How Undergraduate Students Identify and Utilize Informal Mentors

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After receiving a broad definition of mentoring, students were asked to indicate whether they had mentors and the types of assistance the mentor provided. In the absence of a formal mentoring program and with a decentralized and loosely structured academic advising program, one half of the undergraduate business majors sampled identified faculty members, administrators, parents, friends, relatives, and members of the business community as mentors. We examined the role and identity of informal mentors from an undergraduate perspective and explored the composition and needs of the unmentored student population as well. Implications for practice are discussed.

Formal mentoring programs and structured, well-defined, academic advising programs at colleges and universities are designed to assist students in becoming acclimated to the institution, to retain students, to promote academic success, and to assist with career development (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Formal mentoring relationships also provide emotional and psychological support and role modeling (Jacobi, 1991). Informal mentoring relationships can have the same types of positive impact as those of formal arrangements. However, research regarding the success of formal or informal mentoring programs that are distinct from academic advising programs at the undergraduate level has been somewhat limited and often inconclusive (Wallace, Abel, & Ropers-Huilman, 2000).

While mentoring relationships can take various forms (Anderson, Dey, Gray, & Thomas, 1995), much of the research on mentoring in higher education as distinct and separate from traditional academic advising was focused on the assessment of formal mentoring programs intended to assist graduate students, freshmen, or faculty members (Campbell & Campbell, 1997; Cosgrove, 1986; Frierson, Hargrove, & Lewis, 1994; LaVant, Anderson, & Tiggs, 1997; Pierce, 1998). Jacobi (1991, p. 514) asserted, "Despite the absence of empirical validation, most authors assume few undergraduates and many graduate students have mentors" and notes, "the kinds of functions most often provided by the mentor" remains undetermined.

Unlike in traditional academic advising processes, under an informal mentorship approach the pairing of mentor and protégé is not a structured activity. It is spontaneous and arises from the desire of the mentor to help and "a willingness on the part of the protégé to be open to advice and assistance" (Chao, Walz, & Gardner, 1992, p. 621). While very good research has been completed on the roles of faculty and professional academic advisors (Gordon & Habley, 2000), the informal mentoring role of individuals, such as community or business leaders, friends of the family, and parents, has been rarely studied. The literature is silent on the roles of those who mentor undergraduates outside the academy and the functions they perform. Formally assigned academic advisors may fulfill the role of mentor for some students; however, in our research, we did not assume that the terms academic advisor and mentor were synonymous. We sought to determine the persons to whom undergraduate students turn for informal mentoring in the absence of a formal college-sponsored mentoring program. How many students have a mentor? Does the percentage of students identifying informal mentors vary by class year, gender, ethnicity, or resident status? Who are the mentors and what types of assistance do they provide? How frequent is their contact and how valuable do students perceive these self-imposed informal relationships? Finally, how many students have not identified a mentor and are they interested in developing such a relationship?

Methods

The population for this study was all undergraduate students at a predominately White, private, 4-year comprehensive college in the Northeast. The student population was 54% women. Approximately 70% are commuters and 30% are residents of the campus. The students in the School of Business were selected as a cluster sample because they were representative of the entire student population in terms of gender, race, resident status, and class year. In addition, no formal mentoring system was available for undergraduates in the School of Business, and the formal advisement system for undergraduate business majors was prescriptive in nature and varied greatly by department. Some departments assigned students alphabetically to department faculty, others provided group advisement sessions, and in some cases, the stu-

dent's primary advisor was the associate dean. Undergraduate students at this institution generally met with their assigned advisor once per semester for less than 30 minutes.

Each student identified as having declared a major in one of the seven business departments was sent a simple descriptive, self-designed, 16-question survey; a postage-paid return envelope; and a cover letter from the dean requesting their anonymous participation. A follow-up request, with a complete survey and postage-paid envelope was sent to the same students 3 weeks after the first mailing. Of the 782 students who received the questionnaire, 317 returned completed surveys, yielding a response rate of 41%. The respondents were similar to the sample population in terms of gender, race, and class year.

