



MENTORING NON-TRADITIONAL UNDERGRADUATE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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Abstract

Undergraduate not-traditional students are by far individuals that require special attention and care. They need as much (if not more) attention in mentoring than do traditional undergraduate students. This study focuses on the needs of these students, on how well the mentoring program that runs at the university level helps students to engage fully and effectively in the teacher certification program. The results of this research indicate that students appreciate the positive academic and personal attention from their mentor. These diverse students want mentors who understand and appreciate the challenges that face as undergraduate students. They already have full lives outside the school which makes the work of mentors even more important to the success of their students.

Keywords: non-traditional students; mentor; academic success

Introduction

In accordance with the Bologna agreement (2016), seven years ago our university developed and began implementing our hybrid weekend certification program for primary and pre-school education majors. Our goal was to develop a student-centered program that would reach and serve a population of students who had previously been almost totally ignored. In our program we attempted to develop pedagogical philosophy that is student-centered. Consequently, we created curriculum materials that were completely accessible online: program

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information, schedules, texts, homework, assessments, and ability to reach professors, the secretariat, and mentors. Students meet for the face-to-face portion of their classes on Saturdays and Sundays. The rest of the program is conducted online through the use of discussion boards, online written assignments, and written assessments.

We understood that many students enjoy and believe they receive more attention from their teachers in a hybrid format than they do from a completely online format (Johnson & Fitzgerald, 2010). Additionally, we understood the need to help students meet their needs to engage in positive and helpful relationships in their educational pursuits (Fitzgerald & Laurian, 2013). From our research we found that indeed we were working with a diverse population that would find it difficult or impossible to work within a traditional day-to-day setting for their education (Popa, Laurian, Bochiş, Fitzgerald, Bîrle, & Bonchiş, 2015). From that same research study we found that our students have diverse lives and thus needs from our program. Many of our students are married and have families, others have older parents for which to care, most work at least part time, some are already teachers who need to complete their education degrees, still others have been working for years and have decided to change careers, some students have just graduated from high schools but cannot attend the day program because of work, family, or other commitments in their lives, while other students live long distances and would find daily travel impossible. Our students range in age from 19 to 60.

Our program appears to be reaching a population of students that has been underserved for years. These students are diverse, have diverse reasons for enrolling in our program, and have diverse needs (Popa & Bochiş, 2015). Since one of our goals is to implement a student-centered program, we have been developing our mentor program for our students. Each cohort has a mentor to work with students to assist them through our program (three-year program). Each mentor communicates with his/her cohort a minimum of once per month face-to-face and once per week online. The mentor assists students with the process of the hybrid program, schedules/time tables, online issues, questions about procedures, issues with professors, academic advice, and other personal issues. The mentor program was developed to assist students academically and personally in order to assist students in meeting their needs as they traverse the program.

Laurian-Fitzgerald, Popa, and Fitzgerald (2015, p. 93) have developed philosophical ideas for the implementation of a student-centered program. They state,

As student centered learning teachers we believe the following:

1. All students can and will learn in my classroom;
2. Students need to be actively engaged in their learning;
3. Students should make as many choices as possible in their learning;
4. Students need to work positively and regularly with other students in a variety of ways;
5. Students should be encouraged to be curious;
6. Students should do meaningful work most of the time they are in school;
7. Students should work on complex projects both individually and in teams;
8. Students should be independent workers, as well as good teammates;
9. The arts are an important part of helping students learn important curriculum;
10. Students should set goals for their learning;
11. Students should be supported to take intelligent risks in their learning;
12. Students should understand that learning depends on great efforts;
13. Students should understand their place in the world;
14. Students should display fair-mindedness, empathy, and understanding in their work with and about other people;
15. Students should be supported in their efforts socially and academically by their peers and by their teacher;
16. I believe that a positive and supportive class environment is critical to student learning (Laurian-Fitzgerald, Popa, & Fitzgerald, 2015, p. 93).

As a mentor one of my goals is to create a mentoring process that is truly student-centered, instead of program-centered, or curriculum-centered. Our students deserve a great program that is delivered to and with them in ways that are efficient and effective for our students.

