

A Constellation Model Pilot Peer Mentoring Program: Towards Problem-Posing Education

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This paper introduces a constellation model framework for a College of Education pilot peer mentoring program serving first-generation, first-year education students. Peer mentors are also preservice teachers. The program model works towards Paulo Freire's problem-posing education philosophy, where the mentor-mentee relationship is based on mutual learning, trust, and responsiveness. The program is a constellation model; it is cross-referential rather than hierarchical. This framework facilitates responsiveness to the needs of both mentor and mentee in real time. In the 2024-25 academic year, the program served 49 first-generation, first-year education majors in three course sections. A large Introduction to Education course provides the context and framework for the program, serving as the space where program participants interact each week throughout the semester. In Fall 2024, the program invited eighty-four first-generation, first-year students to participate in the program. Thirty-four participants resulted in a 97% return rate in the spring semester. Fifty non-participants had a 78% return rate at NAU in Spring 2025. We are investigating the role of this peer mentoring program in participant persistence and retention.

Keywords: Mentoring Constellation Model, co-constructed relationships, relationship-rich education, problem-posing education

Introduction

The College of Education pilot peer mentoring program for first-generation, first-year education students facilitates peer relationships, aids mentees in navigating college, and supports participant needs. A constellation model works towards co-constructed peer mentoring relationships among preservice teachers. This model offers a flexible, dynamic and responsive framework that represents the multiple individuals that impact mentors and mentees directly and indirectly (Higgins & Jones, 2001).

The College of Education Dean envisioned a college-level peer mentoring program to increase persistence among First-Generation education majors. The request was simple and open-ended: develop a peer mentoring program and get it off the ground. As a mentoring program for education majors did not exist, the mentor coordinator worked to understand structural elements of the university-level peer mentoring program offered to all first-year students and adapted the program significantly by centering and honoring peer relationships.

Literature Review

Constellation model mentoring frameworks delineate non-hierarchical and flexible mentoring practices. This model is used both in business and in higher education settings.

Undergraduate mentoring relationships at Elon University “function within a broader set of relationships known as a mentoring constellation” (Vandermaas-Peeler, Moore & Allocco, p. 4). This model includes multiple collaborative mentoring relationships that extend beyond the one-to-one mentor-mentee model. Furthermore, mentor configurations vary for individuals over time and context, and mentors are responsive to individual needs (Vandermaas-Peeler et al., 2023).

A constellation model is conceptualized as multiple mentoring relationships impacting a mentee or protege in the business world and in higher education. At Elon University, mentoring relationships are embedded in institutional culture; incoming first-year students can participate in program cohorts, work with faculty in undergraduate research, participate in peer mentoring, and are supported by “local and global community partners and alumni” (Vandermaas-Peeler et al., 2023, p.2). The constellation is “relationship-rich” (Felten & Lambert 2020) and supported by mentors in different roles.

Monica Higgins and David A. Thomas (2001) researched mentoring constellations in early career lawyers at “12 large corporate law firms with headquarters in New York State” (Higgins and Thomas, 2001, p. 229). The authors challenge the one-to-one mentoring model. In their view, evaluating primary and “multiple developmental relationships” better reflects an individual's professional experience than a dyadic mentoring

model (Higgins & Thomas, 2001, p.225). A developmental constellation is “the set of relationships an individual has with people who take an active interest in and action to advance the individual’s career by assisting with his or her personal and professional development” (Higgins and Thomas, 2001, p.224). Their longitudinal study of primary and secondary relationships demonstrated that multiple professional relationships was “the critical developmental relationship variable that contributed to career advancement” (Higgins and Thomas, 2001, p. 238) among early career lawyers.

In a pilot mentoring program at a music conservatory in the United Kingdom, mentor exit interviews revealed that informal peer mentoring experiences exist within programs of study and that “partnering with student [mentors] offered opportunities to understand progression journeys” (Jackson & Price, 2017, p.7). The authors define mentoring constellations as “networks of contact points with varying rationales and scope that are dependent on the individual context, need, and social dynamics” (Jackson & Price, 2017 p.7).

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paolo Freire describes co-constructed teacher/student relationships where “both are simultaneously teachers and students” (Freire & Ramos, 2018 p. 72). This relationship centers mutual learning and decenters the “banking concept” of education. Furthermore, problem-posing relationships are iterative; “the problem-posing educator constantly re-forms his reflections in the reflection of the students” (Freire & Ramos, 2018, ops. 80-81). In the college of education program, mentor, mentee, program coordinator, and course instructor work towards this approach within the hierarchical structure of a university.

Program

The college of education model is configured differently from the constellation model of direct multiple mentoring relationships. A key difference here is that the College of Education program includes direct and indirect support for mentors and mentees; peer mentors are the direct support, and a set of professionals in the college provides indirect support. A second difference is that this constellation has one primary mentoring relationship: mentor and mentee. In contrast, the constellation framework of both Elon University and researched by Higgins and Thomas includes multiple direct relationships for mentees.

