Mentoring the successful graduate student of tomorrow

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Abstract

In order to provide a more efficacious approach to mentoring graduate students, it may behoove faculty, staff, and administration to develop a new paradigm in regards to the graduate student of tomorrow. Advising and mentoring are key components of a successful college or university experience and the two terms are often used interchangeably. However, mentoring becomes the prominent factor when it relates to the graduate student. A profusion of research over the past two decades has confirmed the significance and profound impact of faculty mentorship on the success of graduate students. Additionally, the authors posit the importance of preparing today to mentor tomorrow's graduate student. In previous research, the authors found a direct correlation between faculty mentorship, the connection of students with program and faculty, and graduate success. The focus of this work is to review the changing graduate student population, develop an awareness of the significant impact of faculty mentorship, and offer practical suggestions to improve the quality of faculty mentorship in light of future success and challenges.

Mentoring, graduate students, faculty, graduate success, connectedness

INTRODUCTION

For today's educational institutions, student success has been measured by a number of variables: retention, graduation rate, course completion, etc. Among those variables, there are a number of constants. One of these constants has to do with mentoring. In previous research, the authors found a very strong correlation between successful graduate students and faculty advisors or mentors (Bain & Fedynich, 2010). Ellis concluded "the success of graduate education depends on a student-faculty relationship based on integrity, trust, and support" (1992, p. 575).

In order to provide a more efficacious approach to mentoring graduate students, it may behoove faculty, staff, and administration to develop a new paradigm in regards to the graduate student of tomorrow. Advising and mentoring are key components of a successful college or university experience and the two terms are often used interchangeably. However, mentoring becomes the prominent factor when it relates to the graduate student. A profusion of research over the past two decades has confirmed the significance and profound impact of faculty mentorship on the success of graduate students. Additionally, the authors posit the importance of preparing today to mentor tomorrow's graduate student. In previous research, the authors found a direct correlation between faculty mentorship, the connection of students with program and faculty, and graduate success (Bain & Fedynich, 2010). The focus of this work is to review the changing graduate student population, to develop an awareness of the significant impact of faculty mentorship, and to offer practical suggestions to improve the quality of faculty mentorship in light of future success and challenges.

A NEW PARADIGM

Today's generation of graduate students is a cacophony of generational variety. According to Smola and Sutton (2002), this generation is difficult to identify. For lack of a more definitive title, the next generation has been dubbed the Millennials. But this is, at best, a general definition. Hence, it might be advantageous to view contemporary graduate students as Generation V. There are two perspectives of this name. First, Generation V may be seen as an amalgamation of previous generations. It is a reference to a fifth (V) generation that draws its uniqueness from the previous four major generational groups thus constituting a V or fifth generation. This generation may be seen as a unique blend of the baby-boomers, Generation Jones, Generation X, and Generation Y. Second, the V is used to identify the variant nature of this generation. This group is also known for its techno-savvy, disconnectedness, questioning, and great potential. Perhaps this generation should be known, not so much for its age, but for other prominent distinctions such as technical uniqueness. Thus, one may find his or her own generational identify by examining factors other than age.

Regardless of what they are known by, today's generation is unique from any other generation of the past. This means faculty must introspectively consider their relevance to a contemporary graduate population. In essence, for effective mentoring to take place, the faculty/mentor must be willing to move out of his or her comfort zone. Interrogating reality becomes the key to successfully connecting with Generation V. Innovative faculty must ask searching questions such as:

- Who are today's graduate students, particularly those I serve?
- Of the teaching skills I possess, which are relevant to Generation V?

- How much am I willing to change to be relevant and effective?
- What is working elsewhere and how feasible is implementation of those strategies where I serve?

TECHNOLOGY AND GRADUATE STUDENTS

With regards to modern society's constant reformation by technology and decreased social interaction, Trask, Marotz-Baden, Settles, Gentry, and Berke (2009) postulated the need for professors to balance the priorities of research and being teachers of the trade. They recommended scholars "begin to link the process of mentoring graduates students with promoting a scholarship of teaching and learning" (p. 438). It is vital that professors make a concerted effort to be an active part of the graduate student's university experience more so now than in the recent past. The reasoning behind this thinking is that the increased offering of online graduate courses creates an environment where the students are meeting professors less and less in a face-to-face environment. This situation often leaves students without the vital mentoring relationship between professor and student. It is particularly difficult when attempting to involve "students in scholarly activities, such as faculty research projects and publication efforts…" that often assists in the launching of the protégé into their chosen field of study (Melrose, 2006, p. 58).

Graduate schools are by nature changing to keep up with the new world order. That new world order has specifically brought in the increased usage of online courses. As the graduate school changes, so does the graduate professor. The mode in which the professor teaches his/her classes has changed. The communication techniques have changed. Just as graduate education has transformed, so has the graduate student that inhabits today's class rooms. Mentoring today's graduate student is essential more so now than ever before. One would assume that forming a mentoring relationship with a graduate student would be difficult in the virtual realm, but this is not necessarily so. With this present-day cohort of graduate students, the professors can realistically form a mentor-mentee relationship with their students in an arena that appeals to their students – the virtual platform.

The question begs to be answered as to how one can successfully mentor a student via the computer. The elucidation is couched in the new generational category of graduate student Generation V. Professors who wish to make an impact on this generation must be willing to retool their own perspectives and approaches. Jonas-Dwyer & Pospisil (2004) concluded:

> A dilemma for educators who are themselves Baby Boomers or Generation-X and institutions today is being able to predict and identify the changes that will be required to cater to a new technologically savvy generation of students, whilst still fulfilling the educational expectations of the students with more traditional requirements (p. 194).

