

# Faculty Mentoring Undergraduates: The Nature, Development, and Benefits of Mentoring Relationships

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Elizabeth McKinsey, PhD

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Educational research shows that close student-faculty interaction is a key factor in college student learning and success. Most literature on undergraduate mentoring, however, focuses on planned programs of mentoring for targeted groups of students by non-faculty professionals or student peers. Based on the research literature and student and faculty testimony from a residential liberal arts college, this article shows that unplanned “natural” mentoring can be crucial to student learning and development and illustrates some best practices. It advances understanding of faculty mentoring by differentiating it from teaching, characterizing several functional types of mentoring, and identifying the phases through which a mentoring relationship develops. Arguing that benefits to students, faculty, and institutions outweigh the risks and costs of mentoring, it is written for faculty who want to be better mentors and provides evidence that administrators should value and reward mentoring.

## Phases of establishing a mentoring relationship

Every mentoring relationship, no matter at what stage of a student’s progress through college, goes through two or three key phases of development. The most basic step is **connection**.

Most contemporary students want closer interaction with faculty. They praise a professor who “gets to know everyone in his classes. I was very impressed by how much personal interest he took in his students. He always knew how everyone was doing in the class. He really wanted everyone to do well and went far out of his way to help students that came to him. He cared about his students.” Such appreciation for faculty who “take the time to get to know their students, not just to teach them” is a recurrent theme in the most positive student evaluations.

Connection is encouraged when faculty are available and accessible to talk outside of class. This means holding enough office hours so that conversations can be more than cursory, but it also requires approachability, making students feel invited and welcome when they do come. Students appreciated one professor for holding occasional office hours in a local coffee house on Saturday mornings, for, as one said, “To meet outside [the academic building] lent those meetings more of an aspect of collaboration and discussion, instead of something official or dictated.” Students interpret such faculty efforts as evidence that faculty care about them as people, not just as students. On faculty evaluation forms, students often list “accessibility” or “availability” as a criterion for faculty effectiveness.

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Sometimes the Tenure and Promotion Committee has worried that this may signify that the professor encourages dependence or “coddles” students. But understood in context, such student emphasis on faculty accessibility is a corollary to students’ academic engagement and is clearly a sign they are hungry to interact with faculty, eager to know them and be known by them, to establish a connection—a relationship that can open the way to mentoring

Building on connection, the next stage in a mentoring relationship is often **collaboration**. Individual projects such as student-faculty lab research, independent study, a senior thesis, or research assistance on a faculty project are salient examples. One student recalled floundering in her chosen science field until the summer after sophomore

year when she worked closely with a faculty member:

*It was through my work in her lab that I found myself and the success that had eluded me since my arrival at college. I made many mistakes but [Professor D] was always positive and confident in my abilities. I regained my self-confidence and did some good work for her.*

The student subsequently presented at several conferences and received Honors in Independent Study. She concluded her tribute by saying, "I am indebted to [Professor D] for the experiences I gained working in her lab. She is my mentor and my friend, and I have the utmost respect for her."

Collaboration can begin within a classroom setting. "[Professor E] was constantly learning with us," wrote one student. "She would assign problems that she did not know the answer to. The feeling of working in conjunction with your professor was amazing." Another remarked about a different professor, "Never have I met a teacher with such devotion to her subject and her students, or who afforded her students so much respect as co-participants in the learning process." Such focus on student learning in the classroom, now understood as a hallmark of effective teaching, opens the way to mentoring.

### **The payoff – is it worth it?**

The research literature reports significant learning gains with outstanding mentoring (Lopatto, 2010), and testimony from my campus indicates that rewards of mentoring, both for students and faculty, extend further and can far outweigh potential risks.

Could all faculty be good mentors if they wanted to? According to one legendary mentor on my campus, mentoring is a natural talent and cannot be taught. I believe, however, that faculty can be coached as mentors, if they want to be. Clearly, not every faculty member will choose mentoring, or be good at it; some will excel at classroom teaching or research or administrative work instead. Even professors who might excel at mentoring may choose not to do so, given the opportunity cost in time not devoted to research or other activities. But faculty members who decide to spend the time and energy required for mentoring must be supported and rewarded by their institutions. I don't suggest that mentoring should become a fourth category for faculty evaluation (with teaching, research, and service) that is required and assessed for salary or tenure and promotion decisions. Becoming another "box to check off" would undermine mentoring as a "natural" activity and reduce its effectiveness. But when it does happen, mentoring should be recognized and valued as a positive factor and be acknowledged in such decisions.

Although distinguishable from teaching in important ways, for the purpose of faculty personnel decisions, I advocate considering mentorship as an extension to and enhancement of teaching, so it should "count" in that category, as in this example: senior colleagues praised a tenure candidate's extraordinary ability to recognize promise and "pull students up to a level which only he believed these students could ever reach!" Crediting this candidate's mentoring as crucial to his students' success contributed to a positive tenure decision. Such credit will encourage individual faculty who are inclined toward mentoring to decide that it is worth their while. Otherwise, if institutional rewards come only for publications or developing a new popular course (thus yielding the institution either research prestige or enrollment efficiency), faculty will be discouraged from doing the valuable work of mentoring and they and their undergraduates will miss out on important benefits. If encouraged and rewarded, however, faculty can find, through the personal connections of mentoring, rewards as great as the intellectual satisfaction they experience as effective classroom teachers. The most influential professors play both roles.

Reference: McKinsey, E. (2016). Faculty Mentoring Undergraduates: The Nature, Development, and Benefits of Mentoring Relationships. *Teaching & Learning Inquiry*, 4(1), 1-15. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.20343/teachlearninqu.4.1.5>