



## Advising the At-Risk College Student

by Craig Vivian

### *Abstract*

*At-risk college students—those who are socially, financially, or academically underprepared or under supported—particularly are in need of mentoring in college. The reluctance of such students to seek out faculty mentors, as well as constraints on faculty time, are among the factors that limit successful mentoring experiences. This paper presents an action-research project involving a relatively short-term and non-intensive mentoring strategy that resulted in sustained improvement in student achievement, and discusses possible reasons for these results.*

Mentoring is a generally recognized contributor to a positive college experience for students. Mentoring also is acknowledged to be of particular benefit to college students at-risk for failure or withdrawal. However, these are the students that are most difficult to reach. Mentoring relationships with at-risk students are less likely to occur than with high-performing students who are more likely to seek out professors for advice.

The literature on mentoring in college pays a great deal of attention to defining mentoring, identifying the qualities and components of a mentoring relationship, and discussing the strengths and weaknesses of the mentoring approach (e.g., Healy 1997; Colwell 1998). With a few notable exceptions (e.g., Daloz 1999), there has been relatively little discussion about how mentoring operates in the college setting. If a professor wishes to become a more effective mentor for students—particularly at-risk students—how does he or she go about doing so? When successful mentoring occurs, there is a transformation in the participants—particularly in students. Through what mechanism is such a transformation realized?

This paper reports an action-research project on mentoring at-risk students. The project, which evolved from one successful mentoring experience, involved establishing focused mentoring relationships with 12 at-risk students for one semester. The goals of the project were to determine whether mentoring could help these students become successful in college, the amount of time and energy needed, and the students' perception of the experience. The study showed that a relatively minimalist approach to mentoring led to significantly improved outcomes within the study group, as compared to a control group, and that the experience was viewed quite positively by the students involved.

### *Mentoring in College*

Colleges and universities often explicitly encourage faculty members to establish mentoring relationships with students. For example, at Monmouth College, it is a common and shared understanding that students must be ushered gently into intellectualism as individuals, not as anonymous members of a large and impersonal group. Each student has a future path to tread that needs to be jointly mapped out by professor and student. In fact, Monmouth College's 2005–06 catalog states that one of the goals of the institution is to “foster and promote intellectual inquiry and critical analysis through mentoring relationships characterized by individual attention.”

Though this partnered approach is good in theory, there are several obstacles to establishing and maintaining a viable and fruitful mentoring program in the college setting. First, there is the question of available time. According to Little (1990, 342), “Mentors are

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more often constrained than enabled by the organizational circumstances in which they work.” Faculty members are pulled in several directions by the institution and even the most well-intentioned person finds it difficult, if not impossible, to intensively mentor more than a few students at any given time. Even mapping out a student's four-year plan, which should provide faculty members an opportunity to get to know students at a personal level, is often a half hour of impersonalized labor where faculty members serve as waitpersons indicating the presence of a few electives on the menu, among the meat and potatoes of the major.

Second, there is the question of whether a genuine commitment to mentoring exists. Do administrators and professors tend to conceive of mentoring as “a program to be marketed (or endured) rather than as a culture to be built” (Feiman-Nemser et al. 1999, 8)? For mentors to be effective, there must be institutional support, including concrete initiatives to train, educate, and assist individuals in the work of mentoring.

Third, there are the students themselves. Do they *want* to be mentored, or has the gradual encroachment of a corporate and marketing mentality within the ivy walls pre-

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disposed students to look at faculty members as the equivalent of consultants or service providers? Do they want to be mentored by someone who, for them, might hold the same importance in their life as their bank teller?

Finally, the mentoring model itself is not without drawbacks. Mentoring has become increasingly prominent in such fields as teacher training, nursing, and business management.

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Its successful track record in these fields has contributed to an increased interest in mentoring programs within the college setting. However, the type of mentoring employed as part of a career training program generally is not conducive to successful outcomes where intellectual and emotional growth is the goal. Notable developments in recent literature include awareness that mentoring relationships may create dependency and subordination, reinforce an inequitable status quo, promote elitism and exclusion, or act as a means of surveillance

and control (McCormick 1997; Colley 2002). In addition, many types of mentoring arrangements are based on the assumption that the protégé needs assistance because of his or her weaknesses or deficits. This assumption often leads to a hierarchical mentoring arrangement that is inimical to student growth and empowerment (Haring 1997, 1999; Piper and Piper 2000).