How then is this program a constellation model if it only has one primary mentoring relationship? Like other constellation models, our program centers relationships; the constellation core is mentees and mentors. The main constellation includes the course instructor, mentor coordinator, mentor, and mentees. Secondary constellation support includes the Education Dean, Associate Dean, and professionals in related departments such as the College Advising Department. The constellation, then, is the network of individuals

embodying different roles who mutually support mentors and mentees in relationship, community, and in navigating university bureaucracy both directly and indirectly. See Figure 1 at the end of the paper.

Our program localizes peer mentoring in an Introduction to Education course. Additionally, this multi-section course is the only place where college-level peer mentoring is offered. Second-year and upperclassmen Education majors have a dual role as a peer mentor and a course teaching assistant. The mentor’s multifaceted responsibilities contribute to mentee connection to place and community; mentees have weekly contact with their peer mentor in class, mentee and mentor are both education majors, and the peer mentor informally serves as an academic mentor for the Introduction to Education class. Additionally, mentees interact with the course instructor in class throughout the semester, and mentors interact with the mentor coordinator weekly. Each semester, three community events are hosted for all mentees and mentors in the course classroom. See Figure 2 at the end of the paper.

The program serves around thirty mentees in three course sections. Each section has around eighty students with a 35% seat reserve for first-generation, first-year education majors. In Fall 2025, twelve mentees were assigned to four peer mentors in each course section.

During class, the mentor coordinator meets informally and formally with peer mentors each week. Check-ins include conversation and administrative reminders. In more structured meetings, mentoring topics, concerns, questions, and building interpersonal connections

Program localization extends beyond the Introduction to Education classroom and includes in-person introductions to education professors, exposure to resources, and access to counseling services, scholarship funding, and education major advising. The peer mentor is a connector to university-wide programs and services, thereby humanizing an impersonal system.

Guiding Principles

Respect, receptivity, and mutuality guide our program ethos. We honor mentee knowledge, perspectives, and abilities and encourage mentors to personally reflect upon memories of stepping onto campus as a first-year student. We elicit individual worries, fears, anticipations, and other emotions that come up during the transition to college life. Mentors extend personal reflection of their first-year experience to each mentee: a first-generation education student at the same university who is both in transition and anonymous or largely anonymous at the university. In addition, the program coordinator engages in understanding mentor and mentee experiences directly during weekly check-ins, one-on-one mentor meetings, and small group meetings. Taking the lead from mentors, the mentor coordinator engages in a co-

constructed relationship.

While the university operates within hierarchies, the College of Education constellation program is cross-referential and philosophically oriented outside of stratified psychological dynamics. The mentor coordinator works towards co-constructing supportive relationships with mentors to understand participant areas for support, perspectives, and experiences. Additionally, the College of Education leadership's student-centered approach builds trust and rapport within the constellation; the Dean and Associate Dean respect the mentor coordinator and the course instructor, and they support mentor and mentee needs and challenges in real time. For example, the deans guided a response to a participant's loss of university housing. The dean contacted the Dean of Students and then advised the mentor coordinator on how to support this participant within the rules of the university. See Figure 3 at the end of the paper.

Results

33 of 34 Fall 2024 participants enrolled in Spring 2025 classes. This yields a 97% return rate and a 3% non-return rate. Additionally, all thirty-three participants continued their education major in Spring 2025. 38 of 50 first-generation, first-year education non-participants in Fall 2024 enrolled in Spring 2025 classes. This yields a 76% return rate and a 24% non-return rate. We collected data from Data Warehouse, the university student enrollment software. We compiled all first-generation first-year education majors enrolled in the Introduction to Education course in Fall 2024. As each student in this demographic was invited to the peer mentoring program, we separated program participants from non-participants to calculate spring enrollment return rates and participant major. The following is a breakdown of Fall 2024 mentee participation in one-on-one mentoring. We distributed an anonymous Qualtrics Survey to program participants to gauge Fall 2024 program experience. All questions were multiple choice with forced responses in addition to optional short answers. Question topics covered mentee program experience. We asked about mentor impact, Spring 2025 plans to continue at the university, decisions to continue education major, impact of program, one-on-one meeting discussion topics, and what could improve in the program. A salient finding is that our human-first approach to mentoring impacted mentees positively. In the Fall 2024 mentee survey, the highest percentage response to the most meaningful experience in the program included getting to know mentors and sharing personal background.

Discussion

While it is early days to contextualize persistence and retention rates at the university

and within their education program, participant survey responses align with Peter Felten and Leo Lambert's "relationship-rich" focus and supports the idea that "relationships are the path to the learning, professional, and civic outcomes of higher education for our students" (Felton & Lambert, 2020, p.5). Centering relationality aligns with Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy of co-constructed relationships and constellation model frameworks. Constellation model frameworks are "relationship-rich" because they include multiple relationships impacting the participant, both internal to the institution and external to it. Furthermore, this model acknowledges that multiple relationships are more representative of an individual's experience than a dyadic model.

