Beyond mentoring and advising: Understanding the role of faculty developers in student success

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It is old news that interactions between students and faculty enhance student learning. In this article, Vicki Baker and Kimberly Griffin offer another role for faculty in their relationships with students—that of developer.

By Vicki L. Baker and Kimberly A. Griffin

BEYOND MENTORING AND ADVISING

Toward Understanding the Role of Faculty “Developers” in Student Success

INTERACTION between faculty and students has long been lauded by practitioners and researchers as critically important to college student learning and development. Given that learning is a social process, relationships—especially those with faculty—are powerful tools that aid in students’ personal and professional development. Reviews by Ernest Pascarella, Maryann Jacobi, W. Brad Johnson, and others credit faculty interaction with improving students’ development as thinkers and scholars, confidence in their own abilities, integration into the campus community, and interest in graduate education. The findings of our own research on faculty-student interactions reinforce the importance of these relationships, suggesting that they are critical for everything from building students’ capacity as scholars, fostering degree aspirations and retention (especially in the sciences), and promoting the success of students from underrepresented backgrounds.

Pascarella wrote his seminal review on the importance of students’ informal relationships with faculty in 1980, and while student-faculty interaction remains critically important, students’ backgrounds, needs, and expectations are different today than they were twenty-five, ten, or even five years ago. For example, while men once dominated college campuses, women were more likely than their male peers to attend college from the mid-1980s on. Today’s college students are from increasingly diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, and it is anticipated that students of color will be approximately half of all college attendees by 2020. Women and students of color are often in search of faculty members who understand and connect with their social and educational experiences, which may differ significantly from those of the white males who dominated college campuses in the past. First-generation college students are also on the rise; they will need support from a variety of relationships yet may be unable to fully articulate their needs. While they may have adequate to ample social and emotional support, academic support through faculty interaction may be particularly important to
first-generation students due to their limited experience with college.

These demographic shifts have been accompanied by fiscal changes. College has become more expensive; tuition is rising at a rate faster than inflation. In addition to having implications for college access, rising costs have led students and their families to expect a level of service that matches their investment. Educators are expected to be more student-centered and responsive to students’ needs and concerns. As students have become more savvy about and reliant on technology, their expectations of lightning-fast responses to questions and requests for support and feedback have increased as well. Colleges are experiencing these demands from students and their families in addition to demands from accreditation and governmental agencies for more attention and responsiveness to student needs through smaller class sizes and increased faculty contact.

The educator’s world has also changed. Many faculty members work in environments that are perhaps less encouraging of interaction with students than in past generations. Tenure and advancement policies that privilege research productivity over student interaction may limit faculty members’ commitment to working with students outside of the classroom. Such trends even prevail at institutions like liberal arts and historically black colleges and universities, which have a tradition of commitment to students. In addition, full-time faculty members are increasingly being replaced by instructors with part-time appointments. Making a living in these positions often requires appointments across multiple institutions, leaving less time to make connections with students.

Given these pressures on educators, it is important to remember that in addition to the important role they play in student learning inside the classroom, they have a critical developmental function outside of the classroom. However, given the trends noted earlier, we must consider what students actually want and need in regard to faculty contact and how these services will be provided. What can students expect? Should they have the same expectations of all faculty members? While some people define informal interactions as mentoring relationships, we argue that this concept understates the nuances and complexity of these interactions and limits the ability of faculty to promote student development and learning. Students have a wide range of needs, and faculty members have varied ability and interest in serving in these roles. Some faculty members are advisors, others are mentors, and still others fulfill a role we refer to as developers. Understanding the differences between these roles, as well as how each can offer a unique form of support to today’s student, is important as we seek to foster student learning and development.

**THE FACULTY ADVISOR**

As the role is traditionally envisioned, an academic advisor is someone who is responsible for helping students navigate academic rules and regulations. Advisors are expected to share their knowledge of major and degree requirements, help students schedule their courses, and generally facilitate progress to degree in a timely manner. For example, if a student goes to her academic advisor with questions about an area in which she has recently taken an intellectual interest, that advisor might help the student identify a course that would allow her to explore this interest while also fulfilling a general education requirement. The advisor might also identify majors that would be appropriate, given this interest, and compare and contrast the requirements of different options.
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Many faculty are familiar with the role of academic advisor, and on most campuses, advising appears to be delivered in a fairly consistent manner across academic programs. At many institutions, new students are assigned or select an advisor as they start college or prepare to select a major. Having good advising throughout one’s education, especially during the undergraduate years, is critical; yet the importance of good advising is often overlooked. High-quality advisors ensure that students have the information they need to make good choices. Clear guidance that highlights the implications of a student’s choices can fundamentally alter her or his progress. A reliable source of accurate information on how to fulfill degree and general education requirements and an individual to engage with in academic planning is a valuable asset, especially as students strive to save valuable tuition dollars and complete college as efficiently as possible.

