

1-1-2008

Making It Count: Mentoring as Cultural Currency

Tanya R. Cochran
Union College - Lincoln

Beth Godbee
Marquette University, beth.godbee@marquette.edu

Published version. "Making It Count: Mentoring as Cultural Currency," excerpted with permission from *Stories of Mentoring: Theory and Praxis*. Eds. Patricia Sullivan, Catherine Hobbs, Thomas Rickert, and Jennifer Bay. Anderson, SC: Parlor Press, 2008: 301-305. Publisher URL: <http://www.parlorpress.com/mentoring.html>. © 2008 Parlor Press. Used with permission.

25 Making It Count: Mentoring as Cultural Currency

Tanya R. Cochran and Beth Godbee

Mentoring relationships, those meaningful and often affective connections that characterize our work with students and colleagues, by their very nature, defy quantification. Even as we use the banking metaphor to describe our “investment” in others, the “return” for our time, and the “credit” we deserve, many of us who value mentoring for its qualitative and interpersonal nature resist putting our work into numeric terms. Yet in an academic culture that asks us to measure our contributions and quantify our merit, we must prove cultural capital—that we have the currency to back our reputation and contributions. Like business models that illustrate income and expenses, the curriculum vita communicates to others how we spend our professional time and energy. We must demonstrate our worth within the academic world if we are to secure tenure and promotion (like funding for a business). While we certainly believe that academic review should move away from such business and banking models, we recognize that to make such change, we must establish ourselves within this system by conveying our worth to others. To do so, we propose ways of changing the curriculum vita and review portfolio to make mentoring *count* and to establish the value of mentoring as a scholarly activity that must be valued because it is valuable to the academy.

One method of identifying instances of mentoring on the curriculum vita is already practiced to varied extents: listing the names and titles of directed readings, independent studies, theses, and dissertations. Additionally, faculty at smaller liberal arts colleges often include categories such as “Student Presentations” or “Internships Directed” that highlight projects they supervise or otherwise support. Such cat-

egories could be expanded to include student publications that develop from coursework or feedback. Since the curriculum vita has historically emphasized publication records, it makes sense to show how faculty support others' publishing. The document can bring attention to the time devoted to conferencing, advising, and otherwise supporting students and colleagues.

We can also highlight the role of mentoring in the portfolios we submit for review. Portfolio cover letters, for instance, can draw the reviewers' attention to the importance of mentoring in our professional careers and contributions. The following excerpt shows how one professor articulated her philosophy of teacher-mentoring within such a cover letter. Here she underscores the central role of mentoring in her academic life:

Most of us do not need a book to tell us what the best teachers do.¹ The best teachers participate in their professional communities, whether by publishing, researching, attending and presenting at conferences, or keeping up with their colleagues' work. They read widely. By making every assignment matter, they challenge and even expect us to stretch our intellectual capabilities, to apply ourselves. They make learning about life and life about learning, encouraging us to confront and wrestle with unfamiliar ideas, to self-reflect, to assume control of our educations, and to collaborate with others. They insist that learning, that knowledge itself, is worthless unless we care, unless it has effect *and* affect. All of these actions suggest that, at their core, the best teachers are teachers who mentor.

Teacher-mentors make us care not with lectures so much as listening, not with grades so much as careful and substantial feedback, not with homework so much as invitations to collaborate with them. What we remember is not necessarily the articles or books they have published. What we remember is their investment in us: unbelievably quick e-mail responses to last-minute questions (some at 2:31 a.m.), suggested reading lists crafted specifically to our interests, the hour it took us to reply to their query "How is your

family?" We remember having someone to emulate both professionally and personally. When tenure and promotion committees begin to value affect as equally as effect, they will finally do what teacher-mentors ask: to care. As you consider some of the unconventional materials in my portfolio, I request that you be such a committee, one that recognizes, appreciates, and rewards the commitment required to care.

While the content, tone, and style of such a cover letter will reflect the individual professor as well as take into consideration departmental politics, the letter above offers another example of what we can do to begin altering the current system of tenure and promotion and revising what counts as professional activity.

Other components of the tenure and promotion portfolios are recommendation letters solicited from co-workers, publishers, and scholars in the field. In addition to these letters, we might ask for ones from students and colleagues who have benefited from mentoring relationships. Often students ask their mentors for recommendation letters or referrals; to reciprocate, they could write letters for faculty to include in their portfolios. The following excerpt from one such letter illustrates how mentoring can be overtly recognized and documented:

I am writing in support of tenure and promotion for Dr. Lisa Burrell², the Director of the Writing Studio and Assistant Professor of English. I have worked with Lisa Burrell for two years, and she has been the most positive and influential part of my master's experience. In fact, she has inspired me to continue my studies through a doctoral program in composition and rhetoric. Lisa's interests in the field have certainly shaped my own, as she has exhibited for me what it means to be an academic in the broadest sense of the word.

In the two years we have worked together, Lisa has devoted large amounts of time to my academic and professional development. In the fall 2002, I enrolled in Lisa's special topics course on writing centers, and there I began several projects on tutoring, composition, and feminist pedagogy that led to directed studies as well as my first publications.

The letter goes on to provide detailed information about collaborative projects, the publications Lisa supported, and how the mentoring relationship influenced broader personal and professional development. Such letters might appear alongside ones from esteemed colleagues who praise the faculty member's research, publishing, or other professional contributions. In this way, mentoring becomes an equally important part of their academic pursuits.

In addition to letters from students and colleagues, review portfolios should contain a variety of artifacts that support the value of mentoring and illustrate the time involved with mentoring activities. Just as faculty collect copies of their publications, workshop handouts, and other materials, they should assemble documents that highlight the role of mentoring in their daily work. Such artifacts might include the following:

- Office hour sign-up sheets showing frequency and length of conferences
- Copies of written feedback given on student papers
- Transcripts of video or audiotapes of conferencing
- Directed and independent study course designs or reading lists
- Copies of recommendation letters and referrals
- Journal entries or reflection pieces describing mentoring collaborations
- Samples of student work that resulted from conferencing and other feedback
- Evaluations or reflective writing from students and colleagues

Such documentation makes clear the time and intellectual engagement devoted to mentoring activities. It further acknowledges the centrality of mentoring to ongoing academic work.

We hope that these strategies may help us not only gain recognition for our mentoring but also generate new thinking about how to represent and make known the work we do with advising, conferencing, and otherwise befriending students and colleagues. We argue that mentoring *is* professional activity and that outcomes of the relationships with colleagues and students should be weighed more heavily in career decisions. Mentoring should be included not only as a line of the curriculum vita but especially as a substantial component of an-

nual reports and reviews. In tenure and promotion decisions, letters from students and colleagues should be taken seriously and required as part of the review process. As we assemble teaching and professional portfolios, we might provide evidence of mentoring relationships and discuss how mentoring plays out in our personal and professional lives. By taking some of these steps, we can move towards a system of tenure and promotion that is more balanced and more reflective of how the best teaching and learning actually occurs.

NOTES

1. If you would like such a book, though, see especially Ken Bain, *What the Best College Teachers Do* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard UP, 2004).
2. Pseudonym used.