



Personal and social support factors involved in students' decision to participate in formal academic mentoring

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ABSTRACT

In this study, we examined the role of personal and social support factors involved in students' decision to participate in formal academic mentoring. Three hundred and eighteen students completing Grade 11 and planning to study sciences in college filled out a questionnaire and were then asked to participate in an academic mentoring program during their first year of college. A total of 150 students agreed to take part in this program (volunteers) and 168 declined the offer (non-volunteers). The overall findings support the hypothesis that academic mentoring is more attractive for some students than others depending on their personality, help-seeking attitudes, academic dispositions, perceived support from friends, and support available during the transition to college. These findings were discussed in light of the different mechanisms proposed by mentoring and social support literatures.

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1. Introduction

Over the past 15 years, many mentoring programs have been developed and are now offered in postsecondary educational settings (Salinitri, 2005; Tenenbaum, Crosby, & Gliner, 2001). These programs typically match newly arrived students (i.e., mentees) with teachers, older students or employees (i.e., mentors). Program components vary greatly from one institution to another according to the characteristics of the mentees, the preparation and training given to mentors, the amount of mentor/mentee contact, the mentor/mentee modes of interaction and the types of activities available. They are based on the premise that a stable relationship of trust, support and expertise leads to greater stress resilience and the promotion of personal skills. Program objectives are generally to enhance the social, academic and vocational integration of young people in their academic and/or professional settings (Campbell, 2007; Eby, Allen, Evans, Ng, & DuBois, 2008; Wanberg, Kammeyer-Mueller, & Marchese, 2006).

Notwithstanding the social relevance of academic mentoring programs, the proportion of students who voluntarily agree to participate remains relatively modest, especially among higher-risk groups (Thile & Matt, 1995; Weinberger, 2005). One of the major challenges for those who coordinate academic mentoring programs is therefore to clearly grasp the factors that

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determine whether or not students will accept a mentoring offer. Greater understanding of these factors could help to fine-tune the strategies used to promote mentoring programs, thereby enhancing their viability. This article examines the respective and interactive contribution of a set of personal characteristics and social support resources in the prediction of students' decision to participate in an academic mentoring program during their first year in college. This program matched students newly admitted to a science program at college (mentees: 17 years old) with students completing their bachelor's degree in science and engineering at university (mentors: 23 years old). Its main goal is to foster student academic integration and vocational development.

1.1. Personal characteristics and mentoring participation

Some studies have explored the personality factors that distinguish mentees from non-mentees, as well as those that predict a person's participation in more than one mentoring relationship. These studies, which, for the most part, were conducted in the workplace, indicated that mentees have a greater internal locus of control, greater needs for power and achievement, lower negative affectivity, and higher self-monitoring and self-esteem than non-mentees (Turban & Dougherty, 1994; Fagenson, 1992). It was also shown that individuals who had taken part in many mentoring relationships throughout their lives displayed higher needs for achievement and dominance and greater self-esteem than those who engaged in one or no mentoring relationship (Fagenson-Eland & Baugh, 2001). Other studies applied the Big Five classification system to the mentoring relationship and showed that mentees' agreeableness, openness, extroversion, and conscientiousness led to higher psychosocial support in mentoring (Waters, 2004).

Beyond the mentees' personality, other personal characteristics may influence the decision to engage in a mentoring relationship. The Youth Mentoring Model (Rhodes, 2005) and the Mentoring Socio motivational Model (Larose & Tarabulsy, 2005) both suggest that mentee characteristics such as social skills, capacity to seek help from others and beliefs and attitudes toward social support can influence mentee involvement in the mentoring relationship. Along the same lines, Keller (2005) suggests that the motivations, attitudes, values, goals and needs of mentees at the onset of the mentoring relationship may foster the youths' involvement in the relationship and the potential benefits for their development.

The student academic dispositions (e.g., academic success, test anxiety, and motivation) represent a third group of personal characteristics that may have the potential to influence their decision to participate in a mentoring program. Some studies suggest that mentoring is especially useful for students with lower academic dispositions. For example the Grossman & Johnson study (1998) showed that mentoring was more beneficial for youth with initially low or moderate achievement levels compared with youth with initially high achievement levels. Similarly, the Garceau, Larose, Cyrenne, Guay, and Desc-hènes (2008) study found that mentoring had greater impact on the academic persistence of college students with a low grades in high school compared to those who had above-average marks in high school. While the findings of these two studies have no specific bearing on the decision to participate in mentoring, they nevertheless suggest that mentoring may be more attractive to students who have or anticipate having difficulty on the academic front.

1.2. Available and perceived social support and mentoring participation

We hypothesize that the decision to participate in mentoring may also depend on the support available when the mentoring offer is made by the institution. In fact, some counselling studies have shown that the lack of quality support provided by the students' network (e.g., low attachment, social integration, and guidance support) was positively associated with the students' intention to seek help from a counsellor (Rickwood & Braithwaite, 1994; Vogel, Wester, Wei, & Boysen, 2005). However, some youth mentoring studies arrive at different conclusions. For example, mother, father, and friend support, as well as emotional support, positive feedback and advice from the mother, were shown to be positively associated with having a natural mentor among urban early adolescents (Rhodes, Contreras, & Mangelsdorf, 1994; Zimmerman, Bingenheimer, & Behrendt, 2005). Similarly, a longitudinal study among late adolescents showed that youth who derive emotional support from the parental relationship had a more positive perception of mentor support and mentoring in general (Soucy & Larose, 2004).

To clearly understand the links between social support and the decision to participate in a mentoring program, we propose to distinguish two different conceptions of social support: available social support and perceived social support (Pierce, Sarason, & Sarason, 1996; Vaux, 1988). Available social support is evaluated using quantitative indicators such as the number of people in the network in a position to help and the accessibility of formal support (Vaux, 1988). Available social support is directly affected by the social context and then might also be assessed using indirect contextual indicators such as the presence of an academic and social transition, belonging to a single-parent or recently immigrant household and the education and income of parents. Perceived social support refers to an individual's general perception of being supported. This perception is rooted in past support experiences (such as attachment) and allows a person to value help-seeking and believe in the availability of support when needed (Pierce et al., 1996). By this conceptual logic, it is conceivable that students who have little support available (for instance those who must leave home and family to attend college), but who have a general positive perception of support from parents and friends might be more likely to participate in a mentoring program. However, current mentoring research does not allow us to verify this hypothesis.

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