Mentoring in a Cooperative Learning Classroom

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This manuscript introduces an experiential model of cooperative learning, and a public/private partnership between industry and higher education—one that included mentors as an integral part of the classroom experience. Each of thirty-seven students in a Principles of Management Experiential Learning class was assigned an experienced executive/professional who served as their mentor. These individuals had experience congruent with students' career goals and aspirations, and they were able to help them craft a reflective end-of-term paper. Interview data from mentors illustrates the type of career guidance and advice they offered to their mentees, and why they thought that mentoring was important for college students.

Because academic research has demonstrated the benefits of mentoring for both mentors and mentees alike, this paper argues for modifying the performance appraisal system within higher education so that mentoring can become a standard part of the student and faculty experience.

Mentors share information between themselves and less seasoned persons; they transfer not only helpful tips, but political aspects of culture that can be essential to mentee survival—ones that remain hidden unless someone has an "inside" connection to a more powerful other.

Dictionary.com defines mentoring as "(in business) the practice of assigning a junior member of staff to the care of a more experienced person who assists him in his career." Assistance includes feedback and support, along with career advice and role-modeling (Wang, Tomlinson & Noe, 2010), coaching, opportunities for high visibility assignments (Livingstone & Naismith, 2018), and potential entrée to the mentor's own well-connected and well established social/business networks. Mentors act as "brokers" by bridging structural holes between otherwise disconnected parties, and they liaison to more powerful network players. Hussey and Campbell-Meier (2020) explain that mentorship is different from "coaching"—an activity that consists of interactions more focused on identifying and rectifying job related (or personal) deficiencies, rather than on developing a more junior person.

Mentors create a "safe space" for mentees who, in the best-case scenario, experience relationships based on mutual trust, reciprocity, honesty, supportive non-judgmental feedback, emotional care, helpful professional guidance and advice, respect, candid sharing, and transparency (Hussey & Campbell-Meier, 2020) where mentees can bounce ideas off their mentors and explore career related options. In a sample of 47 librarians, one of them described mentoring as "a professional relationship helping someone to figure out or to navigate a career" (p. 6). Because mentoring can grow to become a close personal association over time, it is not so much a professional linkage, but a "matter of the heart" (Gehrke, 2009, p. 190), one that widens, affirms, unifies, deepens, and sustains both parties. In a professional setting, mentoring has been associated with positive on the job benefits of increased satisfaction, greater feelings of organizational support, lower intentions to leave, and a greater willingness to engage in organizational citizenship (Fowler, Fowler, & O'Gorman, 2021), meaning activities outside one's job description that help the organization, the community, and fellow employees.

The purpose of this manuscript is to describe a Cooperative Learning Model and the role of mentors within a Principles of Management Experiential Learning course. This paper will explain the importance of mentorship to college students, and the potential fallout from its absence. It will also discuss the role of a public/private partnership, explain how a Cooperative Learning model can facilitate mentor identification, and showcase interview responses from mentors who describe the importance of their role. Recommendations for models based on a similar concept (that can apply to junior faculty within university and college settings) are included.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Mentoring emerges from personal associations, "non-parental adults" such as neighbors, friends, community leaders, and/or teachers. These role models typically have a positive impact on recipients: e.g., university students who had amassed a web, or constellation of mutually selected "natural mentors" reported an increase in their self-worth, and a decrease in their anxiety and depression (Hussey & Campbell-Meier, 2020). Adults who provided affirmative messages and support (when requested) played a significant role in countering "noxious messages" that these students received on an elite, predominantly White campus.

Undergraduate students with autism, as well as personality based/perceptual differences, may also benefit from mentoring. Ten autistic undergraduate students at Curtin University were each assigned a peer mentor recruited from the Australian University School of Psychology and Speech Pathology and the School of Occupational Therapy and Social Work. The mentors' job was to coach mentees in time management, how to excel in their coursework, and how to improve their interactions with faculty/staff. Mentors provided coaching and emotional support that were linked to a positive transition at the university and an increased ability to manage academic coursework, deal with negative emotions, and make new friends. Mentees reported perceiving a significant degree of social support, a "reassurance of self-worth" and guidance from their mentors. Participants liked the informal and instantaneous nature of the relationship: "It's sort of just, in general, if I have needed support somewhere, I know that I could just text **her** [the mentor], and she will be ready to help" (Siew, Mazzucchelli, Rooney, & Girdler, 2017, p. 8).

