

Mentoring to Develop Workplace Leadership Skills

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Abstract

College graduates of the 21st century will enter a world of work that requires them to work and learn in a global, technology-based environment. Research suggests that many college graduates are proficient in technology but lack the requisite “soft skills,” specifically leadership skills, to make them effective employees and managers. The Southern Illinois University Carbondale Mentorship Academy was created to develop the workplace leadership skills of college students, addressing the need for skilled employees.

Introduction

Workplace readiness skills are consistently mentioned in the literature as a priority for college students who are to be proficient in a competitive, global, technology-based work environment (Cadrain, 2005, Dunn & Pope, 2001; Kaul, 2000; and McLester & McIntire, 2006). Leadership skills are listed as one of the most important workplace readiness skills. The Conference Board created a report that presented the views of 283 human resource professionals from mid-market companies (revenues of less than \$1 billion). The report listed leadership skills as very important for college graduates, and that there will be an increase in their importance over the next five years (The Conference Board, 2008). The report also recommends that “As more baby boomers retire, the need for leadership skills training . . . at lower levels of the organization will grow” (The Conference Board, 2008, p. 5).

Leadership skills encompass many facets. The Conference Board’s (2008) definition of leadership is the ability to “leverage the strengths of others to achieve common goals; use interpersonal skills to coach and develop others” (p. 36). Dunn and Pope (2001) included listening and observing skills, self-management skills, presentation skills, and negotiation skills as additional aspects of leadership. “Effective communication, consensus building, teamwork and listening have at times been underrated skills but now are considered essential to the success of any leader” (Kaul, 2000). And McLester and McIntire (2006) described leadership skills as applied skills to focus on the practical side of leadership.

Many times management training and leadership training are used interchangeably. Restaurants and Institutions (2004) said “the difference between management and leadership training is the former teaches people what to do while the latter shows them how to think” and “how to think about handling problems” (p. 42). Dunn and Pope (2001) discussed a leadership training program that focused on a “practical task-oriented approach with softer people skills, academic models and real situations that delegates either have faced or will face and also encourages learning” (p. 224).

Offstein and Morwick (2004) described mentoring as a leadership tool that can develop leadership skills. Although they discussed the use of mentoring in the workplace, their recommendations for the use of mentoring are applicable for college learning. Offstein and Morwick (2004) stated that “Mentors can teach junior . . . professionals important skills not found in a book, such as persuasion,

reflective listening and consensus building” (p. 104). Once again, practical application is mentioned as a key feature of leadership.

Institutions of higher education continue to include, in their mission and vision statements, a commitment to the development and support of student leaders that contribute to a global society. Oftentimes, student leaders are developed through university service activities in their local communities. The mission statement of Southern Illinois University Carbondale (SIUC) reads, “Its programs of public service and its involvement in the civic and social development of the region are manifestations of a general commitment to enhance the quality of life through the exercise of academic skills and application of problem-solving techniques” (SIUC Policies and Procedures, 2008). In order to help fulfill this mission and give SIUC students the opportunity to develop leadership skills through practical community service experiences, the SIUC Mentorship Academy was developed.

Program Development

During the 2006-2007 academic year, Southern Illinois University Carbondale distributed grant funds to employees to develop diversity initiatives that would promote and support the value of diversity on its campus. The author, an assistant professor in the Department of Workforce Education and Development, was awarded approximately \$25,000 in grant funds to establish the SIUC Mentorship Academy. This academy was developed in an effort to improve the 21st century college readiness and workforce preparedness skills of minority and disadvantaged high school students throughout the southern Illinois region. The Mentorship Academy also sought to develop the leadership skills of a diverse population of undergraduate and graduate students. The SIUC students were partnered with high school students to serve as their mentors for one semester in order to (1) demonstrate how welcoming the campus is to diversity; (2) teach the high school students about campus services; (3) illuminate academic offerings, and career fields; and (4) increase the self-efficacy of the high school students in relation to their interest and confidence to attend and succeed in college.