Collectively, these conditions work against successful college mentoring programs. All too often, what is supposed to be mentoring in the college setting merely becomes stewarding or shepherding—faculty members herding a large group of students along a set path. Advisors make sure students fulfill the requirements for their major and file all necessary papers, and take students to task if their academic performance drops below an acceptable level.

Mentoring, as shepherding, poses particular problems for at-risk students. These students are often first-generation college students, may be educationally underprepared, have greater financial constraints, and have less social and familial support than other students. When at-risk students arrive at college, many feel they are entering an alien culture. First-generation college students face uncharted academic and social territory—a circumstance that can lead to unfulfilled expectations, self-doubt, frustration, and departure (Hicks 2002). Minority students may have difficulty understanding and adapting to the college culture. This can lead to a lack of academic success, even for those students who are academically prepared and capable (Freeman 1999). Wilson (1997) pointed out that minority students are likely to be affected adversely by negative mentoring, which can occur when a men-

tor has low expectations of a protégé. In this situation, mentoring actually depresses the student's aspirations and performance.

The responses of at-risk students to the social, cultural, financial, and intellectual stressors they face in college often are perceived as passivity and apathy by faculty members who have little understanding of the circumstances confronting these students. The result is that overwhelmed students in dire need of true mentoring often receive counseling or warnings instead.

### ***Mentor and Mentees: Complementary Roles***

The word "mentor" originated in Homer's *The Odyssey* (n.d.), a story which provides an instructive analogy for professors who wish to reach at-risk students. In *The Odyssey*, Mentor is a trusted friend who advises the young Telemakhos in his father's absence. Telemakhos also has another advisor, Mentee, who plays a brief, but pivotal role, in his journey of discovery and transition into young adulthood. The actions of both Mentor and Mentee must be considered together to understand the role of the advisor in Telemakhos's story. Mentee provides as much an important model for those advising undergraduates today as does Mentor.

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At the outset of *The Odyssey*, Telemakhos is still a youth, unsure of who he is or what he should do in his current predicament. His father, Odysseus, has been gone for more than ten years, and no one knows whether he is alive or dead. His mother's suitors had parked themselves in Telemakhos's house in Ithaka, pressing her to decide between them, while consuming Odysseus's wealth of livestock and wine. Telemakhos's own situation is precarious. His mother's suitors had made it clear they would not tolerate interference from him. Telemakhos sits apart from the suitors and watches them glumly. He dreams of his father returning and routing the suitors, but has no thoughts of taking action himself.

At that point, Mentee, an old friend of Odysseus, but a stranger to Telemakhos, comes to the house. Mentee prods Telemakhos into recognizing that he could be an actor, rather than merely an observer. "You are no longer a child," Mentee tells Telemakhos. Mentee leads Telemakhos to understand that he must raise objections to the suitors' treatment of him and his mother, and actively investigate whether Odysseus is alive or dead. Only then would Telemakhos know his own position and be able to make decisions regarding his subsequent course of action.

Mentee's words inspire Telemakhos. The next morning, he calls an assembly of the Ithakans and takes his father's seat among them. He calls the suitors to task and de-

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mands a ship to search for his father. They are stunned by Telemakhos's newly found confidence, but are not covered by it. They mock him as a child and refuse to provide a ship for his voyage.

It seems that Telemakhos is stymied, but Mentor, his other advisor, enters the picture. Mentor tells Telemakhos to get provisions for the voyage. Mentor himself would get a ship, a crew, and equipment, and help sail the ship.

Mentes and Mentor took different approaches to assisting Telemakhos. Mentes led Telemakhos to understand that action was required and that he was capable of undertaking the necessary action, while Mentor actively helped out with concrete, logistical tasks.

