This article describes the results of a qualitative analysis of student relationships on a university campus. A group of students and staff were interviewed regarding who at their institutions had an influence on their learning, and whom they would identify as a mentor. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with students and identified mentors. An analysis of the data led to conclusions that peer relationships are very influential for college students. The development of close, interpersonal relations with students is essential in student success.

INTRODUCTION

This article will examine the results of a qualitative study at a four-year, public institution in the western United States that generated data about those college relationships that are important for students. The two primary questions of this qualitative study were: (1) Who in the university environment influences the learning and development of students?, and (2) Why are these identified relationships central to student success? Selected students, and faculty or staff mentors identified by these selected students, were interviewed about their perceptions of the impact of student peer and mentoring relationships. Their answers provided insight and validation for college and university administrators on the value of cultivating relationships with students to foster student learning and development.
Many researchers such as Astin (1993) and Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) have attempted to identify those experiences within the college or university environment that impact student learning. Extensive longitudinal studies were conducted, and reviews of the historical literature were utilized. Astin (1993) considered longitudinal data collected over 20 years. Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) reviewed 30 years of research on the developmental impact of college on students. These two landmark studies provided extensive evidence that relationships are important for student persistence and learning and advance the idea that student-peer and student-faculty relationships play a role in student success. This paper, through attempting to address the questions identified previously, will validate these findings and addresses the question of why these relationships are so important.

METHOD

Four college students between the ages of 18 and 25 years old were interviewed for this study. Students completed a demographic survey that included information to further define qualities, characteristics, and background of the subjects. Additionally, students were asked in the survey to identify a faculty or staff mentor. Six mentors total were identified by the four students. Two mentors were selected to be interviewed for this study based on the criteria that (1) students confirmed in the interview that they indeed shared a mentoring relationship with the self-identified faculty or staff; (2) the identified mentor was an employee of the university; and (3) the mentor was available and willing to participate.

Characteristics

An equal number of male and female students participated in the study. These students performed better academically than the institutional average and were involved in co-curricular activities, including intercollegiate athletics, campus programming,
organizations, professional honoraries, Greek life, and residence hall and student government. Students reflected some of the diversity of the institution. Three students were residents of the state, while one student attended the university from a midwestern state on an athletic scholarship. One student reported Hispanic or Chicano as the ethnic origin. The other three students did not identify with an ethnic origin. Three students attended the university directly after obtaining their high school degrees, while one student previously attended a community college. The students majored in education, speech pathology, business, and zoology and physiology.

One male and one female administrator were selected from a total of six identified by students. Both were employed by the university in the division of student affairs. Their jobs required them to advise students on a day-to-day basis. One mentor had been a student affairs staff member for over 30 years, while the other had worked in student affairs for less than 10 years. Both were identified by name as a mentor by one of the students interviewed for the study.

Research Setting and Data Collection

Students were selected for the study based on their background and interest in participating. Upon agreeing to participate, students completed a demographic survey and read and signed a consent form. The students were scheduled for an interview to be held in the student union. The location was familiar to all of the students and was convenient for them.

A semi-structured interview was conducted with six structured questions asked consistently of each student. Probing questions then were asked based on student responses to the structured questions. These interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes. Student responses were recorded, and detailed field notes were taken. Mentors were interviewed in a similar manner. The exception, for the purpose of convenience, was mentor interviews were conducted in each mentor's office. The name
of the student who identified them for this study was shared with the mentors during the interview. Permission was asked of students to have their identity disclosed to their mentor if the mentor was selected to be interviewed. Students and mentors were asked to select a pseudonym to maintain confidentiality in the written report. The student pseudonyms selected were Flo Jo, Anna, Dean, and Austin. The mentors selected Hoosier and Elizabeth.

Data Organization and Analysis

Qualitative researchers triangulate (Mathison, 1988) by collecting data from two or more independent sources. To achieve triangulation, three forms of data collection were utilized in this study. The data forms included demographic surveys collected prior to interviews; tape recordings transcribed to field notes; and researcher reflexive journaling done following the interview, while compiling data, and during the analysis phase.

The investigator coded data by printing transcripts onto preassigned colored paper for easy identification. Also, reflexive journal notes by the investigator were written into sections within the interview transcripts and marked "observer comments" or "OC." This process tracked investigator feelings and reactions during the process of interviewing (Bogdan & Biklin, 1998). The data was read by the investigator five times from start to finish with categories of data identified during the fifth reading. Data segments from the transcripts were grouped by writing the category and page number in the margin. These segments were then cut into strips and taped onto blank white pages of paper by category. The organization of data in this manner helped in defining themes for greater evaluation.

