

Never underestimate the importance of mentors

Your Turn

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Guest columnist

Mentors regularly appear in books and films.

Movies, for example, often feature a protagonist/hero's call to adventure; seemingly insurmountable challenges that the protagonist must overcome; and a guide or mentor to help the protagonist surmount the challenges. Think Yoda in 'Star Wars,' Gramma Tala in 'Moana', Dumbledore in the 'Harry Potter' films, Zuri in 'Black Panther' and Mr. Miyage in 'The Karate Kid' – each was pivotal to moving the script and the protagonist toward self-realization and success.

In college, mentors are also critical to ensuring that students identify and successfully traverse the most promising educational pathways. In their book 'Relationship-Rich Education: How Human Connections Drive Success in College', Peter Felten and Leo Lambert note the results of a 2018 national survey of 4,000 college graduates who reported that just one or two such relationships were twice as likely to rate college as 'very rewarding' compared to graduates with no such relationships.

Why? Mentors guide students through the process of identifying and pursuing meaningful academic and co-curricular choices and – importantly – help them stay on the path when challenges arise.

According to a National Bureau of Economic Research study, students with a mentor are 14 percent more likely to stay in college and 13 percent more likely to graduate in four years. This matters, especially for first-generation students who, as graduates, are more than twice as likely to report having no mentors in college compared to graduates with at least one parent with a college degree (15 percent versus 6 percent).

Importantly, smaller colleges make it easier for students to find a faculty mentor. According to a Gallup survey of over 100,000 college graduates, mentoring relationships with a professor are less common for students attending large research universities.

An analysis conducted by the Council on Undergraduate Research finds that undergraduate students who participate in mentored research realize enhanced employment prospects when they graduate.

Of employers surveyed by the council, 87 percent stated that they were more likely to hire graduates who completed mentored research projects because of the benefits accrued in developing critical thinking, improving motivation and persistence, building confidence, and working in teams. The analysis also noted that mentored research 'helps students clarify career goals...encourages them to apply to graduate school...[and] helps them to remain in college and persist.'

In one recent national public opinion survey about what defined the best university, 'excellent teachers' topped the list at 80 percent with 'students who learn a great deal' following close behind at 72 percent. Yet, as noted by higher education strategist Jeff Selingo, only a tiny portion of the formulas behind major college rankings are dedicated to teaching and mentorship.

For example, in the Wall Street Journal's Best Colleges List, only four percent of a college's ranking score draws from indirect measures of teaching and mentoring quality ('interactions with faculty' and 'overall quality of teaching').

The U.S. News & World Report rankings do not incorporate any direct measures of student engagement to calculate schools' overall scores. U.S. News measures faculty salaries, research citations, the ratio of full-time to part-time faculty, and the student-faculty ratio. Collectively, these categories account for no more than 15 percent of schools' overall scores and receive less weight than the peer assessment of school quality provided through surveys of presidents, provosts, and admissions heads (20 percent).

Selinger observes that large research universities focus much more heavily on research funding, output, and graduate student education: 'No one wins that lifetime appointment of tenure by ignoring research to focus on becoming a world-renowned teacher ... elite schools and those trying to break into that top tier have actually decreased their spending on instruction and increased their spending on research and student recruitment as they have risen in status.'

The aspect of a smaller school like mine that I am proudest of is that when we ask alums what they treasure the most, they note that someone took an interest in them, became a mentor and changed their life's trajectory for the better. Typically, this is a faculty member, but sometimes a coach, a staff member, or a fellow student serves in this role. Moreover, the extent to which Alfred alums mention pivotal mentors exceeds, by far, the responses that I received from alums at prior institutions that I have had the privilege of serving.

The more that we can enhance a culture of mentorship in college, the more successful alumni and a university will be.

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