Promising Practices

Monthly Mentor Evenings

The NCTN Promising Practice Series presents detailed descriptions of strategies from the field that are designed to promote the successful transition of students from ABE to postsecondary education.

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Program Context

Project RIRAL was founded in 1979 and has been designated by the Rhode Island Department of Education as an area learning center, providing classes in collaboration with and administered for 8 local school districts. Educational programs include: adult basic education (ABE), adult secondary education (ASE), English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), family literacy, workplace literacy, work readiness, and transition to college.

As part of its menu of adult education programs, Project RIRAL provides two 16-week Transition to College (TTC) programs each year, one cycle in the spring and one in the fall. TTC began in 2000 as part of the New England ABE-to-College Transition Project coordinated by the New England Literacy Resource Center and funded by the Nellie Mae Education Foundation. It serves 30 students each year. TTC establishes a foundation for success in college by encouraging learners to:

- Identify their individual skills and abilities
- Create realistic goals
- Build confidence in their potential to be successful college students.

This, ultimately, improves the quality of their lives. Without the ongoing support of TTC, many potential college students might not persevere through the rigors of higher education.

Rationale and Background of the Practice

Our ABE-to-College Transition Project grant required that we have a mentoring component. In 2004, we initiated mandatory, monthly, in-house mentoring sessions in an effort to provide a non-threatening venue for students to discuss academic and personal concerns as they arose. These sessions were facilitated by the Mentor Coordinator and the Program Director / Counselor. Our goal was to create an environment in which the concept of mentoring could be modeled for the students. Furthermore, we wanted students to understand the important role mentoring might play as they moved into postsecondary education and beyond. These evenings have evolved into formal “Mentor Evenings.”

Our mentoring program was influenced by workshops presented by Dr. Susan Weinberger, a.k.a. Dr. Mentor (www.hsph.harvard.edu/chc/wmy2005/pass/dr_mentor.htm). We researched various internet sites, the NCTN website, and used our own hands-on experience.

Why mentoring?

Most mentoring studies look at programs for youth, but there are studies that examine retention in college for nontraditional students through strategies of engagement, such as mentoring. “For all students, but certainly for those who are first-generation college students or who need developmental assistance, effective programs also understand that support of learning must come from many quarters...The research in this regard is quite clear, namely that the frequency and perceived worth of interaction with faculty, staff, and other students is one of the strongest predictors not only of student persistence but also of student learning.”

(See Tinto at www.aascu.org/GRO/tinto.htm)

Look to mentoring for nontraditional students as a way to:

- Make available a support system for new nontraditional students
- Network with other nontraditional students
- Share and learn about social and educational opportunities within the college and community.
Description of the Practice

At RIRAL’s Transition to College program, mentoring begins immediately, when students enter the program, not later, after students enter postsecondary education. I serve as the students’ first mentor and mentoring is the primary focus of our Mentor Evenings. At the Mentor Evenings we offer much-needed guidance in life skills and goal setting, advise on individual and group interaction with classmates and instructors, introduce students to available resources, and invite valuable feedback about our program. These informal evenings provide students with an opportunity to be proactive, making connections to build support groups for themselves. Also, I get to know the individual students, which makes the official mentor matching process easier.

TTC students are required to attend four Monthly Mentor Evenings. However, the first time students are introduced to the concept of mentoring is when I talk about my role as Mentoring Coordinator during Orientation. This two-day event gives me an opportunity to meet the students and make notes. I see what they look like, learn about their goals and interests, watch how they interact—they become individuals for me.

In September 2005, as the result of a brainstorming workshop for staff and volunteers, we began inviting current and future mentors to participate in the Monthly Mentor Evenings. The mentors are given a calendar of the meetings at the beginning of each TTC cycle, and they receive monthly reminders. In order to make our matching process more successful, we ask them to think about partnerships as they begin to connect with students during these evenings. Trust between the mentor and mentee is crucial and we believe that it can be created prior to the first semester of college if students and mentors have time to get to know each other.

First Mentor Evening

The first Monthly Mentor Evening focuses on mentoring and begins with a panel discussion (See Student Panel Discussion Topics). The panelists are TTC graduates at varying stages of their postsecondary education—some were mentored, some were not. If possible, I try to have a variety of profiles: male / female, young / old, ESL / English-speaking. The purpose of the panel is for the incoming students to hear from their peers and to have an opportunity to ask them questions about their college experience. If mentors attend the evening session, I ask them to join the panel, since it gives me an opportunity from the outset to begin modeling and explaining the concept of mentoring. I always invite one of my own mentees to sit on the panel, so that I have an opportunity to talk about our partnership.

The second half of the first session focuses on the importance of academic image and attitude. We talk about body language, group communication, and perceptions. I use a cartoon from the New Yorker magazine to prompt a discussion of the importance of eye contact and building relationships—touching on American cultural behavior vs. that of other lands. We also include a group scenario activity on attitudes, facilitated by staff and mentors, which encourages students to respond to stimulus questions. Groups of three or four students have 10 to 15 minutes to discuss the scenario and report their findings to the whole group.

Second Mentor Evening

Guest speakers from the Community College of Rhode Island (CCRI) attend the second session and speak about on-campus resources such as the Access Program and the Student Success Center. Students participate in a competitive group activity (with prizes) adapted from the text 100 Things Every Adult College Student Ought to Know by Carlette Jackson Hardin. We conduct our monthly group scenario activity on Listening for Notemaking. Once again, visiting mentors are assigned as facilitators to each group.

