Why peer mentoring is an effective approach for promoting college student success

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Abstract

Both hierarchical (e.g. student-faculty member or student-adviser) and peer (e.g. student-student) mentoring are recognized as best-practice strategies for promoting college student success. Formal mentoring programs utilizing both approaches can be found on many campuses. In the current institutional context of scarce or stagnant resources, college and university presidents and administrators face the challenge of determining which mix of programs to support even though little comparative research on the effectiveness of these approaches exists. This article examines three characteristics of a peer mentoring approach that encourage its greater use. The first two characteristics, cost and the availability of a larger number of potential mentors, relate to concerns about the efficient use of resources. The third characteristic, development of a common perspective, relates to questions concerning the relative effectiveness of different mentoring approaches. Peer mentors and mentees are more likely than participants in hierarchical mentoring relationships to share a common perspective with regards to how they understand and enact the college student role. Differences in perspective impact the process of student identity acquisition, perceived mentor credibility, and the likelihood of mentees following their mentors' advice. Higher education researchers are urged to conduct studies exploring the relative effectiveness of both approaches and how to best combine approaches in complimentary ways to help administrators make informed decisions.

Keywords

Introduction

Within higher education mentoring is increasingly seen as a high impact strategy for promoting student success. While the nature of college student mentoring relationships may vary depending upon who provides mentoring support and institutional context, the fundamental goal is to help students stay in school and complete their degrees in a timely manner.

What is mentoring?

According to the National Academy of Sciences: "Mentoring occurs when a senior person or mentor provides information, advice, and emotional support to a junior person or student over a period of time" (as cited in Lev, Kolassa, & Bakken, 2010). The mentor is typically older and definitely more experienced in the institutional/ organizational context, and draws upon her experience to guide and support the mentee's efforts to advance within that same context. Within

higher education, several different forms of mentoring are used to facilitate student success. Mentors can be more experienced peers, faculty members, support staff, and/or alumni.

Kram (1983, p. 617-8) developed a dual function modeling of mentoring that distinguishes between career functions (e.g. coaching, sponsorship, exposure-and-visibility) and psychosocial functions (e.g. role modeling, counseling, acceptance-and-confirmation). While Kram's initial work focused on mentoring within business contexts, there is support for the dual function model within the higher education literature on mentoring (Crisp & Cruz, 2009; Schunk & Usher, 2013). For college students, career development can be thought of as academic support and includes mentors promoting academic success and facilitating mentees' efforts to complete their degrees. Role modeling is an important aspect of psychosocial support (Brown, Davis, & McClendon, 1999; Davidson & Foster-Johnson 2001). Mentors help less experienced students better understand the college student role (Palmer, Hunt, Neal & Wuetherick, 2015) and how to use that knowledge to achieve important goals such as completing their degrees (Collier, 2015, p. 37-8).

Hierarchical and peer mentoring

Hierarchical mentoring for college students involves individuals from two different social positions, such as faculty member–student, adviser–student, or counselor–student. This is similar to a mentoring relationship in a business context where a senior manager mentors a junior staff person. Although Kram's (1983) original work in mentoring research focused on hierarchical mentoring, her later research identified how mentoring functions are slightly modified in peer relationships (Kram & Isabella, 1985).

Peer mentoring describes a relationship where a more experienced student helps a less experienced student improve overall academic performance and provides advice, support, and knowledge to the mentee (Colvin & Ashman 2010). Unlike hierarchical mentoring, peer mentoring matches mentors and mentees who are roughly equal in age and power for task and psychosocial support (Angelique, Kyle, & Taylor, 2002; Terrion & Leonard, 2007). Although a peer mentor may or may not be older than the mentee, there is a considerable difference in each one's level of college experience.

Benefits of mentoring undergraduate students

Both hierarchical and peer mentoring have been shown to positively impact traditional indicators of college student success such as average GPA, credits earned, and retention (Campbell & Campbell, 2007, pp. 137, 143; Colvin & Ashman, 2010, p. 128). In addition, researchers have established that both approaches facilitate new students' adjustment to campus (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Ruthkosky & Castano, 2007) and increase students' satisfaction with their universities (Tenenbaum, Crosby, & Gliner, 2001, p. 326; Ferrari, 2004, p. 303). Despite the evidence of the positive impact of mentoring, there has been little research done comparing the relative effectiveness of hierarchical and peer mentoring.

