

Incorporating Industry Mentors Into Leadership Courses

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Introduction/Need for Innovation

Mentoring has become more extensive in higher education, acting as a useful interventional tool to improve student experiences at the university level (Cornelius et al., 2016). The definition of a mentor varies across literature, however, the term frequently emphasizes how an individual works with a student to guide them on their career path, while offering professional development and experience (Clayton et al., 2013). The proactive engagement between students and mentors strengthens learning and increases student success and retention (Cornelius et al., 2016). Mentoring undergraduate students can be designed to supply students with both psychological support and academic advice (Lunsford et al., 2017). Research highlights that mentoring positively affects student outcomes. Student outcomes include a greater sense of belonging, an increase in capacity for socially responsible leadership, strategic learning strategies, and self-confidence in professional abilities (Lunsford et al., 2016).

How it Works

In an effort to foster engagement in leadership education within the Oregon State College of Agricultural Sciences and build a community of belonging, we built in an industry mentor component to a new two-credit leadership course for freshman and incoming transfer students in the College of Agricultural Sciences. A primary goal for this course was to create a pipeline for continued leadership education and engagement while helping new students transition to Oregon State University. We worked with academic departments to identify professionals in various agriculture and natural resource industries who would be willing to serve as mentors. Once industry mentors were selected, we, the instructors of the course, assigned 3-4 students to each mentor, organizing groups based upon the student's declared majors and the industry mentors educational and career experiences. Our intent was to provide the students with a mentor of similar career interests in order to facilitate conversations that included mutuality in both shared relationship excitement and experiential empathy (Lester et al., 2019).

Upon the completion of assigning the mentor-student groups, and prior to the start of the course, we communicated with the industry mentors via email about the expectations for the mentoring experience and times they would visit the class virtually. The mentors committed to three, 50-minute sessions throughout the term. During these sessions, the mentees were assigned a designated quiet space to log into Zoom and connect with their mentors. Each mentor connection was fairly unstructured; we encouraged students to learn about their mentor, ask questions in regard to their leadership journey, and solicit advice on how to navigate their college and career transitions and opportunities. Also, students were encouraged to ask their mentors about their leadership experiences, specifically in regards to the five practices of exemplary leadership that served as an outline for the course curriculum (model the way, inspire a shared vision, enable others to act, challenge the process, encourage the heart) (Kouzes & Posner, 2018).

Results to Date/Implications

We solicited feedback from both the 8 mentors and 29 mentees about their experiences, through informal focus group interviews. These interviews served as an opportunity for the participants to reflect on their mentorship experience as well as provide future recommendations related to the mentoring process. Mentors were posed with the following question, *what did you find valuable about the designated meeting times with your mentees?* Responses indicated that

mentors found great value in the mentoring process and that it was rewarding to be given the opportunity to participate in servant leadership. They found their connections to be beneficial for the students, as they were able to share personal experiences and perspectives related to their leadership journeys. They were hopeful that their stories and advice would be impactful to students' future decisions, as they navigate where they are headed in their own leadership voyage. The response below summarized a majority of the feedback from the mentors:

I find a lot of value in reaching out and having interactions with people that are in their undergraduate programs. It was nice to just be able to connect with them and I hope that I have been able to serve as a role model or a point of contact in the industry and have students be able to ask questions and to hear from us. We had some nice discussions, and it was a positive experience. I really enjoyed my discussions with the students.

The students were posed with the following question, *what did you find valuable about the designated meeting times with your mentors?* Responses represented an admiration for the personal real-life stories that their mentors so vulnerably shared. The students found their stories related to failure and trial and error to not only be inspiring, but also reassuring. Students also found value in being able to learn about their mentors' different points of views and perspectives on challenges that they have navigated within their leadership experiences. Students have a greater understanding for the importance of having a growth mindset throughout their leadership journey. The response below summarized a majority of the feedback from the mentees:

I'm glad that we have been able to have these industry mentors to talk with and learn about their real-life experiences out in the workforce using leadership. It's always interesting to listen to their take on leadership practices and be able understand different perspectives in regards to all things that encompass leadership.

Future Plans/Advice to Others

We plan to continue utilizing industry mentors in future sections of this course. It is recommended that you allow for additional and longer mentoring sessions. Many of the mentors mentioned the challenge of hearing and seeing all students during the meetings as each student group shared one laptop. In the future, we will encourage each student to bring their own device to better facilitate “face-to-face” interactions. We will also explore the options to connect in person versus remote, although that will depend on if mentors are local. Last, we found connecting with the mentors was a unique way to build connections between our college and the agriculture and natural resource industry. In the future, we plan to think of innovative ways to nurture these relationships to better serve our students and college.

Costs/Resources Needed

There are no monetary expenses required to carry out the implementation of our idea. However, it is important to mention that this execution does take time to organize. This time is dedicated to obtaining a mentor list, selecting mentors, communication with mentors (via email and potentially telephone), and assigning mentors to students with similar majors. Additionally, it is important to note that in order to facilitate this idea, a highly suggested resource would include an alumni database with contact information, allowing instructors from educational organizations to connect with their alumni.

References

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