A simple descriptive survey was designed to address specific research questions regarding informal mentoring relationships, the types of assistance informal mentors provide, and the value of the relationship to the protégé. Although very good academic advising assessment instruments are currently available, such as the ACT Survey of Academic Advising (ACT, Inc., 2001), these instruments were judged inadequate for this task because they asked many questions in which we were uninterested for this study. In addition, they did not address informal mentoring in a way that we felt was appropriate for our research questions.

Demographic data[1] was collected to better understand the student population under study. In the absence of a widely accepted or precise definition of mentoring (Jacobi, 1991; Peper, 1994), an intentionally broad definition was used to include relationships that assist the student in his or her academic, career, and personal life. A mentor was defined as an individual who assists one on an academic, career, or personal level. The mentor may be someone whose advice is sought and valued, or someone who offers advice and suggestions that the protégé believes are beneficial to her or his academic, career, or personal life. Students were asked to indicate whether or not they had mentors. Those who answered affirmatively were asked to select a descriptor for that individual(s) from the 11 mentor categories listed: "full-time faculty member in my department/major, full-time faculty member in the business school, but not my major; full-time faculty member at the college, but not in the School of Business; a part-time faculty member in the School of Business; an administrator; my academic advisor; the chair of my department; a member of the business community; a parent (circle mother and/or father); a relative other than a parent; a friend of the family; other." They were also asked how they chose the mentors. Students were also asked to indicate the frequency of their contact with their mentors, the type(s) of assistance they received, and how valuable these relationships were to them. In addition, the responses of the students who did not have mentors were analyzed to determine their characteristics and their levels of interest in being a part of such a relationship.

Limitations of the Study

This study was limited by the fact that the sample was composed exclusively of business majors at a predominately White, majority commuter, private, religiously affiliated comprehensive college. It is impossible to know whether or not students in other academic disciplines, or at different types of institutions, would identify similar informal mentoring patterns and relationships. Future research should explore informal mentoring patterns and relationships for more diverse student populations and at institutions that have structured, developmental advising programs.

Results

Who Had a Mentor?

In the absence of a formal institutionalized mentoring program, 159 (50%) of the respondents identified at least one mentor; 11% of this group identified more than one. Fifty-two percent of the women respondents and 48% of the male respondents indicated they had found a mentor. Of the 118 resident respondents, 47% identified a mentor while 52% of the 199 commuter respondents did so.

The percentage of male protégés increased with each successive class year: 11% of the male students who had mentors were freshman; 37% of the male students who had mentors were seniors. The pattern differed for women: The highest mentoring rate was reported at the sophomore level (34%), but only 27% of women who had mentors were seniors.

Although the number of students of color in the sample was small, 27% of the Black (4 of 15) and 25% of the Hispanic (2 of 8) students identified mentors as did 56% (5 of 9) of the Asian/Pacific Islander students and 100% (3 of 3) of the Native American/Alaskan students. Fifty-two percent of

[1] The racial demographic categories used for the survey (Hispanic, Black, White, American Indian or Alaskan Native, and Asian or Pacific Islander) were consistent with the categories used on various other data collection instruments at the institution. This terminology was used throughout the study.

White student respondents had a mentor. Due to the small number of students of color in the sample, a Fisher's Exact test was conducted and revealed a value of 12.050 ($p = 0.04$), indicating a significant difference between the number of students of color and White students who identified a mentor.

Who Were the Mentors?

Respondents were asked to select the identifier(s) that described their mentor(s) from the choices listed. One hundred fifty-nine respondents identified 185 mentors (Table 1). Twenty-nine percent of the protégés identified a faculty member as a mentor, making faculty the mentor category most often selected by the total protégé group. In all, 25% of the respondents identified father as a mentor and 15% identified mother. Male protégés identified two primary types of mentors: faculty members (34%) and fathers (33%). Women protégés also identified faculty members as mentors most often (24%) but clearly indicated that they sought advice and assistance from a variety of individuals. Twenty-two percent of the women respondents identified a relative (not a parent), family friend, or member of the business community as a mentor; 21% cited their mothers as mentors; 19% indicated a college administrator or academic advisor as a mentor; and 19% identified their fathers as mentors.

