Qualities That Mentors In The University Setting Should Have

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Abstract

Mentoring is gaining more and more attention as a way of enhancing the capabilities for the personal and professional development of graduate students. This paper revolves around the concept of mentoring and the particularities of its implementation in the University setting. The research focuses on the qualities that mentors should have in order to be successful in this task. It reviews the qualities that have been identified in previous studies and then compares them with the responses to a questionnaire that was sent in 2014 to 33 former graduate students that participated in a mentoring program between 2010 and 2013 at the School of Civil Engineering of the Polytechnic University of Madrid.

Keywords: Mentoring, mentors, qualities, University.

1. Introduction

Mentoring has experienced an increase in popularity in recent years, particularly in the professional arena. More and more private companies of very different sectors are implementing this tool as a way of enhancing the capabilities of their employees. This paper explores how the concept of mentoring has been applied to the University setting. The research focuses on the qualities that mentors should have in order to be successful in this task. It is organized as follows. We first analyze the main features of this concept according to the literature. Subsequently, by building on recent studies, we examine which are the main qualities that the mentors should have. We then move on to analyze the responses to the questionnaires sent to 33 former graduate students that participated in a mentoring program at the School of Civil Engineering of the Polytechnic University of Madrid between 2010 and 2014. Finally, we provide some concluding remarks.

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2. Analysis of the concept of mentoring

Some studies have analyzed the concept of mentoring and its key components in higher education settings (Dunn & Moody, 1995; Gaffney, 1995; Peper, 1994; Terrell, Hassell, & Duggar, 1992; Valadez & Duran, 1991), while other studies have examined various aspects of the mentoring process (Anderson, Dey, Gray, & Thomas, 1995; Monaghan, 1993; Krueger, Blackwell, & Knight, 1992). Many authors agree that mentoring involves a supportive relationship which promotes guidance and cognitive, social and emotional development. The positive effects of mentoring are generally thought to be the support and role modeling aspects of these relationships. According to Leão and Ferreira (2013), the mentoring process should: 1) Enhance youth’s social relationships and emotional well-being; 2) Improve cognitive skills through instruction and discussion; 3) Promote positive identity development. These processes are likely to act in an integrated way over time. Furthermore, the effectiveness of each one of these three practices is probably determined by the quality and longevity of the relationships established between students and their mentors.

Mentoring can be considered as a relationship which affects everyone involved, mentor, mentee/student and organizations. So, it can be considered a relationship where every individual involved has benefits. Many mentors say that the rewards they earn are as substantial as those obtained by their mentees. Being a mentor enables them to: i) Achieve personal growth and learn more about themselves; ii) Improve their self-esteem and feel they are making a difference; iii) Gain a better understanding of other cultures and develop a greater appreciation for diversity; 4) Feel more productive and have a better attitude at work; 5) Enhance their relationships with their own children (Akili, 2013).

The role of the mentors is to help students develop their potential and capabilities. The best way, according to Akili (2013), is to approach one’s development from intellectual, social, and professional vantage points. In his/her role as a faculty member, a teacher works to develop the intellectual capability of the students. But the other elements—social and professional development and maturation—are equally important. Each student or young professional is a collection of his or her individual backgrounds, traditions, and aspirations. Each mentee also represents an opportunity for teacher/mentors to help students prepare for lifetime-lasting careers in engineering.

Some authors have developed a model of mentoring. One of them (Kram, 1985) divides mentoring into two major functions: career development and psychosocial development. Career development focuses on preparing or promoting the students in their careers, whereas psychosocial development focuses on supporting the student’s personal and emotional self, including their sense of competence, identity, and effectiveness in their professional role. He further subdivides these broad functions into sub-functions that support each domain: 1) Career Development: Sponsorship, Coaching, Exposure/Visibility, Protection, Challenging Assignments; 2) Psychosocial Development: Role Modeling, Acceptance/Confirmation, Counseling, Friendship.

3. Characteristics required in mentors

There are a number of studies in the literature that have analyzed the characteristics that mentors should have in order to be successful in this process. According to some studies, successful mentors share the following qualities: 1) A sincere desire to guide and assist young adults; 2) Respect for young people; 3) Active listener; 4) Empathy; 5) See solutions and opportunities; 6) Be flexible and open (Mentor, 2012). Leão and Ferreira (2013) have identified the following factors that are relevant to the relationship between mentor and mentee (from lower to higher relevance): gender, formality, proximity, experience, reciprocity, requirement, commitment, methodology, confidence, communication, knowledge, perseverance, and motivation.