Telemakhos could not have undertaken his voyage without Mentor's assistance. However, Mentor's approach would have been ineffective or counterproductive had Mentes not goaded Telemakhos into resolving to take action. What might have happened had Mentes never appeared, and Mentor brought Telemakhos to a ship equipped for a voyage of discovery? We can imagine Telemakhos boarding sullenly without interest in where he was going or in making plans for what he would do when he got there. He, therefore, would have little chance of reaching a successful conclusion to his voyage.

As it turns out, Mentes and Mentor are the same person—the goddess Athena in mortal guise. Athena had planned a two-pronged strategy for bringing Telemakhos to successful adulthood. First, as Mentes, she rouses Telemakhos into action. Second, as Mentor, she provides support for the action that the youth determined must be undertaken.

### *Mentor as Stranger*

In his foundational work on college mentoring, Daloz (1999) portrayed mentoring as a transformational process. He described higher education as a developmental journey undertaken by the student and explained the tasks incumbent upon the mentor as his or her protégé begins this journey. Daloz (1999) depicted mentoring as a process that centers on a steady dialogue between mentor and protégé in which cognitive movement is encouraged and supported. It is through this dialogue that the protégé's transformation becomes purposeful and directed. Daloz (1999) saw the mentor as a guide who has the specific tasks of:

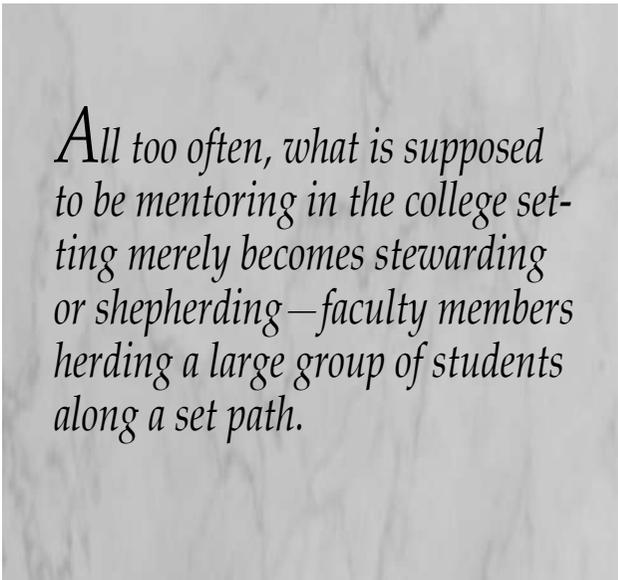
- engendering trust;
- seeing the student's movement;
- giving the student a voice;
- introducing conflict;
- emphasizing positive movement; and
- keeping an eye on the relationship.

He believed that if the mentor can competently juggle the six mentoring tasks, then the protégé will develop into an inclusive and complex thinker who successfully synthesizes multiple perspectives.

Daloz (1999) saw the development that takes place in a mentoring relationship as occurring in stages, and cited developmental theorists from Piaget to Kegan to explain the psychological changes that take place in individuals over time. Daloz (1999) used examples of insightful conversations between mentor and protégé as surface indicators of the psychological changes the protégé undergoes during the guided journey. It is a journey that forces the protégé to become an individual—to map out an idea of self that is aware of limitations, as well as opportunities for development. Throughout this journey, a mentor must support, challenge, and provide vision to the student. These three elements fuel the protégé's journey and supply it with direction. For both the mentor and protégé, it is a journey that holds the promise of transformation, reflection, and growth.

Missing from Daloz's model of mentoring, however, is the function that Mentos fulfilled in *The Odyssey*: to put courage into Telemakhos—to rouse him. The notion of rousing is critical, because it is the catalyst that gives the protégé the initiative to undertake a transformative journey.

What would "rousing" entail for a marginal or at-risk student in college? First, the student must come to believe that he or she is capable of succeeding in college and is an actor rather than an observer. Second, the student must recognize his or her rightful place as a member of the learning community. He or she must claim that place and the voice that goes with it, just as Telemakhos claimed his place and voice in the Ithakan community. Third, the student must understand what he or she needs to do to be successful. For students who find college an alien environment, the most important element of this understanding is an awareness of the structures within which they are operating. Knowledge of the social, cultural, and institutional structures in the college environment helps students break down problems into manageable segments, so that obstacles do not seem so overwhelming.



