Mentoring in First Year Composition: A Tool to Boost Institutional Retention

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With the support of the Chancellor's office and a grant from the National Education Association, the English department launched an initiative to place English MA students into first-year composition classes as mentors to students during the 2007-08 academic year.

These mentors attended all classes and were tasked with helping every student in their section perform to their highest potential. Training included workshops prior to each semester during which instructor-mentor teams could compose, adjust, and revise course syllabi to include the mentor as an active partner, and in particular to perceive ways to prompt students to meet with mentors in regular, individual, out-of-class conferences. Most instructors either made the meetings a requirement or offered incentives to students for scheduling such conferences (or penalties for not scheduling them). Training ensued throughout the semester, and mentors were tasked with documenting each session on a standardized log, tracking such features as conference location and length, referrals made, and topics addressed.

At the end of each semester, students completed standardized evaluations of the mentoring initiative, enabling an analysis of their evaluations for frequencies of occurrence of Nora & Crisp's essential elements.
Several studies have revealed that successful mentoring affects college student retention (Reyes, 1986; Drew, 1990; Lee, 1999; Rodger & Trembley, 2003; Austin, 2006; Wilson, 2006; Sorrentino, 2007). Also, research on attrition shows that the first year is a critical stage in students' decisions to persist or leave college (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980; Tinto, 1993, p. 14; Grant-Vallone et al., 2004; Nicpon et al., 2006). Nora and Crisp (2008) have identified four essential elements that comprise mentoring:

1. psychological/emotional support
2. academic subject knowledge support
3. support for setting goals and choosing a career path
4. specification of a role model.

In this assessment initiative, we measured students' perceptions of mentoring they received while completing English 100: Composition 1 to determine the degrees to which they identified Nora & Crisp's essential elements in the mentoring they received.

Robust presence of these elements, we hypothesize, would suggest enhanced capacity of this initiative to assure student persistence at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa.

Assessment Methodology

Participants: 404 First-Year Students in English 100: Composition 1, who were mentored during the Fall 2007 and Spring 2008 semesters

Data Collection: At the end of each semester, students were asked to complete anonymously a two-sided paper survey evaluation given in class. Analysts focused on responses to one open-ended question in particular:

Please identify the various roles that your mentor played this semester, both in the course as a whole and in your experience as an individual student. Please give as many specific, detailed examples of your interactions with your mentor as you can remember.

Data Analysis: Three analysts established a color code for each of Nora & Crisp's constructs, then they independently coded each of the 404 end-of-semester responses to this first prompt by following guidelines for qualitative data analysis outlined by Miles and Huberman (1994): analysts used a "descriptive coding" method, in which they were "attributing a class of phenomena to a segment of text"(p. 57). Responses were generally coded by clause; however, singular words also occasionally served as units of analysis to avoid holistic fallacy. In analyzing these data, analysts occasionally drew on comments elsewhere on the student's evaluation when a segment seemed ambiguous. Thus any one student response could signal all four constructs—or none at all. If all three analysts did not agree on an interpretation for any given segment of text, the segment was classified as "uncodable."

Source: Miles, Matthew B., and A. Michael Huberman. Qualitative Data Analysis: An Expanded Sourcebook, 2nd ed.
Mentoring in First-Year Composition to Bolster Retention: Confirming Mentoring Constructs and Probing Reciprocity between Academic and Social Integration

Manuscript under Review at the *Journal of College Student Retention*

~Jim Henry and Holly Huff Bruland, University of Hawaiʻi at Mānoa

~Jennifer Lee Sano, Michigan State University

Drawing on over 400 anonymous end-of-term evaluations of the initiative by mentored first-year students in English 100 during the Fall 2007 and Spring 2008 semesters, the authors demonstrate that students identify the four essential constructs of mentoring as established by Nora & Crisp (2008), thus suggesting that the UH Writing Mentors initiative boosts the university's efforts to improve retention rates. In addition, the authors extend Tinto's theory on "persistence" by demonstrating that for these same first-year students, the realms of "academic integration" and "social integration" are not as discrete as Tinto would suggest, at least in First-Year Composition classrooms.
English 100 Mentoring Program End-of Semester Survey

Explanation: The purposes of this survey are two-fold: 1) to evaluate each individual classroom mentor specifically; and 2) to assess the English Department's mentoring program as a whole. Your honest, thoughtful feedback will provide meaningful information to your mentor and help us to improve the mentoring program for future students. All completed evaluations should be returned to one student in the class. The student will then turn in the forms to the English department's main office at Kuykendall 402. Your mentor and instructor will be allowed to read these evaluations only after final grades for the class have been submitted.

