

Mentoring: A Pivotal Support Service

Rosemary Saur

Department of Science and Engineering Support
National Technical Institute for the Deaf
Rochester Institute of Technology

The concept of mentoring and the role of the mentor are as old as Greek mythology and as new as today. Over the centuries it has been recognized that the novice in any area of endeavor has the need of an expert, a seasoned veteran in that field to provide him or her with the guidance and incentive to succeed in a sometimes-unfriendly world. Daloz (1986) has put it in almost-poetic terms:

Mentors are guides. They lead us along the journey of our lives. We trust them because they have been there before. They embody our hopes, cast light on the way ahead, interpret arcane signs, warn us of lurking dangers, and point out unexpected delights along the way. There is a certain luminosity about them, and they often pose as magicians in tales of transformation, for *magic* is a word given to what we cannot see, and we can rarely see across the gulf. (p. 17)

Not everyone can say they have had a true mentor in their career, but virtually everyone has been mentored by someone, somehow, somewhere along the way. In the field of education, mentoring has often been considered as synonymous with advising. But, as Daloz points out, this idea is only partially true.

Mentors generally have a wider role than conventional faculty advisors. They may or may not teach classes, but

they are inevitably engaged in one-to-one instruction and are consequently more concerned than regular teachers with the individual learning, needs and styles of their students. What makes the difference is their willingness to care - about what they teach and whom. They know they exist as teachers only because of their students; they know they are part of a transaction, a relationship. (pp. 18-19, 20)

Whether or not a person has an official mentor, the practice of mentoring is an important one in fostering the growth and success of college students (Campbell and Campbell, 1997). The student who becomes lost in the crowd, regardless of the size of the college or university, rarely has a profitable educational experience and seldom succeeds to the full extent of his/her capacities. Research on student retention (Tinto, 1988) has clearly shown the need for students to establish links with significant persons in the college environment within the first few weeks, even days, of their arrival, if they are to stay in the school.

What does mentoring mean or require when dealing with students with special needs, especially deaf and hard-of-hearing, students? This paper will briefly explore the implications of this question in several ways. The role of mentor and the practice of mentoring will be distinguished from one another with the emphasis on mentoring. Also introduced will be

the notion of group mentoring, and how it can fulfill the role of mentor, differently than that of the single individual. As a concrete example, the monitoring, as it is carried out in support departments at the National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID) at the Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT) will be examined. The literature which is reviewed in this paper contains few references to mentoring for disabled students, specifically, and none in regard to deaf and hard-of-hearing students. Therefore, the field is ripe for investigation and thinking about this crucial support we provide to these students.

Background

The importance of mentors and mentoring is well recognized in the research literature. Success in a profession, in business, and in pursuing an academic career can be strongly influenced by the relationship between a mentor and protege (Gasorek 1998; Hansman 1998; Madison and Huston, 1996; Shea 1994). These and other studies have shown the benefits of the relationship between a novice in the field and an expert, experienced, and knowledgeable individual who takes that novice "under his/her wing." Mentoring has also become an important part of the effort to work with youth who are disadvantaged or considered to be at-risk for a variety of reasons (Dollarhide, 1997; Woodlief, 1997; O'Connor, 1995). Publications such as Kaplan/Newsweek's *How to be a Great Mentor* (n.d.), special programs, handbooks and other materials (Takahata, 1993; Lees and Carruthers, 1997; Windham, 1999) as well as the use of the internet (Aune, et al., 1997; Sumner, 1998) all demonstrate the current interest and acknowledged benefits to this practice.

In studying further education and higher education, a number of studies have shown how a faculty/student mentoring system can improve student achievement, retention, and satisfaction with their academic programs and with university life (Campbell and Campbell, 1997; Wood, 1997; Canton, 1995; Ross-Thomas and Bryant, 1994; Smith, 1995; Turney, 1998; Wallace and Abel, 1997). Programs may even extend to working with alumni in some situations (Jackson, 1998). The effect of mentoring

on the learning process has also been studied, and this focus is not a recent development (Daloz, 1986; Heuer, et al., 1996-97; Highsmith, Denes, and Pierre, 1998; Ricks and Van Gyn, 1997; Salerno, 1998). Students also see benefits to mentoring relationships (Karje, 1996; Tuckman, 1996; Turney, 1998). It is also recognized that students who have special needs benefit from mentoring (Aune, et al., 1997; Wolfe, 1991).

