



Mentoring Students Can Make a Difference

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As educators, we can help our students lift their sights to see beyond graduation. We can identify ways to be more effective mentors with our students, but this will require patience and persistence. Mentoring students calls for our best innovation and intentional efforts.

Many college students face personal challenges that can make their higher education experience difficult, including mental health concerns, belonging fears, loneliness, and the impact of social media. While instructors face a changing university culture that may be quite different from what they experienced as students, most teachers can recall a mentor who made a positive difference in their life.

We can help shape the future as we share our knowledge and experience with students and improve the trajectory of their lives. We offer some suggestions for possibly improving student mentoring.

Mentor one on one. Even in large classes, instructors can identify students to connect with personally. Some instructors have seen success texting or calling individual students during the semester to welcome them to the course and provide encouragement. While the calls are brief, they can help students better relate to the course and the instructor. Students from nontraditional backgrounds, including first-generation college attendees, may need additional attention. Something as simple as knowing a student's name can make a positive difference in their university experience.

Some students may find managing a traditional university schedule difficult, including time management and correctly using technology. Faculty mentors can guide students toward available campus resources to help them succeed.

Mentor through partnering. Meaningful mentoring opportunities can arise as instructors partner with students to identify personal goals for their course. As students work with their instructors, they can come to view them as mentoring partners who can assist them in achieving academic success. Such mentoring can empower students to achieve more than they would have otherwise, and their learning experience can become more meaningful.

Mentor by modeling. Teachers are inherently role models. In the classroom, professors may share personal experiences that provide opportunities for better connecting with their students. As students see instructors as real people who have successfully navigated struggles and challenges like those they currently face, they gain perspective and encouragement to better face their own academic and personal difficulties. Remind students that persistence and resilience can help them accomplish their goals. Instructors who share how they managed a poor grade in a class or a challenging personal situation while continuing in their studies can help students who may feel overwhelmed as they navigate similar obstacles.

Mentor with intention. Recognizing that time is a precious commodity, instructors should focus on optimizing mentoring opportunities with individual students. Research has shown that the quality rather than quantity of interaction is what matters most in mentoring (Hernandez et al., 2017). Even though an instructor's interactions with a student may be limited in scope or duration, they can still have a lasting impact on that student's academic performance if the mentoring is directed and intentional. Instructors can feel encouraged that they do not need to have frequent or lengthy meetings with students to have an impact.

Mentor with empathy. While we want to achieve our courses' stated learning outcomes, our students will benefit as we mentor them with empathy. This will include assisting an increasing number of students with university accommodations successfully through our courses. This may also include knowing how to support students through personal crises, such as a death in their family, divorce, accidents, or illness.

An increasing number of students deal with social anxiety and depression (Roche et al., 2022). How we choose to offer mentoring support to struggling students and possibly refer them to professional university support services may have lasting consequences. Some possible tell-tale signs to watch for include a change in attendance patterns, a marked reduction in submitting coursework on time, and

failure to reply to instructor or teaching assistant messages. Ideally, we will mentor students with empathy by encouraging them to complete necessary coursework and helping them find their own ways to succeed.

Mentor through challenges. Effective student mentoring is not without challenges. Large classes and heavy teaching demands can make personalized student mentoring more challenging. Mentoring students in online classes will often require additional creativity and time to be effective. Timely, targeted, and ongoing training to assist faculty members in effectively mentoring students is often lacking. You may wish to request additional training from your faculty support office or center for teaching and learning.

Intentional mentoring can even benefit students who do not seek help from instructors. Research has shown that mentoring positively influences students even if they did not seek it (Cox et al., 2014). Instructors can acknowledge students in class or by comments on assignments. Instructors can incorporate student questions into lesson content, validating their concerns. Instructors can respond to emails promptly. While some students may not accept the mentoring offered to them and may not come to office hours or seek out a deeper relationship with an instructor, in-class intentional mentoring can often help those students.

While mentoring can take many forms, we can and should see ourselves as mentors to help our students become more resilient. As faculty members, we share subject expertise with students as part of our weekly lessons, but we can also share appropriate portions of ourselves. The time we take to help them find solutions to their academic challenges can have lasting benefits to their persistence in achieving their educational goals. You may never know when a brief encounter with a student may make a significant impact. We can make a difference if we take time to mentor our students.

References

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