

Building a Mentoring and Coaching Ecosystem to Support Student Wellbeing and Transformation

Robinson, D., Taylor-Bianco, A., Thaheem, I. Ghimire, S., & Taylor, P.

Ohio University

This qualitative case study is a part of a larger study that examines the perspectives of participants involved in several university student and alumni mentoring and coaching pilot programs. This case highlights a university framework that embraced shared and reciprocal mentoring experiences (mentoring circles and group mentoring and coaching models). Recognizing that multiple mentors or “constellations of mentors” enable individuals to maximize mentoring and coaching experiences, alumni student engagement opportunities were built into the structure of group mentoring and coaching activities. The framework proposed shared and group mentoring and coaching activities that integrated the mission vision and values of the institution and that provided pathways to varied mentoring and coaching engagement activities and experiences for students and alumni. Faculty and staff conveners incorporated student alumni MC experiences into the learning activities in their courses. Peer mentors were envisioned to provide extra support for students and faculty and to help increase the comfort level of students. Results and reflections were collected through in-depth semi-structured group interviews of mentees, mentors, and program conveners to capture their feedback and ideas about their programs. The goal of the research is to examine best practices for a proposed mentoring program framework from multiple vantage points. Documentation of mentor and mentee reflections on experiences and preferences coupled with snapshots of mentoring and coaching activities from selected groups and courses during a university pilot program are used as data to develop the program. Perspectives from students and mentors on mentoring and coaching enrichment activities and experiences provide insights and ideas on approaches to improve best practices in the creation of a mentoring culture at the studied university. These insights were used to develop a mentoring and coaching strategy which is paramount to creating a sustainable ecosystem.

Keywords: Mentoring, coaching, student wellbeing, student transformation, culture of mentoring

Introduction

Mentoring and coaching programs can significantly enhance student development and wellbeing, while also advancing their academic, professional and personal trajectories in higher education (Kutsyuruba & Gooden, 2019; Lunsford, Crisp, Dolan, Wuetherick (2017). Scholars suggest that mentoring and coaching programs increase students’ self-awareness, sense of belonging, and satisfaction (Andersen & West 2020). These programs have also been known to bolster student retention and persistence (Lunsford et al., 2017) while creating student (Lunsford et al. 2017) and alumni (Skrzypek et al., 2020) affinity toward their alma mater (Lunsford et al., 2017). As colleges and universities seek to enhance student development and offer support for life-long trajectories, mentoring and coaching experiences offer great promise for students’ growth (Allen & Eby, 2021). Although we have witnessed a recent proliferation of mentoring and coaching programs at colleges and universities (Long

et al., 2021) given the increasing life demands, there is a call for programs to consider a focus on mentoring and coaching models that include a focus on wellbeing (Kutsyuruba & Gooden, 2019; Long et al., 2021) In order to further enrich the student experience, creative, integrative, and intentional approaches will be required to transform student mentoring and coaching experiences and scale mentoring and coaching opportunities for greater impact. Consequently, as institutions of higher education seek to build university-wide cultures of mentoring and coaching, programs that integrate innovative models involving multiple partners (i.e.: alumni) with students in mutual mentoring and coaching engagement can help to foster these cultures.

This case study therefore illustrates a university’s effort to envision a mentoring and coaching program that would offer rich experiences for student and alumni engagement. Therefore, highlighted herein are insights about mentoring and coaching needs from multiple university partners involved in university

visioning and pilot initiatives.

Visioning about a Student Alumni Mentoring and Coaching Culture

A Midwestern university community embarked on a systemwide process of strategic planning and as a part of a dynamic vision for developing distinctive experiences for students that would integrate opportunities for student and alumni mentoring and coaching. Faculty and staff involved in the strategic planning sought to integrate experiences for student and alumni mentoring and coaching that would inspire students to dream and imagine future possibilities for their academic, life and leadership journeys.

Following this process, various university partners explored opportunities to offer an expanded community of mentors for students by engaging alumni who were eager to support student advancement and future pathways. Recognizing the value of mentoring and coaching to student success and wellbeing, leadership at this mid-size university sought to leverage the prospect of enhanced student mentoring and coaching through a deeper understanding of activities that were already occurring and increased opportunities for student alumni engagement that would be in service of the vision and mission. Consequently, a qualitative exploration utilizing group interviews and themes from individual and group interviews varied campus partners has contributed to an emergent framework for a university-wide mentoring and coaching ecosystem. As part of a larger study, this work was envisioned to support student wellbeing, transformation, and belonging, aligned with the university mission and values. The approach was envisioned to foster transformative student alumni connections through varied engagement points while maintaining and enhancing the institutions' mission. We hoped that it would be a strategic approach to mentoring that would provide multiple entry points and opportunities for student engagement. The study explores perspectives of students and mentors on creating effective practices of a mentoring culture. These insights will contribute to the development of a mentoring and coaching strategy which is paramount to creating a sustainable ecosystem.