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Daloz (1999) proposed a mentoring model in which an effective mentor must first secure trust from the protégé. He described personal relationships between mentor and protégé that often are close and intense. However, successful mentoring sometimes initially depends upon a stranger to rouse an individual to begin a personal transformation—just as Mentos, the stranger, rouses Telemakhos from inactivity.

Why might a stranger make a better mentor than a friend? A stranger is more likely to be nonjudgmental. He or she has relatively little stake in the outcome of the men-

tor-protégé relationship. The stranger-mentor is less likely to pressure the protégé or try to influence his or her decisions. At the same time, the protégé has relatively little stake in maintaining a close personal relationship with a stranger. The protégé, therefore, can take more risks with a stranger-mentor than someone with whose personal regard the protégé is concerned. In addition, a stranger is better able to explain

an alien culture than an intimate, whose explanations are likely to be colored by personal feelings. In short, a stranger-mentor may be in a better position to foster independence than a mentor-as-friend.

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In *Teacher as Stranger* (1973), Greene pointed out that the teacher is required to promote growth in the student and, therefore, the teacher-student relationship is necessarily one of asymmetry. Similarly, a mentor occupies the space of the more knowledgeable one. The mentor has a clearer sense of where the student is and where he or she needs to go.

However, the mentor, like Greene's teacher, must guard against using this position to provide answers for the student or to mold his or her path. As Greene stated (1973, 297), the mentor must be aware that there can be "no final explanation of any particular experience," and must "not try to persuade his [sic] students to adopt his evaluations or share his feelings . . . in the end, when they return to the work at hand, the students must embark on their own journeys."

### **The Study**

Serendipity played a role in this project's beginning. Three years ago, a colleague called me about a student. This student, Jack, as I shall refer to him, had been having serious problems in college and, after two semesters, seemed likely to fail or drop out. My colleague inquired whether I might be able to help this student, perhaps mentor him. I agreed to meet Jack and see whether I could help.

Originally, I was not sure what I would or should do. During our first conversation, Jack talked movingly about wanting to succeed, but was unable to make the first step. He was a sophomore, trying to decide why he was still in college. He primarily came to college to play a team sport, but suffered an early injury and never played. He drifted through classes without long-term goals and fell seriously behind. He felt overwhelmed.

It was clear that Jack had the potential to be a successful student, but he was floundering and confused and lacked the self-confidence and knowledge he needed

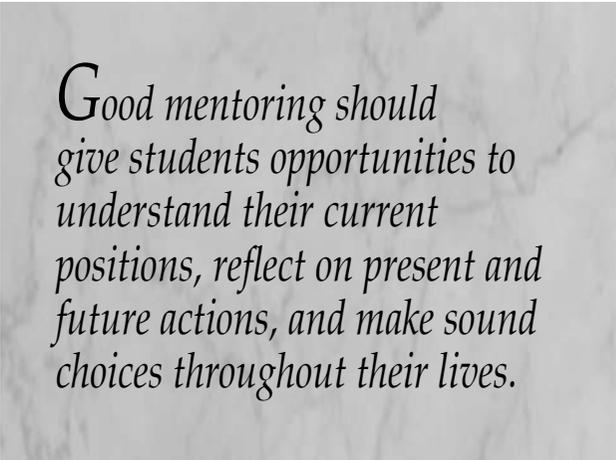
to navigate successfully through the college environment. That's when I began to contemplate seriously what mentoring means for at-risk students. I had a mentor in graduate school and knew instinctively that what had benefited me at that point in my life was not what this young man needed, at least initially. While I had needed someone to guide me through the dissertation process, this young man needed someone to help him survive in what seemed to him an alien and, often hostile, environment.