1) Please list your mentor's name: __________________________________________

2) What is your year in school? □ Fr. □ Soph. □ Jr. □ Sr. □ Other: please specify________

3) Did either of your parents attend college? □ No □ Yes

4) Please identify your gender: □ Female □ Male

5) Approximately how many total times did you meet with your mentor outside of class?_______

6) In what stages of the writing process did your mentor work with you? Please check all boxes that apply.
   □ At the Beginning □ In the Middle □ Near the End □ After a paper's initial grade

7) What topics did you and your mentor discuss in conferences? Please check all that apply.
   □ Preparing for writing conferences (with the mentor or the instructor)
   □ Understanding the assignment's requirements
   □ Choosing (or modifying) a topic
   □ Generating ideas for the paper's content
   □ Finding outside sources
   □ Incorporating outside sources into a piece of writing
   □ Clarifying the paper's purpose and/or audience
   □ Organizing the paper more effectively (including transitions)
   □ Honing grammar, usage, and style
   □ Collaborating with classmates (addressing any peer-to-peer issues)
   □ Approaching the instructor with concerns, questions, requests
   □ Applying the instructor's comments for revision
   □ Developing confidence as a writer and college student
   □ Upholding class and/or university policies and expectations
   □ Understanding material that was covered in class
   □ Utilizing technology and/or university resources (i.e.: library, websites, student health...)
   □ Acquiring skills in time management and personal organization
   □ Handling issues of college and personal life not directly related to the course
   □ Other(s): please specify ________________________________________________

8) Did your mentor help you to connect with any campus resources? □ Yes □ No
   (ie: library, search engines, websites, departments, career counseling, first-year student advising, student health...)
   If yes, please list the resource(s): __________________________________________

9) Overall, how would you rank your level of satisfaction with your mentor?
   □ very unsatisfied □ unsatisfied □ neutral □ satisfied □ very satisfied

10) Overall, how would you rank your level of satisfaction with your experience in English 100?
    □ very unsatisfied □ unsatisfied □ neutral □ satisfied □ very satisfied

Please continue on to back side of this survey.→
### Sample Coding of Student Evaluations

**Coding:** psychological/emotional support; support for setting goals and choosing a career path; academic subject knowledge support; specification of a role model

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Analyst 1</th>
<th>Analyst 2</th>
<th>Analyst 3</th>
</tr>
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<td>Participated in in-class activities. - She helped very much in all of my compositions, with ideas, suggestions, and support. - She was very knowledgeable and was my best resource for all my compositions.</td>
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<td>SHE WAS HELPFUL OUTSIDE OF CLASS WITH WRITING PAPERS BUT SHE DIDN'T REALLY HELP WITH ANYTHING IN CLASS. She supported me and helped me understand stuff better. She helped with many things such as preparation for essays and papers. She helped me improve my study habits for many classes not only English. She mainly just helped with reviewing our assignments in class. In addition, she gave some advice for some things. She helped me with getting started or revising my papers.</td>
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Findings

Coding the 404 responses to this survey prompt revealed that most students referenced one of the constructs at least once (85%) and that a great deal of them (44%) referenced two or more of the constructs. As might be guessed from the percentages listed in Table 1, those responses that referenced two of the constructs most often blended commentary on academic subject knowledge support with commentary on psychological/emotional support.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nora &amp; Crisp's Mentoring Construct</th>
<th>Raw Numbers</th>
<th>Frequency of Occurrence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Psychological/emotional support</td>
<td>170</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic subject knowledge support</td>
<td>313</td>
<td>79%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goal setting and career paths</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role model</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uncodable</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Table 1. Frequency of Nora & Crisp's constructs identified in response to prompt #1: Please identify the various roles that your mentor played this semester, both in the course as a whole and in your experience as an individual student. Please give as many specific, detailed examples of your interactions with your mentor as you can remember.
Discussion

Composition remains one of the few first-year courses encountered by students in which faculty (and in this case, a mentor) get to know students on a first-name basis, interact with them via their writing, and respond to that writing both orally and in writing. The high rate of psycho-social support indicated by students in their discursive comments is confirmed by the checklists they completed on the front side of the questionnaire. Across the 404 questionnaires, students checked "developing confidence as a writer and college student" in 200 cases (nearly 50%).

One of the most intriguing aspects of Tinto's model of institutional departure to teachers of Composition is the clear demarcation made between an "academic system" and a "social system." Particularly at largely commuter schools, social integration sometimes begins in classrooms, is nurtured within them, and offers an alternative to other socialization practices common on residence campuses.

The importance of both systems to student persistence has been widely theorized and researched; in the context of the current study and the nature of its data, certain student comments confirm in no uncertain terms the value of mentoring that taps both systems in aiding institutional retention, as in the following:

My mentor played various roles this semester. Obviously she mentored me as I began writing the essays, and was a guide who helped me expand upon ideas to create my paper. She was concerned about the well-being of others (including me), and was a friendly face in a crowd of strangers. When I was sick and we met for a meeting, she was concerned for my health, which made me feel cared for. When I saw her out of class, she waved happily towards me, making me feel more comfortable in this new place.