

PROGRAM/INTERVENTION

# Developmental Conversations: Mentoring as a Pervasive Cultural Practice

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## ABSTRACT


This article details Berry College's efforts to enhance its mentoring culture through the Developmental Conversations initiative. By implementing a multilevel framework consisting of three core principles—Equip, Empower, and Encourage—the initiative advances the institution's mentoring culture in alignment with Berry's mission to develop leaders of integrity. We discuss our strategic approach to mentoring including the integration of competency models, perspectives on empowerment, and the central role of cultural encouragement in generating an environment where mentoring is embraced as a critical component of our educational strategy. Insights from implementation efforts highlight the successes and challenges of creating a pervasive mentoring culture that supports both personal and professional growth across the community. This initiative serves as a replicable example for other institutions seeking strategies to enhance their developmental ethos through mentoring.

*Keywords:* Mentoring Culture, Leadership Development, Organizational Change, Competency Models, Educational Strategy

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## Introduction

Mentoring is widely recognized as a pivotal developmental practice (Johnson, 2007). Despite its potential value, the benefits of mentoring are often to a limited group of program participants. While higher education institutions make commitments to develop the entire student population, formal mentoring programs typically reach only a small percentage of the student body (see Cornelius et al., 2016; Gannon & Maher, 2012; Gershenfeld, 2014; Lunsford et al., 2017; Wefald et al., 2021). Formal mentoring can also place an overemphasis on the structural elements of mentoring interventions, such as mentor-mentee matching and the prescribed frequency of meetings, often at the expense of less tangible but more important factors like the effective qualities of mentoring relationships. Developing higher education students through mentoring requires more than simply having a formal program.

At Berry College, mentoring is deeply embedded in our heritage and core values (Berry, 2001), reflecting a rich tradition that precedes contemporary practice. Formal mentoring opportunities are cherished by students. Graduates report valuing informal mentoring efforts as well. There is also alignment with the college's mission, where "We educate the head, heart, and hand—to inspire leaders of integrity who cultivate thriving communities" (Berry College, n.d.).

Mentoring is generally understood to be relational and developmental (Mullen & Klimaitis, 2021). Observations of our mentoring practices were consistent with this definition but also revealed a need for a more coherent and unified strategy. In response, this article explores Berry College's efforts to advance mentoring as a pervasive cultural practice aimed at enhancing character and leadership development across the entire student body. Prompted by the insights gained from the variability in current practices and driven by the potential to improve developmental outcomes, the Berry Center for Integrity in Leadership and key campus partners launched

the Developmental Conversations initiative during the 2023–2024 academic year. This initiative redefines mentoring relationships by focusing on creating meaningful developmentally focused relationships. Our objective was to standardize practices, integrate them into daily campus life, and in doing so improve opportunities for every student. The following sections explore and then outline three foundational principles—Equip, Empower, and Encourage—that guided our efforts to reshape mentoring at Berry College and offer valuable insights for other institutions seeking to enhance their educational environments through similar initiatives.

## Literature Review

In our pursuit of a pervasive mentoring culture at Berry College, we explored a multilevel approach to integrate complementary strategies spanning individual, interpersonal, and organizational levels. This literature review examines key evidence that supports an approach accounting for the interconnected layers of development, providing a comprehensive overview of effective practices that align with our goals of enhancing mentoring practice throughout the institution.

### *Competency Models*

Competency models define the essential knowledge, skills, abilities, and other characteristics (KSAOs) required for effective job performance. These models provide crucial insights that organizations can leverage to enhance performance (McClelland, 1973). A well-defined competency model that articulates the roles and responsibilities of mentors, aligned with the desired outcomes of mentoring efforts, creates a solid foundation for effective mentoring practices.

Research specifically addressing mentoring KSAOs, especially in the context of character and leadership development, remains limited. Fleming et al. (2013) addressed this gap by developing the Mentoring Competency Assessment (MCA) to evaluate mentors in clinical and research settings. They identified six critical

competency areas including effective communication, aligned expectations, assessing understanding, addressing diversity, fostering independence, and promoting professional development. Competency models like the MCA provide administrators with measurable indicators of performance that lend themselves to customizable developmental interventions and tailored support to enhance mentoring practice.

Large organizations can gather data through surveys to comprehensively understand job roles and the competencies that underly performance (Rodriguez et al., 2002). Smaller organizations can achieve similar results using focus groups. Selected competencies must align with organizational goals (Campion et al., 2011). Given the scope and scale of mentoring efforts in higher education, which are likely to cover a range of needs including psychosocial development and career support (Kram, 1983), it is essential to have a precise understanding of the objectives of mentoring. Failure to consider and clarify the intent and purpose of mentoring practice within an organization will contribute to diffused conceptual clarity and mismatched expectations within mentoring relationships. A well-constructed competency model is critical to establishing clear expectations that delineate essential KSAOs and the level at which they should be performed. This is the first step in equipping organizational members at all levels with a consistent understanding of the expectations and responsibilities in the mentoring process.

