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Mentoring: A natural role for learning community faculty

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Mentoring: A natural role for learning community faculty

Abstract

The purpose of this article is to highlight mentoring as an important piece of leading a learning community. The authors will share a definition of mentoring which is applicable to the learning community experience. Characteristics of mentoring will be described, including types of mentoring and mentor-mentee relationships. The authors will apply these concepts to their role as facilitators for a learning community at a teaching-centered, 4-year institution. They will reflect on mentoring in a discipline-focused learning community, share experiences, and discuss the benefits identified for both faculty and students.

Keywords

Mentoring, learning community, peer mentor

Cover Page Footnote

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Introduction

Research suggests that mentoring can help undergraduate students in a number of ways: it supports the transition and adjustment to the first year of college; fosters the development of career skills, professional skills, leadership skills; assists with academic progress and improved grades; and leads to higher levels of degree completion (Crisp, Baker, Griffin, Lunsford & Pifer, 2017; Gutiérrez, 2012). In addition, early faculty contact and mentoring can lead to enhanced mentorship interactions by the end of mentees senior year in college (Fuentes, Alvarado, Berdan, & DeAngelo, 2014). In our undergraduate social work learning community, mentoring—both formal and informal—has become central to our method of leadership and teaching. As a result of our experiences, we have realized that learning communities provide structural opportunities for mentoring and that this is an area that should be further studied and developed. In this article, we adhere to the definition of mentoring by Johnson (2016) as “a personal and reciprocal relationship in which a more experienced (usually older) faculty member acts as a guide, role model, teacher, and sponsor of a less experienced (usually younger) student or faculty member. A mentor provides the mentee with knowledge, advice, counsel, challenge, and support in the mentee’s pursuit of becoming a full member of a particular profession” (Johnson, 2016, p. 23). This mentoring can occur either inside or outside of the classroom.

Characteristics of Mentoring

Crisp et al. (2017) identify four main areas of mentoring: (1) mentoring relationships are focused on the growth and development of students and can be constructed in various forms; (2) mentoring experiences may include broad forms of support that include professional, career, and emotional support; (3) mentoring relationships are personal and reciprocal; and, (4) relative to their students, mentors have more experience, influence, or achievement within the educational environment. Learning communities provide a structural context for mentoring that can build in or draw from all four areas.

Many learning communities are initiated to help students adjust to a new environment and to focus on a major or professional identity. In learning communities developed around a major, as is the case in our program, mentoring is a valuable tool in the student’s growth because the assigned faculty have many of the resources and tools to help students succeed in the identified major. Learning communities can also be intentionally designed to ensure students’ access to their faculty mentors and thus benefit from their experiences in and wisdom about specific fields in the major. For instance, in our learning community—in which faculty teach two social work related classes and students are pre-enrolled—both mentors and their mentees are required to engage once a month in an out-of-class event, typically social in nature. This combination of formal and informal settings provides essential time to learn about an individual student’s growth and development, to provide emotional and professional support, and to build the foundations of a mentoring relationship.

Mentoring fosters relationships which may vary according to the individuals involved and the type of learning community program. These relationships may also be influenced by how mentoring is supported within program structures. Although most freshman learning communities

share commonalities in structure, each university implements its own adaptation.¹ While mentoring is not explicitly part of the basic model, it does offer a logical adaptation that is congruent with the pedagogical aims of learning communities. In our own situation, we enjoy the relationships with learning community students, prioritizing the relationships so that they ultimately benefit the student and the faculty, for instance, by working on research together and by encouraging students to become leaders for other students. One way we manage time so that the relationships blossom is by scheduling overlapping classroom and department events.

Mentoring programs can be impacted by the type of relationship between the mentor and mentee (Leidenfrost, Strassnig, Schütz, Carbon, & Schabmann, 2014). Relationships can be described as *formal*, for example, assigning faculty as mentors to students, or *informal*, such as instances in which students and faculty come together spontaneously or informally (Leidenfrost et al., 2014). Research shows greater benefits derive from informal mentoring in which the relationship develops from frequent positive interactions and shared interests (Johnson, 2016). In our program, the institutional nature of the learning community structure means that the mentoring relationship initially is formal, with delimited time frames of one to two years. For ongoing and informal relationships, the mentee and mentor must initiate activities outside of the institution's direction.

Although there is little research identifying which characteristics of mentors have the most significant impact (Crisp, et al., 2017), Eller, Lev, & Feurer (2014) describe eight themes of an effective mentoring relationship. These include (1) open communication and accessibility; (2) goals and challenges; (3) passion and inspiration; (4) caring personal relationship; (5) mutual respect and trust; (6) exchange of knowledge; (7) independence and collaboration; and (8) role modeling. In order to enhance the development of mentoring relationships, faculty members should receive training that focuses on how to nurture these characteristic themes. However, Leidenfrost et al. (2014) found that “any mentoring style is better than no mentoring at all” (p. 108). In terms of our own work, we have found the greatest benefit from sharing our passion for social work, modeling the principles and practices of the profession, and collaborating with students. Students' comments reinforce our perception that these factors motivate them to want to enter the field of social work.

Learning Communities may be an effective strategy for addressing a gap in students' access to mentoring relationships. Crisp, et al. (2017) found that mentoring can promote “social justice by supporting and equalizing academic outcomes for traditionally marginalized and underrepresented students” (p.16), but that “underrepresented groups may not have equitable access to mentoring support when compared to majority groups” (p. 17). This gap results from first generation students being underfunded and less supported as they search for models to navigate the college experience. By design, Learning Communities create structures that increase chances for underrepresented students to meet other students as well as the faculty who support them. On our campus, students from underrepresented minority groups are strongly encouraged to join a learning community. Our social work learning community has a ratio of underrepresented students that is routinely higher than the campus average, thus potentially providing these students with greater access to mentoring relationships.

