

Alumni Mentoring of Beginning Teachers

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Alumni who are veteran teachers can become a valuable resource for teacher education programs in mentoring beginning teachers from the same institution. An Alumni Mentoring Guild was established through a School of Education and Office of Career Services to bring back alumni to help beginning teachers. Mentors worked with up to three beginning teachers or new graduates for a year to guide them with the challenges of teaching. A self-efficacy questionnaire, narrative responses, and a contact log were used to assess the program. Recommendations for developing an alumni mentoring program focus on collaboration, recruitment, administrative oversight, participant feedback and improvement of a teacher education program.

A recurring concern for teacher education programs is teacher attrition within the first five years of teaching (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2004). According to Ingersoll (2001, 2008), one-third of new teachers leave within the first three years and one-half leave within the first five years. The turnover problem, although high for the entire teaching profession, affects beginning teachers more than others (Ingersoll & Smith, 2003). The National Center for Education Statistics (2005) "Special Analysis of 2005" of mobility in the teacher workforce cites lack of planning time, problematic student behavior, and lack of influence over school policy among the top five factors influencing decisions to leave teaching. While not directly accountable for new teachers' decisions to leave the profession, teacher education programs are often seen as responsible for their new teachers' job performance, and are often held responsible for not preparing beginning teachers for the challenges and responsibilities of real-world teaching (Levine, 2006).

Research has shown that mentoring can be effective in reducing teacher attrition (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2004; Ingersoll & Smith, 2004; Johnson, Kardos, Kauffman, Liu, & Donaldson, 2004). Mentors help beginning teachers with, for example, classroom management, lesson planning, and instructional strategies. Mentors offer practical experience to beginning teachers in handling problematic student behavior and acquiring influence over school policy. Mentors also provide psychological support and are especially effective when they are not in the role of evaluator (Brewster & Railsback, 2001; Mullinix, 2002). They provide indirect personal and professional assistance, help beginning teachers think for themselves, and orient and support beginning teacher actions. Mentoring can be particularly helpful for beginning teachers in school districts where working conditions are more challenging.

Mentors also benefit because they have new incentives and career opportunities as experienced teachers. Mentoring for both new and veteran

teachers also promotes new approaches to teaching and learning and new forms of teacher collaboration (National Center for Research on Teacher Learning, 2006). Mentoring is seen as a way to cut costs associated with recruiting, hiring, and training new staff, and as a way to help with school improvement and reform (Black, 2001).

While teacher education programs usually do not have the funds to provide mentors for beginning teachers after graduation, they can tap into an underutilized resource—*alumni*—to provide some type of service. Alumni employed as teachers can be a valuable resource to beginning teachers. Having been prepared for teaching at the same institution, they understand the program philosophy, have had many of the same professors, and probably understand best any disparities between the type of preparation provided by the institution and the real-world issues of the classrooms in surrounding communities.

The involvement of alumni can help teacher education programs maintain connections with their older graduates and learn from veteran teachers ways in which teacher education programs should change to better prepare new graduates. The purpose of this paper is to describe an alumni mentoring program that we implemented, discuss how we attempted to assess its value, and provide recommendations on how such a program can be implemented.

Description of the Alumni Mentoring Guild

The teacher education program involved in the Alumni Mentoring Guild (referred to as the Guild) is housed at a small, private college in a suburban county in Purchase, New York. The Guild draws on the experience of veteran teachers to mentor new graduates who are just beginning to teach. The Guild is intended to be informal, cost-free, non-evaluative, and provide a level of comfort for beginning teachers that is not available to them through traditional mentoring

programs. It is intended to promote a sense of community between the participants, help mentors and mentees maintain their connection with the college, and provide the impetus for networking within groups and with other teachers.

The Alumni Mentoring Guild is comprised of volunteer alumni who are veteran teachers and beginning teachers. Each mentor (veteran teacher) connects with up to three beginning teachers or new graduates for a period of a year (renewable) to guide them with the challenges of teaching. The mentees (beginning teachers) have someone (a voice of experience) to call or contact when they need information or guidance. Veteran teachers and beginning teachers are in the same certification area as frequently as possible, but in different school districts.

Roles and Responsibilities of Mentors and Mentees

The mentors have three years of teaching experience and/or are tenured as classroom teachers. The mentors participate in a training session on mentoring given by two faculty members to prepare them ahead of time for their roles. The training session incorporates strategies for mentoring and provides a means for sharing successful teaching strategies. The mentors receive professional development credit for the training session, free tuition for one graduate course for the following year, and free admission to selected special events for professional development credit.