The use of online technology has also influenced and, in many cases, improved advising. While technology may lead students to expect near-instant responses to their questions, at the most basic level, it increases direct student access to information on program requirements and course availability. For example, one of the authors of this article, Vicki Baker, sends her students a course completion record prior to an advising meeting; the record, which is created from a template, indicates program requirements and completed courses. Using the record, the students can ascertain the accuracy of their academic records beforehand, allowing meetings to be more focused on discussion and student exploration rather than on just confirming that all requirements are being met.

The Mentor

While students may expect that their academic advisor will also be their mentor, this is often not the case. W. Brad Johnson highlights this point in his book, On Being a Mentor, suggesting that a student’s mentor is not necessarily his or her advisor nor is a student’s advisor always his or her mentor. Advising, in its traditional sense, is built on a series of tasks and the sharing of information. Mentorship requires a student and a faculty or staff member to choose one another to engage in an ongoing series of interactions.

Traditional academic advisors and mentors are also distinguished by a level of personal caring and commitment. Mentorship involves an emotional commitment that extends beyond sharing degree requirements and academic information; mentoring relationships are rooted in a mentor’s long-term caring about a student’s personal and professional development. When faced with a situation similar to the one described earlier in which a student had questions about an area of intellectual interest, a mentor might engage in some of the same activities as an advisor. However, a mentor might also inquire about what led the student to be interested in a particular academic area, suggest additional topics or areas that seem similar, or be more willing to listen and help a student process her concerns about academic decisions. In addition to recommending courses for the student to take, a mentor might facilitate an introduction of the student to a course instructor, making sure that the instructor knows that the mentee has a special interest in the topic of the course. A mentor might also follow up, inquiring whether the student is still interested in the same area, helping the protégée connect interests with a career, and discussing any ongoing personal concerns and issues that might keep the student from reaching her identified goals.

These distinctions reinforce the importance of making sure that students do not assume that every academic advisor will also serve as a mentor. Students should not expect that every instructor or staff member can build a special connection with everyone to whom they are assigned to offer academic advice. Academic advisors can fulfill their most basic advising obligations to students without necessarily having a deep emotional investment or commitment. Further, mentoring is time-intensive; faculty and other advisors need to balance their time with students, which may preclude them from mentoring every student they see. By the same token, faculty should not automatically assume that all students want or need an intensive mentoring relationship. Students who are simply seeking information may not need or want an ongoing relationship or psychosocial support.
While similarities in background between mentor and mentee can strengthen their relationship, the individuals involved do not necessarily need to share gender, race, or ethnicity in order for a mentoring relationship to be successful. A mentor’s interest in working with a student can be spurred by seeing that student as a younger version of himself or herself. However, given the current underrepresentation of women and people of color in the professoriate, a reliance on similarity would either leave many students without mentors or overtax women and minority faculty. The most important conditions for a successful mentor-mentee relationship are respect, an interest in understanding one another, and a willingness to engage in such a relationship.

The Developer

A DEVELOPER (a term first coined by Monica Higginson and Kathy Kram in 2001) extends the kinds of support provided through a mentoring relationship; however, in addition to career and psychosocial support, a developer engages in knowledge development, information sharing, and support as students set and achieve goals. Developers are very much focused on future outcomes; for example, a developer might ask, “Where do you see yourself in five years?” or “What experiences do we need to find or create to help you build the competencies you will need in order to be successful?” A developer relationship is collaborative and similar in some ways to an apprenticeship. The protégé learns by actively engaging with the developer in mutually agreed-on experiences. The following example highlights how a developer might respond to a student who seeks to explore an academic interest, while acknowledging her lack of knowledge on the topic:

The student’s professor is impressed with her initiative and believes she poses some interesting ideas. The professor suggests a directed study and offers to guide that experience, working along with the student. However, the professor acknowledges that she is not familiar with the literature in this academic area and suggests that they learn together. They agree on mini-assignments, as well as short-term and long-term goals for each assignment and the directed study as a whole. The professor teaches the student how to conduct literature searches, and they find articles that are directly and indirectly related to the student’s interest. Separately, they complete each mini-assignment, reading the articles and highlighting the key points. After they both complete the mini-assignments, the professor reads and reacts to the student’s responses and poses questions to the student. The directed study is a success and results in an A for the semester but also serves as the foundation for the student’s honors thesis (which the professor agrees to direct). In addition, the student realizes her interest in research and uses her experience from the directed study to conduct research on graduate programs and fields in which she can explore her interests more fully. The professor and student begin the graduate school search process together, meeting regularly to talk about the realities of graduate school life and a possible career in academia.