A total of nine categories were identified addressing several elements of the physical and academic environment related to learning. While each of these categories provided insights into an element of the living and learning environment of the institution, only
one, entitled "people relations," was singled out for this article. A preliminary report of
the study was prepared. A member check (Guba & Lincoln, 1981) was conducted where
participants were asked to review the results and provide reactions. Improvements to
the report were made based on the member check and reviews by associates.

FINDINGS

The most powerful findings of this study are the impact of student relationships on
student satisfaction with the college experience, and what relations do students
themselves deem important. Further, the findings provide a view of why relationships,
student relationships with peers and student relationships with faculty, are the difference
between success and failure in navigating the campus community.

Relationships

A conference focused on enhancing community at the university was held in November
of 1994. The conference was designed to bring students, faculty, staff, and
administrators together from across the institution to discuss living and learning
environments. Various small focus groups worked together to determine how the
environment may be enhanced for the benefit of student learning and development.
While summarizing conclusions developed by his focus group, Dr. James Hurst, Vice
President for Student Affairs (personal communication, 1994), said, "No student...
should be an isolate. Building relationships with students is the best thing we can do for
The fostering of strong student relationships should be a high institutional priority in higher education when consideration is given to its impact on student persistence and success. The findings of this study emphasize Hurst's statement on the value of a strong learning community and buttress the challenge to prevent isolation (personal communication, 1994).

**Student Peer Interactions**

A number of studies on student development have determined the importance of student peer interactions (Astin, 1977; Bowen, 1977; Chickering, 1969; Feldman & Newcomb, 1969). Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) wrote, "The weight of evidence is quite clear that both the frequency and quality of students' interactions with peers and their participation in extracurricular activities are positively associated with persistence." They also found "it is less clear... that peer relationships and extracurricular involvement have a net influence on persistence when student precollege characteristics or other measures of the college experience are taken into account" (p. 391).

Students interviewed for this study consistently listed peers as the individuals who have the greatest impact on student learning and development. Peers provide career counseling, companionship, and support, and also serve as role models. Flo Jo identified a person she considered a mentor by stating:

This may sound weird but this is a person I go to class with. We take a lot of the same classes. She's a student. [She] is also in Speech Pathology and she is a swimmer. We are the same age. She got into Speech Pathology at the same time I did. I see her as a mentor because she helps me so much in my classes and I have always been at the
same level as her as far as school and athletics. She is someone who has practiced every day like me. She is just someone who has helped me stick it out and I guess I really value that. (March 11, 1998 interview)

Flo Jo provided an accurate description of the nature of student peer relationships and the critical support and camaraderie mutually gained by each student in the relationship. Other students made similar references to the influence student peer relationships had on their learning. Some students cited peer relationships as a primary reason for them to attend college and as an argument for residential living.

Staff mentors spoke highly of the value of student peers in learning. Hoosier, a staff mentor, was asked whether student, faculty, or staff relations have a greater influence on students. Hoosier stated:

I would have to definitely say that peer interactions are the greatest influence on students. Their peers are with them where they live and eat. These influences are significant to the student and no other interaction will be able to have a greater influence. We may not like the peers that students choose to follow, but they are a great influence non the less. (March 13, 1998 interview)

Dalton (1989), in his study of college student peer culture, reports that many faculty, staff, and administrators are not as insightful as Hoosier (March 13, 1998 interview) appeared to be during the interview. Dalton (1989) described peer culture as essentially invisible to staff and faculty except for outward signs and symbols like dress, behavior, and language. The invisible quality of student peer interaction leads to overlooking or underestimating peer influences on student development.
Students referred often to the influences of student peers on their college experience. When they did not speak directly about peer relationships, they talked about experiences through involvement in a student activity, discussions within a class, or the value of living on campus that included interactions with peers. The learning and enjoyment of students in this study depended heavily upon interactions with other students. Students who seek and foster healthy peer relations appeared happier and consequently more successful than students who were more recluse. Students who become "isolates" while those who are influenced by peer groups with negative behaviors are at risk of failure (Hurst, personal communication, 1994).

Astin (1993) made one of the strongest statement in the literature on the influence of peers in the college environment. "The student's peer group is the single most potent source of influence on growth and development during the undergraduate years" (p. 398). Astin's findings in some ways are more significant than others offered in the literature because his research successfully compared the influence of peers against other factors like faculty, curriculum, and institutional type.