The mentees are first and second year teachers. The mentees receive free coaching and online networking with peers. Mentees must be employed as a classroom teacher, teacher's assistant, or substitute teacher.

Mentors and mentees sign a confidentiality form to promise to keep any and all communication between mentors and mentees confidential. The mentor makes the initial contact

with the mentees (telephone, email, face-to-face), and contacts each mentee at least once a month. The mentor listens and helps the mentees think through challenges. The mentor keeps a Contact Log that indicates the date of the contact and the nature of the communication. The mentees respond to communication from the mentor at least once a month. If the mentor does not call, the mentee communicates with the mentor.

Implementation

A career counselor from the Office of Career Services collaborated with the three of us (the leadership team) to conceptualize the basic components of the mentoring program and develop the roles and responsibilities for the mentors and mentees. The career counselor first identified potential mentors for the program. She sought recommendations from education faculty, worked with the field placement director and field supervisors to identify teachers in the field, and invited alumni to join. As soon as ten or more mentors volunteered, the career counselor sought mentees to participate. She sent a letter of invitation to recent graduates, worked with field supervisors to identify student teachers who had found a job, and worked with the education faculty to identify recent graduates with teaching jobs.

The career counselor matched the mentors with mentees by discipline and grade level as well as possible. For example, a veteran high school science teacher was given mentees in science while a combined elementary education/special education teacher was given mentees in both elementary education and special education. The career counselor spoke individually to each mentor and mentee to make sure that they understood their roles, seemed appropriately matched, and would commit to the entire year. Her method for matching was intended to avoid the pitfall of haphazardly pairing mentors with mentees (Black, 2001).

Both groups participated in three sessions at the College: a kickoff in September, a midyear bash in January, and an end-of-year celebration. At the kick-off session, participants learned in detail about their responsibilities for the Guild and met for the first time with their mentors or mentees. They had the opportunity to listen to examples of successful mentor-mentee teams, discuss ways to address different hypothetical challenges, and meet in their own mentor-mentee groups. One month after the kick-off session, the career counselor contacted each mentor/mentee to inquire about any issues and encourage continued participation.

At the mid-year bash, participants worked in small groups and then as a whole group to discuss, record, and report ways in which the Guild was working and needed to be changed. They also listened to a presentation by an outside expert on a specific topic identified from the pre-assessment instrument as a challenge for most mentees (e.g., classroom management or working with diverse student populations).

At the end-of-year celebration, participants worked in small groups and then as a whole group to discuss, record, and report ways in which their participation with the Guild surprised and disappointed them. Again, individual and panel presentations were given to discuss challenges that were identified as issues for the mentees.

Administrative Oversight

The leadership team met approximately every three weeks to develop and monitor the Guild and plan the three sessions for all participants. At every meeting, the career counselor reported to us about the participants' level of activity and any issues that arose. The career counselor emailed and telephoned all mentors on a monthly basis to discuss their progress with their mentees.

To help the mentors promote discussion with their mentees, we created a list of questions for

the mentors to ask (e.g., How are you in managing time in the classroom? What is concerning you the most? What are you proud of so far? How is your relationship with the principal?).

Program Assessment

Our data collection focused on changes in mentee perceptions about their capabilities, on the issues faced by beginning teachers, and the capacity of the Guild to address these issues. We collected data at the beginning of the yearly program at the kick-off session and at the end-of-year session in May with three assessment tools: questionnaire, narrative responses, and contact log.

Questionnaire

A formal questionnaire was used to gauge mentees' feelings of "self-efficacy." The self-efficacy questionnaire is adapted from Schwarzer, Schmitz, and Daytner (1999) and measures "self-efficacy," the "subjective confidence for successfully performing given tasks at designated levels" (Bong & Hocevar, 2002, p. 143). We chose to use this construct because of our belief that feelings of optimism and a sense of control that are folded into the notion of "self-efficacy" (Bandura, 1997) positively impact job satisfaction and are important factors in teacher retention. We also thought that the mentors would be able to help the mentees with coping mechanisms, teaching and management strategies, and practical strategies for managing workload, which would directly affect "self-efficacy."

The averages of mentees' responses on the questionnaire indicated that mentees gained some confidence in most areas of self-efficacy, particularly in dealing with skeptical colleagues, having a positive influence on personal and academic development, and teaching relevant content to students with differing needs and backgrounds. They rated themselves slightly lower on maintaining composure and working

within system constraints. They continued to rate themselves high on their ability to become more capable and exert a positive influence on students (see Table 1).