Benefits of Mentoring

We know that mentoring programs that are developed and implemented well can help undergraduate and graduate students both in terms of university achievement and post graduation success (Rhodes, 2008). Rodeman (2014) studied a successful mentoring program and found four key elements to the program.

All students were assigned to mentor. Students were randomly assigned their mentors. The work between the mentor and mentee began as soon as school started. Mentors were well trained and they were required to meet with the mentees on a regular basis.

This commitment of time and effort on the part of both the students and their professors appeared to be very important to the success of the program.

Research has indicated that these kinds of mentoring programs result in increased class attendance, less tardiness and bullying, and increased grades (Rhodes, Grossman, & Resch, 2000; Thompson & Kelly-Vance, 2001). When students are mentored well they tend to be more focused on and more motivated to achieve their academic goals (Gandara & Mejorado, 2005). This ability to persist is a major factor in university success (Duckworth, 2013). Funk and Elk (2002) also found that the students who have the best results are those who develop close relationships with their mentors. According to Schlosser, Knox, Moskovitz, and Hill (2003) students report that the skills they learn through the mentoring process not only help them during their university years, but also assist them professionally after graduation.

Method

Participants

The participants in this study consisted of a cohort of fifty-two students who were enrolled in a three year certification program for primary and early childhood education. These students were in their third year of the program and have now successfully graduated from the program. This cohort began with 55 students and had a graduation rate of 85.5%. The cohort consisted of all female students. Usually the program has between one and three male students. This was a diverse group of students. Half of the students live in urban areas and half live in rural areas. They are an older population with 58% of the students being older than 24 (13% are 40 or older). The average age of the younger population is 23, making even this group an older population than the day program students. 76% of the students work at least part time; 84% of that group works full time. From this program 44% of the students are married and 40% of that group have their own children. Additionally, 23% of the students already have

earned one bachelor's degree and are in this program to earn a second degree. 29.4% percent of our weekend students live great distances from the university. This program has students with diverse backgrounds, wants, and needs, which posing various challenges for our mentoring program.

Procedures

During the school year, for each term I met the students during their first week of classes to make sure students knew what to expect for the semester. During their first year I explained the weekend program process and schedule. I helped the students learn the online system employed by the university. I met with the students five times during each term. I also met with small groups and individuals on an as needed basis. I employed the online program on a weekly basis to pass on information about schedules, orientations, meetings, final exam schedules, etc. for the students. I also assisted students with academic and other issues involving professors. Students also used me as a sounding board when they became discouraged academically or personally. For some students I played the role of a mediator for them with their professors.

To assess how well we are meeting the needs of our students we ask a group students to respond to a survey during each year of their participation in the program. The university chose 20 students to participate in this survey. The participants were chosen based on attendance and grades in the program. In other words the university wanted to gather advice from what it considers to be its most successful students in the program. Of the 20 students who were asked to participate, 13 students filled out the surveys. The survey consisted of ten prompts. Four prompts were scored on a five point Likert scale from Completely Disagree to Completely Agree. Two prompts added a sixth choice, Exceptional, to the Likert choices. There were three yes or no prompts, and there was one prompt asking for the number of times students meet with their tutor during the semester.

I also gave my third year students an open ended survey that asked three questions: 1. what have I been doing that you want me to continue to do? 2. what have I been doing that you would like me to change? 3. what have I not been doing that you would like to see me do in the future? In this survey the students were asked to share their ideas in order that I may improve the mentoring process for my students.

Results

Thirteen of the 20 students who were invited to participate responded to the online survey presented by the university (*see* Table 1). All 13 students were very satisfied with their interactions with their tutor, with the information shared by the tutor, with the timeliness of information, with the communication both face-to face and online with their tutor, with the number of meetings, and with the overall support they received from their tutor. These results were reinforced and added to in the survey I presented to the same students.

In the survey I presented to the students they were asked to respond to three open ended questions. Students were asked to be honest in order to give me feedback that will assist me in becoming a better mentor. For this survey 43 of the 52 students in the cohort responded to the survey. The tone of the responses was very positive.

