

## **Faculty Mentoring Models: A Case Study of Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute**

Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute (RPI) is currently experiencing a problem with poor student satisfaction in the area of Faculty Advisement. With the increasing focus of faculty on research and scholarly activity, a greater connection to disciplines as opposed to the institution, and the fact that faculty are rewarded for promoting research agendas rather than service to students, faculty members at leading universities and colleges seem to have become increasingly removed from the lives of undergraduate students, and this may be the case at RPI. Bendiner (1962) describes this as the development of the “nonteacher” where “the higher a man’s standing, the less he has to do with students,” and Kerr (2001) has disparaged the fact that undergraduate teaching loads and student contact hours have been reduced as the faculty has become more absorbed with consulting, graduate instruction, and research. This trend toward reducing undergraduate interaction with professors has been accelerating over the past 25 to 30 years, and it is notable that today temporary part-time instructors and graduate teaching assistants meet a larger part of the teaching load, and institutions have largely delegated advising, mentoring and tutoring responsibilities to student and professional staff (Zusman, 1994). Additionally, faculty tenure and promotion decisions have come to depend more heavily on research excellence and publications, and current research supports the argument that the faculty’s growing allegiance to their respective academic disciplines and pursuit of individual research goals reduces faculty availability to students, and causes them to spend less time teaching and advising (Nichols, 2000).

This loss of student-faculty contact occurring at RPI can contribute to several negative consequences, including a campus climate that is perceived by students as

unsupportive, indifferent and alienating. Research by Diamond (2002) indicates a clear relationship between campus climate and student learning, development, satisfaction, and retention. Additionally, developing a sense of integration into a collegiate community that is mediated through relationships between students and faculty members is desirable as this fosters the possibility for ‘teachable moments’ outside of the traditional classroom environment. Reduced faculty contact has a negative impact on student learning in part because students learn more when they have ample opportunities to interact with teachers (Chickering & Gamson, 1999). Additionally, lack of contact with professors subverts several learning principles, such as: (1) learning is done by individuals who are intrinsically tied to others as social beings, and (2) much learning takes place informally and incidentally, beyond explicit teaching in the classroom, often in casual, and serendipitous, contact with faculty (Brown, 2003).

Another area impacted by the reduced faculty availability at RPI is student development, because “accessibility” is primary among the conditions of relationships among students and faculty that foster development (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Research indicates that a large part of the impact of a college education is determined by the extent and content of one’s interactions with the major agents of socialization on campus, namely faculty members and student peers. Actively engaging students contributes to their intellectual and personal growth, and Kuh & Hinkle (2002) indicates that the most “involving colleges” have student-faculty involvement where contact outside class extends class discussions or focuses on major-related activities, while some contacts are initiated by faculty as mentoring or sponsoring relationships. A last area that suffers from loss of student-faculty contact at RPI is student satisfaction, persistence, and

retention. Students who get the most out of college, grow the most academically and are happiest are those who participate in activities with faculty members focusing on substantive work (Light, 2001). All of these potential consequences are inherently related to the reductions in student-faculty contact at RPI.

In an attempt to address and correct these concerns, and thereby increase the amount and quality of faculty/student interaction, the Lally School of Management at RPI has recently implemented a Faculty Mentorship Program. The program was initiated after a student survey found students to be dissatisfied with the advisement they received at RPI, and the President and Provost strongly urged greater involvement by faculty in student advisement. The mentor program that has been implemented is a “shared system” of advising, which provides faculty with the training, tools and incentives to participate in a student mentoring program. This program was supported by and introduced by the Dean of the School and is viewed as a model program for future endorsement by all five academic schools at the Institute. Thirty-six faculty members participated in the initial training sessions held during the Summer of 2003. The expectations, goals and roles of the Mentorship Program, as determined by RPI’s Lally School of Management, are outlined below.

**Program Definition of Mentoring:** For our instructional staff, advising is the highest priority after teaching. Mentoring focuses on the student perspective through an on-going student-mentor relationship intended to assist students in achieving educational, career, and personal goals through the utilization of institutional and community resources. (RPI Mentoring Training Guide)

**Institutional Mentoring Goals** (adopted from NACADA):

- General Information/Referral
  1. Making referrals to other campus or community support services
  2. Providing student information to students and other faculty as appropriate
- Education/Career

1. Assisting students in their consideration of life goals
  2. Assisting students in developing an education plan consistent with life goals
  3. Assisting students in evaluating progress toward life goals and educational plans
- Personal/Developmental
    1. Assisting students in self-understanding and self-acceptance
    2. Assisting students with developing decision-making skills and making informed choices

**Mentor Functions:**

1. Coach- showing students how to do a task or activity
2. Facilitator- creating opportunities for students to develop and use new skills
3. Counselor- helping students to understand and accept the consequences of decisions
4. Networker- referring students to others when appropriate

After almost one academic year of instituting the Mentor program, our consulting team performed a cursory and informal assessment of the program's effectiveness by meeting with a focus group of four faculty participants. The findings are summarized below:

- **Program Strengths**
  1. The culture in the School of Management creates a climate that encourages strong advising and mentoring. The behaviorist backgrounds of faculty also is a factor
  2. Strong support from the President, the Provost and the Dean of the School
  3. The number of students per faculty is capped at 13 and spread out over all four undergraduate years, thereby avoiding an "overload" of student mentees
  4. Training and Development of the Training Manual particularly useful
  5. Commitment of experienced faculty to the mentoring process
  6. Philosophically, the idea of the mentoring program relates well to the Institute's mission to train leaders
- **Program Weaknesses**
  1. The program was initiated by an executive directive, rather than a student-driven, and no student input was gathered as to what was wanted/needed from faculty mentors
  2. There has been considerable faculty resistance from some faculty members

