

Developing Leadership for Life: Outcomes from a Collegiate Student-Alumni Mentoring Program

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Abstract

This application brief describes the exploratory assessment of a mentoring program between current students and alumni of a leadership studies minor program. We connect leadership education research and practice in two ways: first, we describe a process of qualitative program evaluation to inform program best practices and improvement. In doing so, we also highlight the value of an alumni mentoring program as a strategic component of leadership education. Our findings demonstrate the mentoring program supported students' leadership development in the areas of career transition, personal growth, and application to "real-life." Recommendations are offered for creating formal and informal mentoring opportunities.

Introduction

Wildcat Leadership for Life (WLFL) was established in 2011 for the purpose of establishing a leadership legacy through opportunities for alumni connections and engagement that support and develop Leadership Studies' people and programs at Kansas State University (K-State). In pursuit of this mission, the WLFL advisory committee created a mentoring program to support junior and senior level students in their preparation and transition from college to career. Recruitment resulted in four mentor-mentee "matches" who participated in a semester-long pilot program in the spring 2013 semester.

Priority area two of the *National Leadership Education Research Agenda* emphasizes the need for leadership program assessment and evaluation (Andenoro et al., 2013). As part of K-

State Leadership Studies' ongoing commitment to program assessment and improvement, we conducted an evaluative case study of the pilot mentoring program. The case study was guided by these questions:

- What are participants' motivations for applying to the program?
- In what ways do participants interact in the mentoring relationship?
- How does the mentoring relationship facilitate personal and/or professional development?
- How does the mentoring program meet participants' expectations?
- How does the mentoring relationship support K-State Leadership Studies' mission to develop leaders?

This application brief connects leadership education research and practice in two ways: first, we describe a process of qualitative program evaluation to inform program best practices and improvement. In doing so, we also highlight the value of an alumni mentoring program as a strategic component of leadership education.

Background

An exploration of mentoring within literature on higher education (Crisp & Kruz, 2009; Jacobi, 1991; Liang, Tracy, Taylor, & Williams, 2002), leadership education and development (Inzer & Crawford, 2005; Kunich & Lester, 1999; McCauley & Douglas, 2004), and popular press (Elmore, 2008; Maxwell, 2008) reveal three inter-connected components of mentoring: a) a personal, reciprocal relationship between mentor and mentee; b) an activity by which the mentor shares wisdom, support and assistance in personal, professional, or career development; and c) a developmental process of mentee growth and/or accomplishment. In this case, we frame mentoring as both an act of leadership (by mentors) and a leadership learning/development strategy (for mentees).

Mentoring is an increasingly popular strategy in undergraduate education with research supporting the positive influence of peer and/or faculty mentoring on students' college transition, persistence, and academic performance (e.g., D'Agate, 2009; Terrion & Leonard, 2007; Tinto, 1998). While less documented, it appears that mentoring also contributes to student leadership development. Dugan and Komives (2007; 2010) found that mentoring, especially mentoring by faculty, was a top predictor for leadership efficacy and social change values (HERI, 1996) associated with socially responsible leadership. They encourage practitioners to develop processes that foster and develop meaningful mentoring relationships with faculty and/or older peers (Dugan & Komives, 2007; 2010). We extended this recommendation to include establishing meaningful relationships with alumni, who in this case are graduates of the K-State Leadership Studies program serving in professional roles.

Mentoring has been used as a leadership development strategy within professional organizations, often following a more traditional apprenticeship model in which a senior person (mentor) supports the personal and professional development of a junior (protégé or mentee) (McCauley & Douglas, 2004). Kunich and Lester (1999) urge organizational leaders to take mentoring seriously; it is an obligation and responsibility to develop employees who can exercise leadership to address the needs and demands of a complex world. They propose some key elements of effective leadership mentoring, including: a) serving as a real-world role model, b) interpersonal involvement and caring (empathy), c) planting and nurturing “seeds” in the protégé’s life, d) full engagement through listening and responding, and e) assisting with goal setting (Kunich & Lester, 1999). Inviting young alumni who are workplace leaders to mentor college students could not only benefit the students, but also provide an avenue for the alumni to develop mentoring skills needed as they grow in their own professional leadership roles and responsibilities.