When mentors possess similar characteristics as their mentees, the relationship may be particularly beneficial. For exam-

ple, students who were visually impaired were assigned mentors who were legally blind. Mentees benefitted from their assistance with job seeking skills (use of assistive technologies and interviewing), transportation options, accommodation plans, interpersonal skills, and locating and evaluating job opportunities. Because visually impaired mentors had demonstrated success within their own careers, they acted as a confidence booster to mentee counterparts who were visually impaired, and they promoted job-seeking self-efficacy (Antonelli, O'Mally, & Steverson, 2018). Other marginalized groups, such as Hispanic students (who may feel less supported in a U.S. university school setting) benefit from peer Hispanic mentors (Alcocer & Martinez, 2018) who help them to acclimate, feel like they are a part of the campus, and increase their comfort level in dealing with faculty, staff, and administrators (Cox, Yang, & Dicke-Bowman, 2014). Some students attribute their own academic success and career preparation to their mentor's pinpointed study tips, and to the psychosocial support that they received (Miller et al., 2019).

Colleges and universities are more likely to retain students when they feel supported (Siew, Mazzucchelli, Rooney, & Girdler, 2017). Relatedly, Livingstone and Naismith (2018) found that a combined approach of pastoral mentoring (where students are assigned a mentor at the inception of their degree program who follows them throughout the curriculum) and professional model mentoring (where students receive support from designated university services like campus counseling) resulted in positive outcomes for most student mentees who felt reassured by the combination of formal and informal mentoring services. In a model that integrated both approaches, the assigned faculty mentor referred students to campus services on a situation-by-situation basis, and these same mentors also encouraged students to promote their classwork in small group settings.

Young people aspiring to attend college (primary, middle, and high school students) can benefit from mentoring as well. Mboka (2018) describes criminal justice majors who mentored children who were at-risk and disadvantaged. They used the positive associations they developed with mentees as a springboard to discuss pro-social behaviors, and to encourage them to excel within school. Mentors improved mentees' emotional intelligence and overall attitude toward other people, enhanced their social skills by helping them to effectively manage conflict, provided strategies to excel academically, and encouraged them to behave positively toward authority figures. Mentoring approaches that were the most successful included supportive, prosocial behaviors that focused on how to help protégés succeed, rather than ones that were punitive. Quality relationships that were mutual, genuine, encouraging, and accepting were linked to a sense of purpose and meaning in life (Lund, Liang, Konowitz, White, & Mousseau, 2019); moreover, consistent meetings and mentor communication are a factor in the overall satisfaction of mentees (James, 2019). Lund et al. (2019) state that, "Higher education institutions should both encourage and provide students with opportunities to develop relationships with mentors" (Lund et al., 2019, p. 1478).

THE COOPERATIVE LEARNING MODEL AND MENTOR INTEGRATION

Thirty-seven students in an experiential learning Principles of Management cooperative learning class were assigned an executive mentor/professional/business leader. The Cooperative Learn-

ing model enhances the "flipped classroom" by incorporating community involvement:

> Cooperative learning . . . builds upon heterogeneity and formalizes and encourages peer support and connection . . . All students need to learn and work in environments where their individual strengths are recognized and individual needs are addressed. All students need to learn within a supportive community in order to feel safe enough to take risks (Sapon-Shevin, Ayres, & Duncan, 1994, p. 46).

The AACSB 2015 Assessment Conference discussed a partnership between faculty and industry, one that:

1. provides students with a competitive advantage in the job market;
2. fulfills the needs of employers with students who have essential skills;
3. enriches the classroom; and (
4. increases student engagement, retention, and motivation.

The National Association for Educational Statistics found that in 2018, only sixty two percent of enrolled students within higher education completed their degree program from the institution where they originally enrolled ("Graduation rates," 2021)). The AACSB suggests that a cooperative partnership should be driven by business leaders who develop classroom learning objectives, co-teach classes, and make recommendations for how to improve course lessons.