Weekly meetings were held each Friday. Our conversations at these meetings began with my asking Jack to articulate the critical moments he faced during his time at college. In turn, I explained the assumptions and expectations that many professors had about class attendance, participation, and the work ethic. When Jack had decisions to make—for example, whether to turn a paper in late or not at all or whether to explain an absence—I told him how the decisions he made might affect him and how professors would perceive him. I laid out a few scenarios with possible outcomes. I hoped that this explanation of the college culture might give him an existential spark and spur him to act. A few weeks later, he started visiting my office outside of our Friday meetings to tell me how well he had done on a test or how he had worked with a professor to solve a problem. His grades showed improvement that semester.

The following fall, Jack returned to campus. He was a changed person. He went to class religiously and did well. He was excited about his major and was a high-performing and engaged student. At the end of the semester, I made an appointment to chat with him about

what had happened over the past year. He said two things that stuck with me and eventually influenced my mentoring project. He told me that my explanations of the college system and professors' expectations had forced him to make active decisions. Because he understood the consequences of his actions, he could no longer make passive decisions, such as to let things slide. One particular incident stood out. He described it as the time that I "threw him a lifeline," or when I convinced him to proceed with an idea that seemed risky by stating that I would vouch for him.

I reflected on my experience with Jack. Though the approach I had taken was based more on intuition than on a theoretical framework, I worked to uncover what had happened specifically and determine whether this dynamic would spark positive outcomes in other marginal students. I had a long-standing interest in mentoring and had done research with at-risk high school students. To satisfy my curiosity, I prepared a small research project.



*Good mentoring should give students opportunities to understand their current positions, reflect on present and future actions, and make sound choices throughout their lives.*

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My first step was to identify at-risk students based on a GPA of less than 2.0. A list of all students in the college who had completed at least 24 semester hours and who had a cumulative GPA below 2.0 at the end of the 2001 fall semester was pulled. The total sample of students throughout the college was 43 out of 1,050. Twelve of these students were education majors. They were contacted and asked to participate in a one-semester study. All of the students initially agreed, though two students eventually withdrew from the study. The remaining 31 students were used as a control group and were not contacted.

*For mentors to be effective, there must be institutional support, including concrete initiatives to train, educate, and assist individuals in the work of mentoring.*

Many, though not all of the students in the study, fit the profile of the typical at-risk student: 83 percent were male, 42 percent were members of minority groups, and 66 percent were first-generation college students. Approximately 50 percent were involved in a major sport on campus. These students participated in the sport while the study took place.

The students participating in the study agreed that, during the semester, I had permission to contact each of the professors with whom they were taking courses and talk about the student's status in the course. I assured each of them that whatever topics or issues passed between their professors and me during the week would not be raised by me at our weekly talk. However, if the student brought up an issue I had discussed with their professor, I made it clear that I could relate to the student what the professor had shared with me.

The following example was given to all students during the initial meeting:

*Let's say you skip classes one week and come here on Friday to talk. I probably will know you weren't in class if I talked to your professors. But, if you don't bring it up, I won't. If you want to talk about baseball or music for 15 minutes, then that is what we will do. If you do decide to talk about missing class, then I will feel free to discuss it, bringing in both my own and the other professors' perspectives. This chat session is not designed to catch you misbehaving or punish you, but it is an attempt to open up an avenue for you to talk about issues without being judged. If we talk about an issue, I will tell you what I think you should do and why you should do it—I want to give you my interpretation of your situation.*

Each participating student signed a consent form and was asked to undertake two tasks each week. First, students were asked to come to my office every week for a 15-minute informal meeting to discuss whatever they desired. Second, students were asked to write me a weekly e-mail, before Friday, indicating how they felt things were going for

the week. Each of the original 12 students in the test group attended at least one meeting with me. Two students eventually dropped out from the study's weekly meeting and writing assignments, with the other 10 students remaining active participants for the entire semester.

During the weekly conversations, I attempted to elicit from students whether they enjoyed being in college, how often they went home, and if they had significant worries outside of academics. All students in the study purported to be content and rarely went home, preferring to stay on campus.