IMPLICATIONS FOR FACULTY

It cannot be underestimated that faculty are the key to student success. Lovitts & Nelson (2000) purported "the single most important factor to continue or withdraw is the relationship with a faculty advisor" (p. 49). And this assertion holds true across racial and ethnic lines. Girves, Zepeda, and Gwathmey (2005) found that "mentoring can be an effective strategy for

improving retention" (p. 449). The focus is on the relationship, not just the advisor. The faculty help form the union between student and program. A variety of issues then begin to come into play. Jonas-Dwyer & Pospisil (2004) summarized seven factors they felt contributed to a successful academic program: the consideration of the university's strategic direction, cultural awareness within the university, knowing students' characteristics, faculty awareness of their own teaching style and willingness to experiment with other approaches, applying educational design principles, utilization of technological innovations, and determination of institutional feasibility (p. 202-203).

Quality Mentoring

Good quality mentoring by faculty "plays a crucial role in graduate student development" (Taylor & Neimeyer, 2009, p. 257). In essence, the mentor maintains a major role in supporting the graduate student's success in many ways. As to the qualitative aspects of mentorship, the authors have found five essential dynamics for quality mentorship:

First, today's faculty must exhibit genuineness. The contemporary student of today is desperate to understand what is real in a surreal world. Faculty mentors have an unprecedented opportunity to project and model such realness. Farrell (2007) discovered genuineness was a dominant theme in effective mentoring and carried with it five sub-themes identified as acceptance, accessibility, honesty, and supportive (p. 142). Second, faculty must be knowledgeable about the program. Faculty must understand the purpose and scope of the programs they work in. Without such a knowledge, they convey a sense of uncertainty and lack of interest before the student. Third, faculty must create a climate of trust. Establishing trust between the mentor and mentee is essential. In working with minority students, Scisney-Matlock and Matlock (2001) declared: "It takes time to build trust relationships with students, which may be fragile at best" (p. 81). Fourth, faculty must create a climate of connectedness. This involves encouragement, communication, personal interest in the student, and a willingness to listen. Fifth, faculty must be willing to exhibit, demonstrate, and model personal and professional ethics. Weil (2001) asserted "mentoring is crucial to the transmission of ethical standards" as it relates to the overall graduate student progression (p. 471).

Support for the mentee is crucial, but there has to be a degree of challenge and vision included as well, so that the mentee grows academically and professionally (Melrose, 2006). Students often report the importance of having an advisor/mentor that is able to not only guide them professionally, but also possess a thorough understanding of the academic program to guide them in the proper direction (Bain and Fedynich, 2010). Wrench and Punyanunt's study in 2004 found that the trustworthiness and reliability of the mentor "have been identified as key components of effective mentoring relationships, and these qualities are strongly correlated with the protégé's perceptions of cognitive learning, being in a successful mentoring relationship and experiencing the development of a deeper mentoring relationship" (as cited in Taylor & Neimeyer, 2009, p. 258). Creating a climate of connectedness for the mentee via professional networking can provide valuable experiences for the mentee in order to build those essential connections within the professional organizations that are associated with the discipline. According to Moore (1982) professional development associated with the networking experiences "can help the protégé learn the "ropes" in a profession" (as cited in Wright & Wright, 2001, p. 205). Wright and Wright followed up this idea that "the mentor can give the protégé insight into the many unwritten and vague norms that exist in academia" (p. 205).

Retention of Graduate Students through Mentoring

Graduate student retention culminating in graduation has come to the attention of many university administrators recently. Research studies have discovered higher retention and graduation rates to be one of the positive outcomes of the mentoring process (Wright-Harp & Cole, Spring 2008). Along with the degrees granted, Wright-Harp and Cole (Spring 2008) found that there was an increase in "making professional presentations, exposure through attendance at professional conferences, success in securing a postdoctoral position, increased productivity, employability, and finally, career-path success" (p. 14). An earlier study by Russell and Adams (1997) found that mentorship and career-path achievement go hand in hand, in that mentoring graduate students is "crucial to growth and maturity in graduate life and beyond" (as cited in Taylor & Neimeyer, 2009, p. 258).

Wheeless, Blaser and Litzler (2007) postulated "more than 80% of mentee participants are completing the degree they intended to receive when they entered the mentoring program, which is a high completion rate…The high rates of degree attainment support the literature that says that mentoring encourages retention and productivity…" (p. 17). Studies have shown that the majority of students who were mentored completed their intended degree and are working in their chosen field of study (Wheeless et al., 2007). With all this being said, clearly the attrition rates of graduate students can be addressed via formal mentoring.

CONCLUSION

Mentoring is a key component of graduate student growth. Effective mentoring has been revealed by research studies to be a vital part of the university experience for the successful graduate student. Mentoring assisted graduate students to "better prepare for a career...provided them with an alternate support network and had helped increase their self-esteem and confidence" (Wheeless et al., 2007, pg. 19). In light of the current retention issues at various graduate schools throughout the country, mentoring can offer the graduate student a chance to grow and develop as a professional thereby providing incentive to complete their degree. Mentoring acts as a transforming experience for the student from the inexperienced individual to "the colleague by recognizing that graduate education includes socialization to the values, norms, and practices of the discipline" thereby bringing the much needed realization of learning from not just the rules, but to the experience of the exclusions (University of Louisville Graduate Council, 1998-1999, pg. 1). As Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr. so aptly stated it, "The young man knows the rules, but the old man knows the exceptions."

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