

First things first: Assessing mentoring in the first-year experience begins with an exploration of the meaning of mentoring

SKIDMORE

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Mentoring: A valuable part of the FYE

Mentoring first-year students, by both faculty and peer mentors, has emerged as a *key activity* to support students' success. As a developmental relationship that offers career/instrumental functions as well as psychosocial support, research has demonstrated that mentoring can foster:

- A successful transition to college
- Role modeling
- Personal development
- Academic success (higher GPAs, improved retention rates, more learning)

Given its importance in the first year, there is a need to assess mentoring in FYE programs.

The problem

There is a great deal of *conceptual confusion* about the meaning of mentoring – in the literature and among those who act as mentors.

Studies have described *different functions* of mentoring including career development, psychosocial support, sharing expertise, providing direction, building competence, skill development, giving feedback, friendship, protection, encouragement, advice, access to resources, clarify goals, coaching, role modeling, socialization, instruction (Chao, 1997; Jacobi, 1991; Kram, 1985, Noe, 1988, Ostroff & Kozlowski, 1993; Sanchez et al., 2006; Tenenbaum et al., 2001).

Ongoing ambiguity over a term that encompasses so many roles *challenges researchers* who study mentoring and *makes it difficult to explain* what is a mentor (Harmon, 2006).

With variations in the meaning of the term from author-to-author and program-to-program, it is preemptive to assess mentoring without first developing a clear sense of what mentoring means in your institution.

The purpose

To report on one institution's approach to define the meaning of mentoring in their FYE and offer it as a case study on the approach for use at other institutions.

Method and findings

The steps to collect data on the meaning of mentoring in Skidmore's FYE were:

1. Review the various definitions of mentoring in the *literature* and the functions associated with them.
2. Identify a *list of functions* that is extensive and that includes definitions for item development (see examples next column)
3. *Develop a survey* based on those functions. Pilot-test the survey and customize the wording to the institution's FYE. Present faculty mentors and peer mentors the survey of 26 functions of mentoring and ask them:

- Faculty: *What was the meaning of mentoring in your experience of the FYE? Referring to the same functions, which are better suited to the role of a peer mentor?*
- Peer mentors: *From your own experience as an FYE peer mentor, to what extent do you agree/disagree that this is what peer mentoring means?*

4. *Analyze results* based on a 53% response rate (faculty) and a 49% response rate (peer mentors) by examining frequencies, means, and distribution of responses.
5. *Share findings* with FYE administrators, FYE faculty, and the college community. For example...

- Faculty mentoring includes academic goal-setting/tracking, providing feedback, & observing, but it does not include befriending or supporting first-year students.
- Peer mentoring includes helping on assignments, affirming, & socializing. But befriending is questioned as part of the peer mentor's role.
- Mentoring in Skidmore's FYE *does not* include collaborating, personal goal-setting/tracking, confidence building, or sheltering.

Sample items to measure mentoring functions

Learning functions

Academic goal-setting: The faculty mentor helps the student establish academic goals.

Modeling: The peer mentor is a role model of appropriate learning-related behaviors for the student.

Support functions

Befriending: The peer mentor befriends the student by developing a strong connection with him/her.

Confidence building: The faculty mentor communicates with the student in ways that build the student's esteem/confidence.

College transition/progression functions

Introducing: The faculty mentor introduces the student to offices, people, departments, or services on campus to help him/her succeed in his/her college career.

Socializing: The peer mentor helps the student get oriented to life at college.

Implications

The meaning of mentoring varies by institutional context, so defining its functions is a critical, first-step of assessment. If not defined, assessment efforts ask questions such as "How well did your mentor provide you with role modeling (or encouragement, or socialization)?" when those functions may not be associated with mentoring at that particular institution. FYE programs can use this same method to:

- *open a dialogue* about the meaning of mentoring at their institution
- *to fine-tune program materials, FYE orientations, & mentor training sessions* (handbooks, training, pamphlets, lectures)
- *to help mentors understand* what it is they are supposed to be doing when mentoring first-year students
- *as a first step in assessing* mentoring (once you know the meaning of mentoring at your institution, then you can evaluate the extent to which each function is being carried out)

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Summary

Mentoring first-year students, by both faculty members and peer mentors, has emerged as a key activity to support students' success. As a developmental relationship that offers career/instrumental functions as well as psychosocial support, research has demonstrated that mentoring can foster a successful transition to college, role modeling, personal development, academic success, higher GPAs, improved retention rates, and more learning (Bierema & Merriam, 2002; Campbell & Campbell, 1997; Colton, Connor, Shultz, & Easter, 1999; Harmon, 2006; Keup & Barefoot, 2005; Logan, Salisbury-Glennon, & Spence, 2000; Schwitzer & Thomas, 1998; Scott & Homant, 2007; Sorrentino, 2006; Terrion & Leonard, 2007). Given the importance of mentoring to the experiences of incoming students, there is a need to assess mentoring in FYE programs. However, the term "mentoring" suffers from conceptual confusion, so efforts to "assess" mentoring without developing a clear sense of what mentoring means are preemptive. This session reports on one college's approach to define the meaning of mentoring in their FYE. Utilization of this approach can assist other institutions who utilize first-year mentoring with enrichment and assessment.

