FEATURE ARTICLE

An Interdisciplinary Approach to Mentoring, Reflection, and Student Engagement: Initial Findings from a Liberal Arts Pilot Study

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ABSTRACT

A Research Working Group conducted as part of an American Council on Education (ACE) Learning Laboratory (2022) concluded that "mentoring relationships are fundamentally developmental and learner-centered." These relationships are "distinct from other meaningful relationships in that they: (1) Promote academic, social, personal, cultural, and career-focused learning and development in intentional, sustained, and integrative ways, (2) Evolve over time, becoming more reciprocal and mutually beneficial, [and] (3) Are individualized, attending to mentees' developing strengths and shifting needs, mentors' expertise, and all members' identities." In addition, application of Gallup's *"Big Six" College Experiences Linked to Life Preparedness* further supports these findings. This pilot project, a collaboration between the School of Business and School of Education at a selective Liberal Arts Institution, presents the initial findings from the Instructor of Record and Peer Mentors in BUS1110: Gateway to Business courses. These initial findings might be utilized by readers as a way of augmenting and/or enhancing classroom learning

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applicable in their own courses with the goal of preparing students for what Ted Mitchell, President, ACE in Weaver et al. (2023), refers to as "a world of uncertainty, imperfect information," at times, "unrelenting pressure…" The application of "real world insights" enhances students' intellectual development and classroom pedagogical approaches.

Keywords: Peer Mentoring, Pedagogy, Program Innovation

Introduction

"Leaders today," as related by Ted Mitchell, President, American Council on Education (ACE) in Weaver et al. (2023), face "a world of uncertainty, imperfect information," and at times, "unrelenting pressure …" Higher education prepares students not only for the known challenges of today but also those not yet identified. In alignment with the *Journal of Character and Leadership Development* mission, the application of student and faculty member "real world insights" enhances intellectual development in the classroom setting. Notably, when our students "commence," they begin the next chapter in their lives at the Commencement Ceremony. This pilot study was intended to prepare students not only with the skills required for their next 4 years of their educational journey, but beyond as well.

Background

The general framework for reporting our pilot study's selected findings is provided by Keeling et al.'s (2008) *Assessment Reconsidered: Institutional Effectiveness for Student Success.* According to the authors, "The framing of assessment practice in higher education begins with understanding the variations among institutions and individuals that create a particular context for every college or university: institutional type, defined needs of learners, and organization functioning." This understanding was grounded in a collaborative effort between a distinguished faculty member in the School of Education and a distinguished Visiting Faculty member in the School of Business. Specifically, the mission of the institution challenges faculty to "nurture a rich intellectual community characterized by active student engagement with a faculty dedicated to excellent teaching and scholarly accomplishment." The pilot study fulfilled the mission of the institution, promoted student success, and met students where they were at in their educational journeys: generally, their second semester of their first year. An Honor Statement formed the core of the community's expectations:

"On my honor, I will uphold the values of…honesty, integrity, responsibility, and respect."

The pilot study: BUS1110 gateway to business

In this Liberal Arts, first-year pilot, selected findings are shared from a BUS1110: Gateway to Business course which by its description is "designed to introduce students to the diverse and exciting world of business, which engages professionals in creative and analytical thinking to solve problems and seize opportunity."

Selected student learning outcomes include students' ability to:

- Describe the role of business in society including ethical, sociological, and global contexts.
- Apply ethical frameworks in business applications and problem solving.
- Develop written and oral communication skills.
- Plan, build, and collaborate in a team environment.
- Analyze individual and group competitive strategies applicable in personal and career decisions.

Instructor

A previous Senior Associate Provost (CASO) and faculty member responsible for designing the "Integrated Educational Experience" along with the Academic Deans Council at the first, 4-year public institution of the 21st century, our work developing common curricular and co-curricular outcomes was recognized with a perfect SACS/COC review of areas in record time – faster than any other institution in the history of SACS/COC. Applying this experience in the classroom as a Visiting Faculty Member at a 4-year, selective Liberal Arts institution, the pilot study represented a collaborative initiative between the School of Business and School of Education. It presented the opportunity to apply "lessons learned" from two decades of classroom experience, administration, and national presentations on teaching and learning outcomes. The pilot further allowed for collaboration across institutional area and expertise sharing.

Re-visiting course learning outcomes

Notably, the course student learning outcomes were not only included in the syllabus but also regularly revisited over the course of the semester. As suggested in Gabelnick et al. (1990), "a variety of factors make the notion of [a] meaningful educational community – the root of the word college [community]..." In BUS1110, our learning was centered around the course learning outcomes. Specifically, the student learning outcomes provided "coherence to the curriculum and provided students and faculty with a sense of shared inquiry" upon which the course was constructed. Students viewed their progress in the course through the lenses of the student learning outcomes as well as the course timeline.

Application of Gallup's "big six" with re-enforcement by peer mentors

Seymour and Lopez (2015), in the inaugural Gallup-Purdue Index, a research study supported by Purdue University and the Lumina Foundation, identified "six experiences linked to preparedness for life outside of college." These experiences included: (1) "at least one professor" who while at college, "made me excited about learning," (2) "cared about me as a person," (3) "encouraged me to pursue my goals and dreams," (4) "worked on a project that took a semester or more to complete," (5) "had an internship or job that allowed me to apply what I was learning in the classroom," (6) "was extremely active in extracurricular activities and organizations." These "Big Six" were incorporated in the classroom learning experience as an innovation to the curriculum and as reported by Gallup, for preparing students for "long-term life outcomes such as employee engagement and well-being." While successful in the first-year learning environment pilot, "lessons learned" by students were re-enforced by Peer Mentors and narrowed the gap between classroom learning and post-graduation expectations of students.

