Developing Student Leadership Opportunities through Mentoring

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Author's Notes

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Graduate assistants fulfill many roles and functions within the university setting. The partnership formed with supervisors is critical for mutual development and implementation of programs, building professionalism and student confidence. Supervisors provide many opportunities through coaching, sponsoring and connector roles. Intentional collaboration maximizes best practices supporting graduate student leadership development.

Background

Mentoring is often thought of as a collection of key interactions with others where we emerge with new skills, confidence, and knowledge. Within the academic setting, supervisors of graduate assistants provide both formal and informal mentoring through interactions related to the assignment area. Building relationships using culturally responsive pedagogy can mitigate social emotional challenges in the graduate student experience (Packard, 2018; Robnett et al., 2018). Through graduate assistantships, connections are formed, students become more engaged with the campus, and quality relationships are developed. Supervisors that deliberately use collaboration for meshing task assignments with student development help to foster the student's growth, self-belonging, and resilience within the university setting. Blending coaching techniques within mentoring opportunities, such as building trust and rapport, asking open-ended questions, supporting goal-setting opportunities, are examples of best practices in student development. Setting clear expectations, providing opportunities for the graduate assistant to "spread their wings", be available, and yet provide a safe space for difficult conversations are all characteristics of the mentoring relationship (Chopra & Saint, 2017; Marcdante & Simpson, 2018). Exploring university student services needs and academic expertise provide situational opportunities where multiple needs are met. Tasks and projects often require joint initiatives, blending multiple areas within the university setting. This article describes the benefits of how a program brought together two distinct areas

within a university setting, and how the supervisors worked together to foster graduate assistant leadership through a joint project with students-as-partners. Student perceptions of growth are offered.

Communication

Communication strategies are an important consideration to support mentoring and leadership skills development. The ability to communicate effectively is critical in various roles regardless of the setting. Communication skills encompass verbal and non-verbal components. We will present communication strategies within the supervisor-graduate assistant relationship. First, it is imperative to establish rapport. By seeking common ground, the foundation of understanding is developed, and interpersonal relationships are fostered. Asking the graduate assistant explicitly about their goals for professional development in the assignment blends growth opportunities within assigned tasks.

Identifying a clear set of goals and tasks for the graduate assistant assignment adds clarity and fulfills an important component of the role. Tasks may include specific projects and duties such as weekly communications related to the position, conducting research support, etc. In communicating the need for the task, it is important to consider the "what", the "how" and the "why" of the task (Duarte, 2020). Thus, the supervisor must consider the outcomes of assignments, and clearly convey the graduate assistant role and responsibilities needed, along with the timeline for expected completion.

Soft skills are often embedded in job expectations within a graduate assistantship. These include accountability, attitude, flexibility, respect and problem-solving abilities, along with time management, self-confidence and the ability to accept and modify behavior based upon feedback (Donathan & Dotson, 2018; Doyle, 2019). Soft skills are important components of leadership. Through the graduate assistant tasks and opportunities, practicing soft skills contribute to internal leadership development.

Coaching elements also are a part of the communication process. Coaching encompasses collaboration and facilitation of learning (Duff, 2013). Supervisors guide the graduate assistants to explore their strengths in task performance and modify expectations to create positive outcomes needed by the unit or assignment. Feedback about performance helps both parties to use strategies effectively for task completion. Feedback is a two-way street, through which both the graduate assistant and the supervisor grow and build trust, reinforcing

the students-as-partners framework (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017). Providing deliberate opportunities for assuming responsibility for tasks, with oversight, can build self-confidence and self-determination, attributes that will contribute to leadership development.

It is critical that supervisors use observation skills to assess needs, guide the experience, and provide structure and coaching. Viewing students-as-partners provides opportunities for growth. The process of informing and training leaders includes bridging the need for task completion, along with providing advice, feedback, coaching and mentoring is a part of leadership training. When these elements are followed, projects thrive and leadership outcomes are fruitful for all.

Case Example

Colonels Mentoring Colonels (CMC) is a joint venture between the Eastern Kentucky University Housing and Residence Life area and the Department of Occupational Science and Occupational Therapy. Seeing a need in Residence Life for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder, the program was initiated by a graduate occupational therapy student, who was also the graduate assistant in Housing during 2016. The purpose of the CMC Program is to assist students with disabilities to develop the skills needed to succeed in the higher education and housing environment. Further, by providing peer support, participants more fully engage in the college experience. The student-led mentoring program assists freshman and sophomores as they adapt to the transitions of college life: living away from home and friends, developing new routines, and responding to academic demands (Roberts, et al., 2017). The advantage of occupational therapy (OT) graduate students taking the lead as mentors allows the application of professional knowledge within a safe environment. The mentors apply coaching techniques (Duff, 2013) to support integration in the campus setting, build community, reinforce healthy relationships and promote harmony in the lifestyle habits and routines needed in the new environment.

The program is implemented as a collaborative effort with both the graduate assistants (GA's) and their respective supervisors. The GAs have both shared and unique responsibilities to the CMC program. Students self-refer, or are recommended by a Resident Assistant, or another Student Services staff member. Participation in the CMC program is voluntary. The program uses weekly mentoring sessions which typically last one hour for six to eight weeks during the semester. The location of the session was determined by the participant in the most conducive environment for them. At the initial meeting, mentors (OT

graduate students) gather initial assessment data and identify goals for their mentee. Subsequent sessions typically address strategies in skill building to achieve their goals. Goals were re-evaluated periodically for clarity. The skills throughout the sessions were taught using scaffolding. The mentor collaborated with the participant to plan weekly sessions and consulted with a course instructor /supervisor for feedback. Each session was designed to help the student gain skills for a successful experience in the residence halls and campus environment. Additionally, weekly meetings were conducted with OT and Housing supervisors, graduate assistants, and mentors to promote discussion and feedback among peers. Supervisory sessions between OT and Housing supervisors and GAs reinforced reciprocity of the partnership, with ongoing open lines of communication. Through leadership assignments in the CMC program, both GAs had growth opportunities, demonstrating various benefits from their unique positions.

Opportunities from the Student Perspective

The student opportunities through graduate assistant positions incorporated support tasks for the area of assignment along with professional development opportunities. Students-as-partners in the graduate assistant joint project experience had individual tasks, along with shared responsibilities. Table 1 demonstrates the students' roles and responsibilities along with perceptions of growth. It is interesting to note that many soft skills are evident in professional growth responses.

ROLES	PROFESSIONAL GROWTH
Collaborate with the OT and Housing & Residence Life areas to facilitate the Colonels Mentoring Colonels Program	Skills required to be a competent professional including leadership, professional collaboration, management, accountability and self-confidence.
Oversee the CMC Housing-OT Peer Mentoring program & supervision of Peer Mentors	Therapeutic use of self for professional and student collaboration.
Research "behind the scenes" supports for OT student learning	Developing peer leadership and collaboration.
Implement various retention initiatives through Housing & Residence Life, in connection with the departmental Residential Curriculum	Accepting and sharing constructive feedback.

Table 1. Student Perceptions of Roles and Professional Growth

Conclusion

Developing leadership skills within a higher educational setting has many opportunities for both faculty, staff and students. Providing applied experiences within the university setting fosters commitment to the institution and professional growth opportunities. Collaboration is critical for success in the workplace. Through mentorship and students-as-partners opportunities, graduate students can develop and experience self-determination through program implementation such as in this case example.

Acknowledgements:

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