

Creating a culture of mentorship

Last summer, I attended a College of Reading and Learning Association (CRLA) three-day workshop to learn more about training tutors and peer-mentors in academic settings, such as classrooms, writing centers or math labs. Peer mentoring refers to a student modeling the role and habits of a successful student. The terms “peer mentors” and “peer tutors” are often used interchangeably. The workshop provided a strong pedagogical framework for my work with tutors and peer-mentors, but it also opened my mind to the many ways that the mentoring model extends to the academic setting. Thinking about these ideas within our university context prompted me to ask these questions: How can faculty better help students learn about and take advantage of mentors and peer-mentoring at UAF?

Think back to your undergraduate years. How did you become involved in activities or excited about your major? What role did certain professors and peers play in your journey? The student experience is powerfully shaped by institutional culture and environment. According to Astin’s Theory of Involvement, a student’s peer group is the single most potent source of influence on growth and development during [students’] undergraduate years (Hunt, 2003). Research suggests engagement has a more significant impact when it centers around areas of common interest, like an activity or a major (Wenberg, 2019). The bottom line is that engagement impacts persistence. Engagement centers around relationships. I have seen many study groups start across the writing and math lab tables. They show up for one another; it’s like having gym buddies working through an algebra text rather than a weight routine.

We should not wait, then, and hope that students happen into positive peer and mentor communities. Mentoring relationships and peer-to-peer interaction should be integrated into student life from day one, not just when a student reaches their upper-division or graduate classes. Faculty can, and should, regularly play a role cultivating mentor-protégé relationships for students of all levels, even if that role is indirect. Part-time, off-campus, non traditional students, or students who take most or all classes online, may be especially influenced by opportunities for engagement in student life. There are also practical reasons to promote peer mentoring: “In addition to creating enriching learning experiences for students, peer learning processes can help teachers respond to increasingly limited resources and significant demands on their time” (Zamberlan & Wilson, 2015). We at UAF are no strangers to this struggle.

Intentional efforts to increase opportunities for both formal and informal mentoring expands UAF’s capacity to serve students.

What can faculty do to foster a culture of mentorship and a sense of community at UAF?

- Encourage and incentivize peer-assisted study groups at least once a week
- Offer extra credit for students to visit the Writing Center, Math Lab and Speaking Center
- Consider assigning a peer-mentor or embedded tutor to your course
- Consider developing a peer-mentor program in your department
- Promote or incentivize students’ participation in organizations and clubs
- Identify opportunities to create and facilitate student learning communities
- Consider a “flipped” classroom model that integrates tutors into active learning activities

Mentoring is not an exclusively face-to-face activity. Faculty can help create mentoring opportunities in online classes, as well:

- Design structured learning activities that place students in collaborative groups
- Assign a peer-mentor to model effective discussion posts and responses
- Create informal classroom spaces for student connections to form (Slack is a great tool for this!)

Faculty efforts to create a culture of mentorship at UAF benefit all involved.

References

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