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ONLINE WEEKEND MENTORSHIP PROGRAM

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Abstract

The Online Weekend Mentorship Program at the University of Oradea has been developed to help students navigate the process of learning in a hybrid environment. In addition to the assistance their regular instructors give students, mentors work to help students stay on top of their responsibilities to the program. Mentors are supposed to meet with their cohorts in a regular basis, communicate with students online, be available for individual meetings, inform students about their rights and responsibilities, and otherwise support students in their efforts. Mentors also are available to assist students with any issues they encounter during their program (e.g., issues with instructors, navigate issues with the secretariat, help students resolve issues with the online platform, personal issues, etc.). The goal of the mentor program is to assist students so they can spend their important time and energy on their schoolwork. This study offered students the opportunity to assess the Mentor program so the program administrator could make adaptations to the Mentor Program for the benefit of our students. Students are surveyed yearly to assess their mentors, and this study also surveys 200 students to assess the general effectiveness of the Mentor Program.

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1. Introduction

One of the key components for the success of students at the university level is the effectiveness of the mentoring program available for those students. Most institutions of higher education employ some aspects of mentoring to assist their students. Usually, students also have their mentors or advisors as professors in their regular class schedule. That gives students and their mentors opportunities to check in with each other on a somewhat regular basis. Additionally, all professors maintain office hours when students can either schedule an appointment or drop-in to speak with their mentors. Working with students in a hybrid program, where there are some face to face classes and other classes where they work online, poses additional issues for accomplishing effective mentoring. In the case of this study students are on campus for their classes on the weekend. That presents other issues, since many of the offices of the university are not open on the weekends. In order to be effective the mentor program has to be developed so that these kinds of issues are addressed, and, the mentors in those programs must be willing to work differently for their students. The present study has its weekend program students assess the mentor program with an eye toward making the program more effective.

1.1. Mentorship

Creating and implementing an effective mentoring program takes much more than just assigning mentors or advisors to students. A university mentoring program should consider its students, the goals of the university and how the mentoring program fits in with those goals, and experiences that will foster the retention of its students. Fickenscher (2014) gives ten tips for introducing and implementing an effective university mentoring program.

1. Define the program objectives and secure leadership support. “Objectives provide direction to program participants and help departmental staff and professors understand why they should offer their support” (Fickenscher, 2014, Section 1, para. 1). When developing objectives, make sure they align with university and program goals. It is also important to assign a leader to the program who is both enthusiastic and has the formal authority to supervise staff (e.g. area dean, department chair, etc.).
2. Find a strong, passionate director for the mentoring program. The director must strongly believe in the need for effective mentoring for students. Additionally, the director has to be enthusiastic about supporting, training, and advising the participants. The director is the mentor for the mentors, and s/he must be willing to take on that role. To be effective, the director has to be organized, dedicated to the program, and an effective communicator. It is also important for the director of the program to be an effective mentor for students and for staff.
3. Develop a balance for the competing needs of being structured and being flexible. To be effective a mentoring program should have a formal structure that includes the training of the staff, assessment of the progress of the program, and ongoing communication among the mentoring staff and students, and among staff and the director. On the other hand, students have individual needs and personalities, thus, the program should build flexibility into its implementation plan that allow mentors to develop their individual work with their students in ways that work for their students.

4. Market the mentoring program. When a mentoring program begins, there is usually enthusiasm for its inception. Unless people know why the program is important and that the program actually works, that enthusiasm can quickly diminish. It is wise to develop ways to market the successes of the program to students, faculty, university administration, and future students.
5. Think win-win. Develop ways to help students and their mentors. For example, create a mentoring time span in which classes do not run, so students and faculty have the time they need to meet and assess student progress and develop further plans for studies and meetings. Structure the program for success.
6. Prepare all participants for success. Ensure that all faculty members have the training they need to be effective members of the program. Then develop continuing ways to help members (e.g., a mentor newsletter with tips and success stories, etc.). Ongoing support for mentors is as important as ongoing support is for students. Develop processes for initial and ongoing training for students.
7. Make great matches. Effective mentorships work when the match between the mentors and mentees encourages the development of strong relationships. Matches will not work, so do not be afraid to make appropriate switches. The goal is to build strong and effective relationships, and, as professional, we must be willing to put aside our egos these relationships are allowed to develop.
8. Assess progress. The only way to know how well the program is working is to ask questions and listen to people. Ask mentors and mentees how things are progressing, both formally and informally. Take the results of the responses and analyse them in order to improve the program and help the individuals in the program (i.e., mentors, mentees, and instructors).
9. Help mentors and mentees bring closure to the process. As the program draws to a close, facilitate time for the mentors and their mentees to reflect on the process: what they learned, how effective the process was, ideas for improvement, and next steps for the mentees.
10. Broadcast successes. Help people to remember how important the mentor program is by advertising successes in student retention, student successes (e.g., graduating Cum Laude, etc.), student successes after graduation (e.g., students entering graduate programs, students gaining jobs in their fields, career honors, etc.). Celebrate the mentors and their hard work.