Narrative Responses

The purpose of the narrative responses was to identify the issues of concern to mentees and ways in which the Alumni Mentoring Guild was helping to address these issues. All mentees completed an open-ended pre- and post-assessment instrument at the kick-off and end-of-year sessions respectively.

The pre-assessment asked participants to record issues about teaching that could arise during the year. An example of an item from the pre-assessment was "I anticipate that the following issues about teaching may arise this year." The end-of-year assessment asked for major issues that were addressed through the Guild since the beginning of the year, issues that they wish had been addressed, and suggestions for improving the Guild. Responses to each question were listed and grouped by theme.

Contact Log

The Contact Log was used to record contacts between mentors and their mentees, and provide a record of the issues addressed by mentors and mentees. The mentors had a separate Contact Log sheet for each mentee. The data recorded on the Contact Log included the mode of communication (T=Telephone; E=Electronic; Face=Face to face; O=Other), date of contact, approximate time spent in contact, contact initiator, and topic/action plan/outcome/comments. Mentors' patterns of interaction were analyzed.

Eleven themes emerged from the mentees' narrative responses to questions and the mentors' contact logs. The five most prevalent themes for mentees were planning, management, teaching, working with parents, and working with

colleagues. The four most frequently cited themes from the mentors' contact logs were management, teaching, planning, and working with parents. Most communication was through email with the mentor initiating contact with the mentee on a weekly basis. Occasionally, mentees contacted mentors by telephone. Overall, management, planning, teaching, and working with parents emerged as the four most prevalent themes in both the narrative responses and the contact logs (see Table 2).

Narrative responses revealed that mentees participated and continued with this program because they wanted to have support, even if it was not on a regular basis. They wrote that their mentors gave them help with daily routines without threatening them. Mentees liked that it was non-evaluative. They liked the idea of knowing that they could call someone to "vent to" without fear of being evaluated. One mentee said, "It was great getting the email...very comforting." Mentees also liked having a resource for just about any topic. They expressed hope that the networking patterns established during the year would continue into the next year.

Mentors revealed at the end-of-year session that they had benefited too. They said that their conversations with their mentees pushed them to think more reflectively about their own performance as teachers. They also were pleased to be able to help new teachers.

Recommendations for Developing an Alumni Mentoring Program

An informal, cost-free, and non-evaluative mentoring program that calls for the participation of alumni on a regular basis can be mutually beneficial. Alumni receive additional professional development. They also have the opportunity to return to their alma mater without requiring them to make a financial contribution. Teacher education programs have a credible reason to bring back alumni who invariably provide

insights about the effectiveness of the programs from which they graduated. These new insights help teacher education programs stay current with the evolving challenges of K-12 teaching. To begin such a program, we offer the following recommendations.

Collaboration

Career services should be involved in helping to develop and implement an alumni mentoring program because this is the office that students depend upon for information and opportunities about teaching jobs. Career counselors have information about students' job placements and can serve as an important conduit between a School or College of Education and its graduates. Career services can help to publicize such a mentoring program as they meet with students to help them with, for example, resume writing and interviewing techniques. They can also work with admissions offices to publicize to prospective education students that the teacher education program provides services to students beyond graduation.

Recruitment

To recruit as many participants as possible, publicity about the program is important both before and after students graduate. Surprisingly, we found that it was easier to attract mentors than mentees. We hypothesized that (1) new graduates were hired at the last minute and did not sign up soon enough to participate; and (2) mentees did not have the time or inclination to become involved with another program when they were already required by the state to have formal, evaluative mentoring.

Recruitment efforts need to communicate that this type of mentoring program can be used to discuss and solve problems that ordinarily might not be addressed through a formal mentoring program. For example, a mentee discovered that her grade-level team leader was talking about

the mentee's inappropriate teaching methods in the faculty room, while, on the other hand, the mentee thought that the team leader's approaches were outdated. The team leader has many years of experience in the school, and tremendous influence with other teachers. The mentee was afraid to mention this issue to her school mentor because this person happened to be the team leader's friend. The mentee brought this issue to her Guild mentor who was able to help her interact better with the team leader. Thus, prospective mentees need to see the Guild as an additional and different type of assistance.

