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FLIGHT Pods: Empowering Networks for Mentor Professional Development

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This case study describes a model for professional development for college mentors using small mentor communities (Pods). Pods met 3 times per semester to deepen, enact, and assess mentoring with a specific focus. Each mentor shared a project plan, implemented it, and presented findings at semester's end. Projects were based on identified mentoring needs, received support from leaders and participants, and included evaluation systems. Pods were developed based on mentor theories, best practices in professional development, and feedback from current FLIGHT (Financial Literacy, Integrated Guidance, and Health Career Tracts) mentors. According to Holland (2018), mentor communities enhance mentoring practices through knowledge exchange. DuFour (2004) described Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) as groups that improve teaching skills and student performance through reflective practice. Adapting PLC strategies to FLIGHT encouraged mentors to build on previous plans created during their certification. FLIGHT is a university-wide Title V-funded mentoring program that certifies professional and peer mentors. It has trained over 200 mentors and now focuses on deepening mentoring skills and supporting mentors as they mentor in their spaces. Effective professional development on mentoring empowers mentors to develop their training in directions that are directly relevant for the areas and roles in which they serve students and enables FLIGHT to identify and support emerging mentor leaders within the program. This model enables mentors to implement specific practices and measure effectiveness in a supportive environment. Mentors receive localized evaluation methods, help with troubleshooting during implementation, and reflect on projects afterward. Pod projects target specific student groups and demonstrate diverse mentoring approaches. Pods foster a stronger sense of belonging and empowerment for mentors, enhancing their roles at the university and ultimately helping them to better support students.

Keywords: Mentor communities, mentor professional development, professional learning communities.

Introduction

Mentoring plays a pivotal role in supporting student success, particularly in higher education contexts where students benefit from guidance that is both personalized and sustained (Crisp & Cruz, 2009; Packard, 2016). While many institutions invest in mentor training, fewer provide structured, ongoing professional development that empowers mentors to refine and expand their practice over time. This case study explores a professional development model designed to address that gap through the use of small mentor communities, or "Pods," within the FLIGHT (Financial Literacy, Integrated Guidance, and Health Career Tracts) mentoring program—a university-wide, Title V-funded initiative that certifies both peer and professional mentors.

The Pod model was developed in response to the evolving needs of mentors who had completed initial certification and were actively mentoring in diverse campus contexts. Grounded in research on mentor communities (Holland, 2018) and Professional Learning Communities (Arnsby et al., 2023; DuFour, 2004), the model emphasizes collaborative inquiry, reflective practice, and localized project implementation. By fostering a supportive environment where mentors can design, enact, and evaluate targeted mentoring strategies, the Pod model aims to deepen mentoring skills, promote leadership, and enhance student support across the university.

Literature Review

Mentoring in higher education has been researched for decades, with the bulk of mentoring research focused on how institutions can facilitate mentoring programs to help college students succeed (Crisp & Cruz, 2009). As institutions of higher education have created mentoring programs to boost student success, specific funding initiatives for minoritized students, such as Title V grant projects, have recognized the impact that mentoring programs can make and many institutions receiving Title V funding have facilitated some form of mentoring program from their grant funding (Harrell & Forney, 2003).

Methodology

In this study, the FLIGHT mentoring program, was created based on internal findings from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) surveys and existing best practices for mentoring Hispanic and marginalized students. Schmidt and Akande (2011), for example, recommend that institutions that serve a high percentage of historically underrepresented students grow a culture of mentorship by "develop[ing] mentors to work with students. These mentors must be culturally sensitive and be able to communicate what to expect in college and how college work should be done" (p. 51). Earlier research on Hispanic student success resulted in similar recommendations, including building an extensive mentoring network to assist students in the successful navigation of high school and postsecondary education experiences (Harrell & Forney, 2003). Lastly, research has shown that a diverse network of mentors who assist students at varying stages of their college experience is more effective than one or more stand-alone mentoring programs (Higgins & Thomas, 2001; Packard et al., 2009; Packard, 2016; Wiggins & McTighe, 2006).

Following these best practices, FLIGHT, therefore, trains select faculty, staff, and students across the university as mentors and uses an inclusive model for mentoring where mentors become part of a trained cohort that is placed strategically across campus to facilitate intentional mentoring for various student groups. It utilizes elements of both the cascading and the mosaic model (Jackson & Arnold, 2010), which, "allows the mentee to benefit from multiple mentors as well as from various mentorship strategies based on their individualized needs, at a given time in their journey" (Khatchikian et al., 2021, p. 5481). Adopting this type of mentor network has allowed FLIGHT to offer a consistent and unified mentoring approach as it also supports mentors, holds them accountable, and supports meaningful follow-up both on an individual and university level.

