

“Mentoring on the Run”

CSUN’s Response to the Challenge of Mentoring at a Large, Commuter Campus

- **What is meant by “mentoring on the run”?**
- **What is a “community of mentors,” and why is creating this community important for the mission of mentoring at CSUN?**
- **What is meant by promoting a “culture of mentoring” on our campus?**

“Mentoring on the run” is the creative practice developed by some CSUN faculty and staff who have learned to infuse mentoring into their everyday interactions with students, such as through teaching in the classroom or through academic advisement. Mentoring for these individuals is not something extra or something that is done on special occasions; mentoring is integral to their relationships with students. Thus, rather than representing a stunted form of mentoring or a temporary stopgap, “mentoring on the run” is an innovative approach that is well-suited to the difficult challenge of mentoring on our campus. In recent years, the Faculty Mentor Program has highlighted this approach, educated members of our campus community about its significance, and trained faculty, staff, and peer mentors in the art of infusing mentoring into their daily interactions with students. Moreover, to enhance the effectiveness of “mentoring on the run,” we have begun to build a “community of mentors” — i.e., a network of resources to support the work of individual mentors — and promote a “culture of mentoring” through training workshops and the creation of several resource booklets. Finally, we realize that one of the most difficult tasks facing the FMP is to overcome the common misperception on our campus that mentoring can only occur in formal, one-to-one matching programs.

Building a “community of mentors” is crucial for providing a network of support and solidarity for mentors on our campus. Because traditionally mentoring is perceived as a one-to-one activity solely between a mentor and a mentee, the mission of mentoring at a large, commuter campus can feel overwhelming for an individual mentor. However, in reality, mentoring relationships are developed and are carried out within a community of other mentors. In other words, individual mentors function within a community of other mentors. They draw support from this network, gain access to resources, and enhance their effectiveness through this web of mentors. Building this “community of mentors” is especially important for carrying out “mentoring on the run.” Surrounding students with a “community of mentors” — all of whom are linked in an informal network or web — is a way of not only providing support and resources but also insuring that mentoring relationships are developed nurtured at a large, commuter campus.

Building this “community of mentors” helps to promote a “culture of mentoring” on our campus. By a “culture of mentoring,” we refer to the awareness within each mentor of how each interaction with a student is potentially a mentoring opportunity. Thus, we can promote this “culture of mentoring” on our campus by infusing consciousness in faculty,

staff, and peer mentors of the mentoring opportunities embedded in each interaction with students inside and outside the classroom, such as through teaching, research collaboration, advisement, and other daily activities. Mentoring, in other words, does not require participation in a one-to-one matching program. Mentoring does not occur only at a special time of the day, such as a formal meeting with a student. Mentoring opportunities are all around us. Consciousness of these mentoring opportunities helps to promote a “culture of mentoring” on our campus.

In short, our approach to meeting the special mentoring needs of CSUN in this period revolves around three organizing principles: emphasizing the significance of “mentoring on the run” and training faculty, staff, and peer mentors in this approach; building a “community of mentors” to provide a network of support and resources for individual mentors; and promoting a “culture of mentoring” on our campus to infuse consciousness of mentoring into all aspects of faculty-staff-student interactions. These three organizing principles help us identify the strengths of mentoring on our campus and point to the direction for future growth. Furthermore, as faculty, staff and peer mentors on our campus develop greater familiarity with these three organizing principles, our CSUN community has the potential to significantly contribute to the storehouse of literature on mentoring. Currently, most case studies of mentoring in higher education examine formal, one-to-one matching programs. There is a scarcity of research dealing with informal mentoring at large, commuter campuses where the creation of a “culture of mentoring,” the building of a “community of mentors” and the approach of learning how to effectively “mentor on the run” are the keys for meeting the needs of students. Thus, our current explorations into new forms of mentoring at CSUN may have implications far beyond our campus.

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Notes about “Mentoring on the Run”

“Mentoring on the run” is a new approach, and even faculty who are supportive of the general idea of mentoring will not necessarily quickly understand the significance of the new approach. Thus, we need to take a patient but persistent approach in promoting “mentoring on the run.”