The Cooperative Learning Model described within this manuscript was modeled after a business prototype. It included an advisory council (board of directors) comprised of a CEO, a retired CEO, and a CFO who created a nexus between industry leaders and student learners. These individuals made suggestions on course activities, and they identified mentors who worked with students to craft a reflective end-of-term paper.
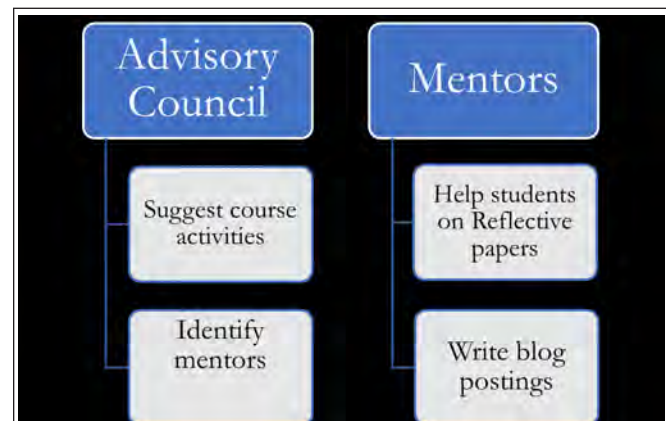

Figure 1. A Cooperative Learning Model of Advisory Council and Mentor Duties

Reflective paper questions included:

- What are the three biggest mistakes that new hires make, and what behaviors can I exhibit to avoid making them?
- What "soft skills" do I need, and how can I obtain these?
- How does this class structure and format contribute to skills I will need as a manager? How can I "leverage" these skills within the workforce?
- How can I be an effective leader, and what are some "lessons learned" from your experience?

Mentors crafted blog posts that addressed class topics of interest—like how to handle difficult people at work (Machiavellians) and how to ascend the corporate ladder. Two mentor postsincluded "Leadership with a Servant's Heart" (Holland, 2011), and "Leadership is not about GettingThings Done" (Foote, 2011). These resources were cross posted on LinkedIn/Twitter so that a broader community could benefit from mentor advice and suggestions. Inclusion of student- centered postings made the class more of a boutique, customizable user experience for learners.

Mentors also provided advice to students on their class assignment, and they helped them to prepare for their future careers acting as a "sounding board" for general life issues.

METHOD
Because a variety of student majors were represented, mentors were recruited from diverse careers such as broadcasting, the military, academia, government, small business, insurance management, healthcare, and architecture. The summer prior to the semester inception, the advisoryboard members contacted potential mentors—individuals who were local businesspeople within their extended networks who might be willing to serve. The instructor on record also recruited mentors during the summer period and during the first few weeks of class—to shore up gaps between mentor background and student interests. Students can be matched to their respective mentor (among other methods) via a Student Data Sheet (questions below):

- What would you like to be doing ten years from now?
- What will be your job title ten years from now?
- What type of tasks or activities will you perform for your job ten years from now?
- What types of decisions will you make as part of your job ten years from now?
- Do you intend to pursue a graduate degree? If so, what type of graduate degree?

Students can provide their name, major, and expected graduation date, along with personal input on the type of mentor they would like to have.

The study received IRB approval, and it was administered through Qualtrics software to ensure that each potential interviewee (mentor) received the same survey. The primary research interest was the type of advice students received, and the overarching theme(s) that emerged from the data that comprised these responses. The purpose of this study wasnot to provide support for a particular hypothesis, but rather, in terms of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) framework, to explore a specific phenomenon: "A scholarship of teaching is not synonymous with excellent teaching. It requires a kind of 'going meta,' in which faculty frame and systematically investigate questions related to student learning" (Hutchings & Schulman, 1999, p. 13).

The course was an EXL, or Experiential Learning designated class. The followingdescription is from the EXL office at Middle Tennessee State University:

> EXL Designated Course
> This course is an experiential learning course. EXL classes include a hands-on learning project (e.g., applied learning, service-learning, creative activity, teacher education, laboratory, co-op, or internship). The course will count toward the requirements of the EXL Scholars Program that formally began on campus in fall 2006. Middle Tennessee State University wants to provide relevant real-world

learning opportunities for students. Research shows that students are more engaged in learning when they can learn "by doing" and that these types of learning opportunities will provide experiences students can include on their resumes that willassist them in gaining employment and/or gaining acceptance into graduate programs.

Interacting with a mentor (and writing a paper on the benefits) was just one of the ways the courseconnected students with a "hands on" cooperative learning experience that was intended to benefittheir careers.