The problem and purpose statement

A thorough review of the literature illustrates there is a great deal of conceptual confusion about the meaning of mentoring. Merriam's opinion that "the phenomenon on mentoring is not clearly conceptualized, leading to confusion as to just what is being measured or offered as an ingredient for success" (1983, p. 169) is still prevalent in the more recent literature on mentoring. Consider, for example, the peer mentoring relationship. According to Harmon (2006), "explaining the concept of peer mentoring has not been easy, often due to the great confusion over the varying peer educator roles on college campus" (p. 56). In addition, Campbell and Campbell (1997) suggest that the literature surrounding mentoring has not clarified the definition of what mentoring is, resulting in a "confusing array of studies loosely aligned with the concept of mentoring" (p. 728). It is argued that this ongoing ambiguity over a term that encompasses so many roles challenges researchers who study mentoring and makes it difficult to explain what is a mentor (Harmon, 2006). Therefore, this session reports on one institution's approach to define the meaning of mentoring in their FYE and offers it as a case study for use at other institutions.

Method

One, the various definitions of mentoring in the literature and the functions associated with them were reviewed. A model (D'Abate, Eddy, & Tannenbaum, 2003) was chosen that provides an extensive listing of 23 functions with definitions that could be used for survey-item development. These 23 functions of "developmental interactions" were adapted and expanded to 26 functions (using the college's published materials on FYE program offerings and input from a pilot test with a 10-person holdout sample) that more closely represented FYE activities as well as the institution's context. The list of functions adapted for faculty mentors appears in Table 1; a similar set was adapted for peer mentors.

Two, a set of surveys were developed (using 5-point, Likert-type scales from strongly agree to strongly disagree) based on the functions described above. Faculty mentors were surveyed using a websurvey; peer mentors, however, completed a paper-and-pencil survey during a weekly seminar course that they attended as part of the FYE program. Faculty were asked, "What was the meaning of mentoring in your experience of the FYE?" And "Referring to the same functions, which are better suited to the role of a peer mentor?" Peer mentors were asked, "From your own experience as an FYE peer mentor, to what extent do you agree/disagree that this is what peer mentoring means?"

Third, the data was analyzed based on a 53% response rate (faculty) and a 49% response rate (peer mentors) by examining frequencies, means, and distribution of responses. The hope was that the data would shed light on questions such as: What is the meaning of mentoring in the faculty's experience of the FYE? And what is the peer mentor's role? Tables 2 and 3 summarize these findings.

Findings

To summarize, Table 2 is based on the faculty's own experiences as mentors (with the exception of the column to the far right which is discussed in the following section). As a faculty, they agree that mentoring includes providing feedback, teaching, sharing information, directing, academic goal-setting, advising, encouraging, aiding, academic goal-tracking, modeling, problem solving, introducing, and observing. However, they do not agree on whether or not mentoring includes socializing, affirming, confidence building, providing practical application, helping on assignments, calming, collaborating, advocating, personal goal-setting, personal goal-tracking, befriending, sheltering, or supporting. For example, "academic goal setting" received a mean score of 4.54 (N=40) with 36 participants (93%) moderately/strongly agreeing that the faculty mentor helps the student establish academic goals, but "befriending" received a mean score of only 2.84 (N=39) with 36% of participants moderately/strongly disagreeing that the faculty mentor befriends the student by developing a strong connection with him/her.

According to the faculty, the peer mentor's role might be better suited to take on a number of mentoring functions (modeling, introducing, socializing, affirming, helping on assignments, befriending, supporting), regardless of the fact that faculty have sometimes included these functions in their own mentoring roles. This further clarifies the definition of mentoring for faculty as one that includes sharing information, teaching, advising, providing feedback, and academic goal-setting/tracking, but that may not ideally include modeling or introducing students.

When compared to responses from the 22 peer mentors who also completed surveys (Table 3), findings show that the peer mentor's own experiences of mentoring in the FYE led them to similar conclusions. Their responses were highly skewed toward moderately/strongly agree with high mean responses for these same functions (helping on assignments, modeling, affirming, introducing, and socializing). Apparently, faculty and peer mentors agree that these functions are better suited to the peer mentor's role, rather than the faculty mentor's role. However, the faculty felt befriending and supporting were better suited to the peer mentors – peer mentors tended to be mixed on these functions, each with a mean response of 3.82 and responses distributed between moderately disagree to strongly agree.