Moreover, involving as many people as possible in the dialogue about defining “mentoring on the run” is crucial for creating a mentoring approach that is best suited to the conditions on our campus. At this time, no one person can fully show the ways that mentoring can be infused into all faculty and staff interactions with students. These ideas will emerge only as we involve more people in discussions, collect their experiences, and learn from their insights. In the process of involving more and more people in this dialogue about mentoring, we will also promote a “culture of mentoring” on our campus and create a “community of mentors.”

At this time at CSUN, at least five barriers block faculty understanding of “mentoring on the run.” In our work with colleagues, we need to address these barriers.

- 1) Top administrators on this campus do not mention mentoring when they discuss campus strategic goals, such as increasing student academic achievement and graduation rates, promoting diversity and equity, and improving the campus climate. (Hopefully, we can begin to change this situation by educating top administrators about the importance of mentoring for accomplishing these objectives and encouraging them to begin mentioning mentoring in their conversations and writings.)
- 2) Most faculty and administrators see mentoring in terms of a traditional model: i.e., participation in formal, one-to-one matching programs. It is very difficult for most to conceptualize mentoring outside this box.
- 3) Given their heavy workloads, most faculty — even those who are already great mentors for their students — feel that they “don’t have the time to do mentoring.” In other words, they are influenced by the traditional concept of mentoring (i.e., participation in formal, one-to-one matching programs) and have difficulty recognizing what Provost Kennedy calls the “little moments of mentoring” that are always present in our classrooms and in our daily interactions with students. Carrying out these “little moments of mentoring” requires not more time or more work but a change in consciousness. As faculty, we need to become more aware of how the little things that we do — and don’t do — in our classrooms are closely observed by students, even if they don’t say anything about them to us.
- 4) Because of the prevailing model of mentoring (i.e., one-to-one matching programs), most faculty see mentoring as a set of practices that can be separated from academic coursework. Thus, even those who are open to infusing mentoring into their courses feel that they must reduce academic content or their academic expectations for students. Similarly, some faculty incorrectly interpret the call to infuse mentoring into their classes as a call to “lower academic standards.”
- 5) As faculty and administrators begin to grasp the significance of “mentoring on the run,” most become intrigued by the approach but also wonder how it can be done.

The following activities are ways that I have tried to infuse mentoring into my classrooms. Currently, I teach mainly “special admit” freshmen; in contrast, five years ago, I mainly taught upper-division students, graduate students, and Credential students. The “special admit” freshmen I now teach are “high potential” students but come into my classes with very low academic skills. Most enter my classes unable to write sentences, and most say they “hate to read.” However, over the past few years, I’ve realized that those freshmen who have failed my classes have not failed due to their low academic abilities. Those who have failed were students who did not use support services such as tutoring, did not learn how to ask questions in the classroom, did not visit me to ask for help during office hours, did not participate in study groups, did not seek out the advice of more experienced peers, and did not learn to see mastering time management as a process. These insights changed the way I teach. I now incorporate activities related to each of these things (i.e., mentoring) into my classes. I now build into my academic assignments components related to time management, study groups, tutoring, etc. This approach has not meant lowering my academic expectations — in reality, students’

learning has accelerated, so I have actually raised academic expectations. In short, by infusing consciousness of mentoring into my classroom, I have changed my approach to teaching.

Here is a list of some of the things I have learned to do to infuse mentoring into my classrooms:

- Focusing on creating good classroom dynamics; good classroom dynamics are crucial for enabling students to take risks in order to learn new skills and grasp new ideas. Some simple things are making sure all students know names of their classmates by the end of the first week, organizing small group discussions in class and helping students understand why working together is important, and creating a classroom climate where questions become more important than answers.
- Creating a peer mentor program to work with my freshmen students both inside and outside my classroom. Since I'm getting advanced in age, I've realized that I need to provide freshmen with experienced students from their own age group to help them learn. This fall semester, I've changed my upper-division service-learning class into a peer mentoring class to provide mentors for my freshmen class.
- Building time management activities into all my academic assignments. Time management is probably the hardest thing for freshmen to learn, and most have difficulty seeing it as a process rather than an end product.
- Helping my students understand how to use student support services on campus, such as tutoring. Most of my students enter my classes exhibiting what brain-based researchers call "learned helplessness." For sometimes as many as twelve years, they have learned behaviors associated with failing. Although they are now motivated to succeed, they have difficulty knowing what behaviors are needed to do well academically and feeling comfortable enough to take new steps related to these new behaviors. One of the new challenges is knowing how to ask for help and how to use the help of others. As a teacher, I assist my students in learning how to ask for help and how to access various support services around campus.
- Encouraging students to meet with me regularly during office hours. I build these visits into several of my academic assignments — for example, one step in a research assignment is for each student to meet with me during office hours and tell me the main research questions they will be investigating in the library.
- Making sure laughter is common in my classroom. I assess whether I have had a successful class each day by the amount of laughter I've heard in the classroom. Usually, freshmen do not associate laughter with learning and counterpose "having fun" with learning. I try to have them see the joy associated with learning.
- Encouraging students to establish as regular (and new) habits getting to class on time and not being absent. In their high schools, most of my students said that their teachers didn't care about whether they were present or absent. In contrast, I make sure that students know that I, as a teacher, value their presence in the classroom.