According to Eich (2008), high quality leadership programs are learning communities that allow current students to “engage with experienced and committed practitioners” who model leadership (p. 181). Actions such as sharing real-world experiences, asking powerful questions, establishing relationships built on trust, dialoguing on important issues, and exchanging feedback were found to have a positive effect on student learning and development (Eich, 2008). Expanding the definition of learning communities to include program alumni invites a new set of “practitioners” into the process of student leadership development. When program alumni who have been influenced by a collegiate leadership program have the opportunity to “give back” as a mentor, they not only help their individual mentee, they also contribute to the growth and sustainability of the community as a whole. As the community’s “old-timers,” mentors may gain new perspectives on their own lessons-learned because they are in a position of helping others (Wenger, 1998).

Despite the wide range of mentoring literature related to college student success and career success, it appears there is little empirical research describing or evaluating the influence of professional mentorship relationships on students’ transition from college to career. Even less is known about the impact of alumni mentoring on leadership development. Our study addressed this gap through an evaluative case study approach. Eich (2008) calls evaluation a necessary component of high quality leadership programs; indeed, “leadership programs need feedback to learn, adapt, and grow” (Andenoro et al., 2013, p. 9). Mentoring program evaluation is especially needed (Inzer & Crawford, 2005) because it can reveal strategies to improve mentor skill, mentee readiness and application, and success of the overall program.

Description of Program Evaluation

Participants

Participants for the pilot mentoring program included four alumni mentor/mentee matches. Three of the mentors and all four students consented to participate in the evaluative case study. Pseudonyms were assigned to maintain confidentiality. All mentors held a bachelor degrees from K-State, with a Minor in Leadership Studies. Frank was a male, 2005 graduate in political science, employed as a lawyer in a metropolitan city on the East Coast. Grace was a female, 2008 graduate in business marketing working as a marketing and development officer for a community-based non-profit. Hannah was a female, 2007 graduate in communication who served as a program coordinator for a state-level leadership development organization.

Mason was a male, junior, majoring in legal communication/pre-law. He was involved in a fraternity, as well as a career related club. Chloe was a female, senior in mass communication/print journalism. She was involved in various leadership roles and a sorority. Taylor was a female senior majoring in social work. She was involved in a cause-based student organization, a scholarly honorary, and a service-based organization. Liam was a male, junior with an open-option major. He was involved in the honors program, service, and a university-wide council. All students were pursuing a Minor in Leadership Studies.

Case Study Procedures

Student mentees and alumni mentors were recruited early in the spring 2013 semester through course announcements, personal recommendations, and social media. Participants completed an application form that included several narrative essays to assist in the matching process (e.g., *What is your career interest or professional goal? Why do you desire to be connected with a mentor/mentee? Describe the strengths you believe you would bring to a mentoring relationship*). Two WLFLE advisory board members served in roles of mentor coach and student liaison. They facilitated the matches and made initial contact with participants in mid-March. During an orientation call (for mentors) and meeting (for mentees), they shared a brief overview of the role and expectations of participation in the pilot program, which included at least three “meetings” between mentor/mentee (e.g., in-person or by phone, email, or video chat), as well as possible topics for conversation. A “mentor guide” was also provided to mentors, which included collection of mentoring tips, as well as a list of articles and resources.

All participants were invited to participate in the evaluative study. Upon obtaining informed consent, we conducted a series of two semi-structured interviews in person or by phone with each of the participants (at the beginning and conclusion of the formal pilot program). In this case, reflective interviews allowed for an exploration of participants' perceptions of the mentoring program and process, and the narrative data contributed to a deeper understanding of

their experiences (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Participants were emailed a copy of their interview transcript for review and feedback in a member checking process (Maxwell, 2013). We used NVivo® software to qualitatively code and analyze all of the case study documents (applications and transcripts). As we read through the documents, we made notes and identified an initial categorical coding scheme, but allowed for additional codes to emerge while looking for patterns of connectivity between codes (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Codes were grouped into descriptive categories, then organized into themes representing the over-arching outcomes of the program, answering the research questions set forth by the case.