Third Mentor Evening

An instructor from CCRI speaks to our students about the writing, reading, and math resources on campus. By this time, students have plenty of questions about course offerings and degree/certificate programs. This interactive workshop provides them with an opportunity to receive feedback from a college professional in an informal environment.

This month’s scenario, Personal Aspects, directly relates to mentoring and focuses on the aspects of life that can interfere with academic success. We ask students to consider how to cope with inevitable outside pressures and we stress the importance of seeking help and support. We introduce the history of mentoring, going back to the origin of the term in Greek mythology: Who was Mentor? How did Mentor know what to do and what to advise? We explain the mentor-mentee matching process and, at this time, make the Mentoring Program Application available to them. Requesting a mentor is not mandatory, and I work on the assumption that if a student wants a mentor, he or she will fill out an application. The Director/Counselor meets with students individually, at the end of the program, which provides a second opportunity for them to consider whether or not they want to have a mentor.

Fourth Mentor Evening

This session is a workshop on Confronting Change, based on Spencer Johnson’s book Who Moved My Cheese? (See www.whomovedmycheese.com for more information on this book.) Students are expected to read the book (provided by TTC) and be prepared to discuss their reactions to the fable. I introduce the workshop with a 10-minute video and facilitate an interactive, motivational discussion of the book’s lessons. I emphasize the inevitability of change, and how it happens to all of us. My goal is to prepare students for the impact that change will have on their educational journey.

Making Connections

During the four Mentor Evening sessions, we try to connect all aspects of the student’s future journey through college: academics, counseling, and the need to be proactive as they maneuver through the bureaucracy of postsecondary education. Our Mentor Evenings provide an opportunity for TTC students to step back and see these connections. Our hope is that, with our help, their academic and life journeys will not only be easier but more fun, and that they’ll learn to share their experience with others.

Flexibility

An additional benefit derived from these monthly evenings is that they provide an opportunity for staff and students to
discuss housekeeping and academic problems that are occurring during the current session. For example, one time
students arrived for the Mentor Evening having just taken their first test in the college reading class. They were
concerned that they had misunderstood what had been assigned for the test. We decided on the spot that this was a
perfect teaching moment, and had a discussion: Did the instructor not make the assignment clear? What should students
do if that were the case? How should they address grades and quiz scores that are not as high as expected? My goal is
to get them to be forthcoming and not fearful. I'm mentoring at this point. We purposely remain flexible during these
Mentor Evenings and are able to switch focus depending on students’ needs.

Staffing
In order to organize these Monthly Mentor Evenings, there must be at least one coordinator who has the time and
commitment to run the program. It is important that the workshop facilitator is someone who can engage the students,
has roots and connections to the adult education/ESOL community, and understands the college community. The
Mentoring Coordinator position requires someone with good organizational and communication skills, someone who can
be an empathetic team player who can work with the program director, the counselor, and staff. It is helpful if the
Mentoring Coordinator has experience with motivating students, professional development, and teaching.

Challenges
Initially, it was difficult for us and our students to separate the mentoring component from the counseling component.
However, with continual monthly emphasis on the definition of mentoring, we are finding that students are learning to
separate the two components.

Also in the beginning, we believed that we could have touchy-feely relationships between the mentors and mentees, but
that’s not the case. It’s important to have mentors who are responsive and knowledgeable about the pitfalls their
mentees may encounter during their academic journey. When I look for mentors, I’m not looking for best friends. I just
want them to keep the students on the educational road and encourage persistence.

Explaining the mentoring program can be a challenge. Our student community often needs to overcome a cultural
resistance to confiding in and relying on people they don’t know well. Our success stems from students’ personal
experience with well-matched mentors. As one of TTC students said, “It takes two special people for it to work.” These
Monthly Mentor Evenings provide an opportunity for mentors and potential student mentees to meet and work together.

Cost and Funding
The major budget items include a salary for a part time Mentor Coordinator, books (Who Moved My Cheese) for students,
“thank you” gift certificates for mentors and panel participants, refreshments, and a small amount set aside for
advertising, and communication.

Evidence of Impact and Effectiveness
The Monthly Mentor Evenings have boosted participation in our mentoring program. I have noticed an increase in
requests for mentors since we implemented these Monthly Mentor Evenings, and a marked change in how many students
actually connect with their assigned mentors. There is definitely more success in the formal mentoring program and in the
partnerships between mentors and mentees.

Prior to implementing the Mentor Evenings, few TTC students were mentored. In 2004, only nine students were
mentored. With the mandatory Mentor Evening sessions in place, these numbers increased. For 2005, 17 students were
mentored. Nine spring semester students were mentored, of which eight continued their postsecondary education and
five remain in touch with their mentors. Eight fall semester students were mentored and six of them continue to be
mentored. This spring (2006), ten students are being mentored during their first semester of college. We have received
13 requests for mentors from current cycle of TTC students planning to begin their postsecondary education in the fall of
2006. In addition to these positive outcomes, several of the mentor-mentee matches have lasted into the students’
second year of postsecondary education (well beyond the first semester requirement). Even if the students have to stop
out, it’s important that their mentors continue to connect with them.

There is also evidence that the Monthly Mentor Evenings build self-esteem among students. My focus during these
evenings is to give students hints on how to improve their image and social skills, enabling them to move forward and be
successful. At the end of our four sessions, I often see an improved air of confidence and a growing ability to succeed in
academic and social settings.