Other studies have identified the following qualities than mentors should possess: 1) Approachable and welcoming in the office and outside; 2) Shares information, knowledge and experience openly; 3) Has good communication and listening skills; 4) Understands the field of engineering and related areas; 5) Has a network of contacts within the college, university and industry; 6) Is motivating, encouraging, positive and empowering; 7) Is willing to set aside/commit time to mentor someone; 8) Is committed to making a difference, one individual at a time; 9) Does not wait to be asked, approaches mentees when he/she feels there is need for it (Akili, 2013).

Communication in mentoring relationships could be considered one of the key aspects that contribute positively to mentoring success (Leão and Ferreira, 2013). This idea is closely connected to the role played by friendship in the
mentoring process. According to Vesilind (2001), teachers, at all levels, should try their best to offer friendship as part of their professional role. There are times and situations where friendship is exactly what is needed in the mentoring relationship. However, such a friendship shouldn’t be destructive or result in impartiality. A note of encouragement, a friendly gesture, asking an underachieving student to chat, answering e-mail, paying attention to students’ extracurricular activities and achievements—are all indicators of friendship and do mean a great deal to students (Vesilind, 2001).

Underlying almost all aspects of learning is the element of trust. Trust between teachers/mentors and students is the affective glue binding educational relationships together. The importance of trust is seen, time and time again, in students’ critical incident responses. One example is when the students are off track and/or loose patience and reach the stage where they can no longer exercise good judgement. In these moments they do need the care and attention of their mentors. At the center of the cluster of characteristics that make teachers/mentors more trustworthy in students’ eyes are two components that may be described as a teacher’s credibility and authenticity (Akili, 2013).

4. Responses from the questionnaire sent to former graduate students

In September 2014 the author of this paper contacted by e-mail 33 former students that had been his mentees at the School of Civil Engineering of the Polytechnic University of Madrid between 2010 and 2013. Out of these 33 former students, 28 responded to the questionnaire. This section analyzes the responses to one of the questions of that questionnaire: ‘Which are, in your opinion, the qualities that a mentor should have in order to be successful in the mentoring process?’

The responses mentioned 20 different qualities, although their frequency varies greatly (see Fig. 1). The quality most valued by the students interviewed for this research is ‘nearness’. According to the context of the responses, it means a combination of being sensitive to the problems and circumstances of the students, approachable, receptive and easygoing. Another relevant quality highlighted by the students is ‘experience’. The meaning expressed by the students indicates mostly that they like the idea of being in the hands of someone with enough experience to help them navigate through the waters of their last years at the University and the first years of professional life. In other words, they don’t like the idea of being guided by someone with very little experience. The third most valued quality is ‘open mind’. According to the context of the responses, it means mainly that they want the mentor to have a broad view of their possible professional careers, from which they can choose the one they like the most. They don’t like the idea of being mentored by someone with a narrow view of the possibilities of their professional development.

After these three most valued qualities, the responses show other qualities that have been highlighted by 4-5 students: empathy, honesty, ability to advise, good communication skills, ability to understand and disinterest. Finally, some other qualities have been mentioned by 2-3 students: being worthy of admiration, extensive network of contacts, ability to motivate, proactivity, keep in contact with the private sector, ability to listen, kindness, availability, spirit of service, to be up-to-date, and being practical.

5. Concluding remarks

The qualities identified in our research are, for the most part, quite similar to those highlighted in previous studies such as Akili (2013), Leao and Ferreira (2013), and Vesilind (2001). However, the responses to our questionnaire show two relevant points (see Figure 1). Firstly, we find that the two most valued qualities are ‘nearness’ and ‘experience’. Both have been identified in the literature but no other previous research has pointed them out as particularly relevant. Secondly, the students have indicated ‘honesty’ as one of the most relevant qualities that mentors should have. This quality, however, does not appear in the results of previous studies.
Fig. 1. Qualities the mentors should have according to the responses of the students to the questionnaire

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