#### *Individual and Interpersonal Conditions*

Effective mentoring is more than merely transmitting information or experiences. Mentoring is fundamentally a leadership activity because it involves bringing people together, coordinating actions, and achieving shared goals. Berry College's mission to produce leaders of integrity suggests mentoring students involves a deep commitment to personal growth and nurturing meaningful relationships. This dual focus is supported by the distinction between leader and leadership development (Day, 2000; Day & Dragoni, 2015).

Leader development focuses on intrapersonal domains including self-awareness, self-regulation, and self-motivation. Leadership development emphasizes the relational domains of practice that include social awareness and interpersonal skills. Development at the individual level lays the groundwork upon which the practical and relational dynamics are built and continually refined.

Seibert et al. (2011) describe two overarching types of empowerment: psychological and sociostructural. Psychological empowerment, conceptualized by Conger and Kanungo (1988) and expanded by Thomas and Velthouse (1990), aligns an individual's self-efficacy and intrinsic motivation with organizational practices. To create an environment conducive to personal and professional development, it is imperative to align mentoring strategies with the intrinsic goals and capabilities of mentors and mentees. Similarly, sociostructural empowerment involves how organizational structures and practices distribute autonomy throughout an organization, enhancing the overall empowerment framework. In mentoring, this involves allowing mentor-mentee pairs to shape their interactions and collaboratively set goals. This process can enhance both the perception of empowerment and relationship effectiveness.

#### *The Role of Culture*

Establishing a mentoring culture offers more than limited, formal experiences by making mentoring a normative part of the organizational experience. A deliberately developmental organization (Kegan & Lahey, 2016) creates a continuous learning environment where every aspect of the organization is oriented toward the personal and professional growth of all its members. Establishing culture involves creating widespread, shared feelings, experiences, and descriptions of the organization that involve its stated values and goals (Schneider et al., 2013).

Creating a pervasive mentoring culture requires a clear understanding of how such a culture contributes

to organizational effectiveness and necessitates specific changes to strengthen and maintain this culture. Without a clear connection to what the organization does, mentoring is likely to remain a peripheral activity experienced by a select few engaged individuals. Broad involvement in mentoring, rooted in a shared organizational philosophy, ensures that mentoring is practiced widely and enhances individual development and overall institutional resilience. The future of organizations depends on how the culture came to be and how it continues to adapt (Schein & Schein, 2017). A pervasive shift across an entire community offers a stark contrast to the incremental changes typically produced by conventional mentoring programs. Actively encouraging community members to engage in and support mentoring invites the integration of developmental pursuits into daily practices aligned with the organization's values and goals.

### Principles for Pervasive Mentoring: Equip, Empower, and Encourage

To clarify the operational structure of the Developmental Conversations initiative, the following table (Table 1) outlines three multilevel principles—Equip, Empower, and Encourage. Each is concisely defined and categorized according to the level at which we apply it within the initiative. While these principles extend to the work that mentors achieve with mentees, we selected them for their utility in developing a mentoring culture. The table illustrates the complementary effects of the principles. In the subsections that follow, each is enriched with quotes from community members that illustrate the observed effects.

#### *Principle 1. Equip*

The principle of equip focuses on enhancing individual capabilities to mentor. Equip involves introducing and supporting the development of relevant KSAOs that serve mentees with diverse experiences, motives, and goals. Equip operates at an intrapersonal level with an emphasis on the mentor's self-awareness and developmental skills. We start the equipping process by inviting mentors to examine their own developmental experiences.

Berry College applied this principle by introducing targeted workshops and creating a supportive skill-based structure that instructs mentors on how they directly support the college's mission. Workshops cover topics and experiential learning activities including effective communication, understanding diverse learning needs, and inviting mentees to exercise personal agency. Competencies such as these ensure that participants are prepared to lead Developmental Conversations that contribute to individual student needs in direct support of the mission.

Notable quotes:

- *"I've already had a few opportunities to use the skills we practiced, and it has been incredibly helpful in making me feel more prepared to engage with my students."*
- *"The [skills] make me feel more like I'm guiding and not directly trying to solve their problems for them."*
- *"I now think more about how I engage with a student long-term. Before the workshops, I would engage with them whenever they came to me, but now I'm thinking through who actually considers me as their mentor, and not just who stops by to talk."*
- *"It's helped me think about how to have those conversations with students with a certain structure on how to approach and engage in something developmental... [I now have] a road map for these conversations."*

#### *Principle 2. Empower*

Empowerment in mentoring concerns creating a relationship where mentors and mentees openly share and collaborate in the development process. This principle builds upon individual-level preparation by embracing a dyadic approach. The mentor-mentee relationship is a space for mutual growth and learning.