Successful Mentoring

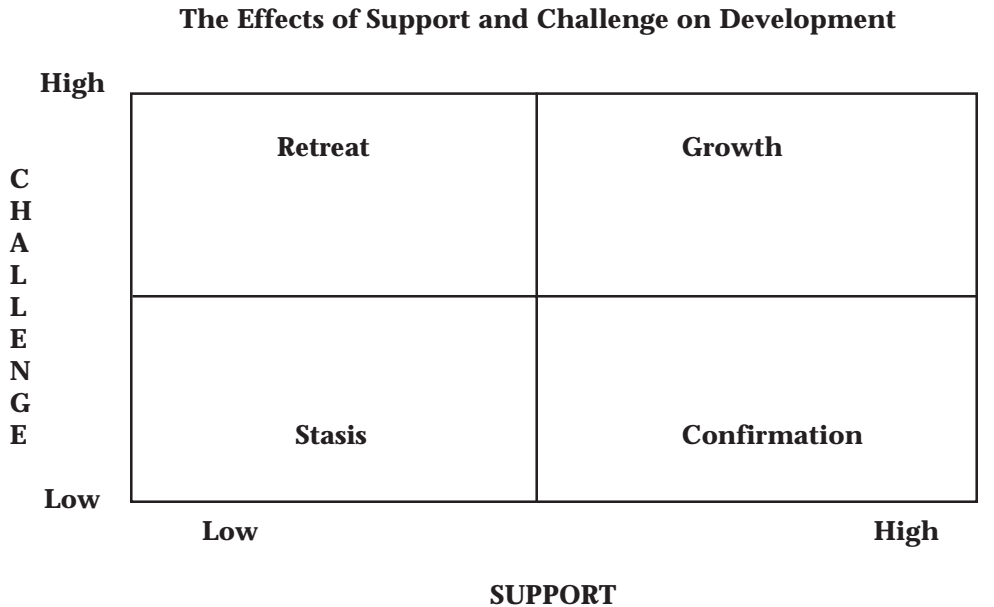
Components of Successful Mentoring. Successful mentoring depends on developing good relationships with students. A number of key components have been identified (Goodwin and Munt, 2000) as aspects of mentoring success. These components include:

1. **Engendering Trust.** This means meeting the student where he/she is at the moment by listening and being non-judgmental. It means offering praise and encouragement and creating the confidence that mentor and mentee can work together.

2. **Providing Support.** This factor means "being there" for the student. Listening and providing positive expectations and structure are important aspects of support. Support is often difficult to balance with the next one, Issuing a Challenge. Both are needed to foster growth and independence. Too much support merely reinforces existing behavior if there is no challenge. Too little support in the face of high challenge, however, leads to retreat and failure.

3. **Issuing a Challenge.** This means constantly raising the bar while acting as an ally and advocate. Set high standards, but check their reality and relevance. Start small, making minor changes and demands rather than demanding too much too soon. The relationship between effective support and effective challenge is shown in the diagram below (Goodwin and Munt, 2000).

Figure 1. Mentoring



Supportive Functions

- Listening
- Providing Structure
- Expressing Positive Expectations
- Sharing Ourselves

Challenging Functions

- Setting Goals and Tasks
- Engaging in Discussion
- Constructing Hypotheses
- Setting High Standards

Adapted from Daloz (1986, p.214)

4. Providing a Vision or Context. This requires that the mentor be a role model who shares his/her own processes and experiences. It means being a mirror for the mentee and providing feedback.