- Teaching students how to ask questions. A few years ago, I came across an article stating that college students can go through their entire educational career (16 years of education) without learning how to ask questions. Most students learn this skill on their own. In my own pursuit of knowledge, I've learned that questions are more important than answers. I try to incorporate this insight into my own work with students and teach them how to ask questions.
- Giving students homework and tests, while at the same time teaching students how to take notes in class, how to breakdown assignments into steps, and how to study for and take tests. Most of my students come into my class with "test phobia"; thus, I need to "deconstruct" tests (and other assignments) to help them overcome anxiety that interferes with their performance.
- Encouraging students to strive for the best grades possible rather than "just passing." Many freshmen quickly assimilate the prevailing CSUN student culture and learn how to do just enough work to get by, settling for a "C" rather than working harder for an "A." On the first day of class I ask each student to write down what grade they want to get in my class and what steps they will take to get that grade (I don't collect this assignment, but I ask students to keep it). Almost everyone writes down that they want an "A." Throughout the semester, I refer back to this first assignment and remind students of the steps they identified to do well in my class.
- Incorporating into my assignments components that help students build social interaction skills, such as learning how to work effectively in small groups, how to build their own leadership abilities, and how to develop empathy and compassion. Brain-based researchers call these skills "higher-order functions" in the "social brain." They contend that the next evolution of humankind will depend on how well we develop these higher-order functions. I believe teachers can play a critical role in helping students develop and deepen skills relating to empathy and compassion.
- Emphasizing in my assignments the need for freshmen to develop their "voice" and to see reading, writing, and speaking in terms of "voice." Paulo Freire once observed that for most people in the world (and certainly for freshmen), "reading and writing (and probably public speaking) are seen as weapons used against them rather than as tools they can use." In my work of building students' academic skills, I try to change the way that students perceive reading, writing, and public speaking.
- Taking the time to initially know what students already know about new subject matter and to build new understanding in relationship to that existing knowledge. I'm a firm believer in the constructivist approach to learning. By taking the time to understand what my students already know about new topics, I'm able to create lesson plans that either build on existing foundations or challenge existing stereotypes.
- Emphasizing to my students that the best approach to learning any subject matter is to relate the topics to their own lives and to think about ways they can share the new knowledge they are learning with others around them. Freshmen tend to see school

course work as something “out there” and not something that’s relevant to their own lives. In my assignments, I constantly

- Being constantly open to and willing to experiment with new ways of engaging my students in order to stimulate wonder and awe about learning. During the past two years, I’ve incorporated at least one magic trick in my classes; also, this past year I have experimented with fortune telling as a way to connect complex and important ideas to students’ lives. The concept of “magic tricks” provokes curiosity in young people (and most likely, people of all ages) and provides a way for me to teach about the importance of prevailing frameworks of reality (what I call “mainstream frameworks,” or manufactured illusions) and alternative frameworks promoted by fields like Asian American Studies. This past year, I discovered that fortune telling is a way to introduce students in a meaningful way to the ideas of people like Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, Gandhi, Grace Lee Boggs, Rigoberta Menchu, and Philip Cruz. I am not a magician, and I am certainly not a fortune teller, but I have learned that these popular forms of culture can be adapted into powerful forms of teaching and learning.

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Notes on “Mentoring on the Run”: Vincent Tinto’s *Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition*

Vincent Tinto, *Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987 and 1993).

