Virtual Mentoring: Leveraging Technology to Grow Potential

Technology has influenced the way we live, work, and connect with our students, colleagues, and employee teams. Over the past year, it has allowed us to meet the needs of our students and colleges in new and innovative ways. At the North Carolina State University Belk Center for Community College Leadership and Research, we use virtual mentoring practices to develop a deeper relationship between our students, faculty, and executive mentors. For the purposes of this article, we refer to "mentors" as any professional who serves as a guide to others within their network, whether that's through mentoring and advising students or serving as a guide to individuals on their professional journeys. In this article, we share one example of a mentoring program that we lead, the ideas behind which can be applied in other educational settings, such as community and technical colleges.

Mentoring in the academic workplace often involves an experienced faculty member helping a new faculty member succeed in their role. A mentor can also be identified as a more seasoned leader mentoring a new leader, or a seasoned staff member mentoring a new staff hire. At the Belk Center, we established a mentorship program by partnering with executive leaders who help doctoral students achieve the next level in their professional careers by attending board of trustee meetings, president's meetings, internal leadership team meetings, and other meetings relevant to student success. The mentor helps build the mentee's professional network and the relationship develops over time as a way to complement the labor market outcomes the mentee experiences. While this program allowed space for exceptional collaboration between our community college stakeholders, the university program, and partners, it wasn't without barriers.

Barriers included the travel time it took for our students to leave their jobs (the majority of our students work full time) to attend the meetings with their mentors, the registration fees associated with conferences our students were invited to attend, and taking time from family to attend these events. The online integration of mentoring activities created new opportunities for students and eliminated many of these barriers to access.

Mentor Matching at a Distance

Technology has provided tools that reach beyond the scope of our geographic location. Thoughtful matching approaches allow students to be matched with mentors who can use their greatest strengths to build students' skills, confidence, and network. Partnering with The Aspen Institute's College Excellence Program to design a survey instrument provided insight into what our students needed from their executive mentors. Students are partnered with mentors based on the results of the surveys, which are administered to mentors and students. Matching is based upon geographic location, identified strengths of students and mentors, and the professional goals of students. The survey tool is administered virtually, allowing completion during a specific timeframe. Things to consider when making matches for virtual mentoring opportunities include the objectives of the mentorship program, the stakeholders involved, and students' desired labor market outcomes.

Launching a Program

If your college is considering launching a mentoring program, it's important to remember a few things to ensure the success of the program. Identifying the objectives of the program is critical, but so is ensuring the mentors and students are in sync with program expectations. Consider designing a pre-service instructional video to describe the program, detail the anticipated expectations, and explain engagement opportunities. There are tools that can help facilitate this process including Voicethread, Screencast-O-Matic, and Vidyard – all designed for screen capturing important messages about the program you are designing and communicating the objectives of the program.

Technology Tools to Engage Mentors

As 2020 prompted the shift to virtual mentoring, many tools became available that served to connect our students with their mentors and the opportunities our mentors provided. National meeting invitations were extended without consideration of travel cost and time, which provided students with the flexibility needed to engage.

Technology can be used to provide a platform for the mentor and mentee to meet virtually such as through web conferencing platforms (i.e., Zoom, Webex, Microsoft Teams) or through virtual settings (i.e., Gather.town, ohyay.co, roomkey.co). Scheduling tools such as Calendly, which syncs with Google and other calendars so people to schedule meetings during your available times, can also help connect mentors and mentees. With the permission of all involved in the mentoring program, social media can be used to highlight student experiences.

Making the Most of Your Mentoring Time

Mentoring can happen in various settings and in differing lengths of time. Students may participate in a mentoring program that lasts the entire semester where peers mentor peers throughout a specific course. A more formal mentoring program may last the length of a program or beyond. If an extensive mentoring program is not appropriate, consider job-shadowing opportunities or incorporating expert guests into courses or events.

When preparing to meet with your mentor or mentee, plan ahead by creating an agenda of one or more items to talk about during the time together. It may increase impact and efficiency to share thoughts ahead of time in an email or added to a calendar invitation so everyone is prepared to use the scheduled time to the fullest extent. Be transparent about what you would like to get out of the time together. Communicate clearly so resources, opportunities, and discussions can be pertinent and impactful.

Examples of How a Similar Mentoring Structure Could Be Used in a Community College

While the mentoring structure this article details is aimed at mentoring graduate students in preparation for a professional role in community colleges, this model can be applied in other educational settings. One of the reasons these mentoring opportunities were created is due to massive, ongoing turnover rates among community college executive leaders because they are retiring at a faster rate than ever before (Shults, 2001; Smith, 2016; Morris, 2017). Many community colleges have similar retention issues involving faculty. A similar mentoring structure can be used in a community college by identifying potential leaders within the organization who, over time, can promote and support succession continuity. A mentoring structure can be put into place for faculty or staff in an effort to onboard and prepare them to be successful in their roles. Mentors can provide valuable connections and equip their mentees to enter mid-level leadership roles. The creation of a mentoring program for faculty and staff at community colleges can support a campus community that focuses on professional development opportunities for educators.

Another mentoring role may include providing a peer review of a curriculum vitae for professional opportunities. Mentors are a source of knowledge upon which faculty connect the dots between their professional goals and current professional engagement activities.

If your college is considering launching its own mentoring program, our team has created a planning template. Visit go.ncsu.edu/plantomentor where you can create a copy of our planning tool and begin the process of developing your own mentoring program that will serve to promote the success of your community college students, faculty, or staff.

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