RESULTS
The survey results revealed that mentors performed a dual-purpose; they were looking out for their mentees' best interests, while simultaneously trying to impart their own prescriptions for success. According to Anthony K. Tjan, the author of *Good People: The Only Leadership Decision that Really Matters*, admired leaders ". . . do everything they can to imprint their 'goodness' onto others in ways that make others feel like fuller versions of themselves" (Tjan, 2017). Ragins (2016) describes "relational mentoring" as psycho-social support for proteges, activities that include acceptance, friendship, and role modeling, along with acting as confidante. These behaviors reflect themes of a close mentoring bond that surfaced from the mentors' own description of their assigned role. Several of them worked with student mentees outside of class by giving them a tour of their facility, taking them to lunch, or by meeting with them informally.

Mentees learned about career preparation and on-the-job strategies, in some cases receiving a "sneak peek" behind the scenes of an actual workplace; one mentee was able to visit backstage at the Grand Ole Opry. Some mentors indicated that their association was not a "one-and-done" but that they were interested in mentoring students over the course of their academic and professional careers. They appeared ". . . fully and selflessly committed to the best interests of colleagues and employees" (Tjan, 2017) through offering advice and by acting as a sounding board.

Mentors "shape[d] other people's character" (Tjan, 2017) by describing the behaviors that mentees/new hires should avoid. Relationships were based on "communal norms" where mentors were not expecting any type of reciprocation or payback (Ragins, 2016). Rather, mentors regarded their role as one intended to "give back" to the community. Question number one explored mistakes that new hires make and the soft skills they need (see Table 1).

The second question yielded responses regarding the importance of mentoring as professional development (Hudson, 2013) in the career growth of students. Premised on the "goal setting and career construct" of mentoring proposed by Nora and Crisp (2008), class mentors realized their formative role in providing guidance, ferreting out the strengths and weaknesses of their mentees, and serving as a role model to provide a critical link in their career success (see Table 2).

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS
Mentors can impart a sense of perspective and a pathway for mentees to see their accomplishments in a larger scheme of planning and personal career preparation. Most of the advice they provided was on how to successfully navigate office politics, and to make the best possible impression at work. Smith (2008)

Table 1. Question #1: What general advice did you give mentees regarding the three biggest mistakes that new hires make? What soft skills do they need, and how can they obtain these?

Survey Result	Explanation
Look and listen, listen, listen to others with whom you interact in your new setting. Do your homework on the task at hand, anticipating what can go well and what might [not] go so well. Always present a solution to every problem/barrier you identify.	Mentors encouraged their mentees to keep an open mind. In their subsequent careers, they will be required to incorporate a variety of viewpoints (from coworkers and customers) into their decision making.
Be prompt, be thorough, ask questions.	The concept of work as a collaborative effort and a sense of community was impressed upon mentees.
Understand the Culture & Vision of the organization & determine if it is a good match for you & your goals.

Understand the behavioral expectations of associates in the organization. (An employer should be able to articulate their expectations and explain how assessment of an associate's behaviors are included in formal job evaluations.) Learn to be cognizant of your mood at all times in the workplace & learn to always "Be at Your Best." | Work as a two-way street, an evaluation by employees as well as employers encouraged mentees to carefully evaluate career opportunities. |
| Importance of building relationships, good communication, and understanding [one's] role in the organization. Need to develop relationships outside of social media. Need to go back to basics with good verbal and written communication. Need to take time to learn about the organization and understand their piece. | Mentors emphasized people smarts, or emotional intelligence, as a crucial skill set in navigating the job market and employment scene. |
| 1. Engaging in too much complaining, as well as condemning and criticizing others. 2. Not demonstrating a genuine interest in others. 3. Not listening. They need fundamental human relations skills in building relationships, gaining the cooperation of others, and leadership. They need to be able to build and maintain face-to-face relationships, and not rely on electronic devices as their sole method of interacting with others. They need to be able to work in teams, demonstrate an enthusiastic, positive outlook, and be able to express themselves orally and in writing. The Dale Carnegie Course is a great way to develop these skills and traits. | Mentors emphasized the notion of mentees "paying their dues" and learning as much as possible.

Millennials (as an example) may begin employment expecting too much too soon (Andersen, 2016) from their employers. They could be disappointed or blackballed from a company or even an industry as a result. |

Table 2. Question #2: Why do you think that a mentor/mentee relationship is important for college students?