However, many mentoring programs for college students do not address how mentors are continuously trained and professionally developed, pointing to a large gap in the literature. Professional Learning Communities (DuFour, 2004), on the other hand, have been a mainstay in K-12 education for many years and have emerged as an effective model for professional development also in higher education (Brown, 2021). In short, a PLC is a collaborative group of educators who work together to improve teaching and learning through shared inquiry and reflective practice. In establishing a culture of mentoring, a small PLC allows for mentors from different parts of the university to share their experiences and develop a plan for mentoring. In the mosaic model (Jackson & Arnold, 2010; Khatchikian et al., 2021), any mentor may mentor any student, so it is more important to have a solid understanding and awareness of multiple student needs across the university, and to have strong connections with other mentors, so that a student can always be referred to the best mentor for any specific needs. The longer duration and more intensive nature of the PLC allows mentors to first articulate and share the specific mentoring needs they have identified, in a second step to craft a plan or approach for a mentoring intervention and to decide on possible methods for evaluation with the input from other mentors, and then to report back any initial findings.

In contrast to more traditional workshops or one-time sessions led by an expert, PLCs create a support community as the strategy is being created, implemented, and evaluated (Brown, 2021; DuFour, 2004). Most importantly, the effectiveness can be assessed and adjusted immediately, since participants are accountable to each other. By engaging in this project together, moreover, mentors also feel confident to reach out with questions and provide suggestions during Pod meetings. Since PLCs are outcome-driven, participants are much more likely to actually implement the newly acquired strategies, also because they have been identified and designed for the needs that are most relevant to them (Brown, 2021; DuFour, 2004).

The second methodology employed in the FLIGHT pods is mentor communities. Similar to PLCs, mentor communities are collaborative in nature and are led by a facilitator/peer rather than an expert who has all the answers. Not only does the mentor community framework model mentor strategies in the realm of professional development, but it equalizes the relationship between mentors. Especially for a group like FLIGHT, which prides itself on an inclusive and diverse model that includes professional mentors who are faculty, administrators, and professional staff, it is important to create a sense of community amongst university members who may have little contact or knowledge of other areas otherwise. In a true mentoring community, the status or individual standing of a particular participant is superseded by their experience as mentor. Our Pods, for example, included faculty mentors, some full professors who had been program coordinators, others rather new tenure-track faculty, and professional staff like advisors, program directors, and supervisors in student success offices. Bringing these different university community members together as mentors allowed every Pod participant to learn from others and to gain a deeper understanding and appreciation of services available to students as well as to strengthen their mentor practices, building upon best practices in both K-12 and higher education mentoring settings (Brown, 2021; Crisp & Cruz, 2009; DuFour, 2004).

The Program: Taking FLIGHT

FLIGHT is a university-wide mentoring program at the University of the Incarnate Word, a private Hispanic-serving institution in San Antonio, Texas. It is a faculty-driven and -owned effort with a faculty advisory board (FAB) that oversees all

activities and includes representatives from every undergraduate school/college on campus, mirroring the framework of a PLC (DuFour, 2004). While the overall program consists of three initiatives (FLIGHT Mentor Center, FYES courses taught by mentors, and a health-profession mentoring pathway), this case study will focus exclusively on the FLIGHT Mentor Center, which offers the initial mentor training for certification as well as multiple continuing professional development opportunities for our certified mentors. The ultimate goal of FLIGHT, in alignment with the university President's strategic priorities for the university, is to foster a culture of mentoring.

Since its first training cohort in Spring 2022, FLIGHT has created a mentoring culture on campus by redefining mentoring as an organic practice that potentially includes every community member on campus. It focuses on mentoring moments rather than traditional and conventional paired mentor roles, foregrounding an intentional connection to a community of mentors across the university. It is designed to not only support students but also the certified FLIGHT mentors, who reconvene regularly to share solutions, practice effective interventions, and identify systemic problems their mentees have encountered. Ongoing professional development for our mentors, therefore, is crucial to maintaining and strengthening those connections, not only to create a strong sense of community and support, but also to introduce mentors to new tools and strategies that are directly relevant to the needs and challenges our specific student body faces.