Literature Review

In our inquiries regarding student perspectives about mentoring and coaching we discovered that students desire to initially engage in shared or mutual mentoring experiences as opposed to isolated one-on-one relationships. These student perspectives are consistent with innovations such as reciprocal mentoring (Dominguez, 2023) mentoring circles, group mentoring (Darwin & Palmer, 2009) and coaching models (Lefsdahl-Davis et al., 2018) and have been proven to leverage the attributes of multiple partners and peers as

they engage in shared activities and offer rich experiences for group members. These shared group arrangements can also offer scalable opportunities campuswide. Dominguez (2023) illustrates how reciprocal and group mentoring models promote mutual learning, personal improvement, and professional development. Through planned, reciprocal interactions, these models improve participants' communication, leadership, and critical thinking abilities. There is a noticeable gap however, as many mentoring projects are isolated interventions rather than components of a larger, integrated campus culture.

Institutional support, well-defined objectives, expert facilitation, and adaptable frameworks that build and strengthen participants over their educational journeys are essential for the success of these kinds of initiatives. An example of a shared mentoring model piloted in our program included mentoring circles to support the student's alumni engagement activities. Mentoring circles, which are group-focused alternatives to the traditional one-on-one mentoring relationships in higher education, are small groups that convene regularly to share experiences, offer support, and discuss professional challenges. Mentoring circles offer spaces to minimize isolation, enhance a sense of belonging, build confidence, expand networking opportunities, and develop robust interdisciplinary partnerships (Giacumo, 2023; Huzing, 2012).

The key factors for success include voluntary involvement, effective facilitation, established goals, and compatibility among group members. When adequately supported, mentoring circles can serve as an effective resource for professional growth and foster institutional engagement (Darwin & Palmer, 2009).

Building on mentoring circle concepts, peer mentoring connects individuals who navigate similar academic or professional trajectories while supporting one another through shared experiences and emphasizing empathy and co-learning (Vandermaas-Peeler et al., 2023). Group & peer mentoring as well as professional learning communities support broader understanding of mentoring relationships that extend beyond the traditional one-on-one model (Lunsford et al., 2017). In higher education, usually mentoring is considered through programs, grounded in leadership, counseling or social work disciplines enabling the students to be field driven socially responsible graduates. However, research by Roncaglia et al. (2025) illustrated mentoring arrangements in the form of shared learning experiences and offered peer professional groups in each program to support collaborative learning by encouraging reflection on practice, confronting assumptions and sharing collective professional experiences, such types of practices resonate with many higher education institutions, and especially those that prioritize student-centered mentorship.

Multiple Mentoring Opportunities

Vandermaas-Peeler et al., 2023 highlighted the

diverse constellations of mentors that acted as a safety net when campus life moved online during COVID (Vandermaas-Peeler et al., 2023). Lessons learned from Vandermaas-Peeler et al. (2023) suggest that multiple mentoring opportunities such as those offered through virtual modalities can enrich the mentoring and coaching experiences.

These authors suggest creative approaches to mentoring and coaching such as embedding constellation-building in both curricular and co-curricular spaces, appointing a “lead mentor” who keeps the network visible, and offering hybrid social events to strengthen ties when face-to-face contact is limited (p.17). Our case highlights a university framework that embraced innovative, shared and reciprocal mentoring experiences (Dominguez, 2023), and group mentoring (Huizing, 2012) and coaching models and circles (Broberg et al., 2022). Recognizing that multiple mentors enable individuals to maximize mentoring and coaching experiences alumni student engagement opportunities we built these arrangements into the structure of group mentoring and coaching activities.

Project Overview

As a part of this larger mentoring and coaching initiative we engaged in university-wide listening sessions to determine the ideas and preferences of various groups including students, faculty, staff, and alumni. Several university units implemented mentoring and coaching pilot programs, and we were also asked to guide and secure feedback regarding the experiences of their participants. The following section provides an overview of this process.

Project Discovery and Listening Sessions

Our exploration for a university mentoring and coaching program began initially by advertising through campus-wide communication channels to solicit perspectives from students. Participants were encouraged to join the sessions through marketing using the slogan “we want to hear your voice.” Several listening sessions were organized to explore student experiences and desires for mentoring and coaching. Diverse University partners including students, faculty, administrators, staff and alumni from varied roles and eras informed the development of our mentoring and coaching framework. We hosted listening sessions with all parties that served as an opportunity for us to learn about the preferences of the various campus partners and that ultimately informed the development of a synergistic ongoing process.