The e-mails and conversations pointed out these students' incomplete knowledge of the college system—they did not understand fully how it worked. Observations, fellow students, and intuition provided the information that these students used to navigate through the murky waters of their education. This lack of knowledge often negatively affected the students' performance. One young woman, for instance, had not turned in an assignment on the due date and, therefore, decided not to turn it in at all. She showed me the paper, which she had finished one day late. I asked her why she did not give it to the professor. She told me that she had heard from other students that the professor was an exceptionally hard grader on anything handed in late, and that the information had dissuaded her. I told her that she should turn in the paper to find out if it were true and that any grade would help her more than a zero. I also explained that if she turned in the paper and talked to the professor, she would send a completely different message than if she never turned it in and never talked to the professor. The student ended up turning in her paper and came back the next week to discuss "what an eye-opener this had been." The student continued to talk to the professor and felt good about the course at the end of the semester.

In the early part of the semester, there were a few instances when a student broached the topic of class or professors during the weekly conversations. Usually, however, the conversations were centered on current events, sports, hobbies, parents, girlfriends or boyfriends, and movies. When the topic of academics did come up, students talked to me about problems and questions they had. I would try to work in a related task for them to complete before the next Friday rolled around. For example, one student told me that he received a good grade on a paper and the professor indicated that the student had made some perceptive remarks. He told me that made him feel good about himself and that he sometimes had things to say in class, but never got around to it. Pursuing this thread, I found out that he sat quietly in the back of class and did not participate. I told him that it was easy to get lost in the crowd in the back of class and it might appear as if he were not interested in the topic. I told him that he had a better chance of interacting with the professor if he sat in the front. His task that week was to sit in the front of class and see what happened—I wanted him to observe if there were any changes in the other students or the professor once he had changed his seat. He reported back that the professor had made eye contact a few times. I then suggested that he try to ask a question the following week. He did and, after that, he became a regular contributor to the class as well as a high-performing student.

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One student, desperately trying to succeed in a class, told me that she was sure she could do well on the exams if she were given 20 extra minutes. She explained, "It just takes me 20 minutes longer than the time he allots for the exams in that class." I told her to ask for 20 minutes and, if the professor seemed hesitant, to present the request as an experiment to prove or disprove her hypothesis that she could do well if given more time. She approached the professor, was given the extra time, and did just as poorly. This result gave her and the professor an opportunity to discuss test-taking strategies, which did seem to benefit her on the third exam in that class.

Throughout the semester, I continually tried to explain the workings of the educational system and offered my view on the ways students' actions or decisions could be perceived. I eventually pushed students to tell me what they felt they ought to do before giving them my advice. For nine of the 10 students, there came a time in the study when they focused on their role and actions at our weekly meetings in lieu of chitchat. At some point, they started to inform me of what they were going to do in an academic situation instead of asking me what they should do. I saw this decisiveness as a step toward the independence they needed to establish.

## Outcome

By the end of the semester, I felt that the experiment was a success. The 10 students who remained involved showed an obvious new spark and became more active and interested in their college experience. I wanted to assess the outcome by more objective measures, however, so I compared the academic performance of the 12 students originally involved in the study with that of the control group of students—those who had similar grades to the study group at the beginning of the semester. The results of the study are interesting though the sample size is small and the non-random selection of participants precludes statistical analysis (Table 1).

**Table 1: Fall 2001–Spring 2002**

Group	Retention Rate	Students with GPA Improvement (%)
Study group: N=12	100% (12/12)	83% (10/12)
Control group: N=31	71% (22/31)	32% (10/31)
Study group; GPA<2.0 (N=7)	100% (7/7)	86% (6/7)
Control group; GPA<2.0 (N=12)	33% (4/12)	25% (3/12)
Study group; GPA<1.0 (N=2)	100% (2/2)	100% (2/2)
Control group; GPA<1.0 (N=3)	0% (0/3)	0% (0/3)

All 12 of the students in the study group completed the semester and reentered the college in the fall of 2002. Of the 31 original students in the control group, nine students (29 percent) were dismissed or withdrew from the college at some point during the spring 2002 semester.

The GPAs for each student over two semesters—in fall 2001 (when no students received intervention) and spring 2002 (when the study group students received intervention)—were compared. In the study group, 10 out of 12 students' GPAs improved, while two worsened (both of these were students who dropped out of the study), or an improvement rate of 83 percent. Eight of these students' GPAs improved over half a point, with the most impressive performance coming from a student who went from a 0.80 to a 2.9. In the control group, 10 students' GPAs improved, while 21 worsened further, or an improvement rate of 32 percent.