Mentoring deaf and hard-of-hearing students. At least three issues come to mind in considering work with deaf and hard-of-hearing college students. The first of these is somewhat self-evident. This is an awareness of the need for effective communication along with a knowledge of deafness and its educational implications. But, it is also important in this regard that the needs and requirements of individual students be considered carefully. Certainly, not all students are alike! The second issue is concerned with having a place for students, a home base of sorts. A support office

or department is in business to serve students more than it is there to manage services, however necessary that function may be. This means it is a place where students are comfortable and want to “hang out”. It becomes a place where students can be themselves and actually mentor one another. The third issue is staff morale. It is important to “take care of the caretakers” or “mentor the mentors”. People who work with special needs students in general, and deaf students in particular, have very little status or recognition in the college setting. How can a department or institution provide the kind of support that is necessary for people to thrive in their support function? This is not an easy question to answer but one that needs careful consideration in the overall picture of providing mentoring and support services.

The Team Approach. Mentoring mainstreamed deaf students requires many different skills and areas of expertise. Therefore, a team of individuals can be the most effective in dealing with student needs. This team may include faculty, staff, counselors, and access providers even if one individual deals with the student most directly and might be viewed as the mentor. The mentor/team approach means that the student has many avenues available to handle various challenges in his/her academic career but also has the benefit of establishing a strong relationship with one individual.

How does the mentoring team approach work? It depends, first of all, on having close and frequent communication among its members. In the second place, it requires that all members of the "team" have knowledge of and a relationship with each student. Team membership, thus, will vary depending on a particular student and that student's needs. Membership may also change as a student progresses through his/her academic career and needs change. The word "membership" is used very loosely in the present case denoting an informal rather than a formal set of relationships. For example, a student's support advisor may confer with several of that student's tutors in order to determine needs in academic programming. Or, an advisor may work with a career or personal counselor who helps the student select an appropriate academic program or deal with a roommate problem.

In the third place, the student is really a part of the team as well. Activity does not really go on behind the student's back. The student may not be actively included in every discussion but will be aware of the network of support he/she has available. The mentoring team is a group that literally follows a deaf or hard-of-hearing student along from freshman entry to graduation and sometimes beyond as well.

The NTID Experience. Deaf and hard-of-hearing students supported by the National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID), who are mainstreamed in the other college of the Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT), graduate with a bachelor's degree at a rate comparable to their hearing peers at the institute. This rate is well above graduation rates for deaf students at other educational institutions across the country. It is true that many of these students are highly qualified and receive

excellent access services for their classes as well. However, many students who go through these programs enter through NTID not fully qualified to be accepted to a baccalaureate program. The success with which NTID has taken these and other students through to completing their degrees can be attributed in part to the diligent efforts of the faculty and staff who work with them in support departments.

The versatility and dedication of one who mentors are key factors in their success, because the position is one that demands that the individual adapt constantly to new situations and needs. Support faculty at NTID/RIT provide advising, tutoring, classroom instruction, and the like. Other staff help students to obtain access services and to negotiate their way through the system. True, not all students may take advantage of mentoring. However, most students benefit from these relationships to whatever degree they use them.

Faculty mentors in support departments at NTID/RIT have some characteristics in common. They are highly qualified in a content area, are knowledgeable regarding deafness, and are able to communicate directly with deaf students. Although the support faculty may initially work with the student, the college program advisor may be or become the student's mentor. The faculty member in the support department will assist in supporting that relationship, continuing to provide a form of mentoring.

It is not only faculty members who serve as mentors, however. Interpreters and interpreting managers, notetaker coordinators, and secretaries also serve a mentoring function in support departments and contribute significantly to the network of support that helps to ensure student success.

How can the mentorship concept be used in institutions with few deaf students and no support faculty available? Mentorship can exist on many levels. A trusted relationship with one individual is certainly the most desirable. A support provider can fulfill that role using all available resources. However, mentorship with program advisors can be fostered through careful negotiation and may ultimately be of the most benefit to students. The goal of mentoring is clearly to help students to fully access the opportunities available to them in their academic careers.

Conclusion

The intention of this paper is to offer background, give examples, and begin to raise issues and concerns regarding mentoring for college students who are deaf or hard-of-hearing. There are many questions yet to be raised and investigated. Clearly, there is a need for research in this area. But, there is also a need for practitioners in the field to share their experiences and to create a body of knowledge that will aid all who work with these students. Being deaf or hard-of-hearing in higher education is a daunting, challenging situation. Beyond good access and educational support mentoring can help to foster student retention, graduation, and success.

