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The process and role of student leadership development should be viewed as a *laboratory for experience*. This orientation presents the student as a leader-in-development as well as a vital contributor to shared outcomes.

Effective advisors function as *mentors*, assisting student leaders in developing sustaining personal leadership practices (delegation, self-care and balance) as well as identifying the limits and boundaries assigned to the student leadership experience by the institution’s organizational structure.

Because the particular strengths and traits of each advisor and student leader will vary, student leaders and advisors should regularly discuss and assess their shared vision and respective contributions. The partnership should begin with a *common vision* defined through program legacy and conversation between advisor and student leader.

In their function as mentors, advisors support student leaders’ leadership development as well as, when desired, growth in other areas of life. The practical elements of this mentoring relationship (*Do we discuss life as well as leadership development? In what ways should we seek or contribute input?*) should be mutually defined at the start of the relationship and should be reviewed regularly. The *mentoring relationships* described by Stanley and Clinton (Appendix A) may be a useful framework to help advisors and student leaders define their expectations and roles.

In the spirit of collaborative partnership, *neither advisor nor student leader should claim sole ownership* of the program or its outcomes. To this end, ultimatums are counterproductive; advisors and student leaders must respect each other’s responsibilities, vision and contributions. When agreement cannot be reached, advisors and student leaders should together seek help from a trusted third party: a department director, another student leader, etc. The vision of collaboration is lost when the advisor-student leader relationship descends into win-lose or either-or dynamics.
Leadership advocated by Lao Tzu is not asserted by threat or force; authority is demonstrated through patient, quiet presence. As an end result of Lao Tzu’s model of leadership, students are active participants in their own knowledge construction and can claim ownership of their accomplishments. John Perkins’ (1993) description of the leadership qualities associated with Christian Community Development advocates a leadership and empowerment strategy built on an adaptation of Lao Tzu’s poetry:

Go to the people
Live among them
Learn from them
Love them
Start with what you know
Build on what they have
But of the best leaders
When their task is done
The people will remark
“We have done it ourselves.”
(Perkins, 1993, pg. 35)

The vision expressed in Lao Tzu’s original poetry and Perkins’ modern adaptation suggests a constructivist approach to leadership, education and community development:

Effective leaders and educators build connections between a community’s existing knowledge and new information. Knowledge is constructed by those who will use it rather than dispensed in its final form by outside experts. In the end, learners own the knowledge and the process.

The Problem

This vision presents a number of challenges. Both advisors and student leaders are limited in their ability to successfully fulfill all the roles and functions needed for program success. Advisors are tasked with responsibilities for student safety and alignment with the University’s mission and vision.

Despite their professional mandates and prior experience, advisors must not impose their vision onto student leaders. Freire (1990) cautions that teachers must work collaboratively with students to construct shared knowledge that is truly empowering:

Leaders – in spite of their important, fundamental, and indispensable role – do not own the people and have no right to steer the people blindly towards their salvation. Such a salvation would be a mere gift from the leaders to the people – a breaking of the dialogical bond between them, and a reducing of the people from co-authors of liberating action into the objects of this action. (Freire, 1990, pg. 167-168)
The constructivist approach to student leadership development requires an emphasis on collaboration and shared meaning-making. In its ideal, student leadership development is neither a place of relativism in which any vision will do; nor is it dominated by authoritarian advisors who cast an unmoving vision. In Experience and Education, describing progressive, learner-centered education that would come to be known as the constructivist approach, John Dewey (1938) suggests that teachers and students must work collaboratively to construct knowledge. Though the teacher enters the process with a vision in mind, the process is unscripted and open to shaping by both students and teacher:

The way is, first, for the teacher to be intelligently aware of the capacities, needs, and past experiences of those under instruction, and, secondly, to allow the suggestion made to develop into a plan and project by means of the further suggestions contributed and organized into a whole by the members of the group. The plan, in other words, is a co-operative enterprise, not a dictation. The teacher’s suggestion is not a mold for a cast-iron result but is a starting point to be developed into a plan through contributions from the experience of all engaged in the learning process. The development occurs through reciprocal give-and-take, the teacher taking but not being afraid also to give. The essential point is that the purpose grow and take shape through the process of social intelligence. (Dewey, 1938, pg. 71-72)

The final product of Dewey’s proposed classroom is the work of all parties; everyone involved in this learning process contributes, learns and grows. Dewey’s vision for education provides an effective framework for the advisor-student leader partnership in which both parties contribute vision and prior knowledge to a shared outcome. The final product of such a partnership is truly shared, and is more effective than could have been achieved by either party alone. Utilizing Vygotsky’s concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (Gredler, 2012), effective mentors provide scaffolding support with which learners can engage beyond their individual capabilities until mastery is developed. In this work of supported development, teachers and mentors must know individual students’ capabilities and vision in order to provide appropriate and welcomed support toward mutually-defined goals (Dewey, 1938).

The Conclusion

Collaborative partnership between advisors and student leaders offers significant opportunities for leadership development and program excellence, but the concept is not without its challenges in interpretation and implementation. This vision requires both parties to make significant commitments to each other and to the collaborative process. When these commitments are valued, the beneficial program outcomes and personal growth are likely to significantly outweigh the costs of investment. When collaborative partnership and the Foundations of Advising are implemented with diligent commitment, the end result will truly be one of which all can say “we have done it ourselves.”
References


Appendix A:
Stanley & Clinton Mentor Role Description

Major Thrusts of Mentoring Types (pg. 42)

**Intensive**
1. Discipler  Enablement in basics of following Christ.
2. Spiritual Guide  Accountability, direction and insight for questions, commitments, and decisions affecting spirituality and maturity.
3. Coach  Motivation, skills and application needed to meet a task or challenge.

**Occasional**
4. Counselor  Timely advice and correct perspectives on viewing self, others, circumstances and ministry.
5. Teacher  Knowledge and understanding of a particular subject.
6. Sponsor  Career guidance and protection as leader moves within an organization.

**Passive**
7. Contemporary Model  A living, personal model for life, ministry or profession who is not only an example but also inspires emulation.
8. Historical Model  A past life that teaches dynamic principles and values for life, ministry and/or profession.

**Characteristics of Successful Mentors:** (pg. 38)
- Ability to readily see potential in a person.
- Tolerance with mistakes, brashness, abrasiveness, and the like in order to see that potential develop.
- Flexibility in responding to people and circumstances.
- Patience, knowing that time and experience are needed for development.
- Perspective, having vision and ability to see down the road and suggest the next steps that a mentoree needs.
- Gifts and abilities that build up and encourage others.

**Ways Mentors Help Mentorees:** (pg. 39-40)
1. Mentors give to mentorees:
   - Timely advice
   - Letters, articles, books or other literary information that offers perspective
   - Finances
   - Freedom to emerge as a leader even beyond the level of the mentor.
2. Mentors risk their own reputation in order to sponsor a mentoree.
3. Mentors model various aspects of leadership functions so as to challenge mentorees to move toward them.
4. Mentors direct mentorees to needed resources that will further develop them.
5. Mentors co-minister with mentorees in order to increase their confidence, status and credibility.