Both undergraduate and graduate students from various disciplines were recruited to serve as mentors in the SIUC Mentorship Academy. Flyers and brochures describing the Academy, its stated mission, the responsibilities of the mentors and mentees, the benefits to both groups, and the dates for the program were distributed to academic departments during the month of January, 2007 (National Mentoring Month). Staff of the Mentorship Academy was also responsible for posting flyers across the campus and passing them out to students and faculty. In an effort to promote the academic integration of the mentoring volunteer work, SIUC students were encouraged to ask their professors for credit in their courses (via service-learning). The opportunity to serve as a mentor was open to any one but was without pay to any student. Prospective mentors were asked to serve a total of 20 hours as a mentor, attend a 4-hour training, and participate in three, 2-hour planning meetings with other group members during the spring semester.

High school students from southern Illinois counties were recruited utilizing a different flyer. Guidance counselors at five high schools were asked to make announcements to their students and select those whom they felt would benefit the most from mentoring. The author also recruited students from her past mentoring program by contacting them and their parents and discussing the benefits of belonging to the Academy. All high school students were asked to attend meetings held on three Saturdays, two in March and one in April.

Program Participants

Initially, 50 SIUC students contacted the Mentorship Academy to indicate their interest in serving as a mentor. After several e-mail and telephone conversations with this group, 24 students completed

the application process and attended the required training. The students were then placed in groups based on similar academic disciplines. The groups were: 7 students in Education (health education, physical education, workforce education and development, and educational administration and higher education), 5 Business students (accounting, business and administration, and marketing), 7 students in Science & Medicine (plant biology, medical school preparation, pre-dentistry, and biology), and 5 Liberal Arts students (administration of justice, psychology, art/graphic design, and social work).

Twenty-nine high school students, freshmen-juniors, were selected and sent materials with the schedule of dates for the (three) Saturdays program. There were 9 freshmen, 13 sophomores, and 7 juniors. The high school students were from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. For example, 9 of the students would be considered first generation college students when they matriculate into college. Five students were living in a long-term residential home for disadvantaged children, and at least two students were living in foster homes.

Mentor Training

All of the mentors were required to attend an orientation workshop that included diversity and career coaching training before they were able to interact with the high school students. A diversity expert was hired to facilitate the diversity training, which introduced them to the various types of demographics and characteristics they may encounter when serving as a mentor. A workforce education and development (WED) doctoral student with research interests and experience in career coaching facilitated the career coaching segment of the workshop. Mentors were given many resources, including websites, handouts, and practice activities to help them work with their mentees in future mentoring sessions. The author, as the training leader, discussed the mentors' rights and responsibilities, gave them directions regarding working in teams of mentors, and distributed timesheets with which to document their service hours.

Mentoring Activities

The mentors had sole responsibility for developing the three, four-hour workshops. They would be responsible for the implementation of activities such as the way in which the information would be shared, the tours of the campus, and other additional activities. The mentors were required to work collaboratively (along side other mentors) during planning meetings for a minimum of two hours prior to the first workshop in an effort to design their component. Each discipline-specific group decided how they would “peak the interests” of the high school students on the first day. They developed icebreakers and games to introduce the students to their fields and included activities that would introduce the students to the mentors so that the mentors could also learn more about each student.

First Meeting: Mentors and Mentees

On the first workshop day, high school students were introduced to all of the mentors, and they scheduled to meet with each of the groups in order to learn about all of the represented disciplines. Six students stated that they had not considered a possible college major, and 23 were able to list the college major or field they were considering. The initial information-sharing workshops helped the high schools students become more aware of the programs of study that SIUC has to offer. Lunch was provided, and mentors and mentees were allowed to continue their discussions on a one-on-one basis. The diversity trainer was also present and he facilitated a fun activity to engage everyone in an effort to help them feel comfortable with each other. Once the high school students attended information sessions with the SIUC students, they were asked to select which groups they wanted to join for the next two workshops. The students were then placed in groups based on their self-identified interests in future college majors. There were 10 students in the Science & Medicine Group, 5 in the Business Group, 9 in the Liberal Arts Group, and 5 in the Education Group. For the remaining two Saturdays, the students stayed in the groups, and the mentors and students became a team.

