



# CHARACTERISTICS OF STUDENT PEER MENTORS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

*The following is an outline of findings from an important paper titled A taxonomy of the characteristics of student peer mentors in higher education: findings from a literature review by Jenepher Lennox Terrian and Dominique Leonard.*

*The paper highlights the core competencies (and characteristics) of effective peer mentors as understood from the mentee's perspective. In preparing for your peer mentorship role, look at these strategies to enhance your skills and recognize areas that you need to develop.*

## ABSTRACT

Unlike traditional mentoring, peer mentoring matches mentors and mentees who are roughly equal in age, experience, and power to provide task and psychosocial support.

In peer relationships, “psychosocial” functions are characterized by confirmation, emotional support, personal feedback, and friendship. Traditional mentoring relationships are similar in that they offer acceptance, confirmation, counselling, role modelling, and friendship.

## PROFESSIONAL, PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT & SELF ENHANCEMENT OF MENTOR

- In a study looking at motivations for mentoring, Allen (2003) found that mentors who are motivated for self-enhancement reasons typically provide greater amounts of career-related support to the mentee.
- Allen et al. (2000) discovered a positive correlation between a mentor's advancement aspirations-'strong, personal career advancement goals' (p. 273) - and willingness to assist mentees needing or soliciting help. This seems to indicate that a mentor with stronger advancement aspirations is more likely to select a mentee who may not have the highest ability or potential but who nonetheless can benefit from a mentor's help.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF THE STUDENT PEER MENTOR SERVING THE PSYCHOSOCIAL FUNCTION

This section describes eight student peer mentor characteristics related to the psychosocial function. They are presented in descending order of frequency: communication skills; supportiveness; trustworthiness; interdependent attitude to mentoring, mentee, and program staff; empathy; personality match with mentee; enthusiasm; and flexibility.

### COMMUNICATION SKILLS

- A mentor applicant should already display effective communication skills, including the ability to listen and to understand others; clarifying behaviours; and understanding of verbal and non-verbal behaviours; ability to express oneself in an open and clear fashion; ability to provide honest and constructive feedback.
- Other studies have identified mentor attributes and characteristics that are closely linked with communication skills. For example, some researchers (Johnson, 2002; Pitney & Ehlers, 2004) describe desirable mentors as “being appropriately humorous”. Similarly, Apter and Carter (2002) describe the “playful state” as most conducive for the mentee because it is “easier to think about and face up to problems in a detached, non-anxious way than in the serious state.”

### SUPPORTIVENESS

- The effective mentoring relationship is a developmental one for both the mentor and the mentee, although the developmental needs of the mentee

are necessarily at the forefront of priorities. University students look for mentors who allow them to make deliberate, conscious choices about their lives.

### TRUSTWORTHINESS

- Some articles identify trust between mentor and mentee as being of primary importance in the mentoring relationship. Other concepts closely related to trustworthiness identified in some of the articles are principled action; professional dignity

### INTERDEPENDENT ATTITUDE TO MENTORING, MENTEE, & PROGRAM STAFF

- This characteristic reflects the reciprocal nature of peer relationships and the need for program staff to help the mentors develop themselves personally and professionally.
- The personal and professional development of mentors rests partly on their willingness to be continuous learners. A mentor’s sense of interdependency is likely to improve collegiality and, according to Tinto (1993), peer mentors achieve this interdependency by supporting the academic and social integration of mentees into the university system.
- Although the need to respect ethical boundaries in mentoring relationships should always remain a primary concern (Rose, 2003), Young et al. (2004) found that inter-dependency and ultimately friendship can facilitate a sense of connectedness between the mentor and mentee while still encouraging individual growth.

## EMPATHY

- The importance of an empathetic mentor is highlighted by the fact that 24% of the reviewed articles identified this characteristic, or closely related concepts, as integral to the mentoring relationship.
- According to Allen (2003), 'highly empathetic individuals may be better able to foster the intimacy and trust that is central to the psychosocial dimension [of mentoring]' (p. 148).

## ENTHUSIASM

- Enthusiasm in terms of a mentor's high energy level and increased perseverance in the face of struggles in the mentoring relationship. In other words, mentors may need to be perceived as having the energy to continue being supportive even when things are not going well in the relationship. High energy is also identified as an important characteristic by Lawson (1989), and other authors point to the importance of similar descriptors: entertaining (Schmidt et al., 2004), fun (Rose, 2003), and outgoing, 2004).

## FLEXIBILITY

- Sipe (1996) warns against mentors showing authoritative dispositions and, more specifically, notes that mentors who emphasize behaviour change above all else are associated with a higher risk of unsuccessful mentoring outcomes. According to Sipe (1996), the effective mentor should be less task-oriented and more focused on building trust with the mentee.
- Mentors can easily begin to see their mentees' successes and failures as their own; in so doing, they may be prone to displaying less tolerance of failure. Therefore, potential mentors should display flexibility not only toward the values of their mentees, but also toward their own expectations for task-oriented outcomes.

*Outline derived from: A taxonomy of the characteristics of student peer mentors in higher education: findings from a literature review - Jenepher Lennox Terrion and Dominique Leonard.*