The Reciprocal Cycle of Mentoring

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THE RECIPROCAL CYCLE OF MENTORING

Sherry's perspective:
The leadership development encounter we want to share has been ongoing for nearly six years. I met Matt Cooney after he returned from a study abroad experience in Mexico. I was hired as an assistant director and Matt asked me—"Who are you and why should I care?" A bit gauche, but forgivable. Once I told him about my experiences and why I was hired it was like at first sight. Matt and I connected instantly. Things got even more intense when I was his instructor for his internship and he had to be accountable to me online. Sometimes that can destroy a relationship, but for Matt and I it strengthened it. The feedback I provided Matt made him trust me. The encouragement I demonstrated made him believe in his abilities and helped him purse a career in student affairs. Thereby, when Matt determined he wanted to pursue a master's in student affairs I was elated! And for him to turn to me as a reference, resume reviewer, and mentor humbled me.

Matt's perspective:
My interactions with Sherry during my undergraduate career left me with a key lesson that I incorporate my professional career as a college student educator. The lesson is to make yourself available to students as you never know how a simple interaction can turn into a lifelong mentor/mentee relationship. As administrators, we often are caught up in the day-to-day aspects of our job in addition to the "other duties assigned", but we must keep in mind that most leadership development in college students happens outside of the standard formalized leadership programs. No matter the day or time, Sherry was available with an open door and its the interactions with her that served as a catalyst for my future career decisions, but also served as a way to develop and reflect on my leadership style and skills.

We believe in the power of lifelong learning. I learn from Matt consistently. Such was the case when I determined I wanted to pursue my doctorate. Matt was in his master's program, but he served as a student reference for me and gave me feedback on my resume! That was when I realized mentorship is a reciprocal process. This is not where our story ends. Matt got his first post-master's position and I helped him determine fit. The first time Matt and I experienced being at the same level as professionals was at the Multi-Institutional Study of Leadership (MSL) Summit. Matt was a member of the research team. I was a contributor/participant. However, there was no tension. Matt and I have such a mutual respect for one another and a passion for leadership.

In order for a mentor/mentee relationship to work both people must have an open mind and allow the relationship to develop naturally and holistically. Sherry and I's relationship has been evolving since the spring of 2007. The conversations we have remain the same, but the context behind our conversations changes: what do we value, is our current situation in line with the rest of our career goals, and, as always, how are you doing? The relationship truly became mutual once we let go of titles and paid more attention to experiences. A big challenge I faced as a new professional was learning about the proper support needed from a supervisor, department, and/or institution to be successful in my current role. I leaned on Sherry to learn how to navigate my new situation, in a similar way that she leaned on me when going through the graduate school search process. As of Fall 2012, our mentorship has returned to where it began: the graduate school search process with myself as the potential student and Sherry as the inspiration for entering the next phase of my professional career.

The takeaway from our mentor/mentee relationship (our student development experiences) is that we must practice the lessons that we teach our students in regards to mentorship. Most universities recognize the importance that a mentoring relationship plays in college student leadership development and many administrators are in their current situation because someone took the time to believe in us, and many times that person turned out to be a mentor. Continue to develop and strengthen your relationships with your mentors, as situations may change but the genuine interest in success should remain the same. It is important to recognize the reciprocal qualities and mutually beneficial aspects of a mentoring relationship, as you never know when your mentee becomes your mentor.

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