

Appreciating Our Interactions with Freshmen

By Glenn Omatsu

Since 1995, I've had the privilege and honor of teaching freshmen. I consider it a privilege because not many faculty have this opportunity. I consider it an honor because not many faculty appreciate the challenge, the excitement and the joy connected with interacting with freshmen daily.

The freshmen that I interact with are members of the EOP Bridge community and are the first from their low-income families to attend college. In addition, most are "special-admit" students with high potential – i.e., they are freshmen with strong motivation to do well in college despite having low grades in high school. The EOP Bridge Transitional Program is built on a foundation of mentoring, and through membership in EOP the freshmen in my classes are part of a powerful, supportive community.

The following are quick suggestions for faculty and peer mentors who work with freshmen. The suggestions are based on my own experiences and from research in the fields of teaching-learning, mentoring, and cognitive science.

- ***Freshmen want to be involved in communities (and relationships) that make learning possible.*** For faculty and peer mentors, it's important to help freshmen forge a community with each other in the classroom and within the overall program they are part of. To promote relationship-building and community-building, faculty and peer mentors need to infuse mentoring into all daily interactions with students, especially the smallest of interactions. For faculty, this means incorporating mentoring into their work as teachers and scholars. For peer mentors, this means realizing that some of their most powerful mentoring moments may occur in small conversations with students outside the classroom. Faculty and peer mentors also need to remember that building positive relationships and a close and supportive community takes time, especially in terms of dealing with issues of trust in a new environment.

- ***Freshmen are very observant and in their early stages as college students learn a lot through their observations and interactions. Specifically, they learn about what a mentor is, not by what mentors say but by observing what mentors do.*** For the first few days (and weeks) in a new class of freshmen, faculty and peer mentors may say that their students don't say very much. However, it's more accurate to state that freshmen are observing a lot and reaching conclusions based on what they see. Thus, for faculty and peer mentors, it's important to transform their observations into teaching moments. For example, most freshmen begin a class with only a vague notion of what mentors are. They learn about mentors not by what faculty and peer mentors say but by what they see faculty and peer mentors do, especially in interactions with students. Students in initial class sessions notice whether peer mentors smile or do not smile, greet or do not greet

students, and pay attention or look bored during class sessions. From these observations, students draw conclusions about peer mentors and the meaning of mentoring.

- ***Freshmen want to be treated with respect as young adults and not as “kids.”*** It is not unusual to hear a handful of peer mentors in private conversations refer to the freshmen they’re working with as “kids” even though peer mentors are only a few years older than freshmen. These same peer mentors would be horrified if faculty in their upper-division classes referred to them as children. More often than not, words are connected to mindsets and mindsets influence behavior. Freshmen – like all college students – want to be respected. And freshmen – like other adults – are able to discern which people treat them with respect and which people do not.

- ***Freshmen (and, in fact, all people) don’t learn things linearly.*** Although this may seem self-evident, it’s important to realize that our university (and the U.S. education system as a whole) is structured around a model of linear learning. For example, a college degree is based on the accumulation of units of credit, with each course having specific learning outcomes. Majors involve completing a sequence of courses, which are organized into levels based on linear progression. Of course, in reality, human learning is marked by moving both forward and backward, by experiencing leaps in consciousness, by layering new levels of understanding on previous knowledge, and by both learning and un-learning.

- ***Freshmen are grappling with the contradiction of striving to become independent while also realizing that they are dependent on others.*** Many freshmen believe that they have to deal with this contradiction by themselves and that achieving independence means not asking anyone for help. Mentors can play a powerful role in helping freshmen reframe this contradiction. Mentors can show how independence comes from using the help of others.

- ***Freshmen eagerly want to transform themselves from high school students into college students by developing better thinking skills and new behaviors.*** To help freshmen transform themselves, faculty and peer mentors should watch for teaching and mentoring moments, both small and large. For example, while freshmen recognize that their decisions have consequences, they sometimes don’t see the consequences until after they have happened. Mentors who have been in similar situations can help them improve thinking. Similarly, to deal with dilemmas in their lives, freshmen usually perceive only two alternatives, an “either-or” solution. Mentors can help them explore other possibilities. Faculty and peer mentors should also watch for opportunities to help freshmen develop the higher-level qualities of compassion and empathy, which have been called essential survival skills for human beings in the twentieth century.

- ***Freshmen are strongly influenced by peers.*** According to researchers, freshmen are more strongly influenced by peers than by professors, peer mentors, or parents. Obviously, some peer influence can be harmful for freshmen, such as prioritizing partying above academics. However, faculty and peer mentors can also harness the powerful impact of peer influence to help freshmen. One way is to help freshmen build a

supportive community in their classroom and within their program to help all students do well.

It's also important to recognize that freshman cohorts are dynamic and rapidly changing. Thus, faculty and peer mentors should watch for emerging trends. For example, in the past two years, EOP Bridge leaders have identified three new trends that have reshaped our strategies to help freshmen succeed. I describe these new trends tentatively, relying on observations from faculty, peer mentors, and leaders in our EOP Bridge Program.

- ***Freshmen spend a lot of time socializing with friends electronically but may need the help of mentors to learn how to socialize in face-to-face settings.*** Perhaps as a consequence of social networking media, freshmen today spend a lot of time interacting with friends electronically. However, freshmen may need the help of mentors to learn how to socialize in face-to-face settings, especially with new people. This summer, one freshman told me that she wanted to talk to a mentor but didn't know how to start the conversation. Another freshman said she was surprised when another student was offended by a comment she made during a group discussion; she said that she regularly texted and posted the same type of comment to her friends and none of them ever felt offended.

- ***Freshmen enter college after spending most of their lives in K-12 schools based on the policy of No Child Left Behind.*** In recent years, there have been numerous reports about how No Child Left Behind has influenced teaching practices (e.g., "teaching to the test.") However, there have been fewer observations about how this policy shapes students' approaches to learning. This past summer, one of our Bridge faculty stated that several students in his class were only focused on getting the "right answers" to questions he asked in class and became frustrated when he told them that he was more interested in having them explain the thinking behind their own answers. In his classroom, like in other Bridge classrooms, students hear that answers to questions are just the beginning of their quest for knowledge in college. However, this past summer it took longer than in previous summers for some freshmen to accept this perspective.

- ***Increasing numbers of freshmen enter college with a feeling of entitlement, which affects how they initially perceive resources and opportunities.*** EOP Transitional Programs Director Shiva Parsa contrasts recent EOP freshmen with past cohorts in terms of changing attitudes and behaviors. She states that growing numbers of new EOP freshmen – including "special-admit" freshmen – come into the program with a feeling of entitlement, mirroring a developing trend for freshmen in general. This sense of entitlement affects how EOP freshmen perceive resources and opportunities. They initially don't appreciate resources provided to them, including peer mentors. They also believe they will automatically receive more chances if they fail classes. EOP leaders realize that this sense of entitlement is harmful for students, especially in this time of diminishing opportunities. Thus, EOP leaders have begun to think about ways to address this new trend through its student-centered and innovative program design, linking together admissions, student services, and academics – all built on a foundation of mentoring.