

July 2012

A Cross Disciplinary Mentoring Relationship: Discussions Related to Students, the Course, and an Academic Career

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The authors gratefully acknowledge the encouragement and support of Assistant Dean Morris A. Grubbs of the UK Graduate School that made this pairing possible.

Recommended Citation

Messer, Amy J. and Fink, Joseph L. III (2012) "A Cross Disciplinary Mentoring Relationship: Discussions Related to Students, the Course, and an Academic Career," *Kentucky Journal of Higher Education Policy and Practice*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 2 , Article 4.
Available at: <https://uknowledge.uky.edu/kjhepp/vol1/iss2/4>

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Cover Page Footnote

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A Cross Disciplinary Mentoring Relationship: Discussions Related to Students, the Course, and an Academic Career

*Amy J. Messer** and *Joseph L. Fink III[†]*

Junior faculty have sought guidance from their more seasoned colleagues with regard to teaching, scholarship, and service responsibilities for decades if not centuries. An exploration of one such mentoring relationship may prove helpful for others who engage in such tutelage relationships for improvement of the academy. Examination of one undertaking may provide fodder for fruitful exchanges among academicians engaged in or contemplating such roles.

The Course

The primary author, a Ph.D. student in sociology at the University of Kentucky, was selected to teach a section of UK 101–Academic Orientation during the Fall 2011 semester. The official description of that offering in the *UK Bulletin* is:

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UK 101 ACADEMIC ORIENTATION. (1)

This course is designed to assist undergraduates in adjusting to the academic life of the University. Through lectures, discussions, exercises, and out-of-class assignments, UK 101 helps first-year students: articulate the purpose and nature of a college education at a research university; articulate UK's expectations of its students; gain an appreciation of the University's mission, history, and traditions; develop skills for achieving academic success such as study strategies and library research skills; increase awareness and use of campus resources; reflect on personal and social issues that first-year students often face in a college environment; become involved in the total life of the University; and form beneficial relationships with students, faculty, and staff.

Running for 21 class sessions over ten and a half weeks and graded on a standard A-E scale, this course features the following Course Learning Outcomes:

This course is designed to introduce first-year students to the intellectual life of the University. Students will:

1. Articulate the purpose and nature of a college education at a research university.
2. Convey the University of Kentucky's general education student learning outcomes.

3. Articulate UK history and traditions.
4. Demonstrate skills for achieving academic success such as study strategies and information literacy.
5. Locate and use designated campus resources.
6. Reflect on personal and social issues (e.g., alcohol, diversity) that first year students often face in a college environment.
7. Attend and reflect upon three campus activities (one campus event, one cultural event, one lecture).
8. Learn the value of forming relationships with other students, faculty, and staff.

In light of the fact that there were 100 sections of this course offered during the Fall semester with instructors from widely disparate academic specialties, there are a number of topics that are mandatory:

- Professors, Academic Expectations, and Classroom Decorum
- Library Tour
- Time Management, Organization & Goal Setting
- Opportunities for Education Abroad at UK
- Examination Preparation
- Discussion of the Freshman Common Reading Experience book
- Academic Integrity

- Your Role in Preventing Violence at UK: Bystander Intervention
- Time Management Follow Up and Active Critical Reading
- Reworking Class Notes
- Academic Advising and Successful Course Registration
- Alcohol Use and Abuse
- Campus Resources and Services
- The Importance of Campus Involvement
- History of UK and Undergraduate Research
- The Importance of Diversity at UK and Beyond

Content suggestions and materials are prepared and distributed by the UK Office of the Dean of Students where administrative responsibility for the course rests. This is done in conjunction with the Office of the Associate Provost for Undergraduate Education at the University, locus of academic oversight.

A Parallel Practicum Course

At the same time the lead author was engaged as an instructor for a section of UK 101 she was enrolled as a student in a graduate course, GS 699–Practicum in College Teaching. That three credit offering has this official description:

The Practicum is a mentored teaching experience that not only immerses the graduate student in teaching [but] also fosters reflection on the experience, provides structured feedback and plans for improvement, and

guides students in developing a teaching portfolio. The practicum requires that the graduate student assume full responsibility for a course, under the guidance of a mentor teacher. Supervision for the practicum experience is a joint responsibility of the Teaching and Learning Center, certificate faculty, and the student's mentor. The practicum is distinct from many mentored Teaching Assistant experiences because the student must have full responsibility for the course, including syllabus and materials development, assessment, instructional responsibilities, and grade assignments. Credit will not be assigned until the graduate student has submitted a teaching portfolio that includes the practicum experience. Prereq: EPE 672; GS 610 (or equivalent); consent of instructor required.