For a new-to-college undergraduate student experiencing the confusing adjustment to college, the outcomes derived from a mentoring relationship are more important than the mentor's social

position. On the most basic level, the mentee is a pragmatist. She is grateful if mentoring can help her succeed and make sense out of the new and complicated university reality. The student does not care if the mentoring support comes from a student professional, a faculty member, or a student peer.

However colleges and universities cannot afford to be quite so pragmatic. Many schools incorporate multiple forms of mentoring as part of a coordinated effort to better support students. While they know that mentoring is effective for promoting college student success, they also need to be concerned with issues of efficiency, e.g. how easy or difficult will it be to set up specific programs and what levels of resources will be required? The next section examines several characteristics of peer mentoring relationships that make this approach attractive for colleges and universities trying to support students and promote retention and graduation.

Advantages of a peer mentoring approach

There are three relevant advantages of utilizing a peer mentoring approach: cost, availability of a relatively larger number of potential mentors, and increased likelihood of mentees following mentors' advice due to sharing a common perspective.

Cost

There are certain core aspects of developing and implementing a program that must be budgeted for, regardless of which mentoring approach is used. These include:
- *staffing:* salaries of workers who will coordinate and supervise the program,
- *program space:* costs associated with physical space including furniture and computers,
- *Information Technology (IT):* development and maintenance costs associated with on-line delivery of mentoring (e.g. on-line resource libraries, discussion groups), the creation of program website or Facebook page.
- *mentee recruitment:* cost of outreach to potential mentees (e.g. postage, printing informational materials and applications), costs associated with initial meetings and mentee orientation, printing costs associated with mentee program materials.
- *recruitment and training of mentors:* cost of outreach to potential mentors ,costs of delivering mentor training including the preparation and printing/copying of relevant materials, food and beverages (typically lunch plus morning and afternoon beverages), printing costs associated with mentor handbooks.
- *general program administration*: costs associated with telephones, copying, office supplies, printer including print supplies, program completion certificates, developing program database.
- *mentee program activities:* costs associated with attending on-campus sports and cultural events, catering costs for any social events that bring together program mentors and mentees.
- *evaluation:* costs associated with data collection (e.g. printing forms), storage of evaluation data, and analysis. On-line mentoring programs will need to budget additional IT resources for evaluation. (Collier, 2015, pp. 102-3)

Peer mentoring programs typically are less expensive then than hierarchical mentoring programs that use faculty or staff mentors for the same purpose (Cerna, Platania, & Fong, 2012). In the current institutional context of increased benefit costs for full-time employees, peer mentors represent a cost-effective way colleges and universities to meet educational goals and address retention issues (Minor, 2007 primarily due to differences in mentor compensation costs. Schools can generate savings by compensating peer mentors with a variety of resources (e.g. stipends, credits, textbook scholarships) that mentors value but that still are much less costly than full-time employee salaries and benefits. Minor (2007, p. 65) suggests that colleges looking to develop cost-effective peer mentoring compensation strategies should consult with mentors about which resources are more valuable to them in addition to working with Offices of Academic Affairs to creatively use existing resources like course credits.

Availability of potential mentors

A second relative advantage of employing a peer mentoring approach has to do with the availability of a larger number of potential mentors. On any college or university campus, there are relatively greater numbers of experienced students potentially available to serve as peer mentors than available faculty members and staff. This has nothing to do with differences in their respective levels of commitment to helping students succeed at college. Instead, faculty and staff members must address multiple job demands that in many cases limit their availability to participate in formal mentoring programs.

However just because large numbers of experienced students/potential mentors are present on college campuses does not guarantee these students will chose to participate in peer mentoring programs. Motivation is an important consideration. Many peer mentors report they initially got involved in peer mentoring programs out of a desire to give back to other students and return the support they received when they were trying to make the adjustment to college (Bunting, Dye, Pinnegar & Robinson, 2012).