According to the University of Glasgow, in their review of effective mentor programs, they found that all of the best programs incorporate the following in their mentor programs: empowerment, effective learning, personal and professional development, trust and respect are found within all successful programmes which give mentees the resources and support they need to achieve their potential. Many program take their cues from the following definition:

Mentoring is “to support and encourage people to manage their own learning in order that they may maximise their potential, develop their skills, improve their performance and become the person they want to be” (The Oxford School of Coaching & Mentoring, 2013, para. 1).

At the heart of effective programs, it appears that a vital component is to put the student first. In the view of many programs, the mentoring process should be student-centered. Effective mentoring programs develop processes for the mentors to get to know their students, their circumstances, needs, wants, and goals so the mentoring can be individually developed for the ongoing success of the student in school and

after graduation. Additionally, mentors must understand how to mentor adult learners who work and learn differently than do younger students (Knowles, 1980).

To develop the goals of the program, the University of Glasgow includes the following training components: a. role description, b. mentor hopes, fears, concerns, c. managing boundaries and expectations - code of practice, d. the role of supervision, e. preparing for and managing meetings, f. managing the relationship, g. confidentiality issues, h. skills development – effective communication, learning planning, goal setting and reflective practice, giving and receiving feedback, i. monitoring and evaluation, and j. preparing for endings (The Oxford School of Coaching & Mentoring, 2013, Section 1. The elements to consider in a mentoring programme).

According to Parlsoe and Leedham (2017, p. 22-28), the education mentor helps her/his mentees in four ways: 1. Confirming the personal learning plan (PLP), 2. Encouraging the self-management of learning, 3. Providing support during the PLP process, and 4. Assisting in the evaluation of success and learning. This process is a student-centered process. The mentor must be very careful to make sure assistance, advice, and goals are developed around the needs, wants, and interests of the student. According to Parsloe and Leedham when these elements are accomplished in a mentoring program there are at least four results for the mentees: 1. Increased confidence, 2. Received increased support, guidance, and encouragement, 3. Clarified goals, and 4. Increased self-awareness.

1.2. Online Mentorship

According to Setlhodi (2018, p. 209), when mentoring students online the university has to attempt to offer the same levels of mentoring as in the on-campus mentoring program, “example e-tutoring and continuous online support and guidance like electronic or online mentoring” (p. 206). Since so many online or hybrid students are older, are married, have their own families, and have obligations to assist their parents (Popa, et al., 2015, pp. 277-278), their decisions to enter a university program often “resembles a period of responding to striking self-inquiry about one’s own competence, effectiveness, and ability to develop and achieve one’s goals” (Setlhodi, 2018, p. 207). These situations suggest that, in order to be successful, a significant group of these students need online mentoring in terms of how to navigate the university system and with their classwork. The purpose of the online mentoring program is to support, guide, assist, and facilitate relationships with and for online learners. Students need to have their questions answered, assistance with class work when necessary, and be motivated to struggle through difficult times. To accomplish these results university member must be as willing and able to work with students remotely as they are with their face-to-face students. Additionally, the university, its professors, and online professionals must be willing to eliminate barriers for students so they can access class materials, mentoring time, the library data base, assistance with technology questions, and personal advice for setting goals and dealing with their hectic lives, while maintaining full-time student status with the university. According to Setlhodi (2018) to be successful this process has to be an adult student-centered program in which the university professionals understand adult learners, adult life circumstances, and online teaching and mentoring. Additionally, as in any mentorship, an online mentor “relationship flourishes in an environment where there is mutual responsibility to carry out obligations” (Setlhodi, 2018, p.210).

