



## How to Set Up a Faculty-Student Mentor Program

by Dr. Charles Taylor

*The goal of the mentor program is to enable students to relate with a professional person on campus under informal and non-threatening circumstances. Ideally, friendships will develop in such a way that students feel comfortable in approaching their mentors for help with academic, social and personal concerns.*

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Social science research overwhelmingly supports the benefits of faculty - student mentor programs. Nagda et al. (1998) examined the effect of an Undergraduate Research Opportunity Program to determine how faculty -student relationships affect student retention. Founded in 1989 at the University of Michigan, UROP served to create intellectual partnerships between freshmen and sophomore undergraduates and faculty. Students from all backgrounds were included in research projects with faculty providing intellectual sponsorship, without turning it into an 'honors' program. Average and sometimes even marginal students had access to mentoring for an entire academic year.

The results indicated that African American students, who were part of the UROP program as compared to those who were part of the control group, demonstrated a significantly higher retention rate; the attrition rate for non UROP students was 18.3% compared to 10.1% for those who were part of UROP. The same could not be said about the Hispanic students studied; however the fact that data indicates different results for different groups just highlights the fact that students of color face different kinds of challenges on campus.

Perhaps one thing that programs like UROP demonstrate is that they allow students to develop close relationships with faculty members and this seems to affect retention in a positive way.

In another study Santos and Reigadas (2002) evaluated the effect of mentoring on Latino students in higher education. They studied the effect of the Faculty- Mentoring Program (FMP) implemented at a California State University. They found that Latino students reported an increase in self-efficacy in college and more clarity in defining their goals as a result of the FMP.

Overall the study showed that the FMP improved student retention by helping the social and emotional adjustment of Latino students on campus. The program provided students an important emotional and social support network to smooth the transition from home to college.

For students who are identified as 'at-risk', often their social networks do not contain enough role models and people in influential positions that could direct them to other resources on or off campus. Having a faculty mentor opens up an arena of resources that otherwise might not have been readily available to the student.



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## Make sure your program has clear objectives

The successful faculty-student mentoring programs that I've looked at generally include these or similar objectives:

1. To foster a relationship in which the student feels that there is someone on the faculty who cares about his or her academic success, and to whom he or she can turn to when the need arises.
2. To sensitize more faculty, staff, and administrators to important issues that minority students face on the campus.
3. To assist students in adjusting to campus life.
4. To foster minority student retention by creating an atmosphere where students and teachers reclaim their supportive roles.
5. To assist students in finding both on and off campus support services as appropriate.

## Administering the Program

It is recommended that a mentor program coordinator be selected to administer the program. This person should be responsible for all parts of the program:

- He or she should attempt to match faculty, staff and administrators whose academic specialty or interest is similar to their assigned student's major.
- When a prospective mentor specifies the gender of student he or she would prefer to mentor, try to accommodate the request. This only applies to gender, not race.
- If this is a new mentoring program, students accepted into the program should be either first semester freshmen or new transfer students. Other students who may request a mentor can be included only if there are adequate resources and their participation does not jeopardize new freshmen participation. In every instance, participation should be voluntary.
- At the beginning of each semester, the mentor program coordinator should hold an orientation meeting for new students and their mentors. Afterwards, mentors and students are expected to meet at least monthly during the school year.
- The program coordinator is expected to stay in regular contact with mentors and students. All questions and complaints are to be addressed as they arise.



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- If appointments cannot be kept, the person experiencing a conflict is expected to notify the other in advance of the arranged date. Students who consistently fail to meet with their mentors should be dropped from the program. In those instances where the matchup between mentor and student does not appear to be working, the coordinator will be responsible for ending the relationship and making new assignments where possible.

The mentor program can increase faculty involvement a great deal by having the coordinator attend faculty departmental meetings to explain the program first hand. Similarly, the coordinator should meet with new minority student freshmen and transfer students to explain the program to them as well. By meeting with both mentors and students beforehand, the coordinator can address specific issues before the formal orientation takes place. Information sheets and application forms can be distributed and explained.

Typically, questions center around how students are selected and what is expected of the mentor. It is recommended that the program maintain a high level of informality. The fastest way to kill faculty enthusiasm is to add another level of bureaucracy. If possible, require little or no paperwork and strive to make the program as hassle free as possible.

After faculty have returned their application forms, the coordinator should follow up as needed to obtain additional information about the mentors that will help him or her make an appropriate match, as well as share information about the mentor with students. The coordinator should obtain information about the mentor's preference for movies and social activities, academic interests, gender of student preferred, etc.

Mentors should be informed that while they are able to discriminate by gender, they cannot do so by race. While it's acceptable for a female mentor to want to interact with a female student, the race of the student cannot be decided by the mentor.

When there is considerable faculty support, the coordinator may find him or herself in the enviable position of having more mentors than students requesting mentors. When this situation occurs, some type of screening process may have to be implemented. However, it may be wise to permit mentor teams of two faculty members, or assign mentors for one semester only, or establish a waiting list. Ironically, a waiting list in this program adds to its prestige. It implies strong support for the program and sends a positive signal to students of color.

Unfortunately, there is no scientific method that can determine who will or won't make a good mentor. Often the people we prejudge as less than ideal candidates for mentorship surprise us and end up receiving the highest praise from students. Your pre-screen questions may help flag potential problems, but keep in mind these 'matches' aren't made in heaven. The decision to exclude someone should be based primarily on whether he or she will meet the objectives of the program. The mentor's reasons for wanting to be a mentor will also be helpful in the screening process.