The non-hierarchical and cross-referential approach of individuals in the program constellation fostered responsiveness to mentor and mentee needs and experiences. Here, there are parallels to Elon University's constellation model approach described as "dynamic, shifting over time to adapt to students' emerging identities, knowledge, and skills, as well as the varying social and cultural contexts in which mentoring occurs (Vandermaas-Peeler, et al., 2023, p.1). Here, an email exchange between a mentor and the mentor coordinator at the end of the semester exemplifies a co-constructed approach:

Exchange

Mentor:

"It's been incredible working for you this semester and getting to know you....You are so kind and supportive, and I truly appreciate you."

Mentor coordinator:

"We worked together. Thank you for being an outstanding mentor and TA. I loved chatting with you and appreciate your take on things." While the mentor approaches the relationship with the mentor coordinator hierarchically, i.e. "I loved working for you," the mentor coordinator reframes the relationship as co-constructed "we worked together."

Conclusion

Limitation

A limitation of this study is its dependence on the primary relationship between peer mentor and mentee. The mentor-mentee relationship is often the sole personal relationship directly supporting participants. Responding to mentee needs depends on the mentor sharing mentee needs with the mentor coordinator and the course instructor. As mentors are also students who manage multiple responsibilities and often multiple jobs, the reality is that opportunities to help mentees we missed because of overreliance on the primary relationship dynamic. In this way, too much pressure may be applied to the mentor in the constellation.

Planning

In 2025-26, we will alleviate pressure on the primary relationship between mentor and mentee in our constellation. Planning for undergraduate research opportunities with faculty may extend both mentor and mentee primary relationships and balance out the primary relationship. We will continue to enact a “relationship-rich” and co-constructed peer mentoring program within our constellation framework to support mentor and mentee needs, challenges, and aspirations.

References

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Appendix

Figure A1
Program Constellation Model

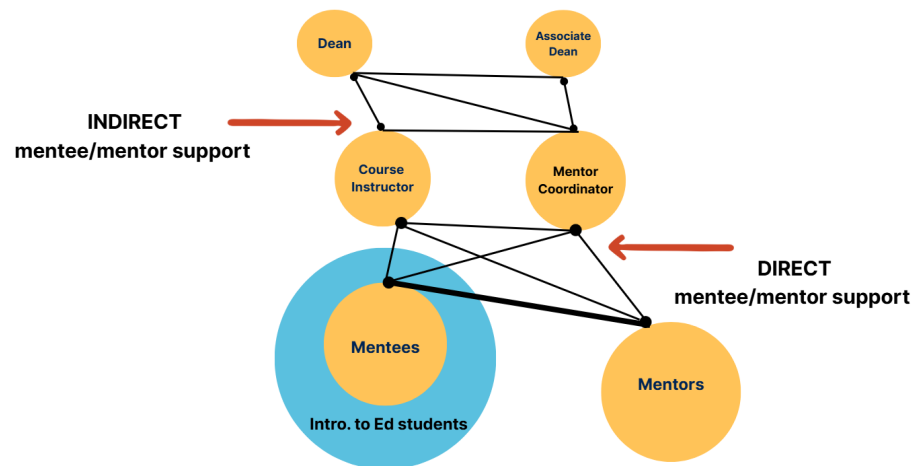


Figure A2
Mentoring Framework

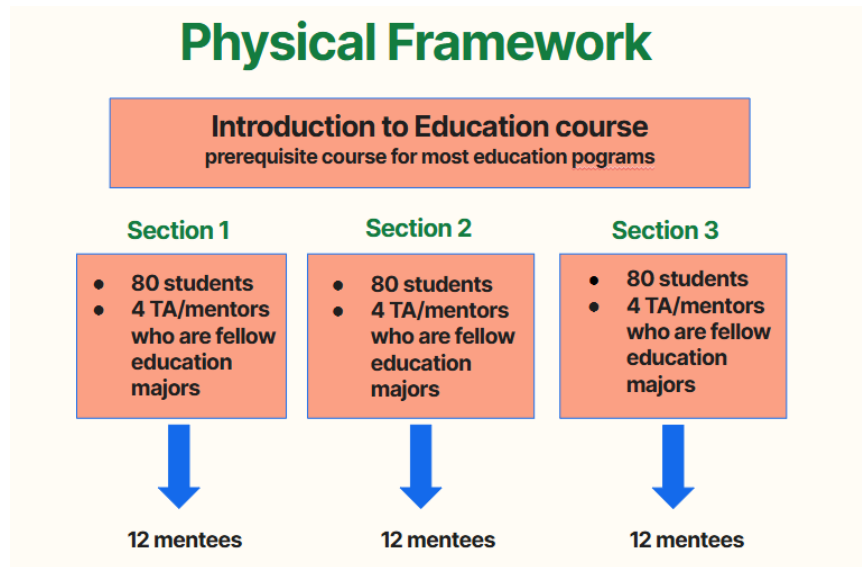


Figure A3
Constellation Program Ethos