The gender of the mentors could not be determined from the questionnaire in 12% of the cases. In those cases where the gender of the mentor could be determined, students identified a woman 31% of the time and a man 57% of the time. Both male and female protégés identified male mentors more often than female mentors. Results from a Pearson chi-square analysis indicated that male students selected fewer female mentors than they did male mentors ($\chi^2(1, N = 159) = 4.415$, $p < 0.036$), and although female students selected more male than female mentors, differences in their gender preferences was not statistically significant. Of the 86 female protégés, slightly less than one half (42%) identified a woman as one of their mentors and 57% identified at least one man; of the 73 male protégés, 30% identified at least one woman as a mentor and more than 77% identified at least one man.

None of the Black or Hispanic protégés identified a parent, relative, friend of the family, or member of the business community as a mentor. Instead, they relied primarily on administrators employed by the college. White protégés selected a college employee as a mentor 36% of the time but also relied on parents, relatives, family friends, members of the business community, and others, citing one or more of these individuals 64% of the time.

In this study, 50% of the resident protégés identified one or both of their parents as mentors; however, only 25% of the commuter protégés did so. One might have expected the opposite to be true because presumably commuter students see their parents on a more regular basis. Did the resident students identify a parent as a mentor because they have not connected with a faculty member or administrator on campus or because they have come to value their parents' advice more since leaving home? Additional research is necessary to answer this question and to explore this issue at institutions with a primarily residential population.

What Type of Assistance Did the Mentors Provide?

Students were asked to identify the types of assistance their mentors provided by selecting one or more of the following: decision-making skills, career advice, personal advice and encouragement, and/or academic advisement (Table 2). Faculty members were cited most often for various types of

Table 1 Mentor selection by gender

	Gender		
Mentor	Female $n = 86$	Male $n = 73$	Total Mentors
Faculty member	21	25	46
College administrator or academic advisor	16	11	27
Mother	18	6	24
Father	16	23	39
Relative, not a parent; family friend; member of business community	19	14	33
Other	11	5	16
Total mentors	101	84	185

Note. Faculty includes all full- and part-time faculty members at the college. One hundred fifty-nine respondents identified a total of 185 mentors.

assistance but led the mentors in providing academic advisement and career advice. College administrators and academic advisors followed faculty in providing academic advisement, but were cited least for providing all three other types of assistance. This result indicates that while students value the assigned advisor's advice regarding academics, they may be inclined to seek more personal assistance from someone of their own choosing. Fathers were cited most often for help with decision-making skills and for personal advice and encouragement. Only 22% of the protégés noted that they received all four types of assistance from their mentor(s).

When the data were examined by resident status and gender the same pattern emerged. Regardless of resident status or gender, personal advice and encouragement was most often cited as the type of assistance the mentor provided. Mentors also gave career advice, help with decision-making skills, and academic advisement. Freshmen and sophomores looked to their mentors for personal advice and encouragement above the other functions listed on the questionnaire. Juniors cited career advice as the reason they sought their mentors. Seniors valued career advice as well as personal advice and encouragement almost equally, but academic advisement was also an important concern for them.

Frequency of Contact and Value of Relationships

Protégés were asked to indicate how frequently they were in contact with their mentors. Over 45% indicated that they were in contact with their mentors at least weekly, on average, which is in stark contrast to the short, once-a-semester, required meetings with formally assigned advisors. These data may reflect the fact that 40% of the 159 protégés identified one or both of their parents as a mentor; however, resident students identified one or both of their parents as a mentor at twice the rate that commuter students identified one or both of their parents as a

Table 2 Number of students indicating types of assistance provided by their mentors

	Type of Assistance				
Mentor	Decision-Making Skills	Career Advice	Personal Advice and Encouragement	Academic Advisement	Total
Faculty member	23	35	28	36	122
College administrator or academic advisor	7	6	7	23	43
Mother	19	15	24	9	67
Father	30	30	38	17	115
Relative, not a parent; family friend; member of business community	21	28	32	10	91
Other	11	9	15	1	36
Total	111	123	144	96	474

Note. Faculty includes all full- and part-time faculty members at the college. One hundred fifty-nine respondents identified a total of 185 mentors.