**Faculty-Student Relations**

Faculty-student relations were a consistent topic of questioning within the interview protocol of this study. This study was designed with the intention of having students identify faculty or staff who have served them in a mentoring capacity during their college careers. The idea of students finding one or more faculty or staff members at the university with whom they could trust and find support seemed to fit with Hurst's (personal communication, 1994) idea of students not becoming isolated. The investigator speculated there would be many faculty and staff identified since the size of the institution with approximately 8,500 students, 700 faculty, and 1,200 staff provides a favorable ratio of students to faculty and staff.
The existing literature supports this study's findings. Astin (1993) identified faculty interactions as a significant aspect of college student development. Astin (1993) found that faculty positively influences the development and success of students in the learning environment at institutions with a student development and teaching orientation. Faculty influence declines significantly at institutions with a research orientation. Many studies support Astin's research that the most successful classroom teachers also are accessible to students outside of the classroom. (Wilson, Gaff, Dienst, Wood, & Bavry, 1975; Wilson, Wood, & Gaff, 1974). Conversely, there are those who argue the causal direction of faculty interactions with students is unclear, since it could be found that students who are more academically skilled seek faculty interactions (Pascarella, 1989; Terenzini, Pascarella, & Lorang, 1982). Terenzini, Pascarella, and Blimling (1996) argue that the direction of the influence is not as critical as realizing that student-faculty contact is important to student learning. Looking for ways to foster these interactions in the college environment should be the primary goal.

The findings of this study were that students did not value relationships with faculty. Students were asked to identify faculty or staff at the university whom they considered to be a mentor. While six mentors total were identified, only one student out of the four interviewed could identify faculty or staff whom they considered to be mentors. Mentors were identified only after some degree of probing and it was clear the students struggled with this activity. Two students identified other students as their mentors without probing or explanation.

The student using the pseudonym Dean may have provided the most discouraging dialogue on faculty-student interaction found in this study. Dean was a bright and academically experienced student who had been at the university for five years. Dean's success since coming back to the university after a two-year break was apparent through his involvement in student activities and high academic achievement. Dean selected his brother as the person who has influenced him the most, and as the person he considers his mentor. His brother, who was not a student at the time of the interview,
took two years off to go on a mission for his church. Dean had gone on a mission himself the two years prior to his brother's departure. Dean explained why he could not identify a faculty or staff mentor by saying,

I don't think that I have known anyone at UW well enough to be able to call them a mentor. They may exhibit qualities and characteristics that I know I want in my life, but I have never known anyone here to that degree. (March 13, 1998 interview)

Dean was asked to explain his feelings about not being able to identify a faculty or staff mentor. Dean continued,

I find that wrong. I think it's really too bad that I can't identify someone like an academic advisor or a professor who has influenced me toward my field of study, or can influence me toward my continued field of study. I think it's wrong. I think it's too bad. And, do I find it interesting? Yes, I do. I think it says a lot about the limits of my experience here. Although I have gained a lot, I think I am limited here. Yeah, I do find it interesting. (March 13, 1998 interview)

Dean's assessment of his experience exemplifies the distance discovered between faculty or staff and students participating in this study. Dean was asked about his desire for a mentoring relationship. He said he desired a mentoring relationship, but found it very difficult to access faculty in that way (March 13, 1998 interview).

Elizabeth was one of the mentors identified by a student in this study. As a student affairs professional, she has considerable experience with student retention issues and she was not surprised by the findings of this study. Elizabeth works with students involved in an honorary organization who ask undergraduate seniors each year to
identify a faculty or staff member who is a mentor to them, so they can honor these individuals with a special award. Elizabeth commented,

How difficult it is for these students to identify even one person who has made a difference for them in the classroom or who knows them on a personal basis. That has (sic) what's been a really sad eye opener for me. I watch senior students say, "Who can I invite? Who do I know? Who knows me? Who's made a difference?" (March 24, 1998 interview)

Lack of Definition

A lack of understanding of mentoring may be an explanation for the responses from students in the study. The literature indicates there is confusion about the definition of mentoring among experts. Given this confusion among experts on mentoring, some uncertainty among undergraduate students is understandable. Levinson (1978) provided the most extensive work historically on the mentoring relationship. He described the mentor as a teacher, sponsor, and counselor, developer of skills and intellect, host, guide, and exemplar. Levinson also was criticized for the fact that the research was conducted exclusively on males. Many others have followed Levinson in studying the mentoring relationship. They defined the mentor as a person who is highly respected for guiding the career, interpersonal, and psychosocial development of the protégé (Bolton, 1980; Cox, 1993; Sheehey, 1976). Merriam (1983) conducted an extensive literature review on mentoring, only to conclude,

No distinct line of research can be traced with respect to mentoring in academic settings. Given the idiosyncratic nature of available studies, little can be said with regard to either the prevalence or importance of mentoring for students, teachers, or administrators in educational settings. (p. 169)
Similar confusion exists about the definition of advising, as well as making the distinction between advising and mentoring. Kelly (1995) wrestled with differing viewpoints of exactly what the faculty advising role is. He found definitions of advising that range from "ten glorious minutes each quarter discussing Beethoven and mountain climbing" to advising as "an extension of teaching." There also were those who considered it "nothing more than signing forms" (p. 23).