1.3. Setting the Environment

According to Sousa (2017, pp. 93-96), all learning has a strong emotional connection to the process, the people, and the learning. Thus, how the environment is set in a mentoring program makes a huge difference in the effectiveness of the program. Johnson and Fitzgerald (2012) found that the emotional climate of a hybrid college/university class matters to students, and it affects their ability to take the risks necessary to do their best learning. Fitzgerald and Laurian (2013, pp. 343-345) explain how important relationships are for any educational environment. They explain that the strength of relationships is important to student success. Positive relationships are built on trust, and trust is developed through trustworthiness. How people (in this case, mentors and mentees) treat each other determines the strength of their relationships. For relationships to thrive, people must treat each other with respect, encouragement, caring, support, love, belief in each other, etc. When issues arise, in positive relationships, people negotiate resolutions based on win-win scenarios (Fitzgerald and Laurian, 2013, pp. 343-345). It is important to remember that there are three elements to any relationship: you, me, and us (Glasser, 2006, Chapter 1). In order to build strong relationships, both parties have to be willing to work on “us”. Johnson and Johnson (2015, pp. 8-9; pp. 22-23) remind us that in any relationship in an educational setting is working on two items: the goal (what we each want) and the relationship (our trust and belief in each other). Setlhodi (2018, pp. 207-209) explains how important it is to develop a mentor program that is student-centered. The goal is to set up the mentor program so that students feel and believe their mentors are working for the success of their students. When students feel and believe that, then they will be open to the mentorship, and they will put forth the kinds of efforts that will result in success (Fitzgerald & Laurian, 2013).

2. Problem Statement

With the growth of online programs for university students, university personnel have to understand their online adult students, their wants and needs, and how to mentor these students effectively (Popa et al., 2015). It is important for any program to develop a system to help students be successful, both for the sake of the students and the university (Fitzgerald, Laurian-Fitzgerald, Popa, & Bochis, 2018, p. 140). According to Setlhodi (2018, p. 209), this is still a relatively new process, and there is not yet enough research to truly understand the nuances of online mentoring. This study is an attempt to add to the literature and to help our university to continuously improve our efforts and abilities to enhance our students.

3. Research Questions

The research question for this study is as follows: What do students in a weekend hybrid pre-school and primary school certification program want and need from their mentors? The sub questions include: What do students like in the existing program? What do students want the program to do differently? What new elements do students want to see the university add to the mentor program?

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose for this study is to assess the needs of the students in the weekend pre-school and primary school certification program in order make the mentors more effective for students. This is one

step in the process to continuously expand the knowledge and skills of the university professionals who work with the students in this hybrid weekend program.

Each cohort in the weekend program is assigned a mentor to assist the students with issues and questions. The mentors are supposed to meet, physically and online, with their cohort on a regular basis (e.g. to make announcements, give out schedules, communicate information about the program, answer questions, and to check-in with students). Mentors also help students navigate the regulations of the university process, assist with academic issues, and help students negotiate with their professors any issues that develop during a term.

5. Research Methods

The purpose of this descriptive study is to find out from the students in the weekend hybrid program what they think about the effectiveness of their mentors. Participants were asked to give their information through a survey developed by the program leaders. Students are asked on a yearly basis to rate the mentor program in general. This descriptive study sought to gather information specifically in relation to the work of the mentors with whom the students interacted with during the past school year (2017-2018).

5.1. Participants

There were 103 students who participated in this study. All participants were enrolled in the pre-school and primary school hybrid weekend teacher certification program. Students in the weekend program take the same classes as do the on-campus students. Students meet with their professors every weekend (Saturday and Sunday) for the face-to-face work of their program. Students also are required to do practical work in schools each semester of their program. Students then do the rest of their work online under the supervision of their professors. All class materials (texts, supplementary material, etc.), assignments, schedules for the semester, final exam schedules, and information to contact important personnel (e.g., program director, secretariat, professors, their mentors, etc.) are available online.

Of the 103 students, 35 were year 1 students, 13 were year 2 students, and 55 were year 3 students. The program is a diverse program in a variety of ways. An analysis of the data from a review of the program in 2015 revealed that 53% of the students were from urban areas and 47% of the students were from rural areas; 76% of the students worked, with 84% of those who worked being full-time employees; 44% of the students were married; 40% had children; 35% of the students lived 30 minutes or more from the university, and the majority of those students had to use public transportation to get to their classes (i.e., busses and trains); and 50% of the students had been out of school for at least four years prior to enrolling in this weekend program. Additionally, 75% of the students were older than 23. The students indicated they needed flexible schedules and ways to complete assignments, teachers to understand their commitments outside of school to work and their families and their transportation issues, mentors to help them navigate the program, and access to materials and resources online.

5.2. Mentor survey

The student participants in this study were asked to rate 11 Likert scale statements. Ten of the statements were created to align with the mentor job description (statements 2 – 11). There were two

statements that were more general. Statement 1 asked student how important they considered the mentor program to be. Question 12 asked participants for recommendations for improvement. The rating scale was based on a 5-point Likert scale running from 1, Totally Disagree, to 5, Totally Agree. Students also were given an open ended statement that asked participants to give recommendations for their mentors. The eleven statements are as follow: 1. I think it is important that the weekend program has assigned mentors to my cohort. 2. Our mentors have met with our cohort on a regular basis. 3. I have talked to one of our mentors one-on-one (either face-to-face or by phone). 4. I have emailed or phoned one of our mentors to ask a question or to get help. 5. I have not had to contact a mentor, but it is important that I know I can if I need help. 6. Our mentors have helped me to understand what I need to do for the weekend program. 7. Our mentors have helped us to know important information about the program (e.g., class schedules, exams, etc.). 8. Our mentors have communicated with our cohort on the program's online program. 9. Our mentors have told us about our rights as students at the University of Oradea. 10. When I signed up for the program, a mentor was available to explain the program to me. 11. Our mentors help us feel we are an important program at the university.

