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Reverse Mentoring: Untapped Resource in the Academy?

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Recently, I came across the term "reverse mentoring." Traditional mentoring and peer mentoring are widely reported in the research literature, and a search of *Innovative Higher Education* yielded 16 articles published since 2000 with "mentoring" in the title and many more with "mentoring" as a key word; my search did not find any articles on reverse mentoring. A quick search of other, larger educational data bases produced much the same results.

As a quick review, traditional mentoring is typically described as hierarchical and unidimensional. The mentor serves as an "expert" who has knowledge and power, while the mentee is a "novice" learner. Mentoring functions include the mentor as a dispenser of academic/professional advice, a guide in career development, a supporter of psychological/emotional needs, and role model. Interactions may be somewhat informal or part of a highly structured departmental or college-wide program, and the relationship may occur across a well-defined or more loosely defined time-period. Face-to-face interactions are the norm; however, an increasing use of technology in mentoring was foreshadowed by Bierema and Merriam's 2002 article on "E-mentoring" in *Innovative Higher Education.*

Mentoring programs may be holistic in design and serve specific student groups (e.g., doctoral students, undergraduates, underrepresented students, at-risk students) or be targeted toward selected students and success in specific fields (e.g., STEM, liberal arts, professional fields). Mentoring in the academy extends far beyond student groups and includes programs to assist women, early career, and underrepresented faculty in navigating the career ladder and departmental and college cultures. In all cases, as suggested by the literature, mentoring programs should be contextually and culturally sensitive.

In addition to traditional mentoring programs, the educational literature contains extensive works on peer mentoring. Similar to traditional mentoring, the purpose is to enable success in academic and career matters and in social/emotional dimensions. Sometimes called "peer coaching," the peer mentoring relationship is less hierarchical and more balanced in power. Some writers assert that peer mentoring may be highly effective overall, and especially effective in the psycho-social dimension where close connections may be established around shared life-stage challenges and opportunities. Peer mentoring may take place on many levels:

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faculty member-to-faculty member, graduate student-to-graduate student, or undergraduate-to-undergraduate. Like traditional mentoring, formal peer programs are carefully designed in regard to process and expected outcomes.

Very little has been written on reverse mentoring, and the existing literature (beyond opinion pieces in periodicals) focuses primarily on reverse mentoring in employment settings. In the workplace, the dyads are created using role reversal, e.g., junior employees or newly hired employees serve as mentors to senior, long-term employees. Not surprisingly, much of the literature focuses on the advantages of reverse mentoring to transfer technological skills and social media knowledge throughout professional and corporate settings. Using the foundational work done by Kram (1985*)* on traditional mentoring and career development, Murphy (2010) theorized that in reverse mentoring, junior employees (mentors) may grow in leadership skills and organizational knowledge; senior employees (mentees) may increase content knowledge, gain technical skills, and develop valuable cultural insights from direct interaction with millennials; and organizations could better develop talent management, social equity and diversity, and innovation. Chen (2013) in a study of seven dyads engaged in reverse mentoring in multinational companies located in Taiwan found that the three functions of traditional mentoring (i.e., career support, psychosocial support and role modeling) largely remain intact in reverse mentoring. The value of reverse mentoring in the workplace is touted on several levels: more experienced workers learn new knowledge and practices from recent college graduates or from newly transferred employees; cross-generational knowledge increases overall; lower-level/younger employees experience leadership opportunities; and social networking and social media usage are more effectively integrated into working relationships.

As millions of traditional age students enroll in college each year and a much smaller number of faculty members prepare to teach and conduct research, is there a role for reverse mentoring in the academy? What experiments can we envision in departments and divisions, across and within fields? Could reverse mentoring provide students with opportunities to teach, to reflect on their knowledge, and to practice leadership skills while gaining insight into the academy as a unique educational and social organization? Perhaps reverse mentoring would enhance academic integration for students and teaching effectiveness of faculty as insights are gained through cross-generational role reversals. Highly skilled faculty members have always been able to elicit student knowledge and to learn from their students; accordingly, maybe reverse mentoring in the academy is another form of active learning, waiting to be identified, theorized, and researched. Now, let's consider the practical, as in business. How can we engage students to formally mentor those faculty members who are deficient in the use of rapidly changing technologies and evolving social media? I look forward to thinking more about reverse mentoring and how carefully designed opportunities might be beneficial to students, faculty, and staff. If it evolves, I hope reverse mentoring in the academy will go beyond technological skills and social media; but, in the meantime, I am tracking down a graduate student to ask yet another software question.

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