Anticipating: "What's the next question?" in-class reflection

The Instructor of Record (corresponding author) utilized on-going assessments in the form of student reflections, both formally (grades were provided on responses) and informally (responses became part of the course discussions), emphasizing interest in students as a person as well as a learner, encouraging them to pursue their dreams. Responses were incorporated into lecture and allowed students to reflect individually. This approach not only aligned with the findings by Gallup, but also the "best practices" in mentoring contained in the ACE report. Specifically, applying the findings of Goodrich (2021), "reflection is an important part of the learning process for student mentors who can reinforce their prior knowledge." Opportunities for student reflection included:

- When building a team, would you prefer to hire those with more expertise (or talent) than your own or team members that can be further developed?

- Name one way that you might use social media when making a career decision.
- What standards do you use when making a decision that has ethical implications?

These on-going, semester-long reflections/assignments were incorporated in BUS1110 as a semester-long "project" consistent with Gallup's "six experiences linked to preparedness for life outside of college." Furthermore, *In What the Best College Teachers Do,* Bain (2004), challenges that "Many teachers never raise questions; they simply give students answers" suggesting that faculty "create a natural critical learning environment" that leaves students with a question: "What's the next question?" Reflection questions were instrumental to student learning.

Connecting learning outcomes with students' experience

While the course text was utilized as the fundamental source of course content, student reflections demonstrated understanding of content on an on-going basis. These reflections supported student learning outcomes. For example, when students were asked to, "Apply ethical frameworks in business applications and problem solving," they considered ways of applying common frameworks informing decisions (e.g., the newspaper test). After considering these frameworks, one student demonstrated a deeper understanding of the concept, "closing the assessment loop" responding, "no matter what decision you make, you have to live with the consequences."

Assessment and evaluation

Student reflections were incorporated into the course discussion as a form of assessment of student learning. Reflections, while generally voluntary, served as a form of assessment of course content. In class, the reflections revealed a diverse array of student perspectives. Peer Mentors could moderate, reinforce, or challenge

responses along with the moderation of the faculty member. Once submitted, on-going feedback could be provided. This feedback as re-enforced utilizing summative evaluations of the student learning included a midterm and final exam. Students who had a provocative or well-written response, could be re-engaged outside the classroom with an email from the Instructor of Record and/or Peer Mentor facilitating learning in-between face-to-face meetings. Specifically, weekly quizzes and reflections accounted for 20% of the overall BUS1110 grade and the midterm/final exams accounted for 20%, respectively.

Self-reported study evaluation

"Peer Mentoring," as defined in Goodrich (2021) "is a multi-faceted and complex instructional technique comprised of different learning arrangements..." The Peer Mentor(s), in BUS1110, were selected as either current or previous semester Strategic Management fourth year students who could share their insights, work with peers, and/or lead course discussions. One Peer Mentor in BUS1110, for example, completed a successful internship and accepted a professional opportunity with the firm following graduation. The Peer Mentor was a positive role model for students. When invited to provide feedback on their pilot experiences, Peer Mentors reported:

- "The best part about my Peer Mentor experience was being able to connect with first-year students that I otherwise wouldn't have interacted with much. I think it was impactful for the first-year students to see where they might be and what opportunities they might have awaiting them at the end of their Elon journey."
- "The best part of my Peer Mentor experience was getting to share my experiences with those interested and developing relationships with the students who did engage with us as resources, as well as developing a relationship with the other mentor and the professor in both classes. I have a natural

desire to want to help those around me succeed, and being an example, to share my experiences and give my advice – I am super grateful to have been offered an opportunity to help these future leaders succeed in their next 4 years at the institution that has given me so much."

Peer Mentors also reported the following opportunities for improvement:

- Peer Mentors were not paid and yet, took pride in student engagement and recommended selection as early as possible to plan for the semester.
- Student Peer Mentors requested Learning Management System access as appropriate, including access to the course timeline in advance of course participants.
- Peer Mentor feedback also included the opportunity of meeting with students in as many ways as possible concluding, "In reality, peer mentors are really not that far removed from the same spot as the mentees themselves are in. This allows for a unique and positive dynamic between the mentor and mentees that needs to be taken all advantage of."

Feedback from students on Peer Mentor participation included:

- "One thing that I would tell our Peer [Mentor] would be thank you for waking up at 8:00 a.m. voluntarily and giving feedback when needed."
- "Good luck at your job, you will crush it. Thank you for spending this semester with us."
- "...thank you for the insight you gave us."
- "...The real world can be scary, but if you stay true to yourself you will be fine..."

The initial evaluation by Peer Mentors may be utilized by readers as a way of augmenting and/or enhancing classroom learning applicable in their academic communities or respective courses. The feedback has applicability across institution types, academic communities, and pedagogical approaches.

Conclusion and continued study

A Research Working Group conducted as part of an ACE Learning Laboratory (2022) concluded that "mentoring relationships are fundamentally developmental and learner-centered." These relationships are "distinct from other meaningful relationships in that they: (1) Promote academic, social, personal, cultural, and career-focused learning and development in intentional, sustained, and integrative ways, (2) Evolve over time, becoming more reciprocal and mutually beneficial, (3) Are individualized, attending to mentees' developing strengths and shifting needs, mentors' expertise, and all members' identities." These findings, connected nicely to the pilot study's design.

Well-aligned with the mission of the institution, the semester-long, on-going reflection and course Peer Mentoring, complemented each other. Applying Gallup's "six experiences linked to preparedness for life outside of college" further supported the pedagogical approaches. Future manuscripts should consider additional pedagogical techniques applied in assessment and specifically, how Exemplars were incorporated in the course. The "lessons learned" are reported and recommended for their applicability across institution types, fields, and subject areas.

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