Finally, evidence suggests that mentoring not only positively impacts the mentee but also the faculty member engaged in mentoring (Johnson, 2016; Leidenfrost, et al., 2014). One immediate benefit for faculty is the opportunity to identify students who can work with them on research or

¹ See defining features of Learning Communities at (<http://wacenter.evergreen.edu/new-eras/lcs/definingfeatures.html>)

other projects (Gutierrez, 2012). Other, less tangible outcomes for faculty include the ability to shape future professionals, expand their understanding of different life experiences, increase their sense of personal satisfaction or fulfillment, encourage their efforts to remain current in the field, and/or lead to development of friendships or supportive relationships (Johnson, 2016; Gutierrez, 2012). Our experiences bear this out: learning community faculty have observed that as a result of their work with students, they feel re-energized and appreciate developing a new perspective on their own work. Thus, when mentoring goes well, the institution can also benefit by having a more fulfilled faculty member and a mentee who is more likely to become a mentor and to have higher academic success (Johnson, 2016).

Applying Mentoring to the Learning Community Experience

We recognize that mentoring is a skill that needs to be fostered and promoted over time. A continuing awareness of mentoring allows members of a learning community to develop their own emphasis and values. Our experiences have shaped a learning community that focuses on four main areas of mentoring. Faculty are invested in the background and developmental needs of each student, in engaging the student in more professional and career opportunities (including making connections with resources on campus for work and/or research), in spending time one-on-one with mentees, and in sharing more about the field of social work and opportunities for growth. Student mentees have been encouraged to seek out campus organizations, have been hired to assist in research, have participated in state and national research conferences with the faculty mentors, have become peer mentors on campus, have developed into campus leaders through involvement in student organizations, and have been hired to work in the social work office. In addition, as faculty have become more aware of research about student success, they have tailored mentoring opportunities that respond to that research. Over the last three years, anecdotal evidence on our learning, shows that 28 of the 64 learning community students reached out for more informal mentoring specifically from the learning community faculty. Although 36 did not reach out directly to the learning community faculty, some may have reached out to others on campus for mentoring support because of their experience in the learning community. This is an area the faculty are continuing to examine.

Our specific learning community is only available to freshmen, who nevertheless experience the benefits of mentoring and take this into more advanced study. Students who have engaged in mentoring relationships beyond the formal structure of the learning community demonstrated initiative early on by consistently attending learning community events, building relationships with the faculty, and seeking out opportunities to work with the faculty after formally transitioning from the learning community to their sophomore year. The familiarity and relationship building that begins during the first year tends to make the transition from formal to informal mentoring less difficult to navigate.

Peer Mentoring

Developing a peer mentoring program provides additional structural means of fostering mentoring relationships. Because our institution values peer mentoring to support incoming freshman, we assign successful peer mentors to each learning community (Leidenfrost et al., 2014). In the social work learning community, a peer mentor, usually one to two academic years older, is assigned to the learning community. Faculty and peer mentors meet prior to the start of the semester to discuss goals for the learning community and to divide responsibilities. The peer

mentor is identified as a colleague, instead of a student, sharing in the responsibilities of teaching classes (as appropriate), hosting learning community events, and addressing student concerns. The peer mentor role has been the most successful when the peer mentor was a past mentee in the social work learning community and thus already familiar with the goals and practices of the learning community. The peer mentor meets with students during orientation week, plans social events, and shares advice for surviving campus life. In our experience, the peer mentor tends to provide more emotional support and advice related to campus life, whereas faculty share advice related to academic and career related issues. Peer mentors do require training and supervision by faculty or the assigned office (Leidenfrost, et al., 2014). We have had to provide extra mentorship to a peer mentor when mentee issues become too overwhelming or fall outside the boundary of the peer mentor's role. A benefit of working with peer mentors is that these relationships have tended to be more reciprocal because the peer mentor has been more likely to seek out support (educational, professional, and personal) on his/her own when needed, is excited to learn more about how to share experiences with his/her own mentees, and asks more about the professor's goals and interests. Our experiences support findings by Leidenfrost et al. (2014) who recommend a mentoring cycle of past mentees being developed into mentors in order to support the progress of the student.

Conclusion

The mentoring relationship between faculty and students has transformed our learning community. Our experiences mirror Johnson's definition (2016) of mentoring, which is most evident in how we develop personal and reciprocal relationships between faculty mentors and our mentees and in the multifaceted support built upon commonalities in our shared focus on a specific profession/major. While it is possible to develop mentoring relationships in traditional classroom spaces, we believe that the learning community has dramatically increased our ability to build these important relationships and experiences. Because we meet our students as freshmen, we can jumpstart the mentoring relationship and its potential for a deeper connection than what is typically afforded faculty in the day-to-day classroom. As we socialize with our freshmen in the learning community, accompany our mentees to diversity events on campus, co-present at national conferences, and assist in identifying graduate programs, we develop social bonds that sustain a strong sense of community for both faculty and students. Research has found that it is difficult to assess which characteristics of the mentor/mentee relationship result in success (Crisp et al., 2017), we would support future research that explores how mentoring relationships transform from formal to informal and that identifies which features facilitate that transformation. In our experience, mentoring has been an invaluable piece of the learning community experience for all involved and should be considered for all learning community leaders.

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