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Mentorship in Higher Education: The Keys to Unlocking Meaningful Mentoring Relationships

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Abstract

Although mentorship in business settings is typical, its emergence as a tool in education started only recently. Consequently, this new opportunity has initiated a discussion about mentorship and its principal elements in an academic context. Aspects like the mentor profile, the relationship built between mentors and mentees, and the scope of mentorship have been constantly explored and debated by researchers in this field. All contributions are invaluable; however, the information on what the authors consider the fundamental elements of mentorship is scattered throughout many sources. This is precisely what we are attempting to do in this article; by presenting insights from a literary review and investigating the principal aspects of a successful mentorship program in Higher Education, we are answering the most fundamental mentorship-related questions – what mentorship involves; what the qualities of the ideal mentor are; what the student-mentor interaction entails; what the role of the mentor is; and what activities this interaction should include – in a single, well-organized source.

Keywords: Mentor, Mentoring, Student Mentoring, Mentoring in Higher Education, Peer-to-Peer Mentoring, Higher Education.

1. Introduction

Mentorship in the corporate world may have had somewhat of a trajectory thanks to the competitive advantage it presents. Still, the same may not be said for its adoption in academic settings. During the 90s, Jadwick (1997, pp. 53-62) acknowledged that the number of studies on the mentor-protégé relationship in Higher Education was minimal; studies both on matched and unmatched mentor-protégé relationships had just started to develop in the US in Higher Education institutions. According to Rhodes (2008, p. 124), until 2008, only 1% of the articles

discussed college students' mentoring. However, the arrival of the 21st Century would see an emergence of mentorship initiatives in Higher Education.

To better understand the status of mentorship in Higher Education as a subject of global academic inquiry, the authors searched Gale Academic OneFile and ResearchGate using the keywords “university” + “mentoring” + “program”. Gale Academic OneFile produced 233 results. ResearchGate yielded 100 articles related to mentoring in diverse fields (Business, Criminal Justice, Medical, Nursing) and regions (Africa, Asia, North America, South America, and Europe). We found that research papers were typically country- or industry-specific and rarely presented global characteristics or conclusions that Higher Education practitioners could use. Digging deeper into the subject of mentorship, we further discovered that essential information about the critical elements of mentorship was scattered among different sources. As mentoring practitioners, we identified a lack of a centralised source of the key elements of mentorship, which anyone interested in learning more or launching such a program would find helpful.

Therefore, this paper aims to compile and raise the visibility of mentorship's essential aspects and processes in Higher Education. This article consists of three sections; after exploring the context and current dialogue around the origins and concept of mentorship, we continue with addressing the mentor role and profile, the mentor-student interaction, and ultimately, the scope of mentorship, before concluding with a summary of research findings as well as considerations for educators who are interested in including such a program in the academic curriculum.

2. Current Context

Today, based on the literature reviewed, mentoring initiatives conceptualised and mentoring programs designed are part of an effort to cultivate essential skills, abilities, and mindset for the 21st century, leveraging technology and the power of networks to help students become familiar with a new environment and, ultimately, to provide them with frameworks and techniques to help them navigate a complex professional and academic landscape.

Mentorship in Higher Education has been increasingly gaining popularity. In recent years, it has come to the spotlight of academic research because, according to Noakes et al. (as cited in Raven, 2015, p. 281), “mentoring relationships are beneficial to both mentors and their mentees”. At the same time, it is an affordable tool for “recruiting, retaining, and developing students through, within, and beyond the academic lifecycle” (Ball & Hennessy, 2020, p. 19), contributing substantially to the latter's positive student experience.

Perhaps the most apparent conclusion derived from the literature review is that even though researchers have described several tasks undertaken by mentors, there is no commonly accepted definition of the term “mentorship” – an opinion with which Anderson & Shannon (1998, p. 39) agree with. In this article, we propose the adoption of the definition given by Lester and Johnson (1981, p. 50-51): “mentoring is a one-to-one learning relationship between an older person and a less experienced person (throughout this article, we will use the term “mentee”, though “protégé” has also been recorded in the literature we reviewed) based on a modeling of behavior and extended dialogue between them”. George & Mampilly (2012, p. 144) elaborate further on this definition, adding that it can be defined “as the systematic, continuous, graduated and progressive interactions [...] over and above the requisite academic exchanges”.

Empirical evidence shows that mentoring positively impacts the mentees' academic performance (Fox, Stevenson, 2006, as cited in Nimante & Baranova, p. 121). Though mentoring is fundamentally intended for the mentees, it can assist the development of the mentor, too (Caruso, 1996, as cited in George & Mampilly, 2012, p. 137), as both parties benefit greatly from their involvement in the program. During this interaction, the mentor can achieve personal growth, and the mentee receives advice, support, and knowledge from the mentor (Falchikov, 2001, as cited in Colvin & Ashman, 2020, p. 56). According to Heirdsfield et al. (as cited in Nimante & Baranova, 2019, p. 125), mentors can master leadership skills, while mentees can benefit from socioemotional support. Therefore, Burell et al. (2001, p. 25) were correct in asserting that a mentorship program should be participant-specific and designed to match both parties' needs, interests, and objectives.