While the disclosures of most of the students in this study were limited regarding student-faculty interactions, a student using the pseudonym Austin easily listed several mentors related to his academic program and his involvement in student government. He included two staff members, a faculty, and an administrator on his list. Austin described the support provided by his education professor saying,

She has really made me realize my potential as a teacher and made me realize this is the field that I really do belong in. She has not only helped me with the academics of this class, she has helped me with certain outside issues that I have been facing. She is always encouraging me to keep going and to always do my best. (March 16, 1998 interview)

Austin's experience in working with several mentors was the kind of data expected in this study. The lack of connection between the other students in the study and faculty or staff is a serious concern. Strong mentoring relationships between students and faculty or staff would be an identified strength in many institutions of 8,500 students, 700 faculty, and 1,200 staff. Also, as institutions grow in size and the ratio of students to faculty and staff become greater, the challenge of providing effective mentoring to students become more precarious. This investigator was disappointed not because of a belief that the students are wrong, but because of a general sense of responsibility for the lack of mentoring these students communicated.
CONCLUSIONS

This analysis provides a viewpoint that could challenge institutions of higher education to examine relationships between students and their peers or advisors.

Students Are Our Job

Students in this study were embarrassed when they could not identify one mentor within the university. Elizabeth (March 28, 1998 interview), one of the staff mentors interviewed, reflected on the discomfort felt in her student honorary organization when senior students could not identify one faculty or staff who had influenced them. Mentoring relationships must be attended to mutually in order to thrive, but institutions have to take the lead in order for these relationships to be firmly established. The data from students in this study indicates that relationships with faculty and staff may never have been established early in the student's campus experience. Students are more dependent as freshman and sophomores and are looking for ways to strengthen their affiliation with the institution. These early interactions by students are extremely important in the establishment of relationships of all kinds that can be depended upon when they become upper class students. Leadership by the institutions is critical for faculty or staff and student relationships to flourish.

The literature cited suggests an institution that is research-oriented or student oriented has an impact on student perceptions of faculty. Research orientation of an institution was found to have a negative effect on student perceptions of faculty (Astin, 1996). Institutions make choices in terms of the value placed on mentoring relationships. Valuing student interpersonal relationships may not be explicitly expressed by an institution, but students know the truth through their experiences with institutional priorities.
Student learning and development is the work of higher education. We cannot make excuses for the deficiencies in student and faculty or staff relationships and students should not feel the need to share the blame. The responsibility falls to those who are in the business of serving students - those who work for the institution.

**Student Peer Relationships - A Vast Resource**

The data on student peers in this study should not be surprising considering the literature cited in this study (Astin, 1977; Bowen, 1977; Chickering, 1969; Feldman & Newcomb, 1969). Peer influence either can be supportive of the individual student's goals for education or it can be harmful. The key is for students to connect with other students through common goals. Advisors and programs can influence the decisions students make regarding peers, but the ultimate control is the students'. The individual faculty or staff member must look for every opportunity to integrate the building of student peer relationships into their work.

**Limitations and Questions**

This study does not seek to provide data for all higher education institutions. The responsibility of utilizing and drawing conclusions belongs to the reader (Bogden & Biklin, 1998). The intent of this study was to provide a perspective on student relationships with members of a specific higher education institution. The limited amount of time spent with the students in an interview can be criticized. More sessions would have allowed deeper analysis. Finally, researcher bias has impacted the findings of this study. The professional relationship of this investigator to the students, the *a priori* investigator knowledge of the literature, and the imbalance of power between the investigator and the students were all factors affecting the results.
This study does pose some interesting questions to be considered in the future. What do faculty and staff view as an advising or mentoring relationship, and how does that compare to the perspective of students? How do different ethnic cultures or adult-returning students (adult students over 26 years of age) view the mentoring or advising relationship? How do peer relationships impact feelings of success in students at various types of institutions? What is the impact of peers on students who withdraw from the institution?

Qualitative methodology is an effective approach to answering many questions on student relationships. This study demonstrates one approach for inquiries into how and why relationships affect students. More research must be conducted in this area to answer these questions. Without a better understanding of how relationships can be enhanced to address issues of retention and success among students, the potential of advising and student services at higher education institutions may never be reached. Peer mentoring and advising programs are successful approaches at many campuses, but an understanding of how faculty and staff can share the success of student peers is extremely valuable for the future of student services and student success.

REFERENCES


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