FLIGHT offers a variety of ongoing professional development for mentors. Each semester, for example, the FLIGHT Faculty Advisory Board hosts a 3-hour-workshop for all mentors. These workshops set the theme for the academic year, such as "Every student is my student," sometimes include invited speakers, and always share data about our current student body, train mentors in specific strategies, and include interactive exercises. These workshops have been very well attended, with an average of 85 mentors attending each of them. In addition to this large-group event, FLIGHT offers several shorter, more focused development opportunities throughout the year, for which mentors can sign up based on their availability and interest. These have included focused discussion forums on how to best include peer mentors and book clubs on the psychology of money to inform mentoring related to financial wellness, for example. Most recently, the FLIGHT Faculty Advisory Board instituted the concept of Pods, small, focused mentor communities that allowed mentors to explore and address specific mentoring needs that arise in their respective areas.

Pods were limited to 7 participants, met three times over the course of one semester, and were led by a Faculty Advisory Board member. We initially planned to offer one Pod, but received 23 applications from FLIGHT-certified mentors within a few days of opening the application, and so decided to offer two Pods in the Spring of 2025. Mentors who applied to be a part of these Pods committed to attending all three 90-minute sessions in person and indicated their interest and plans for the Pods. Mentors were chosen based on the strength of their applications, and two Pods were created that ensured the most diversity amongst mentors in terms of role at the university, seniority, and school representation. Pod 1 included four faculty from four different schools (School of Business, College of Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences, School of Media and Design, and School of Math, Science and Engineering) and three professional staff from different student success and university areas (Office of Student Accountability, Advising, Help Desk).

Pod 2 included three faculty members from four different schools (School of Business, College of Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences, School of Nursing and Health Professions, and School of Media and Design) and three professional staff/administrators (Development, Housing, Writing Center).

The first Pod meeting focused on identifying mentoring needs and priorities for each participant. This allowed mentors to get to know each other, learning more about the specific roles and environments of the university that the other mentors represented, and to narrow down specific needs they had observed to make their mentoring interventions actionable. In the second meeting, which was scheduled two weeks after the first one, Pod participants presented a mentoring plan or intervention, which the group helped to shape and offered suggestions on how to evaluate and track the progress based on the stated outcomes from the previous meeting. Pod participants then had 4 weeks to implement and track their mentor intervention and reported their findings back to the group during our last meeting.

Emergent Findings: Three Directions

In each Pod, mentors engaged in focused, intentional discussions that placed mentoring at the center of professional dialogue. Rather than defaulting to general frustrations or institutional challenges, participants emphasized the importance of listening and reframing conversations to identify actionable mentoring needs. This shift in tone allowed mentors to collaboratively explore how mentoring could directly address specific challenges within their roles. Three key themes emerged from these discussions: the need to support students in developing essential life skills, the desire to enhance or refine existing assignments and processes, and the importance of building stronger rapport with mentees. The diverse composition of the Pods—comprising faculty from four different schools and professional staff from various student support areas—enriched the dialogue and allowed for cross-functional insights into how mentoring could be more effectively leveraged across the university.

The discussions and collaborations in both Pods

demonstrated mentoring in action. Participants openly shared their experiences and challenges, encountering open ears and willing support. For example, when the Director for Student Accountability expressed frustration that she mostly encountered students who had already made mistakes, and she wished to be able to share recommendations and suggestions earlier on, a faculty member in the same Pod offered for her to visit her First Year Experience class. The activity for that class visit then became not only the basis for the first mentor's Pod plan, but she also resolved to start teaching that class in the future. Hearing other mentors describe the class and seeing its potential from her perspective as an administrator encouraged her to expand her mentoring role in this way. Discussions between different Pod members allowed everyone to recognize more clearly the specific advantages and limitations for mentoring in diverse roles on campus, and then to actively offer to fill any gaps. Mentors who served as supervisors for student workers, for example, learned about expectations faculty had in class and could therefore guide their students more effectively. Faculty, on the other hand, recognized how closely some of their students are connected to their workplaces at the university, but had never much inquired about those before. Pods therefore consistently focused on outcome-based thinking that explored how to intervene most effectively, provided ongoing feedback and suggestions from fellow mentors in a constructive and collegial manner, which then in turn allowed participants to honestly share and reflect on successes as well as identify personal barriers and biases that may conflict with their plan for implementation. In line with effective mentoring, the focus remained on empowering participants while recognizing and building on their existing expertise and experience.