Effectiveness

The third relative advantage of employing a peer mentoring approach has to do with the development of a common perspective with regards to understanding and enacting the college student role. Peer mentors and mentees are more likely to share the same perspective with regards to how they understand and enact the college student role than participants in hierarchical mentoring relationships. Differences in perspective impact the process of student identity acquisition, perceived mentor credibility, and the likelihood of mentees following their mentors' advice. "Perspective" is defined by *Collin's English Dictionary* as, "a specific point of view in understanding or judging things or events especially one that shows them in their true relations to one another" (2015). The shared student-peer mentor perspective on how to appropriately enact the college student role is based in the difference in how role identities develop in peer and hierarchical mentoring relationships.

Development of a college student identity. Success in higher education is not simply a matter of students demonstrating their academic abilities. Students transitioning to the university from high school, community colleges, or even other different educational systems, must all learn a new

role or a new version of the role, college student. Individuals develop an associated identity when they internalize an understanding of role and use it to direct thinking, acting and interacting with others (Stryker, 1968; Burke, 1991). For college students this involves efforts to understand instructors' expectations and effectively apply their own academic skills to those expectations (Collier & Morgan, 2008). Both hierarchical and peer mentors promote college success by helping new students learn the college student role.

One way roles are learned is through interactions with others in complementary roles. For students this typically means interacting with faculty members or advisers in hierarchical mentoring relationships. In these interactions, students gets information from faculty members or advisers about how they think the student role should be enacted. Students then try to live up to those expectations.

The other way roles are learned is through role modeling. In a peer mentoring relationship, new students first watch more experienced student mentors use role-related knowledge in the form of problem solving scripts to deal with a range of college adjustment issues. Mentees are then provided with opportunities to practice enacting the role themselves while receiving feedback from mentors to further refine their performances.

Hierarchical mentoring of undergraduate students does not involve role modeling. A faculty mentor is not modeling the college student role when sharing ideas with an undergraduate student mentee on how the student should study for an exam to earn a good grade. Instead, what is happening is that the mentor is sharing knowledge of faculty members' expectations of undergraduate students. The faculty mentor is not a student, yet the mentor is sharing an understanding of the standard that faculty use to judge the quality of their interactions with undergraduate students. Clearly this is very useful information and serves as evidence of the mentor's relatively higher level of expertise. Mentees who can turn this information about expectations concerning their behavior in one class into effective interactions with other faculty members have a better chance of college success (Collier & Morgan, 2008).

With peer mentoring, the situation is different. Compared to the complementary faculty and undergraduate student roles of a hierarchical mentoring relationship, with peer mentoring only one role is involved. The mentor and mentee both share a common identity and a common perspective on how to best enact the college student role.

Beyond shaping understandings of things and events, perspective impacts the meanings a person assigns to the actions and motivations of both one's self and others. Differences in perspective affect how mentees interpret mentors' motivation.

Credibility. Differences in student identity acquisition in mentoring relationships, specifically whether role modeling does or does not occur, may have an impact on mentees' interpretation of mentors' actions. How mentees interpret mentors' motivation for their action has an effect on perceived mentor credibility.

The social-psychological concept of credibility is a useful frame for understanding why peer mentoring may be relatively more effective than hierarchical mentoring for supporting college

students. The person who sends a message is called the message source. Mentors are message sources. A message source's credibility is a critical element in the process of persuasion (Pornpitakan, 2004). Credibility is made up of two components, expertise and trustworthiness. Expertise refers to the source's degree of knowledge of factual information associated with the issue in question; trustworthiness refers to the degree to which the source is perceived as being likely to accurately share this related factual information (Hovland, Janis, & Kelley, 1953). The source's perceived self-interest influences the relative importance of trustworthiness and expertise (McGinnies,& Ward, 1980). Imagine you are receiving information from someone who is trying to convince you of the superiority of one type of computer versus another. From your perspective, when the source is a computer salesman who has a great deal to gain if you are persuaded, then even though the salesman has expertise, it is much more important for you to find someone you consider trustworthy. If, on the other hand, when the source is a friend who has nothing to gain from your compliance, then your friend's relative level of computer expertise takes on a greater importance. On the other hand, your friend might be trustworthy, but if that friend doesn't know much about computers you are unlikely to be persuaded by his or her recommendation.