Second Meeting: Mentors and Mentees

The second workshop was more interactive within each group. The high school students were excited to be a part of a team and connect with their group of mentors. The mentors were required to prepare activities and facilitate short information sessions to provide more detailed information about their majors, college life, and career and advanced educational plans. These activities were developed cooperatively by the mentors prior to this second session(with the mentors and mentees), during a 2-hour planning meeting. Students were also able to ask personal questions of their mentors in order to focus on individual needs. Lunch was provided and students were given a short period for a break time. After the break, the WED doctoral student facilitated a session on choosing non-traditional careers and on high-growth career fields. All of the Mentorship Academy participants attended this session and were encouraged to further research some of the careers that generated their interests. Students were also given a homework assignment, which included completing a Johari Window self-assessment exercise (a tool used to help people assess their interpersonal skills). They were also directed to ask their teachers, parents, and friends to choose adjectives to describe their interpersonal skills in order to compare those words to the terms they chose. This exercise was used to help the mentees think about how their self-perceptions and the perceptions of others shape their goals. The mentors planned to work individually with the students, although in their discipline-specific groups, on this activity.

Third Meeting: Mentors and Mentees

On the third Saturday, the last day of the three-workshop series, the mentors and mentees were very excited to work together. The mentors were responsible, once again, for facilitating workshops, giving campus tours, and working individually with the mentees. They utilized University vehicles to take students on tours, and some facilitated walking tours of the campus facilities and residence halls. A guest speaker, who is an alumna of SIUC, spoke to the Mentorship Academy participants about high school and college persistence and his career path and aspirations. He encouraged them to contact him so that he could answer individual questions. Students were also partnered with their mentors to discuss the Johari Window exercises and discuss what they learned about themselves. During a more formal lunch, the high school students received certificates of completion. The staff, trainers/guest speakers, and mentors all received a gift of appreciation. A photographer was hired to take group pictures, which were later distributed to each participant.

Development of Leadership Skills: An Evaluation Survey

A final evaluation was given to the mentors to gauge their level of skills development. Twenty-four mentors were asked to complete the survey with sixteen mentors returning a completed survey. This constitutes a return rate of 67%. Mentors were asked a series of questions regarding the workplace skills they developed and program effectiveness. Mentors were given the opportunity to choose from a list of skills that they felt had been further developed including: leadership skills, interpersonal communication skills, organizational skills, oral presentation skills, facilitation skills, research skills.

Results of the sixteen mentors returning a completed survey:

- o 50% (n=8) stated that they had developed their leadership skills;
- o 56% (n=9) developed interpersonal skills;
- o 44% (n=7) enhanced organizational skills;
- o 44% (n=7) increased their oral presentation skills;
- o 62% (n=10) developed facilitation skills;
- o 25% (n=4) developed research skills.

Twelve percent (2) reported that they developed “other” skills, but they did not list them, and 12% (2) stated that they did not increase any of their skills. The mentors were asked whether they felt the Mentorship Academy was beneficial to them. Ninety-four percent (n=15) of the mentors felt the

Mentorship Academy was beneficial to the mentors. Some of the open-ended responses to this question included: "It provided a leadership experience,"

"It helped with public speaking and facilitating skills,"

"We grew as a team and excelled as individuals,"

"It was an opportunity to mix well with colleagues,"

"It gave us an opportunity to give back and reach out to students."

Mentors were also asked if the Mentorship Academy was beneficial to the mentees. Again, 94% (n=15) agreed that the program was beneficial to the mentees. Statements included:

"They [high school students] saw individuals that were succeeding,"

"It gave them a chance to experience mentorship,"

"It provided a forum for the students to express their interests,"

"I think they were able to form new relationships."

Finally, the mentors were asked if they would serve as a mentor again in the future and if they would continue mentoring outside of the Mentorship Academy. With the exception of one college student, all stated that they would serve as a mentor for the Mentorship Academy, and all but one student planned to continue mentoring external to the program.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The SIUC Mentorship Academy sought to increase the workplace skills of undergraduate and graduate students as they served as mentors to a diverse group of minority and disadvantaged high school students. The responsibilities given them as workshop facilitators and organizers of interactive activities helped develop their resourcefulness and led to collaborative efforts which proved to be good tools for developing numerous skills. As the literature suggests, practical experiences helped shape and enhance leadership skills. Leadership encompasses more than leading and managing others. Leadership also demands the ability to work effectively in teams, to listen and make recommendations, to help solve problems, and to communicate competently. These talents serve to demonstrate leadership.

Institutions of higher education have opportunities to increase the leadership abilities and expertise of students via mentoring programs. Mentors must begin to see themselves as learners not just the providers of knowledge. Mentoring empowers students to that end. Faculty members can create opportunities for students to acquire the essential workplace skills to help them become proficient and effective employees and managers in a global and competitive workplace.

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