In addition to discussions and interactions amongst Pod participants, Pod plans showed a clear focus on mentoring, a solid understanding and articulation of mentoring needs, and an effective balance between individual roles and larger challenges. Most mentors constructed plans that addressed very specific student needs and at the same time initiated a process or systematic way of addressing them. One mentor, for example, an academic advisor, created a budget sheet that she shared with all of her assigned students before they met with her. Even though her primary role revolves around academic decisions and helping students with choosing the right classes, as a mentor she recognizes how financial wellness factors into her students' academic success. She sends them the budget sheet, which includes questions as well as financial challenges, such as to save a certain amount of money per month or to engage in "no spend weekends," but leaves it up to the students whether they want to discuss financial wellness. This Pod plan, therefore, not only actively acts on one of the pillars of FLIGHT mentor training, financial literacy, but also creates a clear atmosphere for creating mentor moments.

Not every student has the same degree of mentorability or is willing to engage in this type of discussion (Black & Taylor, 2018, 2024), but by signaling her availability and willingness to discuss financial wellness, students self-select whether they want to be mentored in this area. Another Pod plan focused on creating an atmosphere of mentoring by delineating clear ways to signal intentionality, trust, and clear communication. This mentor serves as the graduate coordinator in the School of Business and identified the need to create better rapport with his students.

He was transitioning from the role of faculty to an administrative position, which changed his relationship with students. His Pod plan, and our mentor discussions, allowed him to reflect on these changed interactions with students and to formulate an effective approach. It was one of our moments in the Pod group, where different participants had varying understandings of what "pod" stood for, the meanings ranging from a pod of whales to a flight pod on a spacecraft and peas in a pod, that led this mentor to consider the importance of a shared common ground and the importance of clear and open communication.

These are just two examples of Pod plans, but all of them aligned closely with their initially stated mentoring needs, effectively considered the mentor's personal and professional positionality, and addressed individual student needs with a systemic mentoring approach, which were the objectives of creating Pod mentoring groups.

Discussion

Pods and Pod plans proved successful and effective. All participants submitted a plan, which shows a perfect rate of implementation of the offered professional development. Moreover, in the last Pod session, all participants reported some degree of success in their implementation. Some chose to start with a smaller pilot project that could be assessed within the 2 months of the Pod sessions, but everyone implemented a strategy and created the framework and process for larger implementation. After having shared their initial findings with their Pod, all participants expressed interest in continuing implementation, making adjustments if needed, and to share their strategies and findings with a larger audience, whether that be at one of the large FLIGHT workshops, with their departments, or at professional conferences.

It was especially refreshing to see mentors being open to feedback and larger adjustments without wavering in their commitment to the impact they were trying to have in their mentoring. The advisor who sent out the budget sheets, for example, was at first disappointed that a relatively small number of her students completed the sheet but finally was encouraged by the depth and impact of the conversations she did have. Being part of a mentor network also means that not everyone has to do everything, but that the community as a whole offers multiple opportunities for students.

She also decided to invite interested students to follow-up meetings, both for accountability

and strengthening the initial mentor connection and moment. Another mentor, who had created a dream assignment in her FYES class for students to envision their future personal and professional life, initially also was discouraged at the low response rate from students whom she had planned to ask about the effectiveness of this project and to offer continued support and mentoring. In the course of the Pod sessions, however, she adjusted her plan to revise the assignment as a whole and to institute more concrete touchpoints for students along their academic career with this project, so that it went from an empowering assignment in one class to a cornerstone for their education. Since this assignment and the consistent follow-up incorporate a holistic view of the students, mentoring is now a fundamental aspect of the students' academic journey in that discipline.

Overall, individual mentoring practices deepened and became more targeted. As the first iteration of this model, we started to develop ways to assess the effectiveness of informal mentoring in a qualitative manner. Mentors received resources not only to improve their mentoring practice but also learned how to evaluate and track their efforts, which is challenging for cascading and mosaic models of mentoring. All Pod plans showed some degree of understanding of evaluation even if more work with more mentors is needed.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Pod model for professional development within the FLIGHT mentoring program has proven to be a powerful framework for cultivating a vibrant, empowered community of college mentors. While direct measurement of student outcomes remains a challenge, a meta-analysis of Pod activities reveals significant internal growth among mentors. The Pods effectively broke down barriers, fostering a collaborative environment where active listening and responsive dialogue were central to both planning and implementation. Mentors demonstrated a strong sense of ownership over their projects, signaling a shift from feelings of helplessness in higher education to a renewed sense of agency and purpose. This empowerment is evident in the growing number of mentors sharing their work at conferences, including one presenting at the UNM Conference. The Pods also served as fertile ground for the emergence of mentor leaders, supporting a mosaic model of mentoring that values diverse approaches and distributed leadership across campus. Ultimately, this model not only enhances mentoring practices but also builds a sustainable, supportive network that uplifts both mentors and the students they serve.

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