Survey Result	Explanation
I once had a teacher that told me: "Wisdom is the accumulation of knowledge. Knowledge is founded in life-experiences and develops as you apply what you have learned." I think the mentor/mentee relationships can help provide guidance by bridging the students' learning experiences with the mentor's workplace experiences.	Mentors acknowledged their role was to shepherd students to career success, rather than to behave as their buddy/friend. A vital role that mentors play is bridging academia and the career world. They have a unique vantage point derived from years of experience.
Despite how grown-up students may think they are in college, they do not have the life experience that a mentor has. The mentor can provide valuable guidance/advice on school, work and life in general that would be very hard for the mentee to obtain elsewhere.	Student groups, sororities/fraternities, and extra-curricular activities all play a vital role in student development, but they are not a replacement or substitution for engaging with a career professional (as the next comment also illustrates).
Many have no role model to emulate. They must understand that success is earned and cannot be given. College students need the relationship with an experienced mentor to help them develop as professionals by pushing them to reach beyond their comfort zones and to share a point of view of someone that has experienced life.

Mentors can help mentees identify obstacles and help them develop the tools for overcoming obstacles | Mentors saw their role as one that served to challenge students to become better versions of themselves—by applying relational and advisory career tools. |
| They benefit from practical guidance on how to interrelate the academic and the professional worlds. | Reading about management concepts has a much different impact than learning about them from an experienced practitioner. "Stories from the trenches" that consisted of potential minefields of political incorrectness at work and how to avoid them proved invaluable to students. |
| Students need to understand the way the world works, in a way that goes beyond what they learn in a textbook or via academic assignments. They also need coaching and feedback from people who have experience beyond academia. | Mentors provided corrective feedback when necessary (Hudson, 2013), encouragement on occasion, and support throughout their association. |

suggests that mentors are a "go to" in terms of the unseen, hidden aspects of organizational culture that can be stumbling blocks to new recruits. From their unique vantage point, mentors can help mentees to view themselves more objectively, provide practical advice for navigating the political landscape at work, and help to rectify what they see as deficiencies. The importance of emotional intelligence (and relational competence) at work cannot be overstated; it is cited as one of the primary reasons for job success (Goldman, 1995). Mentors can also serve as mediators in sticky office situations. In the book *What They Don't Teach You at Harvard Business School: Notes from a Street-Smart Executive*, McCormack (1986) suggests that small things in the office (left undone) and the absence of office manners can be huge boss irritants. To help recruits learn the ropes, Iris Bohnet, author of *What Works: Gender Equality by Design*, suggests that organizations should institute a mentoring culture—one that occurs within informal venues like the hallway and company gatherings (Johnson & Smith, 2019) and that consists of micro-affirmations from multiple mentors. Higgins and Kram (2001) explain that the most beneficial mentoring is comprised of more than a singular dyad and should resemble a

constellation of evolving relationships that includes family, friends, and colleagues throughout a person's lifetime and career.

The mentoring model described in this manuscript can be modified to include dyads comprised of working people, like faculty members. In a university setting junior faculty can participate in a mentoring culture that provides both formal, mandated advising, and informal water cooler chats. To achieve a culture where mentoring naturally occurs, universities will need to change the formal evaluation process and hold faculty accountable for interacting positively with those lower in rank [and/or students] (Bohnet, 2016). A "me-first" rewards system, one that solely heralds individual achievement, will work at cross-purposes to people spending time encouraging a colleague/student, offering support, acknowledging their contributions, or simply giving them a compliment (Johnson & Smith, 2019). Johnson and Smith (2019) suggest that organizations pre- select candidates [or faculty] who will engage in pro-social activities by asking them how they provided support/affirmation to someone else. An intentional approach at pre-selection may prevent "marginal mentoring" (Ragins, Cotton, & Miller, 2000), or mentorship that people do half- heartedly because they know they will not be held accountable (Johnson, Smith, & Haythornthwaite,2020).