Table 3 Mentor selection by resident status

Mentor	Resident $n = 56$	Commuter $n = 103$	Total Mentors
Faculty member	19	27	46
College administrator or academic advisor	5	22	27
Mother	11	13	24
Father	24	15	39
Relative, not a parent; family friend; member of business community	8	25	33
Other	2	14	16
Total Mentors	69	116	185

Note. Faculty includes all full- and part-time faculty members at the college. One hundred fifty-nine respondents identified a total of 185 mentors.

mentor (Table 3). These informal mentoring relationships were apparently protégé driven as 20% indicated that they contacted their mentors when necessary and one student responded that communication only occurred when the mentor initiated contact. Fifteen percent of the protégés indicated a mutual-contact arrangement in which the mentor and the protégé contacted each other as necessary.

The overwhelming majority of students found these mentoring relationships to be valuable because they were self-selected and self-imposed. However, 81% of both the men and the women considered these relationships to be very valuable, and 18% described them as somewhat valuable. Only 1% of protégés described the mentorship as not valuable.

Chickering and Reisser (1993) and Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) suggested that mentoring promotes academic success. Data from our study seem to support these prior findings, as those students with the highest self-reported grade-point averages (GPAs) (3.5–4.0) had the highest percentage of informal mentors (54%) and those with the lowest self-reported GPAs (below 2.0) had the lowest percentage of informal mentors (42%). However, the data do not clarify the relationship between academic success and mentoring: Were informal mentors promoting academic success or were academically successful students more likely to seek out and identify informal mentors?

Students Without Mentors

The definition of mentor that was used for this research was intentionally broad. It was intended to include a wide variety of individuals to whom students might go for assistance or advice. However, even though this broad definition was offered, 48% of the female respondents and 52% of the male respondents indicated that they do not have a mentor. Of the unmentored population, the majority (59%) indicated that they would like to have a mentor but have not been able to identify appropriate individuals. Only 28% stated that they were not interested in such a relationship (13% of this group were completing their senior year at the time of the survey).

Identifying a mentor was more important to freshmen and sophomores (74%) than to juniors and seniors (49%), which may be an indication of the uncertainty students experience in their first 2 years of college. Juniors and seniors may feel that because they have navigated the system on their own for 2 years they are capable of graduating without mentoring assistance. However, these students may not realize the potential value of a mentor for the career planning and job search processes. Ninety-two percent of all students self-identified as members of an ethnic minority who did not have a mentor indicated that they would like one but were unable to identify an appropriate person.

Discussion and Implications for Practice

One half the respondents in this study identified at least one informal mentor and an additional 29% indicated that they would welcome a mentoring relationship. Because the definition of mentor used in this research was so broad, the unmentored population is of particular concern. These students were not perceiving any formal or informal academic advising that they were receiving as mentoring. They did not feel a supportive connection to a member of the college community or to someone outside the academy. These students recognized the value of a mentor but were unable to identify an appropriate individual in their lives. Considering the protégé-driven nature of the informal mentoring relationship, perhaps institutional staff could better serve their students by teaching them how to develop these relationships.

One hundred fifty-nine students identified 185 individuals who they considered to be mentors. Faculty members accounted for only 25% of those 185 mentors. Seventy-five percent of identified mentors were either nonfaculty members or outside the academy. In addition, Hispanic, Black, American Native, and Alaskan students identified faculty mentors less often than did White, Asian, or Pacific Islander students. The limited information available here points in several interesting directions and supports the findings of Wallace, Abel, and Ropers-Huilman (2000) that students from historically underrepresented groups know the value of student-faculty mentoring relationships but have difficulty identifying faculty members who are interested in developing such relationships. At the institution under study, Black and Hispanic respondents relied on professional staff members and primarily sought academic advisement. None of these students listed a parent, relative, family friend, or member of the business community as a mentor. Only one of the six Black and Hispanic protégés noted personal advice and encouragement as a type of assistance the mentor provided.