3. Mentor Profile & Roles

Alleman (as cited in George & Mampilly, 2012, p. 137) defines a mentor as “a person with greater rank, experience and/or expertise who teaches, counsels, inspires, guides and helps another person to develop both personally and professionally”. For successful mentoring, it is crucial that the mentee perceive the mentor to be a “competent, reliable advisor” and that the relationship that is developed between the two parties is “personal and trusting” (Campbell & Campbell, 1997; Crisp & Cruz, 2009, as cited in Sandner, 2015, p. 228). Such a relationship requires that the mentor provide information to the mentee that the latter would otherwise not obtain or ignore (Sandner, 2015, p. 228).

3.1. Mentor Profiles

Other skills that emerged from the literature review were organisation, knowledge, attitude, and willingness to instill these qualities in the mentees. In particular, according to Burrell et al. (2001, p. 25), mentors need to be:

1. Knowledgeable. Though they do not need to know everything, they should know more than the mentees.
2. Credible. They should have “successful academic and behavioural experiences” witnessed by the mentees. Credibility is an essential trait in the mentor’s personality, as evidenced in the literature reviewed (Colvin & Ashman, 2020, p. 55). Students may not even reach out to a mentor if they do not consider them credible and helpful (Packard, 2003, as cited in Colvin & Ashman, 2020, p. 55). Collier (2017, p. 14) agrees that this relationship can get complicated if questions of expertise, legitimacy, and credibility arise. In the research conducted by Colvin and Ashman (2020, pp. 62-63), students associated credibility mainly with trust, which relates to ideas such as “belief in the mentor” and “the honesty of the mentor”, and experience, which referred to “experience, knowledge, and applicable credentials”. In summary, the researchers concluded that, in an academic setting, students often defined the credibility of a mentor as “being trustworthy and having experience” (Collier, 2017, p. 14).
3. Supportive. They should be able to “encourage, use praise, and give constructive criticism” by providing specific and formative feedback to the mentees.
4. Facilitatory. They should act as a “guide or coach, not a dictator”; mentees should be able to develop their own experiences while being guided.

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5. Available. They should be “accessible to mentees”; spending time together is vital for fostering this relationship.
 6. Empathetic. They should be able to “identify and understand the mentee’s situation, feelings, and motives”; both parties share the experience of being students in the same environment. Therefore, mentors should be able to relate to the mentee’s challenges and fears and empathise with them.

3.2. Mentor Roles

The mentor roles have been the subject of discussion by many authors. As coaches, mentors help develop their mentees’ skills, and as counsellors, they provide support and help strengthen their mentees’ self-confidence. Mentors can support their mentees through “listening, providing structure, expressing positive expectations, serving as advocates, sharing with their protégé and making it special” (George & Mampilly, 2012, p. 140). Identifying these roles can help both the mentor and the mentee manage their expectations and understand the impact they have on this relationship, as well as the way “the legitimacy and credibility of the mentor is developed by mentors and seen by mentees” (Colvin & Ashman, 2020, p. 57).

Collier (2017, p.14) has determined five specific roles that peer mentors play, which we believe are fit to be included in this study:

1. Connecting link. Mentors help mentees connect to activities and resources on campus and understand the academic environment and campus in general.
2. Peer leader. Leadership has been recognised as a necessary quality for a mentor to have. Leadership can be expressed as “setting an example, sharing personal stories, leading activities, being inspiring, and being an overall leader”.
3. Learning coach. Learning coach activities refer to “teaching learning techniques and strategies, challenging students, explaining concepts, and relating lessons to students”.
4. Student advocate. The student advocate role consists of “helping, explaining things, being a go-between, and answering questions as being a student advocate”.
5. Trusted friend. Being a trusted friend involves “caring about students, relating to them, being there to help, listen, give advice, and in general being trustworthy”.

Nachimuthu (as cited in George & Mampilly, 2012, p. 137) shares a similar opinion; according to his study, a mentor can act as a counsellor, advisor, consultant, tutor, teacher, and guru.

Cohen (1995, pp. 29-31) also studied the aspects of the mentor role. In his Principles of Adult Mentoring Scale (PAMS), he evaluated the six behavioural facets of a mentor’s role: relationship emphasis, information emphasis, facilitative focus, confrontive focus, mentor model, and student vision:

1. Relationship emphasis refers to “creating a climate of trust that allows mentees to share and reflect upon their personal experiences honestly”;
2. Information emphasis refers to “directly requesting information and offering specific suggestions to mentees”;
3. Facilitative focus refers to “guiding mentees through a review and exploration of their interests, abilities, ideas and beliefs”;

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4. Confronting focus refers to “challenging mentee’s explanations for or avoidance of decisions and actions”;
 5. Mentor model refers to “sharing life experiences as a role model to mentees to enrich and personalize the relationship”; and
 6. Student vision refers to “stimulating mentees’ critical thinking regarding envisioning their own future and developing their personal and professional potential”.

