you are struggling in a course. It is embarrassing to do poorly, but it is nice to know that someone there is cheering for you to do well."

Our results support that physical therapy faculty and students in our program perceived the academic mentoring program to be beneficial and worth the time they spent participating in it. This was consistent across the pre-professional and professional phases of the curriculum (Tables 2 and 3). Mentees perceived their mentors helped them flourish in the challenging physical therapy curriculum by providing emotional and moral support in addition to academic support. A student remarked, "It's nice to meet and talk one-on-one with someone within the department on a regular basis. They know what is going, on and I was always given great advice and feedback. I especially owe a big thanks to my mentor for helping me through a rough patch of my academic career and for transitioning me into college academics." Another student commented, "The people are great and they really care about how you are doing personally and academically."

Documentation of academic support is a challenge for some faculty mentors. One faculty member wrote, "I am challenged to 'keep up with the paperwork'. While I know its value, I prefer to spend my time talking with the students and find the paperwork necessary to complete too time consuming."

Based on statistics related to the number of students dismissed due to academic issues between the years 2006 and 2012, retention rate in the pre-professional phase of the program ranged from 97.5% to 99.6 %, and retention rate in the professional phase ranged from 98.6% to 100%. Between the years 2006 and 2012, the National Board pass rate ranged from 96.05% to 100.00%. While student feedback supports the value of the academic mentoring program, we do not believe we can substantiate a direct cause and effect relationship between academic mentoring and performance because issues regarding academic performance are multi-dimensional.

CONCLUSION

We have described our mentoring program with emphasis on the academic component of this program. Faculty mentors and student mentees perceive that students benefit from academic mentoring and that the mentoring program is valuable and worth the time spent participating in it. This article describes one academic unit with a unique program structure and the results may not be generalizable to other health professional programs. We suggest that the process and documents developed by the Program in Physical Therapy may be used as a basis for critical dialogue within other academic units for the purpose of determining the desired academic mentoring system for that particular academic entity. We are currently in the process of assessing the perceptions of faculty and students regarding the professional behavior component of our mentoring program.

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Appendix A
SAINT LOUIS UNIVERSITY
Doisy College of Health Sciences
Program in Physical Therapy
ACADEMIC MENTORING FORM

Student's Name:

Banner ID: _____ **Class of** _____

Student's Mentor:

Year: Freshman Sophomore Junior Senior PY I PY II

Previous Semester: GPA _____ **Cumulative Undergraduate GPA** _____ **Cumulative Prof. Phase GPA** _____

Academic Issue:

1) **Course Grade:** _____ **Course Name** _____ midterm
 2) **Individual Test Grade:** _____ **Course Name** _____ **Grade:** _____ D % _____ F % _____
Test History: Course Name _____ **Exam 1** _____ **Exam 2** _____ **Exam 3** _____ **Exam 4** _____ **Exam 5** _____

Faculty Member Completing Form Mentor Course Coordinator Instructor

Student Contact: Not Needed Telephone E-mail In Person

Contact Date _____ **Meeting Date** _____

GENERIC ABILITIES:

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Responsibility and Professionalism | <input type="checkbox"/> Communication and Interpersonal Skills |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Critical Thinking and Problem Solving | <input type="checkbox"/> Effective Use of Time/Resources |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Commitment to Learning and | <input type="checkbox"/> Stress Management |

Use of Constructive Feedback

Comments:

Student's Response:

- Working too much
- Under-prepared
- Personal problems
- Studied wrong material
- Test anxiety
- Academic load too heavy
- Health concerns
- Electronic diversions
- Other

Clarification of Study Habits:

- alone only
- group only
- alone, then with group
- library/room
- currently receiving tutoring
- approximate #/hours per week
- paced study
- last minute study

Comments:

Recommendations:

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Obtain tutoring: | <input type="checkbox"/> student success center |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Private | <input type="checkbox"/> Career counseling |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Change study strategies | <input type="checkbox"/> Personal counseling |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Meet with course coordinator or specific instructor | <input type="checkbox"/> Medical referral |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Decrease number of work hours | <input type="checkbox"/> Special testing |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Increase preparation | |

Comments:

Summary:

- Student was informed of current academic standing.
- Student does not agree to recommendations.
- Student agrees to some of recommendations.
- Student agrees to all recommendations.
- Student states they understand what is necessary to remain in the program.

Comments:

Follow-up:

- | | | |
|---|-------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Student to contact mentor | <input type="checkbox"/> call | <input type="checkbox"/> e-mail |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Instructor/Mentor to contact student | <input type="checkbox"/> call | <input type="checkbox"/> e-mail |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Meeting scheduled for | | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Meeting not needed at present time | | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other: | | |

Faculty Signature _____ Date: _____
Student Signature (Request optional) _____ Date: _____