When examining the poorest performing subgroups of the two groups, 100 percent of the students in the test group (N=6), whose GPAs did not surpass the 2.0 mark at the end of the fall 2001 semester, remained enrolled in college. The control group's retention rate was one-third—eight out of 12 students withdrew or were dismissed. In the poorest performing subgroup—those students who began the spring 2002 semester on academic probation with GPAs below 1.00—all of the students (two out of two) in the study group remained in school and improved their performance, while all three of the control group students in this category left college.

No further formal intervention with the students in the study group was taken during the following two years. Contact was lost with some of them, some continued to drop by occasionally, some were in classes I taught, and three became my advisees. In the fall of 2004, I again examined the records of the students in both the study group and the control group. The results are shown in Table 2.

**Table 2: Status Fall 2004**

Status	Study Group (N=12)	Control Group (N=31)
Graduated (%)	50% (6)	39% (12)
Active (%)	8% (1)	10% (3)
Dismissed (%)	8% (1)	29% (9)
Probation/no return (%)	0% (0)	6% (2)
Withdrawn (%)	33% (4)	16% (5)

Six of the 12 students in the study group had graduated by the fall of 2004, while a seventh was still enrolled. One student out of the original study group had been dismissed for academic reasons (this was one of the two students who dropped out of the study).

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Four students had withdrawn from the college, but all were in good academic standing. Two students had transferred to other colleges (one for financial reasons and one to take advantage of a degree program not offered at this college). The other two students had withdrawn for financial reasons and were hoping to return.

Of the 31 students in the control group, 12 had graduated and three were still enrolled. Nine students had been dismissed for academic reasons, and two had not returned after being put on academic probation. Five of the control group students had withdrawn, the reasons for which are unknown.

The study group had a significantly higher rate of positive outcomes than did the control group (58 percent versus 49 percent either graduated or still enrolled). Including the two students from the study group who transferred to other colleges, nine out of 12, or three-fourths, of the study group students either graduated or were still enrolled. The most striking difference between the two groups was in the rate of negative outcomes. Out of the 31 students in the control group—11 students, or more than one-third—had flunked out, while only one of the 12 students in the study group had done so.

## *Discussion*

The results of this study must be considered suggestive rather than conclusive. Though the study group included more than one-fourth of the lowest performing students in the college, it was still small in absolute terms. Further, all students in the study group were in the education department; the results may not have been similar for other student groups. Other factors that also may have influenced the outcome include the size of the college and the makeup of the student body.

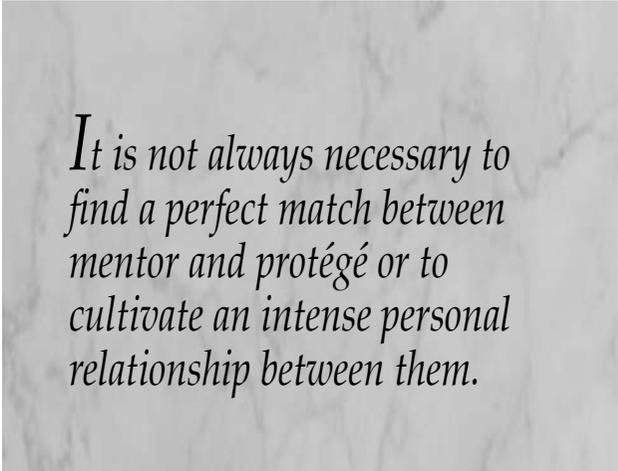
The results are interesting, however, because they demonstrate that successful mentoring is possible without the use of strategies typically associated with mentoring. For example, there was no remedial instruction, no time-use charts, nor inspirational words of wisdom from the mentor. The mentor's time and effort were limited—almost casual—yet effective for this group of students.

