The George Washington University
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Mentoring Partnership Project: Exploring Mentoring Practices for Students with Disabilities in Postsecondary Education

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The Mentoring Partnership Project (MPP) team began with dual hypotheses that (a) mentoring can be an essential component of higher education and, (b) particularly in the case of students with disabilities; students can serve as mentors to faculty providing insight into the disability experience within, and outside of, postsecondary education. Mentoring, in the form of programs for new students, relationships with professors, and alliances with peers can help develop a support system in the too-often impersonal world of postsecondary education. While these programs and relationships exist for all students, MPP staff sought to investigate how, or if, these partnerships translate to students with disabilities.

MPP staff began with a literature review about mentoring relationships related to students with disabilities and disability issues at the postsecondary level.

Whelley, Radtke, Burgstahler, and Christ (2003) noted the important role of mentoring young people to ensure successful transitions from high school to postsecondary education or careers. Their article highlighted that mentors benefited from these relationships with increased confidence in their personal ability to fulfill leadership roles in addition to the knowledge and motivational support a protégé receives. Burgstahler (2001) reported that mentoring programs promoted the career readiness of students with disabilities in academic settings by creating supportive environments.

In reviewing current evidence based research, Warrick, Brown, and Roberts (2007) discerned problems locating connections among mentoring, persons with disabilities and postsecondary education. They concluded:

> While mentorship programs specific to persons with disabilities have been around at least since the 1970s, empirical research on such programs is nascent, especially at the postsecondary level and in vocational settings. By comparison, mentoring relationships in other areas of education have been studied more extensively, and literature reviews on mentoring programs exploring levels of education, other than postsecondary

education, have been written (p. 2).

In an attempt to gather more data about mentoring, and augment the sparse data found in the literature reviews, MPP staff conducted three surveys between October 2006 and April 2007. The purposes of these surveys, in addition to gathering data, were to be part of an ongoing effort to promote inclusion, educate faculty, and create support services for students with disabilities.

Mentoring Partnership Project

Ongoing goals of the Mentoring Partnership Project (MPP) are to (a) promote accessibility, inclusion, retention, and matriculation for students with disabilities at the postsecondary level, (b) increase the knowledge, skills, and awareness of faculty members related to disability issues and (c) create inclusive classrooms.

Based on research conducted thus far, MPP staff have defined mentoring as a dynamic, reciprocal, long-term formal, or informal, relationship that focuses on personal and/or professional development. A mentor is a sounding board and guide. Mentors provide perspective, resources, and ask thought-provoking questions. In the ideal mentoring relationship, mentors and mentees, or protégés, learn from and teach each other. See Appendix A for a "Mentoring Model" MPP staff developed to illustrate our approach to mentoring.

For the purposes of the MPP, faculty is defined as any person in a faculty position. Professors, instructors, lecturers, disability service providers, counselors and teaching assistants, to name a few, all impact the experience of students in the classroom.

The MPP is intended to include faculty-student partnerships, bringing faculty and students together in social and formal settings, in person and on-line. Support is being provided for an on-line mentoring community, student self-determination, and partnership facilitation (See website at: http://web.mac.com/sagemanoa/iWeb/MPP/Welcome.html).

The MPP Surveys

Due to the lack of national or local evidence-based information available about mentoring students with disabilities, the MPP team decided to conduct surveys of existing mentoring partnerships. The MPP team solicited survey responses from mentoring partnerships already known to us, or suggested to us by partners, such as Disability Students Services providers and the IST's advisory board members. The MPP also announced the existence of the online surveys via listservs, group emails, and word-of-mouth.

The survey was distributed electronically via an online survey tool posted in an e-mail that introduced the project and requested participation. Disability Students Service providers throughout the University of Hawaii system, which includes 3 Universities and 7 Community Colleges throughout the state of Hawaii, distributed the survey instrument. In addition to the Disability Students Service providers, counselors, faculty, and other members of the university community distributed the survey or shared it with their colleagues and students.

When the MPP staff developed the survey (reproduced in Appendix B), the intent was to identify, clarify, and describe mentoring experiences provided by respondents to assess the postsecondary environment related to mentoring.