We encourage mentors to engage mentees holistically, considering not just academic or career goals but the entire spectrum of development. Our approach is rooted in the concept of psychological empowerment,

**Table 1***Multilevel Summary Framework of Mentoring Development Practices and Outcomes*

<b>Principle</b>	<b>Definition</b>	<b>Level of engagement</b>	<b>Suggested practices</b>	<b>Outcomes of interest</b>
Equip	Focus on enhancing individual capabilities and readiness for mentoring	Individual (Intrapersonal)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Psychological assessment with a relational focus</li> <li>• One-on-one coaching support</li> <li>• Workshops activities that promote essential skills</li> <li>• Workshop activities including simulation and role-playing</li> <li>• Resource toolkit</li> </ul>	Improved mentor identity, self-efficacy, and relevant KSAOs
Empower	Emphasize development of the whole person in alignment with the organizational mission	Dyadic (Interpersonal)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Goal-setting frameworks for personal and professional development</li> <li>• Personalized guidance through tailored feedback</li> <li>• Structured reflection activities</li> <li>• Peer mentoring groups</li> </ul>	Enhanced psychological safety, adaptability, and trust in mentoring relationships
Encourage	Generate a supportive mentoring culture with shared ideas and practices concerning the accepted ways to think, feel, and act as a community member	Organizational (Cultural)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Promote interdepartmental collaboration and relationships</li> <li>• Host community events that invite and inspire dialogue and action</li> <li>• Continuous learning opportunities to engage after primary skill development</li> </ul>	Shared mindsets about mentoring and student development, culturally institutionalized mentoring practices

KSAO: knowledge, skills, abilities, and other characteristics.

where mentors help mentees align personal goals with academic and professional aspirations. By empowering mentors to create comprehensive developmental conversations, Berry College facilitates a mentoring experience that supports the whole person, forging deeper connections, and promoting more meaningful outcomes.

Notable quotes:

- *“My goal is that students have both professional and personal mentoring from me. What matters is the full picture.”*
- *“[From] forming a relationship ... [to] when [students] keep thinking of you as someone who could help them, [I’m] someone who can keep guiding them forward, that is a privilege.”*
- *“Great opportunity to ... learn and practice the skill of taking conversations to a deeper, more purposeful level.”*
- *“I liked ... being our actual selves so that we weren’t trying to act.”*
- *“I love that Berry focuses on all aspects of a student’s life with the philosophy of educating the head, heart and hands.”*

### *Principle 3. Encourage*

Encourage, the third principle, cultivates a supportive mentoring culture across the campus. This principle involves norms and practices that promote mentoring as a valued and integral part of the educational ecosystem. Encourage builds on Bandura’s (1971) social learning theory which holds that people learn from one another through observation, modeling, and imitation. Every member of the community plays an active role in creating and sustaining mentoring practices. Encouragement reminds us about the relational aspect of culture creation—where espoused values are widely adopted, practiced, modeled, and taught to one another.

To actualize this principle, Berry College initiated several strategies to promote mentoring interactions among faculty, staff, students, and the surrounding

community. These include creating and shaping leadership and character-focused events where potential mentors and mentees can connect, developing recognition programs that honor and celebrate mentoring, and establishing policies that support investing time in mentoring activities. By embedding these supportive activities into the routine, we encourage a culture of mentoring that becomes a shared responsibility and a common practice. The goal is to enhance the overall educational environment that a community committed to developmental growth can co-create.

The choice of the word “encourage” for this principle is intentional, reflecting the commitment required to sustain mentoring as a cultural practice. As Schein and Schein (2017) suggest, culture is a dynamic process whereby new members are socialized into the existing culture. The term “encourage” suggests an intentional emphasis on the nature of this dynamic process, where mentoring is continuously promoted, practiced, and valued. In contrast with solutions that emphasize structural and policy-oriented solutions, we are approaching cultural formation and change with emphasis on the mediating effects of affect, behavior, and cognition concerning developmental practices. The change brought about through mutual encouragement bridges aspirations of personal and professional growth and the community’s daily habits.