The Pilot Program-Structure & Activities

One of our pilot programs offered student and alumni mentoring activities for six weeks . All sessions were online and featured a blend of activities that included topical workshops, and alumni engagement. The sessions included:

community building, developmental sessions emphasizing life and leadership skill development and an exploration of alumni expertise, and storytelling . Activities focused on self-assessment and group reflection in mentoring methods like goal setting, planning & productivity activities We also held an alumni panel and offered speed mentoring sessions to expose students to diverse mentoring pathways and real-world experiences from alumni. Students were introduced to resilience coaching and group-based coaching models to normalize challenges and develop adaptive strategies in day-to-day activities. They collected participant reflections, program feedback, and planning strategies through exit conversations and open dialogue. Alumni feedback and insights were gleaned from listening sessions, pilots, and written correspondence with alumni worldwide and differing affinity groups such as the recent alumni leader’s program, and advisory board members, shared reflections on their mentoring and coaching experiences.

Results

Emerging themes from the student listening sessions offered significant insights that informed the development of our mentoring and coaching framework. Insights from various parties revealed that the evolving model offered the promise of robust, scalable, and transformational experiences for students. Consistent themes provided rich feedback based on the listening sessions, pilots, and reflections from numerous university partners to inform program development. Perspectives from these sources revealed the following key insights:

Group Listening Session Themes

Themes that emerged from group listening sessions with undergraduate and graduate students revealed a desire for opportunities that offered dynamic and multifaceted student alumni engagement. Students expressed the need for alumni coaching and mentoring that would foster opportunities for them to build sustained, relational, long-term life and leadership guidance. Based on this, students wanted to have accessible pathways or multiple entry points to engage with alumni mentoring and coaching activities. Students desired interactions with alumni that supported their scholarly journey and professional development pursuits. Additionally, students desired to have safe non-judgmental spaces where they could develop mentoring and coaching relationships that develop trust, openness, and affirmation. Finally, students hoped that the mentoring and coaching experiences would facilitate relationship formation and wellbeing as engagement contributed to academic progress, personal, and professional growth.

Pilot Themes

Insights from students in the group mentoring

and coaching pilot revealed how reciprocal mentoring experiences facilitated discussion and made them feel seen and supported through the connections they formed with other students. This is consistent with Dominguez (2023) who suggests that reciprocal mentoring can help to bolster a mentee's sense of belonging, self-awareness, and self-confidence through conversations, reflection, and shared feedback (p. 109).

The group-based approach enriched the coaching experience for students by incorporating varied viewpoints when setting goals, developing strategies for meeting those goals while fostering valuable relationships between and among mentees, multiple mentors, and peer leaders. Students described how early participation in mentoring circles began to provide support and guidance during their studies. Some noted that these group relationships were starting to help them manage challenges and recognize their achievements both individually and collectively. As connections within the mentoring circles developed, students discussed some initial differences in wellbeing and a growing sense that this support could contribute to both their academic progress and personal or professional growth.

Alumni & Mentor Feedback

Alumni and mentor feedback was collected to assess reciprocal and group benefits, and program processes. A few of the emerging themes included a desire for mentor training to set offer enriching experiences, to promote consistency and to help alleviate uncertainties about mentoring and coaching. Alumni expressed having previous conceptions of 1:1 mentoring and coaching a desire to understand how mentoring would circles work and how beneficial they are for alumni-alumni connection in addition to connection to students. Experiences with professional coaching were discussed, and some alumni spoke about the need for certified experienced coaches due to the impact they have had on their careers. There was a strong desire to have clearly outlined expectations and time commitments whether it is for engaging in the 30,000-foot level through large group experiences or relate to someone who desires more specific guidance or mentoring.

Discussion

The proposed multi-level framework aligns with the literature advocating for whole institution approaches over isolated programs (Dominguez, 2023; Goh & Richardson, 2024). Our emerging findings on student preferences support recent research that suggests how enriching group, reciprocal and mutual mentoring experiences can be (Huizing, 2012; Darwin & Palmer, 2009; Dominguez, 2023). An early exploration of group coaching approaches has begun to yield insightful opportunities that support student learning and self-awareness. As the project evolved, the proposed multi-level framework began to align

with the literature advocating for whole institution approaches over isolated programs (Vandermaas-Peeler et al., 2023). While envisioning the overall campus framework, we recognized the importance of curricular integration and faculty involvement as this was suggested by both students and staff during the listening sessions. Limitations of the study include small pilot samples and results that may not generalize to all institutional groups and contexts. We found that there were nuances in the varied structure of the programs and the extent to which alumni were engaged in student activities.

We found that flexibility, however, provided opportunities for innovation and diversity in program offerings, thus appealing to a wider range of students.