Implications for Practice

The meaning of mentoring varies by institutional context, so defining its functions is a critical, first-step of assessment. If not defined, assessment efforts preemptively ask questions such as "How well did your mentor provide you with role modeling (or encouragement, or socialization)?" when those functions may not be associated with mentoring at that particular institution. FYE programs can use this same approach to open a dialogue about the meaning of mentoring at their institution; fine-tune their program materials, FYE orientations, and mentor training sessions (handbooks, training, pamphlets, lectures); help mentors understand what it is they are supposed to be doing when mentoring first-year students; and/or as a first step in assessing mentoring (once you know the meaning of mentoring at your institution, then you can evaluate the extent to which each function is being carried out).

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Table 1: Single item measures for functions relating to faculty mentoring

First things first – FYE conference handout

Faculty Mentor Activities	Description and Item for Measurement
Learning Functions: The following behaviors may be exhibited by the faculty mentor to support the student's learning.	
Collaborating	The faculty mentor and student work together in a collaborative manner.
Directing	The faculty mentor provides direction to the student.
Academic goal-setting	The faculty mentor helps the student establish academic goals.
Academic goal-tracking	The faculty mentor helps the student track progress toward his/her academic goals.
Personal goal-setting	The faculty mentor helps the student establish personal aspirations.
Personal goal-tracking	The faculty mentor helps the student track progress toward his/her personal aspirations.
Helping on assignments	The faculty mentor provides the student with help on assignments for the Scribner Seminar in the form of task assistance or technical support.
Modeling	The faculty mentor is a role model of appropriate learning-related behaviors for the student.
Observing	The faculty mentor observes the student in a learning environment (e.g., Scribner Seminar) for developmental purposes (to offer suggestions or tips for improving learning).
Problem solving	The faculty mentor works with the student to examine and resolve any problems that may arise related to the student's learning.
Providing practical application	The faculty mentor provides experiences for the student to apply what is being learned in the Scribner Seminar
Providing feedback	The faculty mentor provides constructive criticism to the student.
Sharing information	The faculty mentor shares information with the student that may help in the student's learning.
Teaching	The faculty mentor instructs/teaches the student to help him/her build expertise, skills, or knowledge.
Support functions: The following behaviors may be exhibited by the faculty mentor to provide support to the student.	
Affirming	The faculty mentor communicates with the student in ways that offer acceptance to the student.
Aiding	The faculty mentor helps the student when s/he is facing challenges.
Befriending (connecting on a personal level)	The faculty mentor befriends the student by developing a strong connection with him/her.
Calming	The faculty mentor tries to calm the student to reduce his/her anxiety/stress.
Confidence building	The faculty mentor communicates with the student in ways that build the student's esteem/confidence.
Advising	The faculty mentor provides the student with advice/guidance.
Encouraging	The faculty mentor encourages the student.
Supporting	The faculty mentor provides the student with personal support.
College transition/progression functions: The following behaviors may be exhibited by the faculty mentor to assist the student's transition to (and progress in) his/her college career.	
Advocating	The faculty mentor acts as an advocate for the student in his/her college career.
Introducing	The faculty mentor introduces the student to offices, people, departments, or services on campus to help him/her succeed in his/her college career.
Sheltering	The faculty mentor protects the student in ways that will help him/her succeed in college.
Socializing	The faculty mentor helps the student get oriented to life at college.

Table 2: The meaning of mentoring in the FYE in the faculty’s experience and which functions are better suited to peer mentor’s role

