

Benefits of mentorship from the undergraduate perspective

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Mentoring is a brain to pick, an ear to listen, and a push in the right direction.

– **John C. Crosby**

Many are familiar with the term “mentor”, however few are aware of its origins. According to ancient Greek mythology, Mentor was the name of Odysseus’ advisor who was responsible for the care and education of Odysseus’ son, Telemachus. As the origin of the term suggests, the idea of mentorship has a long history.

Mentorship is an important component of education, especially in university. For many undergraduate students, university can be a lonely place. Class sizes are typically in the hundreds, professors rarely get to know students’ names, and achievement is regularly rank-ordered to adhere to the oft-mandated bell curve grading scheme. While some students thrive, others slip into the abyss and become yet another attrition statistic. Although the answers to student involvement and efficacy are complex, there is one thing that makes a difference: Mentorship.

Mentorship can give students the opportunity to become more engaged in their own education, but mentoring relationships do not come with instruction manuals. Individuals involved in these relationships set their own boundaries and expectations. As with any relationship, it is essential that the two individuals have compatible interests.

Students might begin by considering classes that have been particularly intriguing, or areas they might like to further explore. After a student has reflected on an area of interest, he or she may begin to consider professors that share this passion. To help find out more about a particular professor, most universities post a brief biography and publication list of members in a given faculty. It is helpful to be thorough when deciding who to contact, as the aim is to create a relationship of support and guidance.

Despite the fact that many professors are busy people, they will often make time to sit down with an interested student. An appropriate way to start dialogue with a potential mentor is to send an email. When composing an email, begin with an introduction followed by a brief outline of the area of interest. Conclude the email by suggesting a face-to-face meeting to discuss this particular area of shared interest. It is recommended that the email is written in a professional tone with clear language (avoid wordiness!), so as not to be overwhelming for the reader.

Despite the ubiquitous nature of email, it is an effective way to establish contact with a future mentor. At the undergraduate level, mentorship is beneficial for several reasons. Not only does it connect the student to an area of interest, it can serve as that extra layer of support that students might miss during university. Additionally, there is the potential for academic collaborations and partnerships. Lastly, when submitting

applications to graduate programs or potential employers, a letter from someone who knows the applicant well, such as a mentor, may be more helpful for decision-makers.

Although mentorship has been around for thousands of years, there is good reason to

revisit and rejuvenate this positive relationship between a student and professor.

*A special thanks to my mentor, J.V. for all of her support.