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Bridging the Professional Gap: Mentoring School Counselors-in-Training

Paper based on a program presented at the 2009 American Counseling Association Annual Conference and Exposition, March 19-23, Charlotte, North Carolina

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Mentoring programs, or mentorships, are not new. Mentoring is a relationship in which an experienced professional helps to teach, guide, and develop the skills of a trainee within an organization or profession (Alleman, Cochran, Doverspike, & Newman, 1984). Many businesses and organizations offer mentoring programs designed to promote employee development. Mentors are paired with inexperienced new employees to offer needed information, to advise, and to set a good example for their less experienced peers. Mentoring has also been “an essential element in the areas of teacher training and administrative leadership in education” (Tentoni, 1995, p. 32). In contrast, little has been written regarding the practice as it relates to mentoring school counselors.

Research shows that in educational systems, teachers were often paired with fellow teachers, but school counselors were frequently left out of the mentoring experience or were oddly paired with a classroom teacher (Matthes, 1992; Stickel & Trimmer, 1994). This pairing of a counselor with a classroom teacher created problems because the counselor was not receiving support for counseling-related concerns (Milsom & Kayler, 2008). However, much of the literature states that formal orientation programs promote a smooth transition of school counselors from their graduate programs to the work place (Matthes, 1992; Peace, 1995; Stickel & Trimmer, 1994).

Although the research is limited regarding mentoring for school counselors, one study has shown an increase in self-efficacy among first year elementary counselors who participated in a district-wide mentoring program. The mentoring program also helped

prevent burnout and increased longevity of counselors (Armstrong, Balkin, Long, & Caldwell, 2006). Milsom and Kayler (2008) showed that interactions with a professional already established in the field led to greater self-efficacy in the mentee. A mentoring relationship increased the confidence of school counselors to work independently and they felt better prepared for their new role in the schools after the mentoring experience.

Although mentoring programs for school counselors may be sparse, the literature offers guidance about constructing one. The first task in developing a mentoring program is to determine the approach, type, mode, and duration. Kirsch (2006) describes two approaches to mentoring: informal and formal. The first approach is the informal mentorship. This approach is one based on a natural connection through common backgrounds or personal relationships. The second approach is the formal mentorship which is based on a structured organizational program. The structure of formal mentoring programs usually includes program goals, schedules, training, and evaluation.

There are three types of mentoring as well: one-on-one, team, and group. One-on-one mentoring is the most commonly used style. It involves a mentoring relationship between one mentor and one mentee. In this mentoring approach, it is common for the relationship to be based on the individual needs of the mentee and the specific abilities of the mentor. Team mentoring involves at least two mentors working together to mentor one mentee. The abilities of the mentors, which may be different or similar, reinforce the contribution of each mentor. Group mentoring involves only one mentor who works with a group of mentees. This type of mentoring relationship may be used with a group of individuals with the same needs (Kirsch, 2006).

Kirsch (2006) describes two modes of mentoring: face-to-face and virtual. Face-to-face mentoring is done mostly through direct contact meetings but can also have some degree of virtual contact. Virtual mentoring allows for mentors and mentees to interact using electronic methods such as email, telephone, or webinar. The author further describes the mentor-mentee relationship as having two durations--short term and long term. The short term mentorship lasts for one year or less while the long term mentorship lasts more than one year.

One benefit of mentoring is that it is a reciprocal learning relationship. Although the mentee is the direct focus, the mentor is dually rewarded for participating in the program (American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, 2008). A mentorship program allows for the more experienced professional to advocate, to give back to his or her profession, and to stay current on professional trends and practices (Smith, 2007). Mentoring can help develop useful leadership skills, elicit network opportunities with other professionals, and promote an increase in overall job satisfaction and pride. According to Alleman et al. (1984), mentoring has personal and professional benefits for each mentee. It also provides opportunities for individuals to learn the managerial politics found in educational settings (Rawlins & Rawlins, 1983).

Mentoring Program

The school counseling program coordinator at the University of South Dakota received informal feedback from students. The students expressed that they found their

interactions with professionals in the field to be very useful to their professional growth. Three school counseling graduate students were invited by the school counseling program coordinator to assist in creating a mentoring program that paired school counselors-in-training with professionals in the field.

The purpose of the program is to establish mentor-mentee relationships that would benefit both parties. The expectation for the mentoring program is to equip school counselors, who transition from the security of a supervised environment to a professional work space where they are less apt to be working under a counselor's supervision, with better self-efficacy in counseling children and adolescents. The mentor would also serve as an additional resource for consultation. Creating a network that would provide professional nurturance is the ultimate goal.

Program Development

The first step in creating the program was to identify which students in the university program were interested in participating. All school counselor track students were invited to a meeting which introduced the concept and provided a format for discussion about involvement. Each interested student was asked to complete a short survey that was used to match them with a professional counselor in the field. There was a 100% response to this initial invitation to participants, and 15 school counselors-in-training became the first group of participants.

The second step was to identify professional school counselors who could be invited to serve as mentors. The school counseling program coordinator had been involved in the field of school counseling in the state for over 20 years and was able to select individuals for invitation to participate who were judged to be exemplary role models for the profession. These professionals were contacted via letter, email, and telephone and then provided with a description of the program goals and an invitation to participate. Those interested were asked to complete a survey.

The survey instrument used for both the mentors and mentees asked some basic demographic information and explored the mentor and mentee's expectations and philosophy about participating in the mentoring program. The surveys were reviewed by the mentoring program coordinators who then matched mentors with mentees who shared their geographic location and grade-level setting similarities.

Informal events for the mentor-mentee pairs were designed and held to allow for networking. Mentors and mentees were encouraged to connect on an individual basis through the use of electronic communication between scheduled events. Students were also encouraged to utilize their mentors when completing class assignments and projects for which their mentor could be a resource.

Program Evaluation

Since this program is new, data will be gathered on the program each spring. Information will also be gathered from graduates after their first, second, and third years in the field using the following:

1. A log to show type and frequency of contacts.
2. A survey instrument designed to measure overall program effectiveness.
3. A questionnaire to ascertain benefits and gather feedback about gaps in the program and suggestions for change.
4. Individual interviews to discover how participants viewed their professional development as a result of the program.

Informal feedback has been received to date from participants. Mentees have reported that having a mentor to rely on throughout graduate school is not only beneficial to their academic studies, but also a motivational factor that has helped to validate the success of the relationship and the mentoring program.

The relationship established between the mentor and the student will provide the student with knowledge that is not obtainable through a textbook alone. Not only will these students improve their knowledge about professional school counseling, they will also inevitably create invaluable contacts and establish a valuable support system that will enhance their job seeking experience. Volunteer mentors provide graduate students with insights that come from years of experience working directly with students in a variety of school districts; this helps to expose them to diverse theoretical orientations, ideas, and styles (Smith, 2007). Participation in this program will allow students to identify their areas of weakness and fill the gaps in their knowledge. The benefits are not reserved exclusively for academic and career advancement; the mentoring program can help to reduce the student's frustration and anxiety, while increasing motivation and confidence.

Counselor educators may benefit from this research as they strive to extend knowledge and experience in their field. This program provides opportunities for counselor educators to familiarize themselves with the current school counselors' work environment and lessen the transition from training to professional employment. It is the belief that this program can serve to assist in the preparation of future school counselors that serves as a continued incentive for the mentoring program in place at the University of South Dakota.

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