What started as a directed study, potentially a short-term relationship, evolved into a long-term commitment that required both of the individuals involved to jointly develop knowledge, share information and ideas, and actively engage in learning. The student shared her initial idea with her professor. The professor, in turn, helped provide a learning opportunity and guidance about the research process, which involved fundamental tasks (developing reading lists, conducting literature searches) and the development of important competencies (critical thinking, analytical skills, conceptual ability). The student also learned through informal means such as observation and modeling. There is reciprocity in the developer relationship. The student learned how to collaborate, an important skill in any field. At the same time, the

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A developer opens doors, helps a student think through what he or she wants to do, and identifies and creates opportunities for the student to build the necessary skills to succeed.
Interpersonal and networking skills are no longer a luxury but a necessity, and learning how to navigate such processes at the undergraduate level is critical.

by asking, “Do I have the skills and abilities to be successful in this field?” And if not, “What do I need to know?” and “What experiences do I need to pursue in order to develop the necessary competencies?” Students may want to engage in discussions with advisors in their field as well as developers who can work closely with them and provide them with an honest assessment of their skills, knowledge, and abilities.

➤ What do I enjoy doing? Conceivably, the student will be working for the next thirty to thirty-five years. The goal for the student is to find a career or field that he or she thinks will be enjoyable. Individuals in a student’s prospective field will serve as vital sources of information by offering a realistic job preview.

In the process of answering these questions, the student starts to identify individuals who may best support his or her development. We encourage students to think beyond individuals in their academic department and consider including community members, family members, advanced students, or individuals in their career field. Reflecting on the questions listed and identifying individuals to engage with as developmental network members takes time, careful analysis of individuals’ competencies, and maturity in order to articulate goals and anticipated outcomes. But by diversifying his or her developmental network, the student is actively creating and co-creating developmental opportunities that will facilitate success at the undergraduate level. Furthermore, the student is gaining critical skills and strategies that will translate to other professional and academic experiences. Interpersonal and networking skills are no longer a luxury but a necessity, and learning how to navigate such processes at the undergraduate level is critical. Technology greatly increases a student’s chances of gaining accurate information about a given field and also aids in targeting individuals to engage with and include in his or her developmental network. The bottom line is that students cannot wait for these relationships to come to them or to develop organically. Rather, students must be proactive about identifying and cultivating their developmental network.

Suggestions for Faculty and Staff

While we acknowledge that many institutions have academic advising centers and that individuals associated with those centers have a great deal of responsibility, our primary interest in this article is the faculty or staff member outside a central academic unit. As junior faculty members ourselves, we are especially sensitive to the time commitment that being an advisor, mentor, or developer requires. We also acknowledge the lack of incentives for engaging in such relationships at most types of institutions. At the most basic level, we encourage faculty and staff to be honest and realistic with students about the time they have to offer. Each of these roles requires a different level of time and commitment. Given this fact, we encourage faculty and staff to be honest about their own strengths and weaknesses; some individuals are not good with details, in which case traditional academic advising may not be an appropriate role to take on if given a choice. We suggest that faculty and staff members make known their willingness to serve as mentors or to engage in developer relationships. In some instances, faculty or staff members may see a particular student with potential, and we urge them to reach out to that student and engage in a discussion. Sometimes students need a nudge and the social validation that comes from someone in authority approaching them to acknowledge their potential. Finally, in the case of research faculty, our hope is that there will be an alignment between their research agenda and their work with students, allowing each to inform the other.

Conclusion

Our goals in this essay are to shed light on the importance of faculty-student (or staff-student) relationships to student success and to describe the various faculty or staff roles that are available to help students succeed. Students rely on the support of faculty advisors and mentors to help them navigate their undergraduate experiences. Now a new role, developer, has emerged, and we argue that all three relationships are necessary and vital to student development and learning at the
undergraduate level and beyond. While each role is of critical importance, we reinforce our call to students, faculty, and staff to attend to the different forms of relationships in which they can engage, choosing the type of relationship that best meets their needs, interests, and abilities. This small but crucial step can result in greater benefits and fewer frustrations as faculty, staff, and students work together.

Notes