One of the leading researchers on why students leave college is Vincent Tinto. Tinto’s review of research also helps to identify critical factors underlying student persistence in college and academic success. In his analysis, Tinto moves beyond past research that has tended to over-emphasize individual student attributes; he examines instead factors relating to what we might be called “institutional culture” — i.e., the academic and social environment of each college, such as faculty-student interactions, student-student interactions, academic interactions in the classroom, the intellectual and social ethos outside the classroom, student support services, etc. Of course, all of these factors deal with mentoring relationships, both formal and informal relationships. In the following summary taken from Tinto’s book, I focus on ideas relating to two concepts important for CSUN at this time: the relationship between mentoring and student academic success and the significance of learning communities (or “communities of mentors”) for student persistence and achievement.

In his analysis of why students either leave college or persist to graduation, Tinto identifies the key role of faculty interactions and peer interactions and their impact on

students. According to Tinto, “the faculty, more than any other group, represents the primary intellectual orientation of the institution. Their actions, within and without the classroom, provide the standards by which individuals come to judge the intellectual ethos of the institution. . . . The classrooms, the hallways, and the offices of the institution become testing grounds for student judgement as to the intellectual character and worth of the college experience” (p. 53). In addition, for students, interactions with their peers are particularly important in the decision to leave or stay in college. For students, “social identity is sometimes as important as intellectual identity, especially in the first year of college” (p. 53). For large, commuter campuses in urban areas, the impact of student contact with others is important for persistence for those students who are regarded as having “marginal” status on campus, such as “high-risk” students (p. 79). Overall, “the degree and quality of personal interaction with other members of the institution (whether with faculty or with peers) are critical elements” in students’ decisions to either stay in or leave college (p. 56)

Tinto emphasizes that frequent contact with the faculty appears to be a particularly important element for high student persistence rates in colleges (p. 56). “This is especially true when that contact extends beyond the formal boundaries of the classroom to the various informal settings which characterize social life. Those encounters which go beyond the mere formalities of academic work to broader intellectual and social issues and which are seen by students as warm and rewarding appear to be strongly associated with the continued persistence” (p. 57). Moreover, faculty behavior within the classroom often serves as the “important precursors to subsequent contact,” according to students. “Classroom behaviors influence student perceptions as to the receptivity of faculty to further student contacts outside the classroom” (p. 57). Thus, according to Tinto, “it is of little surprise to discover that institutions with low rates of student retention are those in which students generally report low rates of student-faculty contact” (p. 58).

Overall, Tinto concludes that student academic success and their intellectual and social development are greatest in those universities “where students interact with both faculty and student peers,” whether through formal or informal mentoring relationships (p. 70).

Tinto’s summary of educational research also highlights the importance of what we can call “communities of mentors” on student persistence and academic success. He emphasizes the role that “supportive relationships” play in “preventing and reducing the harmful effects of stress and enhancing individuals’ ability to cope effectively with stress in specific social settings” (p. 122). According to Tinto, “the establishment of supportive personal relationships — with faculty, peers, and other significant persons — enables students to better cope with the demands of the college environment,” and this, in turn, has positive impacts upon students’ academic success (p. 122). These research findings point to the importance of “collaborative effect of a variety of actors, faculty and staff alike, across the campus” (p. 122).

Tinto’s focus on the importance of collaborative efforts by faculty and staff to promote student success leads to his emphasis on conceptualizing colleges as “learning communities.” He identifies student involvement and integration in college life, especially through contact with faculty, as “a key determinant for a variety of educational outcomes” (pp. 130-131). This involvement and integration is related to the quality of

students' investment in their learning, which, in turn, is related to the amount that they learn. Thus, Tinto argues that faculty need to understand the importance of promoting student involvement in their classrooms through the creation of classroom learning communities (p. 131). Tinto further contends that the first several weeks of college for students are a very critical period. In this period, student social attachments (i.e., their capacity to involve themselves in learning communities) "may be a necessary precondition" for subsequent involvements at their institutions, including academic involvement (p. 134). In this initial period of adjustment to college life, Tinto emphasizes the importance of student contact with faculty, "specifically accessibility and contact with faculty outside classrooms, helpfulness of faculty, and the concern they show for students" (p. 135). According to Tinto, "once social membership has been achieved or at least once concerns over it have been addressed, student attention appears to increasingly center on academic involvements" (p. 134). In short, Tinto advocates for designing students' first-year college experience around learning communities and mentoring relationships, especially with faculty.

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