For the first question of the survey (What have I been doing that you want me to continue to do?) all 43 students responded that they were very pleased with my interactions with the students. The largest response from the students, 39 responses, indicated that the students want their mentor to continue to “be on our side”. One student stated, “She stood by our side and helped when we were down and lost.” Other students felt like their tutor gave them a voice by listening to and taking their ideas seriously. One student said, “She took our ideas into consideration”. Another student stated, “She always smiled at us and supported our efforts enthusiastically”. Another student stated, “She communicated with us in helpful ways face-to-face and online”. Students also indicate that they appreciated the timeliness of communications face-to-face and online. As one student stated, “It made my life easier because I knew what to expect and how to address issues that arose before they became big problems”. It is obvious that students want to be supported both academically and personally. Students also want logistical support so they know how the system works. They also want to know what will occur well enough in advance to feel that they are on top of their responsibilities. Finally, students appear to want to be nurtured (continue to “smile at us” and “be enthusiastic about our work and efforts”).

Table 1. *Online Mentor Survey from university*

Prompts	Responses
1. My expectations regarding my tutor's activity were satisfied.	13 – Completely Agree
2. The meeting calendar (weekly meetings, face to face meetings) with my tutor was accessible and timely.	13 – Completely Agree
3. My tutor sent me useful information about the program, the learning process and other similar information.	13 - Yes
4. My tutor sent me useful information about the deadlines regarding filling in the academic contracts, school fee, administrative problems and other similar issues.	13 - Yes
5. Communication between the tutor and students is good, both by face to face meetings and also by using the online platform.	13 – Completely Agree
6. The tutor supported students with useful information regarding the use of the online platform, getting the username and access to it.	13 – Completely Agree
7. My tutor's training and attitude is adequate.	12 – Exceptional 1 – Completely Agree
8. The tutor was always available for students to answer their questions, both online on the platform, also on their face to face meetings, according to their weekly program.	12 – Completely Agree 1 - Agree
9. In general, I appreciate my tutor's activity as:	12 – Exceptional 1 – Completely Agree
10. How many times did you meet with your tutor during this semester?	5 – 5 Times 2 – 10 Times 6 – Many Times

For the second question (What have I been doing that you would like me to change?) 39 students responded that we they were completely satisfied with their work with their mentor. As one student wrote, “Keep on doing what you are doing. It is great”. Students who left this item blank expressed to me verbally that they did so because they had no advice for me.

The third question asked students to give me advice about what else I could do to assist them. Four students requested more assistance on textbook issues. Four students suggested trying to develop some extracurricular activities. Two students asked for more face-to-face time. One person asked for more face-to-face time for students who were not already working in schools.

Discussion

It is clear from the results of this study that students want mentors who are enthusiastic about their mentees both academically and personally. This result is in line with the work of David and Johnson (2014) and who have found that students want to be supported personally and academically by their mentors and their peers. It is also clear that students need more logistical support as they begin a program, until they fully understand the process (Popa, 2011). In my discussions with my mentees they have indicated how important early face-to-face and online communication was to their feeling supported by their mentor. Students want their mentors to be there for them on a regular basis, even if they have no specific needs. They appear to want to know their mentor is available if they ever need her/him. It is clear that some students are much more comfortable reaching out to their mentor if they want or need support or assistance. Other students appear to need the mentor to reach out to them for the students to feel comfortable in seeking assistance.

Some students ask for outside of formal meeting time with me. We have met at a picnic on the green at the university, gone out for pizza, participated in Christmas caroling, and have been involved in raising money for charity. The students who request and participate in these informal activities seem more invested in their cohort and in the university. It seems that contemplating more consistent ways to engage faculty and students in these kinds of activities might be a very worthwhile endeavor.

Conclusions

It is evident to me from the results of this study and my other experiences with my mentees that the more I care about, interact with, and support my students both academically and personally, the more engaged they are in our program. In addition to the benefits of higher engagement and achievement, an engaged mentor program appears to set the tone for how

engaged our pre-service teachers should be as professional educators. I conclude that all students need and want mentors to hold them up when they need assistance, to support them when they falter, and to give them the emotional support that all human beings need in life. Is not this what we want our future teachers to do for their students? If we want our future teachers to be mentors as well as instructors, then it seems that we should model the way for our students. All students at any age want to feel that their teacher mentors care about who they are as well as what they learn. I am more convinced than ever that I need to continue to grow as a mentor for the sake of my students and for the sake of their future students.

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