This result may signify an absence of such support and may indicate that, for this student population, more direct institutional intervention is necessary to insure that all students benefit from the personal support and encouragement which, overall, was the type of assistance most often received by the protégés (Crawford, 1998; Shumate, 1995). Any successful informal mentoring program needs

to include many individuals other than faculty members (Thile & Matt, 1995), and students need to be assisted in developing the skills and abilities necessary to identify and initiate mentoring relationships with many different types of individuals. Of course, students of color may have difficulty identifying mentors at predominately White institutions. The institutions may need to identify faculty members, staff, and community members who are interested in mentoring students of color and then directly link interested students with interested mentors. How institutions identify appropriate mentors for students of color will vary greatly on the demographic characteristics of faculty and staff as well as the demographic characteristics of the local community.

In their study of students and faculty role models, Erkut and Mokros (1984, p. 399) found that women students did not necessarily "gravitate toward nor avoid female role models" but rather "chose female faculty as models to the extent that women are available on campus," while men tended to avoid female role models. Our research supports the Erkut and Mokros findings. At this historically male institution, where approximately 85% of the full-time faculty members and full-time administrators in the school of business were male, women students were more successful than men at identifying male and female mentors both within and outside of the academy. The women students identified mentors from five separate mentor categories at an almost equal rate, whereas the male students relied primarily on male mentors, specifically their fathers and faculty members. Further research could explain why these gender preferences seem to exist for men but not for women. However, anyone assisting students in identifying informal mentors should take notice of this finding and remind students that the quality and type of assistance the mentor can provide should be their primary consideration in seeking out a mentor (Schlee, 2000).

Students in this study identified a variety of individuals from whom they received various types of assistance. However, we could not determine whether they sought out a particular mentor because they recognized that they needed a certain type of assistance or if they realized, even as a result of the survey itself, that they were receiving a particular type of assistance from an individual whom they subsequently identified as a mentor. In any case, undergraduates participating in our study clearly receive assistance from individuals outside the academy. Consequently, professional academic advisors and faculty members, already stretched for time and funds, may have a previously unidentified external resource to assist them in mentoring undergraduate students. Recognizing and incorporating these informal relationships into the development of a mentoring program could be a valuable and very productive strategy for professionals in higher education. Rather than attempt to provide all forms of mentoring assistance to all students through either a formal advising or formal mentoring program, perhaps advisors should use available resources to better educate undergraduates on the role of mentors, how to identify them, and the value of identifying several mentors with expertise in different areas (Hytrek, 2000). Educational programs of this nature could be incorporated more regularly into orientation, first-year experience programs, or as an extension of existing advising programs similar to those offered at Cleveland State University, Texas Southern University, Northern Illinois University, or Southern Illinois University at Carbondale (Jeske & Rode, 1999).

Summary

Undergraduate students in this study sought out various types of assistance from a variety of individuals within, and outside of, the academy. However, additional research is necessary to determine the role and use of informal mentors in other institutional settings particularly those that, unlike the institution under study, have a strong, formal, or developmental advisement system in place.

If students would benefit from all the types of assistance noted in this study, perhaps advisors should discover who students currently use as mentors and then attempt to assist them in identifying others who could provide additional assistance. These students have overwhelmingly noted that they consider informal relationships to be very valuable, and clearly, one of the strengths of informal mentorships is the voluntary nature of the relationship. A number of these undergraduate students are currently using a variety of informal mentors to assist them with personal, academic, and career advice. These relationships should be taken into consideration when mentoring programs are developed (Zachary, 2000). Rather than ignore this potential resource, administrators and faculty should capitalize on it.

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