Findings

Motivation for Participation

The students in this study described several specific reasons they desired a mentoring relationship: a) to develop professional connections and networking, b) to be advised by someone “who has already been through it” (e.g. graduating and finding a career), c) to broaden their knowledge about their specific career interests, d) to learn about leadership opportunities, and e) to apply what they learned in the Leadership Studies program after graduation. Alumni mentors were motivated to participate because they believed in the importance of mentoring relationships in general, and acknowledged the valuable role mentorship had played in their own lives. They wanted to be able to take on that role, or “give back” to others. As recent graduates, they believed they could help students navigate their journey into the career world, offer personal insights that can’t be learned from a textbook, be a sounding board, and ask questions that would challenge students to develop their own insights.

Mentoring Interactions

After being “matched,” the mentors and student set up a time for their initial meeting. During their initial meeting, mentors and students discussed the goals and expectations of the relationship. The mentors and mentees interacted through a variety of mediums: phone, FaceTime (video chat application), or face-to-face. Their interactions typically lasted thirty minutes to one hour and took place either once a week or every couple of weeks. To build a trusting relationship with their students, mentors asked the student’s about their interests, involvement on the campus, and aspirations and career goals. A pattern emerged in how mentors and mentees interacted. Mentors were able to gain student’s trust by being informal, more conversational, or “laid-back,” and sharing information about themselves like “an open book.” All mentors and mentees indicated the development of a more personal connection with one another over the duration of the mentoring relationship. At the conclusion of the pilot program, each mentoring pair determined the “what’s next” of their relationship; mentors agreed to stay in touch with their mentees on an “as-needed” basis.

Value of Program: Participant Growth and Development

This outcome highlights the value of the mentoring process from both the student mentee and alumni mentor perspective, in particular how the process impacted participants' growth and development, as well as the connections made to leadership.

Development of Career Related Skills. The students identified three main areas where mentorship helped them develop career related skills. First, mentors aided students with the transition from student to career by providing feedback on their resumes and other career-related documents. Mentors also provided advice and experiential knowledge about transition into the workplace and what it means to be professional in the workplace setting. Finally, some mentors, given their similar career background/interests of their mentee, were able to connect their mentee to professional networks and resources (e.g., people or scholarships).

Personal and/or Professional Development. The students identified areas where they developed personally and professionally from the relationship with their mentors. They felt they became more prepared for the future as it became more tangible, and developed a positive outlook on their future plans. On a personal level, students identified being more confident and self-reflective in regards to their presentation of self.

Leadership Development. During their mentorship experience, students identified how they developed their leadership beliefs, as well as actual practices. Mentors served as role models to the students. Through their example as leaders, mentors showed how leadership ideas can be translated and used in real-life situations. Mentors also encouraged students to take action on goals and challenged them to seek out developmental opportunities, such as scholarships, resources, or meeting with other professionals.

How Mentors Perceived Growth in Students. Mentors were asked to reflect on the growth and development of their student mentees. Their responses were similar to the students' own descriptions. Occupational preparedness seemed to be the most commonly identified growth; mentors reported that they saw their mentees transition from student to career by identifying majors, figuring out the next step in relation to their career, and expanding their connections to other professional networks. In addition, mentors also noted that they developed a deeper and more meaningful relationship with their student as their mentorship interaction continued over the course of the semester.

Mentors' Own Professional and Personal Development. Students were not the only ones to benefit from the mentorship relationship. The alumni mentors also identified several areas where they saw personal or professional development in themselves. They identified that through this experience they were also able to develop their own mentorship skills through testing out leadership techniques they had learned in their careers. Mentors also reported that it reinforced

the importance of having mentorship in all areas of life – beyond just career – as a source of guidance and feedback. Through the mentoring relationship, they felt as if they were giving back to both the student and the Leadership Studies program.

Lessons Learned: Expectations and Experience

This theme connects expectations and experience of participants to form recommendations for not only the program administration, but also considerations for future mentors and mentees.

Program Recommendations. Mentors identified two recommendations for the program as a whole. First, they stated that mentors and mentees should be paired based on similar career interests and background knowledge. They indicated that this could produce more fruitful mentorship relationships due to background similarities. Second, mentors recommended that the overall time of the mentorship relationships should be increased. They suggested a duration of at least a year to develop a substantial relationship with the mentee.

