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Mentoring

What's in a Name?

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MANY INDIVIDUALS MAY KNOW THAT MENTOR IS a character from *The Odyssey*, but perhaps only a few are aware that, according to Homer's epic poem, it is not Mentor who fulfills the duty of advisor and guardian to Odysseus' son Telemachus. Rather, it is Pallas Athene, the goddess of wisdom, who takes Mentor's form and actually does the job of helping the young man.¹ As if cursed by Dionysus, the god of illusion, the term *mentor* continues to be the source of confusion to this day.

The words *mentor* and *mentoring* undeniably have considerable rhetorical strength. It is flattering to be called someone's *mentor*. Having a mentoring program increases the reputation of an institution. But these terms are often used when others would be more appropriate. Mentoring should not be confused with peer support, tutoring, teaching, coaching, supervising, advising, counseling, sponsoring, role-modeling, or precepting. The conceptual confusion is common but harmless in everyday communication and perhaps irritating in formal documents and policies—but it is detrimental in scientific discourse. For example, only 4 of 34 questionnaire studies identified in a systematic review of academic mentorship in medicine offered the participants a clear definition of mentors or mentorship.² Because study participants had to decide the meaning of these terms, it is not clear what kind of relationship or process was actually explored. The conceptual diversity of this situation creates an error variance that limits the ability to summarize research findings and estimate the effects of mentoring.³ Although it is probably unrealistic to expect that a single uniform definition of mentoring could be established, the mentoring literature provides enough insights to dispel most of the terminological confusion.

A supportive or developmental relationship can be rightfully termed functional mentoring if it has certain structural, interactional, and temporal features.

Structural

Mentoring is a dyadic relationship between a more experienced or senior person (mentor) and a less experienced or junior person (mentee). This excludes different forms of peer learning and support (“peer-mentoring”) that may be im-

portant for professional and personal development but that cannot provide some crucial mentoring functions such as sponsorship, protection, and promotion of visibility. The dyadic form is a major structural feature of the relationship, although at any one point, individuals can receive particular mentoring functions from many different persons in their developmental networks⁴ and even participate in more than one mentoring dyad.

Mentoring is established formally (assigned) or informally (unassigned) and is initiated by either the mentor or the mentee. Some studies suggest that informal mentoring is more effective than a formal relationship,⁵ but it is possible that such findings are caused by essential differences in the compared relationships. For example, because a relationship is established within a formal mentoring program does not necessarily mean that it is truly a mentoring relationship. If an assigned relationship lacks some defining interactional characteristics, such as a high level of commitment, it cannot be considered mentoring. The quality of a relationship is much more important than the way it is established.⁶

Mentoring is characterized by institutional proximity and by primarily direct, face-to-face contact. This excludes support from a distant site provided mostly through electronic media (“e-mentoring” or “virtual mentoring”), which, although similar to peer support in that it can be used for teaching, supervising, and counseling, can rarely provide mentoring functions related to navigating the institution and advocating for the mentee.

Interactional

Mentoring exhibits a range of developmental functions, excluding formal assessment. Different typologies of mentoring functions can be found in the literature, but a holistic model has been developed in the context of general medical practice.⁷ In this model, mentors help their mentees acquire and integrate new learning (educational aspect), manage transitional states (personal aspect), and maximize their potential to become a fulfilled and achieving practitioner (professional aspect). Mentoring equally encompasses all 3

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aspects, which makes it distinct from other developmental relationships. For example, tutoring, teaching, and coaching mostly exhibit educational functions; sponsorship and preceptorship exhibit professional functions; and counseling exhibits personal functions. Mentors can also serve as role models, but the terms role model and mentor cannot be used interchangeably, because role modeling lacks the high level of commitment to the relationship found in mentorship. Supervision is conceptually closest to mentoring; however, it often implies a managerial/administrative function and includes formal assessment. Although mentors regularly provide informal feedback to their mentees, formal assessment should never be a part of a mentoring relationship, because the dual roles of supporter and assessor can cause conflict.⁸

Mentoring is an intense, personal, and nonsexual relationship with a high level of commitment. Mentoring is also reciprocal but asymmetrical, which means that mentor and mentee can both benefit from the mentoring, but the primary purpose of the relationship is the growth and development of the mentee.

Temporal

Mentoring continues over an extended period. Formal (assigned) relationships can be established with a predefined duration, but if they are successful and develop into functional mentoring relationships, they usually continue to evolve in a less formal way, even after closure of the formal program.

Mentoring changes over time. If it is functional, a mentoring relationship develops over different phases, depending on the needs and resources of both sides. At some point,

mentor and mentee must separate and redefine their relationship; otherwise, mentoring can become dysfunctional.⁹

A real, functional mentoring relationship is a complex phenomenon that affects the personal and professional lives of both mentor and mentee and implies a degree of intimacy that makes it similar to relationships with friends and family. It requires time, commitment, skill, and a bit of personal chemistry.¹⁰ Homer's lesson is still true today. It is not enough to be mentor in a name only—the spirit and wisdom of Pallas Athene are what actually make mentoring so special.

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