Survey Results
A total of 13 faculty and students responded to the survey. Although respondents were not asked to identify if they were faculty or students, from the information provided survey analysts could deduce that an equal number from each group answered the survey.

Eight major themes emerged from the survey respondents: 1) reciprocity, 2) informality, 3) longevity, 4) socializing, 5) technology, 6) collaboration, 7) commitment, and 8) transference.

Related to reciprocity, respondents indicated that they learned from each other. For example, one faculty member wrote:

> I am learning a lot about his learning style. We have discussed how much time it takes for him to have a text reader and how much pre-planning it takes for every single course. I love books on tape – so we have discussed similarities and differences between books on tape and text readers. I am learning much about technology from my mentee. He is an absolute Whiz when it comes to technology!

Another faculty respondent stated that the reciprocal mentoring included,

"Various writing and disability knowledge skills. RE: writing I've helped with other person's writing; I've been helped with publishing ideas."

Regarding informality, 10 of the 13 respondents largely considered their relationships more casual than formal. The survey only asked respondents to describe formal relationships, so less data was collected on this question, but one respondent did write, "Relationship initially formal moved to informal."

Longevity was demonstrated with all partnerships having been together for longer than one year. Building on the informal relationships already identified, respondents indicated they shared time together in such activities as having coffee, socializing at dinner, and watching movies.

Various methods of communication emerged as a result of the survey. The partnerships' communication involved face-to-face meetings, email, and phone conferences. This variety of communication methods demonstrated that time together was not solely based on face-to-face interactions and that technology was essential to support their relationships.

Similar to the theme of reciprocity, collaboration was emphasized by respondents and a value of cooperation was expressed, such as exploring "scholarly research, writing, professional presentations," and "usually mentee brings up subjects most concerned and we would work together, talking about situation, circumstances and real life experience."

Commitment was evident in the respondents' relationships. They shared a strong sense of loyalty and desire to create lasting relationships. For example, one faculty wrote:

> I first got to know the individual before he moved to Hawaii. Afterwards, I taught a class he took. Since then we have become friends. Mostly I would see him in informal situations and one of us would ask questions about issues of concern. Since then we have done one formal presentation together, he is a grad assistant in a class I take, and we have talked a lot about issues of Assistive Technology and disability culture.

This commitment was also expressed by the enthusiasm evident in the respondents' answers. Another faculty respondent declared, "These relationships started when XXXX was their instructor now it is as tutor, cheer leader [sic] and friend."

Finally, respondents were asked if their mentoring relationships would be transferable to other partnerships. One respondent stated, "We met as faculty/student, developed a relationship and have continued it after the faculty/student relationship concluded." Another wrote, "So far it is working with more than one individual and has in the past also." A third respondent concluded, "I think our mentorship model represents a good model for mutual, collaborative, learning."

Post-survey actions

Because the survey results yielded a small sample (n = 13), MPP staff sought other means to collect data. A website was created with the dual intent of supporting mentoring partnerships and as a resource to gather more information about these partnerships. Intended as an interactive tool to transcend geographic barriers, the mentoring website strives to create a community of mentoring partnerships.

Another means to gather information about mentoring relationships was to develop a second survey. This survey was included in the conference promotional materials of the approximately 700 attendees at the March 2007 Center on Disability Studies Pacific Rim Conference on Disabilities in Honolulu. Forty-six surveys were collected from this distribution. This survey could be taken by anyone attending the conference, so the scope extended beyond postsecondary education. (See Survey questions in Appendix C.)

Thirty-two of the 46 respondents indicated they had been in a mentoring relationship, with 20 in informal relationships and 12 in formal ones. Of these respondents, 23 indicated they were mentors and 10 indicated they were mentees. However, because respondents had the option of choosing more than one answer per question, the data reflects a total of 33, which exceeds the number of respondents for this item. Respondents were asked what constituted a formal mentoring relationship. Responses included, "It was [a] formal title for a school counseling program;" "within educational development certain

teachers mentored me as a student. I now do that as a teacher for both students and junior faculty;" a mentor is assigned by institution."