The mentees recommended continuing, and even expanding, the program so that more students could experience the benefits of having a mentor. In addition, they could see value in starting the mentorship program earlier in college (i.e., as a freshman or sophomore, rather than limiting it to juniors and seniors). Finally, they saw a benefit in helping both the mentors and students be more prepared for the first “meeting.” For example, it would be helpful to offer future participants some ideas on how to prepare questions or communicate expectations in order to maximize the relationship.

Recommendations for Mentors. The mentors identified several skills that good mentors should have, including open-minded, a good-listener, compassionate, and understanding. They urged new mentors to let the student facilitate the direction of the relationship, but set clear boundaries regarding what the mentee wants to gain out of the relationship. The student mentees also identified qualities of a good mentor; in particular, students expected their mentors to be flexible, caring, supportive, and to share stories that showcased both their successes and failures.

Recommendations for Mentees. A key recommendation the mentors provided for future mentees was to be open and accepting of constructive feedback. Specifically regarding the “meeting” times, they urged mentees to be engaged in the process, come prepared to meetings, and know what they want to meet about in the future. The students also described some important additional attitudes and actions needed by mentees for a successful relationship. Mentees must have a desire to start preparing for life after college. They need to be open and have a willingness to learn and try new things, and a willingness to change expectations when new learning emerges. The students suggested that mentees should spend time formally preparing for

the first meeting by writing down a list of goals and questions for their mentor. And finally, they emphasized that to truly take advantage of the mentoring process, mentees must be willing to take action on the advice and suggestions they receive.

Conclusions and Application

This case study served as an evaluation of a one-semester pilot mentoring program between current students and alumni of a Leadership Studies minor program. Mentoring has previously been linked to student leadership development and success in college (Dugan & Komives, 2010; Jacobi, 1991). Our study illustrated a formal process for mentoring between upper-level students and alumni for the purpose of leadership development and career preparation. The use of qualitative research methods provided an opportunity for participants to make meaning of their experience, and resulted in rich description by which we (researchers) and program leaders could understand and evaluate the mentoring process and outcomes.

We found that the students in this study wanted to be mentored, and that program alumni were eager to be mentors. Through one-on-one interactions, participants developed personally and professionally. Students felt better prepared regarding their future career or goals, expanded their network, and made “real world” meaning of their leadership education. Mentors also perceived growth in themselves and found satisfaction in the opportunity to “give back.” Giving voice to the participants’ experiences and recommendations allows organizers of Wildcat Leadership for Life to be reflexive and promotes growth and sustainability of the mentoring program. The mentoring program has continued with another four matches in the fall 2013 semester and will continue to match alumni and students on a rolling basis. These results have already informed program leaders as they continue to make connections and communicate with new participants. This illustrates what Eich (2008) called “research-grounded continuous program development” (p. 184), an essential component of high quality leadership programs.

We conclude that the mentoring program supports the mission of the K-State Leadership Studies program to develop leaders. Additionally, the relationships developed between current students and alumni expands the reach, form, and value of our learning community and enhances our current classroom efforts. Truly, leadership mentoring is a powerful tool for development, as Elmore (2008) explains:

“While there is a place for classroom or conferences, real workers and leaders are best developed through life-on-life mentoring. It requires us to make deposits in people, one life at a time. It is about forming a learning community involving experiences and relationship with each other.” (p. viii)

While the findings of this case study are specific to our program, we believe any leadership education initiative (curricular or co-curricular) could utilize formal or informal

mentoring as a student development strategy. We recommend reaching out to program alumni to not only serve as mentors, but to consider the interest and viability of an alumni-led mentoring effort. If creating a formal mentoring program is not an option, we recommend educators offer workshops to students on how to find and establish this mentoring relationships with program alumni or other professional adults. To foster similar meaningful relationships between students and practitioners, educators can invite leadership program alumni or other professionals to participate as classroom speakers or facilitators, to serve as community partners for service learning or experiential learning activities, or to assist in evaluation and feedback of students' final projects or presentations. Educators could also create assignments that challenge students to interview or shadow leaders in professional roles, which may lead to informal mentoring relationships. Further research and assessment is also needed to determine how these types of informal mentoring experiences contribute to students' personal and professional development.

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