How can the success of this minimalist approach to mentoring be explained? The students in the study became more active, more involved, and more successful in college. Why? I believe the best explanation of the dynamics of this study lies in what Coleman (1988, 96) termed "social capital." Coleman defined social capital as a system of relations among persons that determines the obligations and expectations, information channels, and social norms that exist in a community. Social capital is maximized in a social system in which all actors are aware of the actions taken by all other actors. This mutual awareness is termed *closure*. If a social system has closure, a high degree of trust is likely to develop, and the community can reinforce desired behavior and quickly sanction any negative behaviors.

By communicating with each of the students' professors, with the students' knowledge and approval, I was creating closure. The students were no longer anonymous members of a crowd. They knew they were observed, and this knowledge sparked greater self-ob-

servation, which was reinforced by the weekly writing assignments. This self-observation on the part of the students, in turn, generated a greater consideration of their actions and the consequences of those actions—in short, a greater sense of agency, position, and voice. Because the students were observed by a stranger, they observed themselves through strangers' eyes and were more objective and dispassionate than they otherwise might have been.

The closure of social capital is not always benign. It can be used to oppress, as well as foster independence. The most extreme example of observation and information as a means of control is the Panopticon, an architectural design for a prison which consists of a tower surrounded by cells into which an observer in the tower can see without being seen (Foucault 1984). When the power to dominate rests on a differential possession of knowledge, such asymmetry of seeing-without-being-seen can be the basis of power, if the knowledge obtained is used as a means of control. Colley's (2002) research demonstrated how the intrusion by a third party to whom the mentor reports about the protégé turns the mentoring relationship into one of surveillance and control.



*It is not always necessary to find a perfect match between mentor and protégé or to cultivate an intense personal relationship between them.*

To guard against the possibility of falling into a Panopticon trap, students were made aware that they were being watched with interest, but without judgment. They were told their behavior would not be reported to other professors and that, under no circumstances, would any sanctions be imposed on them nor would information obtained be used for that purpose. Finally, they were told that if they failed to attend the weekly meeting for three weeks in a row, they would be removed automatically from the study.

### **Conclusion**

Good mentoring should give students opportunities to understand their current positions, reflect on present and future actions, and make sound choices throughout their lives. If the mentor begins this process as a trustworthy guide, then the choices made by the students might not be autonomous. Instead, their choices may be prescribed by a sense of loyalty to the relationship. Conversely, a stranger does not warrant the same degree of loyalty from the protégé. If a stranger-mentor presents situations or ideas that could stimulate action, the action chosen by the student is more likely to be part of an attempt to create himself or herself, rather than to follow in the footsteps of the mentor.

In a way, this simplifies the task of mentoring considerably. It is not always necessary to find a perfect match between mentor and protégé or cultivate an intense personal relationship between them. The mentor needs to lead the student to take his or her place

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as an active member of the college community. For at-risk students, often the first task of mentoring is to demystify college. The mentor can demonstrate by example that faculty members are human, approachable, and reasonable. The second task is to help students develop a self-awareness that will lead to a sense of agency and responsibility. Again, this need not be a difficult task. The expression of interest in and awareness of the student's activities may be sufficient to spark such self-awareness. As Lee (1999) pointed out, students' nonclassroom interaction with faculty members is strongly related to their retention rates. This effect occurs without any formal mentoring efforts on the part of faculty members. As Zelditch (1997) observed, mentoring need not be a dyadic relationship. The various roles that a mentor fills don't need to be carried out by a single person. This alleviates pressure on the mentoring relationship, which can be shared among faculty members, administrators, counselors, and peers.

The usual approach to mentoring in college is for an advisor to shepherd students along a path that is expected to lead to academic success for the majority—mentoring without Mentees. For many students—those who come to college with a strong sense of purpose and direction—this type of advising is adequate. However, there are many students for whom this type of advising becomes an exercise in miscommunication, frustration, and discouragement.

This study suggests that at-risk students, especially, are in need of an awakening, or a rousing, to help them determine they have the ability to act and understand the structures in which they are acting. Once they choose to act and decide on the direction they will take, they can look to a mentor to guide them on their journey. Should a faculty member assume the role of Mentor before Mentees, the student may miss the opportunity for developing his or her independent choices, and instead become someone who is merely shepherded through the college years.

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