Given that the practicum requires that the “graduate student assume full responsibility for a course, under the guidance of a mentor teacher,” the second author was approached by Dr. Morris A. Grubbs, Assistant Dean for Graduate Student Development in the UK Graduate School, to inquire whether a mentorship relationship would be of interest. On the surface this might appear to be an unlikely pairing—a sociology graduate student with a pharmacy professor. This is particularly striking because although it is not at all unusual for professors to work collaboratively with graduate students in a mentoring relationship (e.g., assisting with recitation or discussion sections in history or leading laboratory

sessions in chemistry) that is usually done in the context of a shared specific academic discipline. Thus, the traditional model is that these mentoring relationships and discussions occur within a common substantive discipline of mentor and mentee. The unlikely pairing that occurred for this initiative makes it interesting; the focus was predominantly on teaching rather than on the substantive content. However, it may be that this overture from the Assistant Dean was based on the fact that the proposed mentor was teaching the course for the twentieth time and, as such, might have some course-specific experiences to share that would possibly be beneficial to the mentee.

The Mentor-Mentee Relationship

The mentor and mentee met at the outset of the semester to get acquainted and to establish the schedule of discussion sessions. During the flow of the course five discussion sessions were held every other week for one hour. At the outset of the semester the primary focus of the discussions was course content and coverage while later sessions evolved to a theme of teaching methods, classroom management, drawing quiet students into discussions, etc. Interspersed were dialogs about issues related to the mentee's potential academic career along with the joys and challenges of pursuing various career paths. Topics and issues discussed related to the course being offered included:

- Challenge of getting students engaged with the university who continued to live at home and spend time with their circle of friends from high school
- Working effectively with the student peer instructor/co-instructor
- Communicating with students who have overdue assignments
- Selection of optional topics for class sessions
- Providing feedback on students' written submissions
- Classroom activities and initiatives to encourage student participation
- Academic strategies such as where to study and how to do so (e.g., alone or in a group, varying study approaches for multiple choice versus essay exams)
- Class discussion after the first major exam many students had experienced
- Tips for working effectively with Teaching Assistants
- Attendance at campus events such as lectures and performances
- Classroom discussion of the Freshman Common Reading Experience book
- Guest presentations (e.g., Academic Advisor discussion on students being actively involved in the advising process)

- Using five minutes of each class session to discuss miscellaneous topics of importance (e.g., where is the campus post office)
- Issues related to living in a residence hall (e.g., roommate relationships)
- Use of role play to provide students with experience in approaching professors during office hours and making those meetings productive
- Engaging students in a research university environment where their coursework is expected to be varied and cover a broad range of topics

Outcomes

From the perspective of the mentee, one of the goals of this undertaking was seeking insights about whether a professorial career in high education was desirable. Topics discussed related to this possibility included:

- Types of institutions (e.g., research universities versus liberal arts colleges)
- Expectations of faculty in the various sectors of higher education
- Public institutions versus private
- Class size variations among the sectors
- Advantages and disadvantages of an academic career

- Advantages and disadvantages of being a professor in different sectors of higher education (e.g., research university vs. liberal arts college)
- Challenges with pursuit of tenure
- Balancing expectations related to teaching, scholarship, and service
- Student contact through the role of faculty advisor
- Teaching load expectations in various segments of higher education

From the mentee's perspective, each discussion led to different considerations necessary to consider a career as a faculty member at an institution of higher education, including the different types of contributions necessary. Discussions with the mentor led often to different paths of discussion as the mentor has an unusual position at a research university when compared to other faculty, one where he is able to devote most of his effort to teaching. The mentee's previous relationships with faculty have been focused on the life of a research faculty member with a smaller amount of teaching responsibilities.

An advantage of this pairing to the mentee is that the mentor is from a professional college instead of from the social sciences. This advantage provided the mentee with a different perspective from what her previous exposure at institutions of higher education have been. Students are increasingly involved more in professional

disciplines than in the liberal arts. This relationship and introduction to a different college's mode of teaching provided an experience that the mentee would not have been able to receive within her own discipline.

Further, the mentor's experience through interaction with faculty at other institutions allowed him an insider's knowledge that allowed the mentee to ask a more varied liturgy of questions.

From the perspective of the mentor, the opportunity to discuss and revisit approaches to a number of topics covered in the course was very valuable. In addition, the senior faculty member involved was reinvigorated by contact with a younger, enthusiastic colleague who aspires to a career in the academy.