Conclusion

This paper highlights an institution-wide mentoring and coaching initiative that helped to promote a culture supporting student wellbeing and transformation. Pilot program participants confirmed listening session feedback that multiple mentoring arrangements and relationships could yield robust outcomes for students within the different roles offered in the higher education setting. Students, alumni, and faculty suggested the need for group mentoring and coaching experiences, and constellations of mentors as opposed to one-on-one matches, offer more wide-ranging support. The results from the case study underscore the significance of developing a holistic coaching ecosystem that emphasizes both the personal and professional development of students. We recognize that a truly transformational mentoring and coaching framework also requires critical assessment of power structures within mentoring groups. Further, mentoring and coaching should not be regarded only as interventions but also as ways to invest in students in higher education. By adopting adaptable and multi-faceted mentoring approaches, institutions can establish enduring and impactful mentoring environments that cater to the changing requirements of a diverse student population. Future studies can explore the scalability of such university-wide mentoring programs. Studies can also be based on examining the training needs of faculty and mentors for sustainable implementation of such mentoring and coaching initiatives. As universities integrate more flexible and effective mentoring models, future research needs to be directed more towards discovering how multiple digital technologies can contribute to the maximization of these models.

References

- Allen, T. D., & Eby, L. T. (2021). The art and science of mentoring. In E. H. Reames & L. J. Searby (Eds.), *The art and science of mentoring: A Festschrift in honor of Dr. Frances Kochan* (pp. 15-22). Information

- Age Publishing.
- Andersen, C. L., & West, R. E. (2020). Improving mentoring in higher education in undergraduate education and exploring implications for online learning. *Revista de Educación a Distancia (RED)*, 20(64). <https://doi.org/10.6018/red.408671>
- Broberg, M., Bose, B., Pineda-Mendez, R., Gehr, R., Jange, C. G., McDermott, J., Loui, M., Eisma, J., & Devine, D. (2024). Lessons learned – preparing graduate students and postdoctoral researchers for tenure track careers through mentoring circles. 2022 ASEE Annual Conference & Exposition. <https://doi.org/10.18260/1-2--40662>
- Darwin, A., & Palmer, E. (2009). Mentoring circles in higher education. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 28(2), 125–136. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360902725017>
- Dominguez, N. (2023). Reciprocal mentoring for students and staff in higher education. In J. Haddock-Miller, P. Stokes, and N. Dominguez (Eds.) *Reciprocal mentoring* (pp. 103-134). Routledge.
- Giacumo, L. A. (2023). Mentoring programs in organizations: An online graduate-level course design case. *International Journal of Designs for Learning*, 14(2), 14–29. <https://doi.org/10.14434/ijdl.v14i2.34011>
- Huizing, R. L. (2012). Mentoring together: A literature review of group mentoring. *Mentoring & Tutoring: Partnership in Learning*, 20(1), 27–55. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13611267.2012.645599>
- Kram, K. E. (1983). Phases of the mentor relationship. *Academy of Management Journal*, 26(4), 608–625. <https://doi.org/10.2307/255910>
- Kutsyuruba, B., & Godden, L. (2019). The role of mentoring and coaching as a means of supporting the well-being of educators and students. *International Journal of Mentoring and Coaching in Education*, 8(4), 229–234. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJMCE-12-2019-0081>
- Lefdahl-Davis E. M., Huffman L., Stancil J., Alayan A. J. (2018). The impact of life coaching on undergraduate students: A multiyear analysis of coaching outcomes. *International Journal of Evidence-Based Coaching and Mentoring*, 16(2), 69–83. <https://10.24384/000560>
- Long, A. C. J., Ghosh, S., Smith, K. E., Downs, N., Molenaar, C., Novak, K., McCauley, E., & Vander Stoep, A. (2021). Evaluation of a mindfulness-based program for college student well-being delivered by university staff. *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, 12, Article 610931. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyt.2021.610931>
- Lunsford, L. G., Crisp, G., Dolan, E., & Wuetherick, B. (2017). “Mentoring in higher education.” In *The SAGE handbook of mentoring*, D. Clutterbuck (Ed.). (pp. 316–34). SAGE Publications Ltd. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781526402011.n20>
- Roncaglia, I. (2017). The role of well-being and wellness: A positive psychological model in supporting young people with ASCs. *Psychological Thought*, 10(1), 217–226.
- Skrzypek, C., Diebold, J., Kim, W., & Krause, D. (2020). Formalizing alumni mentoring in social work education: Lessons learned from a three-year program evaluation. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 58(2), 403–416. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10437797.2020.1817820>
- Vandermaas-Peeler, M., Moore, J. L., & Allocco, A. (2023). A constellation model for mentoring undergraduates during COVID-19. *Teaching & Learning Inquiry*, 11. <https://doi.org/10.20343/teachlearning.11.9>