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Gray and Smith (2000) in an article on mentoring practices for nursing students indicated some qualities that students look for in a good mentor. According to the authors, the students described a good mentor as someone who is friendly and easily approachable, has a good sense of humor, is professional, organized, caring and understanding. It is important that a mentor be all those things because the point of mentoring is to provide support to students, both academic and emotional to ensure that they do not experience isolation in college that could result in dropping out. Therefore it is crucial to look for 'well rounded' qualities in a mentor.

After the screening is completed and the roster of mentors is filled in, the coordinator will need to begin the process of matching mentors and students. Before the matching is done, it is assumed that the coordinator has already met with both groups. It is also assumed that the coordinator has obtained enough information to help both the mentor and student break the ice.

Information about the mentors and students can come from the program's application forms. Many campuses use a student survey to provide an academic and social profile of students enrolled in the program. Based on the survey results, mentors, for example, will know immediately what movies, music, and speakers students prefer. The survey also lets the mentor know which academic areas the student may need assistance in.

### Orientation

When the mentor-student match is made on paper, the coordinator is ready to inform both parties and call a general orientation meeting. The orientation meeting should be held off campus if possible. If that cannot be arranged, hold the meeting in the student union or some other informal setting. The coordinator should impress upon everyone that this is an informal program that stresses personal interaction. The coordinator should mention the importance of keeping dates and showing up on time.

It should be mentioned that at a minimum, monthly meetings are required, but that more frequent meetings are preferred. After a question and answer period, there should be ample time left for mentors and students to interact. Get acquainted and ice breaking activities can be used during orientation to help mentors and students become comfortable with one another. When the meeting is over, every mentor and student should have set a date for their next meeting.

Lee (1999) describes Tinto's model of integration that suggests that college is composed of two kinds of environments; academic and social. A successful transition to college involves a successful integration into both these environments in college. Research suggests that social integration affects retention and ultimately graduation. That's why a strong mentoring program can be vital in helping students' transition into the campus environment.



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## Monitoring the Program

Once the program is up and running the coordinator's role shifts to monitoring the program. While the mentors or students should be free from as much paperwork as possible, it is important for the coordinator to keep good records. The coordinator should have a spreadsheet that includes mentors' and students' contact information. Records should be kept of any contact with mentors and students, and of the types of activities in which the mentors and students have engaged. Through appropriate monitoring, the coordinator can nip potential trouble spots in the bud. He or she can contact mentors or students who repeatedly miss appointments, and serve as a mediator when appropriate. The coordinator can share best practices and serve as a support person for both student and mentor.

## Handling Conflict

Occasionally, a situation arises in which the mentor and student are incompatible. The coordinator should talk to each party separately to find out what caused the conflict. If the situation cannot be reconciled an attempt should be made to find other matches.

## Year End Activity

Prior to the semester's end it is recommended that the coordinator put together an ad hoc committee comprised of mentors and students to plan a year-end activity. This could be a picnic, a banquet, or similar social gathering. There should be time allotted for mentors and students to tell what the program has meant to them. The yearend activity should culminate the program for that semester. I've found this is a great way to not only thank the mentors but to build goodwill for the program.

## Funding the Program

It is not necessary to create a full-time coordinator position to administer this program. It can be run out of an existing Students Affairs Office, depending of course on the size of the office. An experienced graduate student or existing staff member can be assigned to the program. Essentially, the program requires more time than money. Upfront time is needed to set up the program and get it off the ground. Once it is running, time is required for monitoring the program. You will need to allocate funding for office expenses and for the orientation and year end activity. Overall, the mentor program represents an inexpensive method for impacting minority student retention in a positive manner. Faculty are involved directly in retention initiatives in a personal way.



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## Evaluation

Evaluation of the program can occur at the yearend activity, depending on the type of evaluation your program selects. The coordinator can develop a traditional evaluation form based on the program's objectives, and have participants complete it. By analyzing the results, he or she will have a better picture of how the program was perceived and know what its strengths and weaknesses are.

The coordinator should perform a self evaluation as a well, noting aspects of the program that worked well, along with those aspects which needed improvement. She or he should determine how many mentors and students continued their relationship beyond the academic year. Consider performing a study to test if your program contributed to new student retention. The point in all of this is to stress the need for an annual evaluation. By doing so, the program stands a greater chance of being around on your campus for many years. The real test however is the reaction on the part of students. Based on their feedback, you'll know whether your program was effective or not.

## Conclusion

Culture is not a stagnant concept by any means. It is something that is dynamic, evolves and gets shaped by numerous environmental factors. Just like people, institutions have a culture too (Lee, 1999). Colleges in the United States have been predominantly white institutions, and hence cater to the predominant white culture, where ethnic and racial minorities have to maneuver their way through in order to fit in.

Research universities in United States generally have a competitive culture, despite the new found emphasis on collaboration, and community values, research is still an individual effort, and there is much emphasis on individual success. In order to survive in the competitive atmosphere, one has to learn to think critically and produce good work primarily on their own (Lee, 1999).

Ethnic minorities may feel isolated in such an environment where underneath the language of 'cooperation' there is fierce competition for grants, for research aid, for coveted projects, that might create a feeling of confusion for those who are not familiar with the college environment since many are first generation students.

The presence of a mentor to guide students through the informal unwritten rules of college life and how to excel academically may be more important than the formal rules and regulations of working through college. That is true for any student, but even more so for ethnic or racial minorities who have twice the burden of not only excelling academically, but also fitting into a dominant culture.



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