Ten of 32 respondents had been in their mentoring partnerships for one year or less. When all respondents were asked what kinds of activities were pursued in their mentoring relationships their replies included, "go to meetings together, email, work on projects together, social activities;" "career planning;" "helped with familiarizing with life in Hawaii;" "observe teaching;" and

> assisted mentor with multimedia community service projects, presenting at conferences. discussed my studies when I was a student and brainstormed ideas together. now that I've graduated and work full time, I continue to consult with this mentor and maintain a relationship with him.

Perhaps the most pertinent question on each of these surveys related to whether these mentoring relationships are transferable. On this survey item, respondents declared, "Yes compassionate communication is something everyone should practice;" "Yes, it is just like any other mentoring relationship, providing guidance to someone with less experience;" and yes, common goals, interests, and values and experiences contributed to our relationship. This shared perspective made it easier for us to communicate and interact at a deeper level. Ultimately it was realizing how important impact from a respected source that validated both of our roles, expectations, and outcomes.

Conclusions and Directions for Future Research

As stated at the outset, this paper shares preliminary findings. We used information and conclusions drawn from a literature review and website discussions, but the majority of information and conclusions shared were derived from surveys distributed via the University of Hawaii system and at the Pacific Rim Conference on Disabilities. Combining all survey instruments data from 60 respondents were collected, analyzed, and shared.

The most important conclusions may be the following:

Mentoring for students with disabilities seems to work equally well in formal and informal settings when

1. Successful mentoring evolves into friendships;
2. Students with disabilities are both mentees of faculty in areas of the faculty's expertise *and* mentors to faculty in areas about disability;
3. Successful mentoring partnerships may transfer skill sets to other arenas

The lack of existing research has extensive implications on future research. Possible suggestions for future research include combining the most salient questions from each survey and expanding the data source to as many respondents as appropriate throughout US colleges and universities thus building upon the research base presented in this article. This might be followed with focus groups or interviews to obtain richer data with more depth.

Each survey elicited useful information regarding the nature of mentoring relationships and the self-reported reasons they were successful and meaningful. Sharing perspectives, communicating and interacting are the essence of the mentoring relationship. To conclude with the words of one respondent describing a mentoring relationship, "This shared perspective made it easier for us to communicate and interact at a deeper level."

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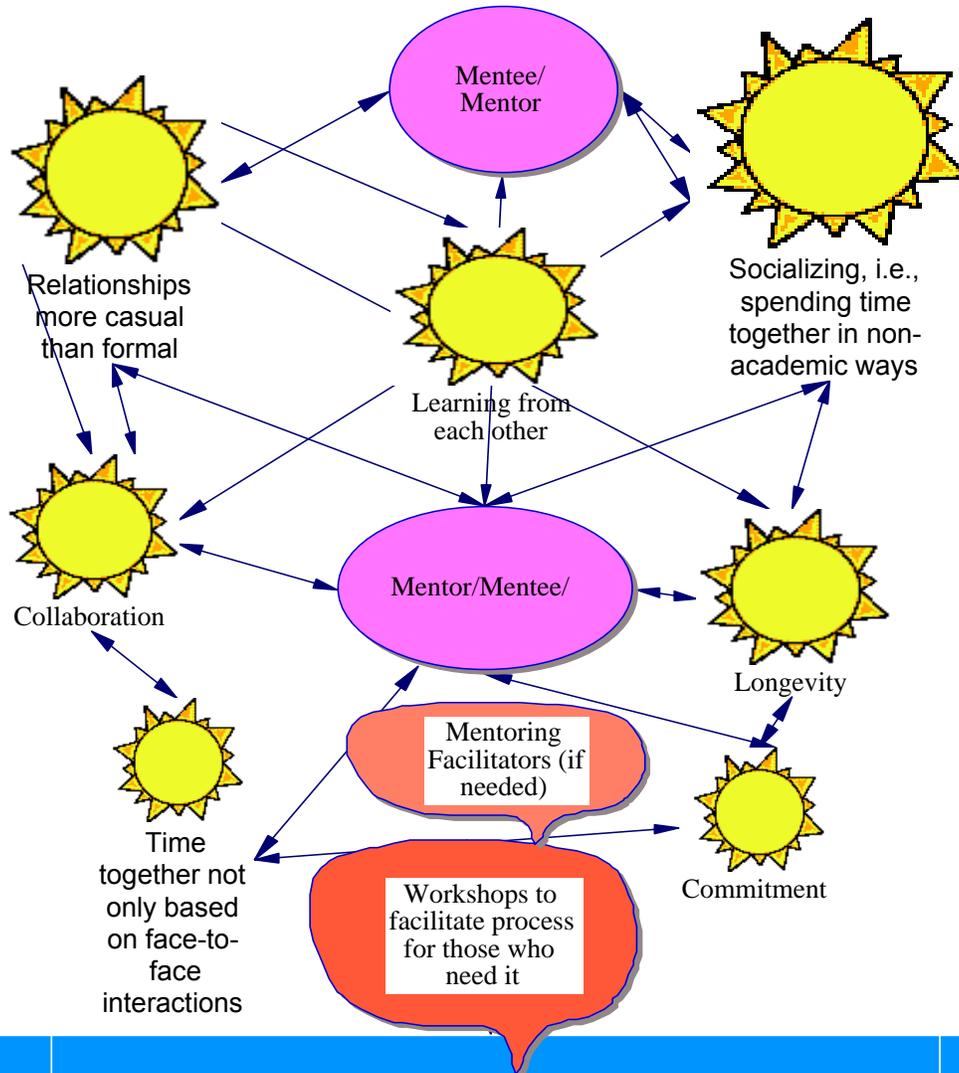
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Mentee/
Mentor