Colvin & Ashman (2020, p. 64) mention another aspect of the mentor role, setting an example, which refers to their ability to act as an example for the mentee.

Despite the benefits and rewards reported above for both parties, mentoring also comes with challenges. Therefore, as highlighted by Terrion & Leonard (2007, pp. 152-154), there are some prerequisites for successful mentoring, such as the ability and willingness to commit time, the same university experience, and the academic achievement of the mentor.

In regards to the ideal age gap, it has been suggested that the mentor should be eight to 15 years older; otherwise, the relationship could become “peer like” (Levinson et al., 1978, as cited in George & Mampilly, 2012, p. 139), opinion with which Gehrke (1988, p. 43) also agrees.

3.3. Scope of Mentorship

Gehrke (1988, p. 43) considers the mentor-mentee relationship as a “unique opportunity for personal growth”, while Anderson & Shannon (1988, p. 38) see mentorship through a set of five individual but integral processes:

1. An intentional process. The mentor fulfils their responsibilities intentionally.
2. A nurturing process. The mentee’s personal growth and development are cultivated and facilitated by the mentor.
3. An insightful process. The mentee learns from and applies the experience of the mentor.
4. A *protégéctive* and supportive process. The mentor supports and advises the mentee.
5. A role modelling process. The mentor serves as a standard of behaviour for the mentee to emulate and follow.

Ball & Hennessy (2020, pp. 22-23) have defined four core categories in which mentoring can be subdivided:

1. Aspirational mentoring refers to “converting” students, in other words, influencing their decision to accept a place at a university after receiving an offer and before enrolment.
2. Belonging, identity, and development, refer to mentors helping cultivate a sense of belonging to the university and the program of study among students.
3. Career planning refers to increasing the mentees’ professional skills and self-confidence through mentoring.
4. Professional contribution refers to mentors as experienced staff with the role of supporting students whilst on placements. Peiser, Ambrose, Burke and Davenport (as cited in Ball & Hennessy 2020, p. 22-23) emphasise how workplace mentors assist knowledge transfer “from the codified information presented in university to practical application”.

Alleman & Clarke (2002a, as cited in George & Mampilly, 2012, p.140) found that mentors use a set of specific multi-faceted activities, which contain items assessing nine activity categories:

1. Teaching the job
2. Counseling
3. Endorsing activities
4. Sponsoring
5. Protecting
6. Teaching organisational politics
7. Career helping
8. Challenging tasks
9. Friendship and demonstrating trust.

These activity categories can be further organised into three broader categories:

1. Guiding activities, which include “teach the job” activities, “challenging tasks”, and “teaching politics” activities, which refer to the mentor’s task of developing the mentee’s skills;
2. Helping activities, which include “career help,” “protecting”, and “sponsoring” activities; in other words, “the practical help provided by the mentor to enable career advancement and showcasing of the mentee”; and
3. Encouraging activities, which include “career counseling,” “friendship”, and “trust”, which refer to the mentor’s role in “developing the mentee’s confidence in themselves and colleagues”.

An important aspect of mentoring effectiveness is relationship quality (George & Mampilly, 2012, p. 141). According to Burrell et al. (2001, p. 25), indicators of an effective mentoring relationship are purpose, creativity, and personal investment.

The literature we reviewed has highlighted various benefits of interactions between a mentor and a mentee. When studying the benefits of peer mentoring, Sanders & Higham (2012, pp. 21-22) found that they could include the acquisition of skills related to “self-management, leadership and communication”– the latter is a skill that is also emphasised by Ylonen (2011, p. 807) and Hudson (2013, p. 780-781).

4. Conclusion

The purpose of this article was to collect and summarise the context and research around the most critical elements of mentorship according to the literature we reviewed. These are the definition of mentorship, the ideal mentor profile, and the scope of mentorship. These categories, definitions, and characteristics are helpful to bear in mind when designing mentorship programs and engaging in these types of activities as either a mentor or a mentee.

Mentorship programs generate outcomes and valuable benefits for mentees and mentors and provide ample support and space for individuals to learn from others. In the bigger picture, such programs help connect different alumni generations and create a circular model of knowledge-sharing and growth for both students and alumni, mentees and mentors. Making this

information available to colleagues in the educational space will hopefully trigger reflection about the origins and evolution of mentorship and proposals to enhance the students' learning experience while studying. In sharing these tools and methods, we hope to contribute meaningfully to the conversation and support our peers in their quest to build new disruptive models.

Although these outcomes might seem more apparent, the below the surface outcomes are perhaps even more impactful on a systems level. The unique and personal nature of the mentor-mentee relationship can be cultivated and create an impact not only in direct social interactions but also in a more comprehensive social system. By looking at the past and the evolution of these concepts, mentorship practitioners can better understand how to shape their own designs and begin to speculate on what could be enhanced to tackle the new challenges they will face in the future. Ideally, such programs should aim at helping mentors and mentees contribute to something much bigger than themselves. With this article, we hoped to have provided a look at the past to help understand how we can shape the future together.

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