References

- Aune, B., Stockdill, S., Johnson, D., Lomas, D., Gaipa, B. and Lorsung, T. (1997). *Careers on-line: career networks for university students with disabilities*. Minneapolis: Office of the Vice President for Academic Affairs, University of Minnesota.
- Campbell, T. A. and Campbell, D. E. (1997, Dec). Faculty/student mentor program: Effects on academic performance and retention. *Research in Higher Education*, 38 (6), 727-42.
- Canton, M. E. (1995). *Mentoring guide for community colleges*. Pacifica, CA: Canton Associates.
- Daloz, L. A. (1986). *Effective Teaching and Mentoring*. San Francisco: JosseyBass Publishers.
- Dollarhide, C. T. (1997, Oct). *Mentoring using identity development theory: Retaining students of diversity*. Paper presented at the Michael Tilford Conference on diversity and Multiculturalism, Wichita State University, Kansas. (ERIC Document Reproductive Services, No. ED 418613).
- Goodwin, L. and Munt, J. (2000, Feb.). *Anyone can be a mentor*. Paper presented at the First Student Affairs Professional Development Day, Rochester Institute of Technology.
- Heuer, B. et al. (1996-7). Leveraging learning through mentoring relationships. *Journal of Educational Technology Systems*, 25(2), 133-139.
- Highsmith, R. J., Denes, R. and Pierre, M. M. (1998). Mentoring matters. *NACME Research Letter*, 8(1).
- Jackson L. C. (1998, Nov-Dec). Breaking tradition. *Currents*, 24(10), 32-33.
- Jowett, V. and Stead, R. (1994). Mentoring students in higher education. *Education and Training*, 36(5), 20.
- Kaplan/Newsweek/National Mentoring, Partnership. (n.d.). *How to be a Great Mentor*. Washington, D.C. National Mentoring Partnership.
- Kartje, J.V. (1996). O mentor! My mentor! *Peabody Journal of Education*, 71 (1), 114-125.
- Lees, K. A. and Carruthers, S. S. (1997). *Unlocking the door to effective mentoring: An activity-based handbook for mentors and mentees*. Greenley, CO: Center for Human Enrichment, University of Northern Colorado.
- O'Connor, S.M. (1995). *Evaluation of a mentoring program for you that-risk*. Unpublished master's thesis, Boston University.
- Ricks, F. and Van Gyn, G. H. (1997, Spring). Mentoring- relationships as learning opportunities. *Journal of Cooperative Education*, 32(3), 41-55.
- Ross-Thomas, E. and Bryant, C. E. (1994). Mentoring in higher education: A descriptive case study. *Education*, 115(1), 70.
- Salerno, B.A. (1998). Teaching radical history - who has the time?!: The impact of changes in higher education on the practice of radical mentoring. *Radical History Review* 72. 6.
- Smith, M. R. (1995). *The faculty student mentor program: Factors influencing program participation*. Unpublished master's thesis, San Diego State University.
- Sumner, T. (1998). *Design considerations in developing a web-based mentor network*. Unpublished master's thesis, Teachers College, Columbia University.

Takahata, G.M. (1993). *Title III mentoring program*. San Diego, CA: San Diego Community College.

Tuckman, B.W. (1996). My mentor: Robert M. Gagne. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 71 (1), 3-11.

Turney, C. (1998). *The student's university: personalising university teaching: student mentoring, supervision and participation in universities*. St. Ives, N.S. W.: Sydmac Academic Press.

Wallace, D. and Abel, R. (1997, November). *Clearing a path for success: deconstructing borders in higher education through undergraduate mentoring*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE), Albuquerque, NM.

Windham, T. (1999). Contemporary use of a timeless resource. *Winds of Change*, 14 (1), 16-19.

Wolfe, R. (1991). *Supplemental instruction with mentoring support at Anne Arundel Community College, final report*. Arnold, MD: Anne Arundel Community College.

Woodd, M. (1997). Mentoring in further and higher education: learning from the literature. *Education and Training*, 39(819), 333.

Woodlief, G. M. (1997). *The measured and perceived effects of structured mentoring- on an at-risk student population*. Unpublished master's thesis, Arizona State University, Phoenix.