Notable quotes:

- *“I now understand ... how to be an effective mentor and also feel a sense of connection with others who have done the workshop, even if they weren’t in my group or even in my workshop session. This is a transformative experience for our community.”*
- *“Exposure to other faculty and staff in the workshops and watching them learn as I learn has been incredibly helpful.”*
- *“Creating a culture of mentoring on campus is a good-to-great initiative in itself. We’re already good at this, we’re trying to be great.”*

- *“It has served a really important role in surfacing some of the unspoken truths about our college culture.”*
- *“It’s a great reminder that we are all part of this work and that we all have to build capacity because we all carry the load.”*
- *“It was very helpful not only in learning new ways to approach mentoring but also in making connections to colleagues and as a new employee of Berry.”*
- *“One of the greatest benefits is helping people to see the missionality of their work ...affects employee retention, belonging, meaning in their work. Particularly promising with new employees.”*

## Lessons Learned and Future Directions

The journey of defining, refining, and expanding the mentoring culture at Berry College yielded significant insights and pointed to paths for future development. Our efforts have underscored the importance of intentional and adaptive approaches to cultural enhancement. In our efforts to cultivate leaders of integrity—citizen leaders equipped to serve and improve society—there is yet work to be done to leverage mentoring as a pivotal component of our educational strategy.

### *Lessons Learned*

1. **Strategic Development.** A cultural change initiative based on a multilevel framework is showing promising effects for advancing individual growth, mentoring practice, and campus mentoring culture. Thoughtfully designed interventions and complementary support provide a robust context for development. The framework offers a promising approach to better serve our students.
2. **Scheduling and Participation.** It is challenging to coordinate workshops that fit the busy schedules of faculty and staff. The workshops’ intensive nature requires commitment. We observed faculty and staff who expressed a strong desire to participate but found it difficult to do so. Some simply had too many commitments to sign up for the workshops. Others would sign up but later cancel in response to urgent tasks and

responsibilities. Ongoing work is needed to establish mentoring as an intrinsic part of the community’s roles where mentoring is perceived as a core role rather than viewing it as an additional responsibility.

3. **Inclusivity.** By promoting shared leadership within Berry’s mentoring framework, we made measurable progress toward establishing a culture where mentoring responsibilities are increasingly shared by the community. This is a promising indicator that we can mitigate the restrictive assortative processes typical of formal mentoring programs that reach a limited few.

### *Future Directions*

1. **Support for Mentors.** We are reviewing our efforts and seeking campus partners to help us encourage wider participation in the upcoming year. We are working to build awareness with a focus on onboarding efforts while providing developmental mentoring resources that are accessible and valued by the full community.
2. **Potential Costs of Mentoring.** As more of the community invests in developmental relationships, it is essential to address potential costs (see Lunsford et al., 2013). Despite a clear developmental focus and mission alignment, mentors may perceive that mentoring places additional demands on their time. We are committed to examining the community experience and making evidence-based decisions for continuous improvement.
3. **Recognition Efforts.** We are exploring initiatives to recognize and celebrate mentors’ contributions appropriately. Crucial mentoring outcomes are distal, so we are exploring ways to enhance engagement and acknowledgment of mentors’ work in the near term. This year, Berry initiated a partnership with its Student Government Association to launch a thank-you card campaign. We provided resources and encouraged students to express appreciation for the significant contributions that faculty and staff made to their development. This initiative could significantly impact how mentoring contributions are

recognized and promote reflective practice among students about the value of mentoring.

4. ***Continued Emphasis on Personal and Professional Development.*** We are committed to a culture where mentoring is central to our educational strategy and exemplified by our practice as a community. After workshops and interventions, we collected a wealth of feedback and perspectives from participants to identify potential growth areas in our efforts. Ongoing dialogue with our community is vital to effectively meet the evolving needs and expectations of participants while ensuring that our efforts remain relevant and impactful.

## Conclusion

Our journey to enhance the mentoring culture at Berry College through the Developmental Conversations initiative has been challenging, enlightening, and rewarding. By applying the multilevel principles of Equip, Empower, and Encourage, we made significant strides in a year toward embedding a pervasive mentoring culture. These principles have helped us closely align the desired, normative practice with Berry's mission to develop leaders of integrity who actively contribute to thriving communities. In short, our community is experiencing notable gains that are enriching the mentoring experience. As mentors embrace this approach to meet the diverse needs of our student body, they are integrating lifelong learning and development in practical and observable ways that enhance Berry's educational legacy.

To navigate the complexities of these change efforts we built a resilient team of collaborators who are driven by a clear vision for the future. The challenges and collaborative solutions we devised highlight the critical need for a flexible approach while steadily advancing toward our overarching goals. Our experience underscores the substantial value of commitment from key campus leaders who have supported and promoted these developmental opportunities for personal and professional growth.

Let this be a call to action for others in any organization with a developmental purpose. Embracing these principles is not simply a path forward, but a commitment to integrity in the mentoring practices that can positively advance the future of the organization.

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