Function of Mentoring	This is the meaning of mentoring in my experience of the FYE				This function is better suited to the role of a peer mentor (according to the faculty)
	Moderately or strongly disagree (1-2)	Neither agree nor disagree (3)	Moderately or strongly agree (4-5)	Mean response	
Functions that are clearly part of mentoring: High means and consistently rated as moderately/strongly agree					
Providing feedback	0% (0)	5% (2)	95% (37)	4.72 ^a	19% (7) ^c
Teaching	0% (0)	5% (2)	95% (37)	4.69 ^a	8% (3) ^c
Sharing information	0% (0)	5% (2)	95% (37)	4.59 ^a	44% (16) ^c
Directing	0% (0)	5% (2)	95% (38)	4.55 ^a	14% (5) ^c
Academic goal-setting	0% (0)	8% (3)	93% (36)	4.54 ^a	19% (7) ^c
Advising	3% (1)	3% (1)	95% (37)	4.51 ^b	24% (9) ^d
Encouraging	0% (0)	8% (3)	92% (36)	4.46 ^b	51% (19) ^d
Aiding	0% (0)	3% (1)	97% (38)	4.44 ^b	43% (16) ^d
Academic goal-tracking	0% (0)	10% (4)	87% (34)	4.36 ^a	11% (4) ^c
<i>Modeling</i>	5% (2)	13% (5)	82% (32)	4.28 ^a	83% (30) ^c
Problem solving	0% (0)	18% (7)	81% (31)	4.21 ^a	31% (11) ^c
<i>Introducing</i>	5% (2)	15% (6)	80% (31)	4.18 ^b	68% (25) ^d
Observing	0% (0)	18% (7)	82% (32)	4.13 ^a	11% (4) ^c
Functions that are unclear: No consistent rating pattern					
<i>Socializing</i>	13% (5)	13% (5)	74% (29)	3.95 ^b	95% (35) ^d
<i>Affirming</i>	8% (3)	32% (12)	61% (23)	3.79 ^b	60% (22) ^d
Confidence building	10% (4)	15% (6)	75% (29)	3.79 ^b	51% (19) ^d
Providing practical application	8% (3)	38% (15)	54% (21)	3.77 ^a	33% (12) ^c
<i>Helping on assignments</i>	16% (6)	18% (7)	66% (26)	3.72 ^a	77% (26) ^c
Calming	14% (5)	24% (9)	83% (24)	3.61 ^b	57% (21) ^d
Collaborating	18% (7)	31% (12)	51% (20)	3.44 ^a	58% (21) ^c
Advocating	16% (6)	37% (14)	47% (18)	3.39 ^b	11% (4) ^d
Personal goal-setting	34% (13)	18% (7)	47% (18)	3.03 ^a	56% (20) ^c
Personal goal-tracking	33% (13)	21% (8)	46% (18)	3.03 ^a	33% (12) ^c
<i>Befriending (i.e., connecting on a personal level)</i>	36% (14)	26% (10)	37% (14)	2.84 ^b	84% (31) ^d
Sheltering	37% (14)	39% (15)	24% (9)	2.84 ^b	32% (12) ^d
<i>Supporting</i>	42% (16)	21% (8)	37% (14)	2.74 ^b	78% (29) ^d

Notes: Functions are listed in descending order by means. Values in parentheses indicate frequencies. Percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number. ^a indicates N=40. ^b indicates N=39. ^c indicates N=36. ^d indicates N=37. *Italics* indicate functions better suited to the peer mentor’s role, according to the faculty mentor.

Table 3: How peer mentors rate the functions of mentoring in their experience of the FYE

Function of Mentoring	This is the meaning of mentoring in my experience of the FYE					Mean response
	Strongly disagree (1)	Moderately disagree (2)	Neither agree nor disagree (3)	Moderately agree (4)	Strongly agree (5)	
Learning Functions (N=22)						
Collaborating	0	3	1	11	7	4.0
<i>Directing</i>	0	0	1	8	13	4.55
Academic goal-setting	0	2	4	12	4	3.81
Academic goal-tracking	1	0	6	14	1	3.64
Personal goal-setting †	0	4	6	12	0	3.36†
Personal goal-tracking†	1	1	10	10	0	3.32†
<i>Helping on assignments</i>	1	0	1	9	9	4.25
<i>Modeling</i>	0	0	1	4	17	4.72
Observing	0	0	7	10	5	3.91
Problem solving	0	2	1	10	9	4.18
Providing practical application	0	0	6	8	8	4.09
Providing feedback	0	1	3	13	5	4.0
Sharing information †	0	6	0	0	16	4.73†
Teaching	2	1	7	8	4	3.50
Support functions (N=22)						
<i>Affirming</i>	0	0	3	2	17	4.64
<i>Aiding</i>	0	0	2	6	14	4.55
Befriending (i.e., connecting on a personal level) †	0	1	7	9	5	3.82†
Calming	0	0	5	9	8	4.14
Confidence building	0	0	4	7	11	4.32
<i>Advising</i>	0	0	2	4	16	4.64
<i>Encouraging</i>	0	0	1	3	18	4.77
Supporting †	0	1	7	9	5	3.82†
College transition/progression functions (N=22)						
Advocating	0	2	8	8	4	3.64
<i>Introducing</i>	0	0	2	5	15	4.59
Sheltering *	1	4	12	5	0	2.95*
<i>Socializing</i>	0	0	2	8	12	4.45

Notes: Except for the mean response, values indicate frequencies. *Italics* indicate functions better suited to the peer mentor's role, according to the peer mentor. † indicates functions that are unclear if they are better suited to the peer mentor's role, according to the peer mentor. Asterisks (*) indicate functions that are not suited to the peer mentor's role, according to the peer mentor.