There is a credibility-related issue that may arise in hierarchical mentoring relationships. When a mentee is not sure of the mentor's motivation for sharing information, that mentee might discount some of the potential benefit of the mentor's shared expertise. In a hierarchical mentoring relationship, the undergraduate student mentee is being asked to accept the mentor's advice because of the mentor's acknowledged higher level of expertise. The mentor is viewed as knowing what's best for the student, like a manager knows what's best for a new employee, or a parent is knows what's best for a child. However, since the mentor is obviously not a student it may be unclear to the mentee whether the mentor's expertise-based advice is based on the mentor's past experiences as a student or based on how the world appears to work from the perspective of the mentor's current role as a faculty member or student affairs professional.

The mentor clearly has expertise, but when credibility is considered, the key question becomes, 'is the mentor trustworthy?' For a new-to-campus college student, it may not be clear why the hierarchical mentor is taking the time to help; maybe helping is just part of the faculty member or staff person's job. The student may not be completely clear on what to expect from someone in a faculty member or staff mentor role because of a lack of familiarity with those roles.

With peer mentoring, the situation is not the same due to a difference in role relationships. Compared to the complementary faculty and undergraduate student roles of a hierarchical mentoring relationship, with peer mentoring only one role is involved. Both the mentor and mentee share the college student role. In this case there no longer is an issue with the mentee struggling to understand the mentor's motivation. The peer mentor is seen as *trustworthy* because the peer mentor is a college student, the same as the mentee. The mentor's motivation for helping is assumed to be the same as the mentee imagines he would experience when he helped another student; one student helps another because they are in the same boat. Even if the mentee knows the mentor is being compensated for participating in the mentoring relationship, the near-peer nature of the mentor-mentee relationship causes the mentor to be seen as more similar to the mentee than faculty members or staff. In a peer mentoring relationship, the goal is assisting the mentee in becoming more expert in a role she and her mentor already share.

The peer mentor has a high level of expertise, based on previous success in enacting the mentee's current role because she is already an upper division college student. The mentor models the role of a successful college student by sharing her knowledge of faculty members' expectation for students, along with time-tested personal strategies that the mentor has used in successfully meeting those expectations. The peer mentor is seen as highly credible. The mentor's expertise and relatively greater level of trustworthiness provides an unambiguous message to the mentee that following the suggested strategies will most likely lead to mentee success because these strategies have clearly worked in the past. This is how the development of a shared common perspective on how to enact the college student role between the mentee and her peer mentor.

Therefore, because role modeling is present in peer mentoring relationships but not in hierarchical ones, and importance of similarity on trustworthiness and credibility, peer mentoring may be relatively more effective in mentoring undergraduate students due to student mentees' perceptions of peer mentors as being more credible. Mentees' interpretation of mentor motivation affects perceived mentor credibility that in turn affects how likely a student is to follow her mentor's advice. Mentees who follow their mentors advice are more likely to be successful, so sharing a common perspective about how to enact the college student role seems to be associated with student success within higher education. However because there is no research that directly compares perceptions of credibility for hierarchical and peer mentors with the same populations of students, the argument that peer mentors may be viewed as more credible by mentees remains a hypothesis.

Conclusions

This article explored three characteristics of peer mentoring relationships that make this a viable approach for promoting college student success. Two of these characteristics have to do with issues of efficiency: cost and the availability of a greater number of potential mentors. The third has to do with \ effectiveness: how differences in how role identities are acquired and whether a common perspective develops, impact perceived mentor credibility and the likelihood of a mentee actually following her mentor's recommendations.

Both hierarchical and peer mentoring are effective approaches for promoting college student success. Both types of programs can be found on many campuses. As colleges and universities look to build upon their current efforts to facilitate student success through mentoring support, it will become increasingly important to pay attention to issues of effectiveness and efficiency. Higher education researchers can assist institutional players make informed decisions by conducting studies that explore the relative effectiveness of both approaches or how to best combine approaches in complimentary ways.

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