A "Master Mentor" program (Johnson, Smith, & Haythornthwaite, 2020) at Johns Hopkins School of Medicine identified mentors from a faculty group with a track-record of uplifting and affirming their colleagues, providing support, taking a less experienced colleague "under their wing," exhibiting a high degree of emotional intelligence (empathy, relational affluence, ability to work well with others, and integrity), and providing sustained, coordinated skill building. A trickle-down model, one where a mentoring culture is championed and communicated by top management or administration, has the best chance of succeeding and becoming a sustained effort. Cox, Yang, and Dicke-Bowman (2014) explain that mentoring within universities may be "hit or miss" because it is not a consistent factor on which faculty are evaluated: ". . . the lack of mentoring as a shared purpose of the institution creates a cultural barrier to its enactment, as it is usually not recognized as a component of the faculty duties" (p. 395). Career-wise, a lack of mentoring can result in students taking jobs that may not serve their purposes, or in them becoming side-tracked within their career progression: "Too many young people are left in the lurch, wandering aimlessly in a professional wilderness" (Perry, 2018) because they have inaccurate/non-existent guidance, and no one to help them to gain entrée into a path that may lead them to their dream job. Mentors can also explain the benefits of college and help students with the application process. In addition, faculty who do not have a mentor may flounder, because they are unaware of the "hidden" expectations for tenure, and they may fail to adequately navigate the political landscape. Realizing the importance of pairing untenured/new faculty with established faculty mentors, University of Massachusetts Amherst offers biweekly meetings between these two groups—sessions that cover topics like grant proposal writing, teaching support, time management, performance appraisal, and the importance of work-life balance (Misra, 2019). Omstead (1993) suggests that nurturing new faculty is one of the best investments an institution of higher learning can make. A "sink or swim" model can result in junior faculty performing tasks that the university does not value, performing their tasks incorrectly, and/ or ultimately in their departure.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Because the benefits of mentoring relationships are numerous ("Industry Mentor Program," n. d.), more granular examination of these dyads may reveal reciprocal advantage. In this study, only mentor viewpoints were solicited; it is not known (apart from anecdotal student reports) what mentees thought of their respective mentor, what additionally they would have liked to experience in their mentoring relationship, and/or if they thought these types of associations should expand or continue within the university setting. Study of a co-op program could serve as a proxy. At Northeastern University, a Co-op Mentor Program connects students in New York City, Washington DC, San Francisco, Silicon Valley, and London with alumni. Surveys sent to both mentors and mentees could illuminate gaps in the program and serve to enhance the mentoring experience for students and the enrichment that mentors feel. Both parties should know upfront the time requirements, expectations, and potential benefits in a communique that is distributed before mentoring begins (Padhi, 2019). A survey could address if mentees would like to work with more than one mentor, if they might benefit from a group mentoring session, what topics would they like to discuss with their mentors, and in what types of experiences on or off campus they would like to participate.

For the most part students report positive experiences from mentoring programs. Student leaders, or peer mentors to first year nursing students reported an increase in their self-confidence, a renewed sense of purpose, better time management, and greater interpersonal skills (such as confidence, communication skills, and self-esteem). After having served in leadership roles themselves, several of them felt a kinship with faculty whom they perceived as classroom leaders (Miller et al., 2019). They also derived an intrinsic satisfaction from volunteering their time to aid in the development of young people, and they benefited from "reverse learning" because of their experience (James, 2019). One student commented, "*My job as a student mentor further developed my presentation skills, public speaking skills, planning and organisation skills as well as attention to detail*" (p. 106).

Reverse mentoring, where younger or less experienced employees share a unique skill set with someone more experienced (or older), can be a significant source of potential job satisfaction and organizational pride, and it can promote a willingness to engage in activities outside of one's typical role.

Mentoring however can also result in a negative experience. In "Mentoring Gone Wrong Can Create Long-lasting Damage" Llopis (2012) explains that some mentors may exploit their mentees, taking credit for their work and ideas to leverage a career promotion for themselves.

Future research could explore the ramifications of a mentee rating system of the mentor experience, both within cooperative learning environments and within office settings. If mentors know they will be held accountable, and if they are given explicit expectations for the program outcomes upfront, misunderstandings and conflicts of interest may be less likely to occur.

SUMMARY

Mentoring is a function that is often "hit or miss" because organizations do not emphasize and reinforce its value through incorporation in formal evaluation, and because institutions of higher education may not explain the benefits of working with corporate mentors to their professors. This manuscript, through a

presentation and discussion of interviews from executive/ professional mentors in an experiential cooperative learning classroom, provides support for the incorporation of "guides on the side" who can educate students on the political aspects of company life, and who can act as psychosocial resources throughout the course of their careers. The mentor model also provides a valuable springboard for employees at the university level where experienced, tenured persons can assist junior faculty in navigating unfamiliar terrain and help them to avoid making potential costly mistakes.

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