Relationships more casual than formal

Socializing, i.e., spending time together in non-academic ways

Learning from each other

Collaboration

Mentor/Mentee/

Longevity

Mentoring Facilitators (if needed)

Time together not only based on face-to-face interactions

Workshops to facilitate process for those who need it

Commitment

Mentoring Model

Mentoring is a dynamic, reciprocal, long-term formal, or informal, relationship that focuses on personal and/or professional development. A mentor is a sounding board and guide. Mentors provide perspective, resources, and ask thought-provoking questions. In the ideal mentoring relationship, mentors and mentees, learn and teach each other.

Appendix B

Mentoring Partnership Project Survey Items

Are you in an informal or formal mentoring relationship?

If it is a formal relationship, please describe what makes it formal

How long have you worked together?

Please identify activities or other things do you do together:

How do you work together?

What are you learning from each other?

Does the college's Disability Service Provider or any other 3rd party play a role in this

mentoring relationship?

Do you think your mentoring relationship would translate to other partnerships?

Why or Why not?

Please identify any unique features about your mentoring relationship:

Comments and feedback section.

May we contact you to follow up on this project? Please let us know if you are willing to participate in future activities (e.g., interviews, focus groups, surveys, etc.).

Appendix C

Pacific Rim Conference Survey Questions

1. Please identify your primary role related to disability. I am a(n): (circle all that apply):
a. Student/graduate assistant
b. Advocate
c. Instructor/professor/faculty member
d. Professional
e/f. Other:

2. I am /am not (please circle response) a person with a disability.

3. Are you (or have you ever been) in an informal or formal mentoring relationship?

4. In this relationship I was/am the:
a. Mentor
b. Mentee

5. If this was/is a formal relationship, please describe what makes it formal:

6. How long have you (did you) work together?

7. Please identify activities or other things you did/do together:

8. How did/do you work together? For example, face-to-face, email, phone, something else?

9. What did you learn/are you learning from each other?

10. Does/did a third party (e.g., college Disability Service Provider) play a role in this mentoring relationship?

11. Do you think components of your mentoring relationship would translate to other people's mentoring relationships? Why or Why not?

12. Please share any additional thoughts here:

13. May we contact you to follow up on this project? YES   or   NO   Please let us know if you are willing to be contacted by MPP staff regarding your participation in mentoring activities (for example, via email, interviews, focus groups, surveys, etc.). If so, please include your preferred contact information and the best time to contact you below: