

Mentoring Strategies for Support Staff: The Forgotten Link in Fostering a Culture of Wellbeing

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One of the primary goals of higher education institutions, particularly those that serve first generation and non-traditional students, is to ensure that every student is given an opportunity to grow, flourish and succeed. The literature suggests that one way to deal with this issue is through the creation of a mentoring culture. While that many institutions have implanted mentoring programs, a review of the literature indicates that an important group within this culture- staff members- are often forgotten in this process. Staff members touch the lives of everyone in the institution in a variety of ways. These interactions can have positive or negative effects upon others and may be especially important to students. This group of employees tends to be among the most stable in terms of longevity in the institution. The benefits of mentoring staff are numerous. Among them are retention, personal growth, professional growth, collaboration with other parties on campus, being comfortable asking questions when they need assistance, and contentment with their jobs- which in turn will tend to foster self-satisfaction and improved interactions with others. Since, staff contentment and success, or lack of it, can have a major impact upon all those with whom they interact, they should not continue to be the forgotten group within these institutions. This paper describes programs and strategies focused on mentoring support staff, developed and implemented at Walla Walla Community College in Washington State. Participants will have the opportunity to ask questions and share their own experiences. While the session deals primarily with higher education staff, the concepts and strategies shared should have value to those in any content and/or career area.

Keywords: Mentoring strategies, support staff, culture of wellbeing, higher education Institutions.

Introduction

Walla Walla Community College (WWCC) is approaching its 60th year of offering education to the Walla Walla area in Washington State. It started as a small single building and grew into a multiple location and 10+ building institute. WWCC offers a wide variety of programs and has a major impact on the growing and demanding agricultural area it serves. Walla Walla has a wide variety of faculty and staff to ensure its students are provided the most rewarding education while at the institution.

The College has engaged in discussions to ensure that our institution is welcoming to all; that it is a place in which our students and all those who work here will feel supported and be successful. From these conversations, we proposed the initiation of a school-wide mentoring endeavor. However, unlike most institutions, WWCC determined that the process should begin with the development of a mentoring program for our support staff. The support staff are the group who tend to remain at the institution the longest. Support staff are generally employees who report to someone, but a large number of them do not have anyone who

reports to them. Although they may oversee staff, they tend to fall in a structure below higher-level leadership.

Support staff may serve a variety of purposes on campus, such as financial aid, custodians, grounds workers, secretarial roles, business offices, payment staff, and lab technicians. These individuals tend to have extensive interactions with students, faculty, administrators, and other staff personnel. These interactions can have a positive and/or negative impact on others and on the culture of the institution. Since we view this group as of extreme importance in setting and maintaining the culture of our institution, we initiated mentoring program efforts with this select group.

Higher education is a unique environment that involves a dynamic structure- that can positively or negatively on the students it serves. Within this space, "commitment passes down hierarchical lines in the organization and that commitment in lower levels (partly) stems from commitment at the top" (Bendermacher, et.al. 2017). Support staff in; educational institutions are expected to be prepared and ready for any situation that

may arise while offering the best experience for everyone, including students. In addition, many of these employees, such as those in admissions, student services and financial aid, have direct contact and influence on students. They also interact with individuals at all levels and positions in the institutions. Thus, the personal wellbeing of these staff employees can have direct and indirect influences on the students, faculty, administrators, and other staff members they serve and with whom they interact.

Support staff employees comprise between 30 and 35 percent of the employees in these institutions, so their influence can be quite significant. However, although the support staff are often at the frontline of the student experience, a review of the literature indicates that very few formal mentoring opportunities are offered to the support staff. We consider this a serious issue.

If we are unable to provide a mechanism to foster wellbeing and mentoring, this may be where we sometimes lose those individuals. Those individuals may not want to contribute to collaboration or further communication to enhance the positive culture within the institution. Institutions offer mentoring-based programs to faculty, management, students, and high-level staff. However, although the support staff are often at the frontline of the student experience, a review of the literature indicates that very few formal mentoring opportunities are offered to the support staff.

Literature Review

Mentoring is a proven strategy for fostering wellbeing and researchers have recommended applying it to create a positive institutional culture (Hill & Kutsyruba, 2024). Yet, there is scant research on this topic related to support staff. Although this group tends to be comprised of long-term employees who interact with a wide variety of individuals within the organization, their personal growth and advancement appear to be undervalued when mentoring initiatives are created and implemented. Staff voices are heard to better understand the staff perspective and the environment in which they operate. Notably, staff voice should be heard in isolation, nor given priority (Cain, Goldring & Westall, 2022). Higher education staff need to be adaptable to the ever-evolving landscape of higher education, including new technologies, changing student demographics, and shifting institutional priorities. Career adaptability can be fostered through professional development programs that focus on learning agility, resilience, and the ability to embrace change. Career Development Theory is a social-psychological framework aimed at enhancing individuals' career paths, job satisfaction, and long-term professional growth. (Ungvarsky, J, 2024)

Program

The Welcome Buddy program is intended to a

new hire or new staff member to help acclimate them to campus and to highlight institutional resources and connections. During the initial phase, the individual is introduced to their Welcome Buddy. A Welcome buddy is someone who usually comes from within that person's department, but can be from outside of the department, pending welcome buddy availability. The welcome mechanism includes a campus tour, a department welcome and a welcome lunch. During the initial welcome phase of a new hire, it is crucial that the Welcome Buddy checks in with them every couple of weeks to see how they are doing or if they are stuck at finding tools or resources. It is essential that during this period, the Welcome Buddy and those they are mentoring become comfortable with one another. Taking that initial step of asking basic questions ("How are things going?", "Are you stuck at anything?", "Do you need help finding a resource or tool?") can do wonders for the growth of the mentee. At some point during the welcome phase, resources and tools are provided for professional and personal growth.

Introducing that initial connection has proved to provide a key component in the longevity of an employee. We provide them with a welcome to our institution, take them around campus to see what is offered for them to take advantage of; but also, what they can showcase to the students, introduce them to individuals that they may need to connect with on a future project, or even just give them that feeling that they are here for the greater good of the student. Through feedback from staff, it was determined that some parts to the welcome/mentoring phase can be beneficial to current staff. Therefore, some mentoring experiences for new employees are beginning to be offered to staff already employed if they are for this support

Results

Our program is in its initiation stage, so we do not yet have comprehensive assessment data on its impact. Our evaluation strategy includes short- and long-term data, personal satisfaction, and institutional impact. Individual data will be gathered from mentees and mentors to determine their level of satisfaction with their mentoring experiences, the greatest positive outcomes, problems or negative outcomes, and/or recommendations for improvement. As our program grows, we also intend to administer surveys to students, faculty, and administrators regarding the culture of WWCC. Questions related to staff will be included in these surveys.

Discussion

With the world's population shifting back to a face-to-face instructional setting, many institutions are still struggling to meet the needs of individuals negatively impacted by COVID. Students are walking through our doors and must retract back to what they knew prior to the pandemic. Employees who are joining the workforce are

expected to be prepped and welcome those students back to this reality. Providing the proper tools and material is a key component in achieving this dream. A crucial part in this process is the initial welcome students receive and the support they receive daily. Initiating a mentoring program for staff is a first step in creating this welcoming and supportive mentoring culture.

The hope is that these mentoring-based initiatives can be created so that evolution and career support can occur. Noe describes this as, "Career support refers to mentoring behaviors that prepare mentees for career advancement" (Noe, 1988). Career support is a tool we can use to encourage individuals to evolve and grow within the professional setting for career advancement. Offering that welcome culture will create multiple high impactful occurrences, which may be trusting communication, dialogue back and forth between multiple entities, the creation of professional and personal growth, and even break out of that silo that is created from the lack of that initial welcome.

This mechanism will help create confidence in people to create that premier experience for students and individuals who want to further their growth. Offering that initial connection has proved to provide a key component in the longevity of an employee. We provide them with a welcome to our institute, take them around campus to see what is offered for them to take advantage of; but also, what they can showcase to the students, introduce them to individuals that they may need to connect with on a future project, or even just give them that feeling that they are here for the greater good of the student. The welcome begins with the progression of growth and evolution.

It is not required that support staff will engage in mentoring programs, or other tools that are provided. It is up to them to determine if they would like to enhance their personal growth and translate that into the everyday work setting.

Getting the support staff comfortable with at least prospecting the idea is the first step in the growth and evolution phase. Our goal is to offer students the red-carpet experience, but we should also offer that to each person who walks through the door.

Conclusion

Offering mentoring experiences to each person who walks through the door is our goal. However, finding the correct way to do that will involve working to identify what that staff person is looking for. Through the Welcome Culture, we can listen to that staff member's day one, week one, month one and beyond what they have for expectations, but also what they are looking for personal and professional growth. Staff members may not want to participate in the mentee role after they have been welcomed to campus, but it is not for us to determine that. We need to give them the option to participate. Once we open that initial communication funnel, they can choose how they would benefit from that resource. This tactic can

really open the collaboration aspect that is needed to flourish for day-to-day activities but also help follow the vision of the institute. It does not matter if we are targeting the person who started day 1, or the person who has been within the institution/workforce for 20+ years. It is the goal to ensure we offer tools, as well as the welcoming culture platform, to assist staff in determining how they would like to grow their career. The health and success of an institution depends on the well-being of its community; for WWCC, this begins with the investment of its support staff.

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