Administrative Oversight

Someone on the leadership team must work directly with the mentors and mentees. While we were fortunate to have our career services representative help work with the program, the person can be anyone from a teacher education program or other type of office who is willing to work with alumni in this capacity. Especially important is the need to interact with alumni through email, telephone calls, and special sessions so that the momentum is not lost. The administrator in charge needs to pay particular attention to the participants in the beginning of the program to avoid attrition. For example, our career counselor discovered within the first month of the program each year that a mentor-mentee switch was needed to satisfy the mentees' desire for a better fit.

Even with such careful oversight, the administrator needs to understand that some mentees and mentors simply will not participate when they learn about their responsibilities as participants. Frequent and appropriate communication with the mentors and mentees will enable the administrator to discover patterns of participation that can be used to make adjustments and revise expectations, as needed, to promote maximum involvement.

Participant Feedback

Encouraging regular feedback from mentors and mentees communicates that the administrator is interested in hearing from its participants about ways to provide the best possible program. For example, because mentors and mentees expressed the need to have more opportunities to socialize and bond, we built in additional time for socializing and networking at the three face-to-face sessions. However, being receptive to feedback does not necessarily mean that the expressed needs will be addressed immediately. For instance, we discovered that mentees were mixed in their view of the importance of having mentors from the same content area and grade. Some believed that it was essential, especially for lesson planning, and some did not think it was necessary because of the kinds of issues that were discussed. If feedback is heard, and reasonable explanations are given about the challenges and issues, participants are more likely to understand and accept existing program conditions.

Improvement of the Teacher Education Program

Participants' perceptions of their areas of strength and weakness helped us to reflect on our program offerings and make some changes. We realized that we needed to provide more support for all teacher candidates on topics such as classroom management, working with parents, working with difficult colleagues, and dealing with system constraints. This prompted the faculty to already revise coursework and field experiences to include additional information on classroom management and working with parents.

Because the participants did not have to worry about repercussions with grades or evaluations, they shared their real concerns about their preparation for teaching. Obviously, communication with alumni about the quality of their experience in a program helps those in charge to discover ways to improve programs.

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Table 1

Mentee's Self-Efficacy Average Scores Survey adapted from Schwarzer et al. (1999)
Combined three year data 05-06 through 07-08

	Questions	Sept Average n=37	May Average n=21	Difference Weighted Average
1	I am convinced that I am able to successfully teach all relevant subject content to students with differing needs and backgrounds.	3.05	3.31	0.25
2	I believe that I can maintain a positive relationship with parents even when expectations differ.	3.33	3.46	0.12
3	When I try really hard, I am able to reach even the most difficult students.	3.15	3.21	0.06
4	I am convinced that, as time goes by, I will continue to become more and more capable of helping to address my students' needs.	3.72	3.80	0.08
5	Even if I get disrupted while teaching, I am confident that I can maintain my composure and continue to teach well.	3.39	3.36	-0.03
6	I am confident in my ability to be responsive to my students' needs even on a bad day.	3.31	3.46	0.14
7	If I try hard enough, I know that I can exert a positive influence on both the personal and academic development of my students.	3.64	3.91	0.27
8	I am convinced that I can develop creative ways to cope with system constraints (such as budget cuts and other administrative problems) and continue to teach well.	3.20	3.18	-0.02
9	I believe that I can motivate my students to participate in new projects.	3.40	3.53	0.13
10	I know that I can carry out new projects even when I am opposed by skeptical colleagues.	3.09	3.37	0.28
11	I believe that I can maintain and implement my personal philosophy of education.	3.61	3.65	0.04

Response format: (1) not at all true; (2) barely true; (3) moderately true; (4) very true

Table 2

**Themes that Emerged from Mentee’s Narrative Responses
to Questions and Mentors’ Contact Logs**

Themes Mentioned	Mentee Pre-Assessment	Mentee Post-Assessment	Contact Logs
Management not including time-management; motivation	21	8	14
Teaching: Special needs students/Differentiation; Tutoring; Teaching Strategies/Models; Homework	18	4	13
Working with Parents	15	1	11
Working with Colleagues and Administrators	14	2	6
Planning and Lesson Planning; Time Management; Scheduling	22	2	11
Curriculum; Standards; Content-Specific Issues	10	3	5
Assessment/Grading/Report Cards; Testing	4	2	6
Stress Management	4	0	6
Evaluation: Observation; Annual Reviews; Tenure; Certification Video	3	0	0
Professional Development	6	9	2
Professionalism	5	1	0
Other; Record Keeping; Resources/equipment/ supplies/ Home Life; Budgetary Constraints	7	0	1
Total References	129	32	75