Empowering Students through Mentoring
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"If he [the teacher] is indeed wise he does not bid you to enter the house of his wisdom but rather leads you to the threshold of your mind" - Khalil Gibran

The word "mentoring" conjures up in my mind images of the young apprentice in a medieval blacksmith's shop. The young boy observes intently as the craftsman's strong arms raise the hammer and bring it down to strike the metal rod. Sparks fly. By the end of the day, the deafening sounds of clanging are hardly noticed. Memorable conversations take place in this dark little shop - they talk about the day's work, the clients and their families, the rising price of coal, and the workshop the boy dreams of having. Days turn into weeks, and the boy feels more and more that he is a part of the metalsmithing community - he has experienced the ups and downs of the trade, has shared his teacher's challenges and joys, and understands the meaning of hard work and trustworthiness. The craftsman finally steps away from his work. A perfect product has taken shape. He and the boy momentarily lock eyes in celebration. At the end of the apprenticeship term, both individuals emerge changed - the young man is a skilled worker with new ideas for expansion and growth. A master craftsman believes in him, and he will work to make him proud. The older man feels younger - he has connected with a bright young man brimming with energy and ideas; he has given back to his community by training a strong and enthusiastic new member. A timeless bond between generations has been forged.

Definitions of mentoring in the literature abound. Weinstein (1998) defines mentoring as a "**power-free** partnership between two individuals who desire mutual growth. One of the individuals usually has greater skills, experiences, and wisdom." In the context of student mentoring, mentors offer individual academic and personal guidance to a student. They help place a young person on the road to a productive professional journey. Mentoring interactions aim to improve the overall academic experience of the student to result in a more meaningful and coherent educational experience.

As educators, all faculty are involved in the *informal mentoring* of students by virtue of being involved in instruction and advising. Mentoring and teaching are intricately connected. Our philosophies of learning, world views and personalities inadvertently impact students' processes of learning, development of identity, and setting of academic and career goals. Our students see the world partially through our eyes. It is worth reflecting upon our influence on students, and our potential impact upon them, in order to intentionally design educational environments where they can flourish.

As AUC takes steps to set up a formal mentoring program that would allow interested undergraduate students to be paired with a faculty mentor, it is a good time to discuss the benefits of mentoring programs, and how we can position ourselves to create a program that will be instrumental in providing student support.

Much research documents the benefits of formal mentoring for undergraduate students. These include:
- Increased academic success and retention (Crisp and Cruz 2009; Terenzini, Pascarella, and Blimling 1996; Campbell and Campbell, 1997)
- Better cognitive skills such as problem-solving, and analysis (Cosgrove, 1986; Kardash, 2000)
- Development of skills that help students in the professional world such as long term planning and decision-making (Schlosser, Knox, Moskovitz, and Hill 2003; Cosgrove, 1986; Kardash, 2000)
- Social integration, feeling part of a community, ease of transition to college**,** satisfaction with educational experience (Cosgrove, 1986; Kardash, 2000)

Formal mentoring is an *institutionally-supported initiative* which allows faculty and students to develop mentoring relationships within a structure that assists them to make it most productive. Formal mentoring matches students who desire this service with a faculty member of similar interests. This may take place

based on general disciplinary interests , or similar research interests, the latter with the understanding that the faculty and student will work together on common research projects.

The student and teacher become "partners" committed to supporting the student navigate the years of study with purpose, and allowing him / her to personalize the college experience. This takes place through informal conversations and joint activities. The mentoring relationship unfolds as student needs evolve from course-related concerns to longer-term planning, goal-setting, career exploration and personal development. The mentor may coach the student to engage with their course content, to make use of relevant campus events, to seek productive social activities that will broaden their communication and personal skills, and to tap their personal talents and find areas where they can excel. Where research is involved, the student is introduced to the scholarly culture of the discipline, learning about research norms, disciplinary expectations and opportunities for learning and networking. The personal one-on-one nature of the mentoring connection gradually makes it safe for the student to show vulnerability, discuss concerns, perceived shortcomings and fears. The faculty member may show support by sharing similar experiences, opinions, or investigating alternatives and resources with the student.

The goals of mentoring may be summarized as follows:

- Students build a trusting relationship with a faculty mentor outside the classroom to discuss matters of importance to the student
- Students explore learning and development opportunities within the campus and beyond
- Students discuss their academic and career questions, and are pointed to available resources to help support their planning
- Students experience professional and personal growth, demonstrating improved research, industry and communication skills, and increased ethical and civic responsibility.

When students know they have a dedicated faculty advocate on campus, this contributes to their sense of "mattering" (Schlossberg, 1989), a feeling of belonging to the institution, and being an essential part of a community. Mattering empowers students to develop agency in planning and decisions regarding learning, activities and careers; it is critical in building student motivation.

The role of the institution in a mentoring program is to provide an infrastructure for facilitating such relationships by overseeing the logistics of matching mentors to mentees, developing frameworks for identifying strategic learning outcomes and conducting assessments for the mentoring program. In addition, the institution must provide resources and professional development for faculty to learn about best practices and engage in relevant professional development. Incentivizing mentoring for faculty may also be a plus, though mentoring in itself is commonly viewed as having intrinsic rewards for faculty.

A student has come into my office for a quick assignment deadline question, but ends up staying half an hour. The conversation turns to his declaration dilemma, his research paper in another course, and his swimming practice last night. As I chat with him, I think about how much I sound like my favorite undergraduate mentor, whose matter-of-fact belief in my abilities helped me feel that succeeding was never a question, but just a matter of exercising the right skills. And I think about how the work of a caring instructor continues long after the student has left the class.

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