6. Findings

The data from the survey reveal that students in general are pleased with their mentors (see Table 01). The mean scores for the 11 questions ranged from 4.22 to 4.78. Four statements were rated at 4.7 or higher: 1. I think it is important that the weekend program has assigned mentors to my cohort (4.70); 6. Our mentors have helped me to understand what I need to do for the weekend program (4.70); 7. Our mentors have helped us to know important information about the program (e.g., class schedules, exams, etc.) (4.78); 8. Our mentors have communicated with our cohort on the program's online program (4.78). Five statements were rated at 4.44 or above: 3. I have talked to one of our mentors one-on-one (either face-to-face or by phone) (4.51); 2. Our mentors have met with our cohort on a regular basis (4.59); 4. I have emailed or phoned one of our mentors to ask a question or to get help (4.46); 9. Our mentors have told us about our rights as students at the University of Oradea (4.44); 11. Our mentors help us feel we are an important program at the university (4.46). Two questions were rate below 4.3: 5. I have not had to contact a mentor, but it is important that I know I can if I need help (4.22). This statement had the most students (10) who rated the statement as Disagree or Totally Disagree. 10. When I signed up for the program, a mentor was available to explain the program to me (4.24). This question had 14 participants who rated this statement as a 3 – Neither Agree nor Disagree. It appears from these results that many students (88) have not really used the mentors on an individual appointment but appreciate having them available and appreciate the general work they do.

For statement 12, participants were asked to give recommendations. The first year students recommended more meetings with their mentors. This makes sense, since first year students are the most inexperienced students with the program and with the technology for the program. Thus, the mentors should think about differentiating the mentor program by year of the program. Second year students recommended regular meeting with their mentors, but they want those meetings to not interfere with class time. This would necessitate that mentors and professors coordinate their efforts. These students want more regular meetings with their mentors scheduled on a regular and coordinated basis. Third year students

recommended receiving help with communicating with their professors online. Students in general said that they need help from their mentors when they have issues with professors. For example, students recommended that mentors help the students to get professors to understand their life situations (e.g., married people with children and a full-time job, etc.).

Table 01. Mentor Survey Results

Statement	Mean	Standard Deviation
1. I think it is important that the weekend program has assigned mentors to my cohort.	4,70	.698
2. Our mentors have met with our cohort on a regular basis.	4,59	.678
3. I have talked to one of our mentors one-on-one (either face-to-face or by phone).	4,51	.712
4. I have emailed or phoned one of our mentors to ask a question or to get help.	4,46	.777
5. I have not had to contact a mentor, but it is important that I know I can if I need help.	4,22	1.060
6. Our mentors have helped me to understand what I need to do for the weekend program.	4,70	.543
7. Our mentors have helped us to know important information about the program (e.g., class schedules, exams, etc.).	4,78	.541
8. Our mentors have communicated with our cohort on the program's online program.	4,78	
9. Our mentors have told us about our rights as students at the University of Oradea.	4,44	
10. When I signed up for the program, a mentor was available to explain the program to me.	4,24	
11. Our mentors help us feel we are an important program at the university.	4,46	

7. Conclusion

In general, students appreciate the fact that they have mentors to help them through their programs. Students also would like their mentors to be even more helpful to them. First year students feel like they need more help from their mentors to learn about the program and how to navigate the university rules and the technology used in the program. Students also want their mentors to be advocates for the students. For example, students would like help when professors are not communicating with student online, or when professors appear to ignore the situations adult students face in the real world. Students also appear to want more meetings with their mentors, but they would like those meetings to be scheduled so that students do not lose class time. Although most students do not access their mentors for personal issues, there are some students who relate they sometimes need to access their mentors for personal advice (so they can also be successful in university). Students in this study indicated they appreciate the efforts of their mentors, and they would like the mentors to be even more involved in their academic success.

From the results of this study, it appears that students want at least six elements from a mentor program: 1. Meet with the cohort regularly, 2. Be available for one-on-one conversations when needed in multiple ways), 3. Advise students about the logistics of the hybrid program, 4. Help the students navigate

the online portion of the program, 5. Communicate student rights to the students, and 6. Help students to feel they are an important part of the program.

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