

Teaching Newsletter: How the Definition of Mentoring Is Changing

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Hello and welcome to Teaching, a weekly newsletter from *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Today, Dan Berrett is your guide. Beckie Supiano looks at the growing importance — and changing meaning — of mentorship, our colleague Katherine Mangan tells us about a new effort in Texas to partner with employers to teach students about creativity and problem-solving, and Dan suggests some reading material.

Fostering Mentorship

When he was an undergraduate at Denison University in the 1980s, Fred Porcheddu would have told you that his professors were mentoring him. They saw him as a strong student who could follow in their footsteps, and they groomed him to join the professoriate.

Today, Mr. Porcheddu, who is an associate professor of English and chair of the department at his alma mater, sees mentorship differently. It's something that should be available to all students, not just those at the top of the class. And its goal should be helping students along whatever path they choose, not nudging them into academe.

This vision of mentorship is spreading at Denison. The university's president, Adam Weinberg, wants to make it a central part of the student experience there — an effort I wrote about in my [latest article](#) for *The Chronicle*.

Mentoring students doesn't mean acting like their parents — or their best friends. Mark Moller, Denison's dean of first-year students, describes mentorship as a "professional" relationship, as opposed to a "personal" one. This framing, he thinks, can remind faculty and staff not to take it personally when a student they are mentoring chooses not to follow their advice, or acts in ways they disagree with. Students, he says, retain their autonomy.

That's just part of what makes these relationships difficult to manage. No one can make them happen in the first place. That's why Mr. Weinberg talks about the effort in terms of increasing the odds that students find a mentor. Mentorship can't be forced, he says, but it can be encouraged. And when it happens, research suggests, college becomes a richer experience for students — both during and after their time on campus.

Do you see mentoring undergraduates as an important part of your job? How do you conceptualize that role? And how can you tell if you're fulfilling it successfully? Write me at beckie.supiano@chronicle.com, and I may share your response in a future newsletter.

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Teaching, Industry, and the Creative Economy

Each week this fall, a bus picked up students enrolled in the University of Texas at Austin's College of Fine Arts and took them to the local design studios of IBM, where they trained under the watchful eyes of the company's designers.

The course, dubbed "Radical Collaboration," was the first of what Texas educators hope will be many collaborations between the school and industry. Similar company-based courses are being offered this semester. In "Radical Collaboration," IBM's designers teach undergraduates who are taking courses through the university's new [School of Design and Creative Technologies](#).

This fall, the students represented majors like engineering, computer science, fine arts, and business, and worked in groups of five to seven on problems faced by IBM and its clients. In one, they used the company's artificial-intelligence system Watson to help students register for classes. They were also learning [design thinking](#), which is increasingly popular in higher education; colleges of business, engineering, and, at Texas, fine arts have opened specialized programs.

Courses at Texas' design school teach students to think creatively and solve complex problems facing employers in such industries as health care, transportation, and the performing arts. Students also work on soft skills like building empathy, and interviewing people about what they most value and need in products and services.

"The creative economy is one of the nation's fastest-growing sectors," says the school's assistant dean, Doreen Lorenzo, who has co-founded and led successful startups. "We're giving our students the tools they need to go out and succeed in it."

ICYMI

- As a new semester gets underway, David Gooblar writes about the importance of setting the tone for a course through a "teaching persona." One example he [described](#) in *The Chronicle* is using a joke to begin the first class to surprise his students or make them "a little delighted." A deeper way to think about persona is as a way of modeling traits that students can emulate. He calls these "intellectual virtues," which is a [subject](#) we've explored in the past.
- "The theory was beautifully simple: set a goal, measure the goal, then use the data to make adjustments," David Eubanks wrote in *Intersection*, which is published by the Association for the Assessment of Learning in Higher Education. "It was that last part where everything seemed to fall apart." Mr. Eubanks might seem an unlikely source for such a pronouncement. He is assistant vice president for assessment and institutional

effectiveness at Furman University and a board member of the association, someone who is described in this [piece](#) in *The Chronicle* as “an assessment insider.” Mr. Eubanks concludes that the usefulness of assessment results in making improvements is so elusive “because the methods of gathering and analyzing data are very poor.”

- Debates about teaching using active-learning methods or the lecture are as pitched as they are everlasting. In a blog post, Kevin Gannon, a professor of history at Grand View University, gives a nuanced account of his own thinking about this divide, and he identifies some reasons that these arguments often arouse such intense passion. “The clash over lecture-based pedagogies is a collision of disparate visions of higher education’s purpose and different ways of seeing our students,” he [wrote](#) in *The Tattooed Professor*. “It’s far more than just quibbling about different in-class teaching techniques; the question of lecturing is, I believe, fundamentally wrapped up in the roots of our scholarly identities.”

Thanks for reading Teaching. If you have suggestions or ideas, please feel free to email us at dan.berrett@chronicle.com, beth.mcmurtrie@chronicle.com, or beckie.supiano@chronicle.com. If you have been forwarded this newsletter and would like to sign up to receive your own copy, you can do so [here](#).

— Beckie and Dan

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