3. The President's message to strengthen faculty advising/mentoring is undermined by an equally strong, if not stronger, message to strengthen research
4. The School did not change the rewards system/incentives for faculty to participate and there are no consequences for failure.
5. Students have not been as universally accepting of the program as was indicated in the literature
6. The definition of mentor and the premises upon which the program were developed are vague and there is no systematic means to evaluate the program's success

- **Observations**

1. Word of mouth among students is a powerful inducement for students to gravitate toward "good" mentors
  2. Mentoring relationships seem to develop most and strongest with juniors and seniors. The motivation is student concern with careers, graduate school, and transitioning from the Institute to whatever it is they will do next
  3. Experience of faculty may be a key element in the success of mentoring. Junior faculty may be ill equipped to mentor based on lack of experience and their desire for tenure
  4. The culture at the Institute in general is one that values "figuring it out for yourself", independence and competition
- After reviewing the goals, functioning and outcomes of the Lally School of Management's Mentor Program, our consultants developed recommendations to enhance the attainment of the stated super-ordinate goal of increased faculty/student interactions by means of the Mentor Program. In recommending organizational change, research and experience have informed us that several specific areas of an organizational configuration warrant particular attention as targets of potential change. These areas are: (1) changes in institutional mission and expectations, (2) changes in incentive and reward systems, and (3) structural changes. In further investigating what specific adjustments at RPI will move the institution toward its goal of greater student-faculty interaction, our recommendations are as follows:
    1. It is strongly recommended that a focus group of student participants meet to assess/evaluate the program to determine what students want from advising and mentoring. It's not enough to simply know that they are dissatisfied. Additionally, a focus group(s) of faculty and students should be established as an ongoing means to monitor the strengths and weaknesses of the program and progress toward goals/outcomes.
    2. Operationally define "Mentor" to guide expectations, including the differing developmental needs of students at various points throughout

their educational experience. This definition should specifically address the roles that a mentor is and is not expected to fill.

3. Develop on-going training based on the specified circumstances and needs that are identified throughout the year, and continually update the Training Manual as new information becomes available or changes occur. Benchmark with other universities to identify best practices.
4. Get freshmen and sophomores connected by developing activities in conjunction with the Office of the First Year Experience. Emphasize the importance and benefits of utilizing a Mentor to incoming students in order to establish a culture among students in which mentoring is valued.
5. Establish a faculty development program that supports mentoring service, in addition to teaching and research. This may differ from School to School within the Institute and needs to take into consideration different cultures and expectations. Mentoring/advising training should be required as part of the new faculty orientation.
6. Develop mechanism(s) to celebrate and publicize success stories among students and faculty members.
7. With support from the top university administration, involve faculty in determining a reward/incentive structure for effective advising and mentoring. Senior administration should balance their message regarding the relative importance of research, teaching and mentoring, and should act as examples by themselves participating fully in mentoring activities with faculty and students. They should also frequently communicate the importance of mentoring to faculty and staff by way of its inclusion in policy development, recommendations and directives, and other administrative communications with faculty and students.

It is proposed that, through the implementation of these changes to the Mentor Program, student/faculty interactions within the Lally School of Management at RPI will be achieved, thereby facilitating the attainment of the many benefits that have been found to be associated with such interactions. The Mentor program is a method of simultaneously encouraging faculty to interact with students and students to interact with faculty, in a one-on-one setting, while focusing on academic issues. Small seminars, independent study and undergraduate research are useful to increase such student faculty

interaction, and all are available at RPI, but as of yet, have not achieved the desired level of student satisfaction with faculty engagement. The Mentor Program is therefore meant to more formally encourage this interaction. Ultimately, the current climate of higher education, predominant at RPI and many other institutions, emphasizes that faculty increasingly engage in research and discipline-related activities, and less so in teaching and student service. Despite the fact that faculty members are aware that student-faculty interaction is a significant factor in student success, this awareness and the existence of opportunities such as small classes, research opportunities and independent studies do not sufficiently encourage these interactions to happen. RPI has decided that these interactions are important to its mission and its students, and must therefore take an active role in encouraging these interactions to happen.

In the continuation of the program, it is our very strong recommendation that RPI begin to approach the design and implementation of the program from a students-up perspective, the heart of this being a faculty-student initiative as opposed to an executive/administrative one. Additionally, this initiative must be supported by specific, operationally defined terms, standards and goals, measured by thorough and frequent assessments of goals and outcomes. Among the most important of our recommendations is the firm definition of the term 'Mentor', and the clarification that a Mentor is not a Counselor, nor an Advisor. Although it is inevitable that sometimes these roles will overlap, a Faculty Mentor is primarily concerned with interacting with the students outside of the classroom around substantive academic issues and their relevance to the students' life, goals and perspectives outside of the academic environment. This connection of the students' personal and academic worlds is a substantial factor in

developing the greater engagement, satisfaction and success that such student-faculty interactions are hoped to foster. Faculty are not being asked to step outside their roles, only to extend their role outside the classroom in a one-on-one setting with students in an effort to help them internalize and implement the academic information in a way that is relevant and significant to them, thereby increasing their interest, engagement and understanding. This is a function that can only be properly filled by a current faculty member, because of the unique relationship and status they have with the student population, and is therefore not something that could be achieved with the same success by Counselors or Advisors.

Without the adoption of the recommendations we have proposed, we would alternately suggest that RPI simply change its focus from a formal Mentoring Program to strengthening the informal mentoring/advising opportunities that are in place. However, we feel that the Mentoring Program merits further investigation and exploration, and that with some adjustment it could be a successful and unique solution to RPI's desire for increased student-faculty mentor relationships.

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