

## Making Mentoring Matter for Students

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**Abstract:** This paper describes how one academic program integrates its summer mentorship program with its academic curriculum to enhance the development of capacities associated with leadership.

Leadership Rice is an academic and experiential program to develop the leadership capacities of undergraduates at Rice University in Houston, Texas. The gateway course is open to students from all disciplines and all years. We aim to stimulate our students to care about contributing positively in the world and to have the capacities to be effective when opportunity and passion move them to act.

The most catalytic component of Leadership Rice, open to by application to students who have taken the gateway course, is the Summer Mentorship Experience. This provides us with the laboratory to link theory to practice, ideas to action, heart to mind. The work of Michael Lombardo and Robert Eichinger, which identifies 67 capacities associated with leadership, influences our curriculum. Lombardo and Eichinger contend that capacity-building happens mostly when people are required to do challenging work that has value to an organization on deadline with helpful feedback. Their research emphasizes the overwhelming value of work:

Development... will be about 70 percent from on-the-job experiences or learning on-the-job, working on real tasks and problems; about 20 percent from feedback or working around good and bad examples or role models of the need, and 10 percent from courses and reading. The Leadership Machine,  
p. 114

Our experience over the past six years leads us to both support and amend this finding.

Each summer, Leadership Rice places 40-60 students in full-time, paid summer mentorships. Certainly, students who are asked to do substantive work, especially during the summer when they are able to work full time, grow and mature. They learn general skills related to working, particular skills related to their content area and social skills that come from interacting with different kinds of people in a variety of settings. For some, summer internships provide an important opportunity to live independently for the first time. But because our focus is not simply on preparing students for the world of work but on developing leadership capacity, the summer mentorship should reinforce capacities related to leadership that are part of the class curriculum. Over the years, we have developed an appreciation for what brings added value to the mentorship experience and this paper discusses what we have learned.

In 2002, we surveyed all students in our summer program. Because the evaluation was uncontrolled, the results are only suggestive, but they support the view that for undergraduates, structured experience is valuable but course work creates a level of awareness that enhances the work experience.

There is nothing startling in noting that classroom theory informs world practice. The challenge for us is how to integrate the two for the greatest impact. Before the summer of 2002, the required Leadership Rice course came after the summer mentorship. However, 20 or so students took an elective course with us before the mentorship. Of those students who took the course and then a mentorship, 100% were committed to the statement “It is possible to help undergraduates develop their capacities for leadership.” All of these students thought it would be a bad idea for our program to provide summer mentorships with no course work while only 3/4 of the students without the course felt that way.

As a result of this survey and other evaluative information, our core leadership course is now required in order to apply for the Summer Mentorship, and we view them as an integrated process. The class and the mentorship strengthen each other, as one student wrote in a weekly email:

During class, I often felt that most of the information was just common sense. It wasn't until I started this job that I was truly able to see its value. I was able to practice the skills that we learned in UNIV 309 in a real-life setting, and although what we learned may have been common sense, the mere act of reflecting upon our day-to-day experiences with those things in mind can significantly change the way you see your company and your place in the company.

## **Steering the Mental Ship**

Ronald Heifetz, in Leadership Without Easy Answers, defines leadership as the management of attention. We work to focus attention on six areas:

- Being comfortable with ambivalence and ambiguity.
- Taking responsibility for what happens.
- Acting with integrity. (We define integrity as only making promises you intend to keep, keeping the promises you make and when there are breakdowns, as there often are, dealing with the situation immediately and effectively.)
- Communicating effectively.
- Honing learning agility.
- Developing good relationships.

Our course discusses all of this but during our Summer Mentorship Experience, we nurture and nudge that focus in a variety of small ways.

1. April Orientation Celebration. With input from former participants, we set the stage for focusing attention. We also want to create a team spirit that makes the students feel they are part of something special. In this gathering, we make assignments to an email group and send each email group off for a “bonding” dinner.

2. Start of Work Orientation for Houston students, which includes an etiquette lunch. Our intention here to is to create a secure holding environment that helps students get centered and focused.
3. Weekly Email Groups provide forced weekly reflection. They also give the staff a way to monitor how well the students are doing.
4. Weekly Summer Meetings. In Houston, we arrange a 4-5:30pm weekly seminar for sharing experiences. We encourage students grouped in other cities to meet weekly as well. While we used to use these for supplemental summer training, we now see their greatest value as providing a forum for students to hear and be heard and feel supported in their efforts.
5. Site Visit. We do a staff site visit to 85% of our mentorship placements.
6. Reflective Essay. These are published in a monograph each fall.
7. Materials to Mentors to align them with our objectives.

We believe these small steps, aggregated, significantly enhance the impact of the mentorship experience. Our students are smart, hard working and excited about having a mentorship opportunity. If they arrive at a new work place and find that they do not easily have a clear role and cannot quickly begin to make a contribution, there is the danger of their developing an attitude about work that then inhibits working through these issues. We know this, in part, because our students repeatedly describe to us how they watch other interns in their offices behaving in ways that result in less productive and satisfying summers.

It is, we think, most helpful during our orientations to discuss the following, which we do with the help of students who have already participated in the program:

1. **Be patient:** The students who cannot tolerate early ambivalence run the risk of withdrawing commitment too soon. Training a new person who is only staying a short time to add value is effort, we caution them. It may be that when a student first arrives, the organization is, in spite of our efforts, not prepared or distracted by some event. A student from the West Coast arrived in Boston to work for a small internet marketing company. The mentor barely took note of his arrival, handing him a stack of files and articles and pointing to a chair. He happened to arrive the day the company's main server went down. With their livelihood at stake, this young man's hurt feelings were not on their screen.

Situations like these, we explain, are structural not personal. Do not despair, Do not make judgements. Do not whine or give up. Be patient. Be poised. Stay engaged. Do whatever you are asked as if the organization's entire success depended on it. Earn respect by the quality of your work and your attitude. Introduce yourself, ask to be included in things if appropriate and make clear your willingness to work – but most of all, look for ways to contribute.

We want to develop the ability to tolerate ambivalence and ambiguity. If our students can learn how to get centered in themselves and not be thrown off balance by difficult or awkward situations, they will be better positioned for the adventures of leadership.

2. **Be honest:** We have noted that students think it is embarrassing if things are not great and want to shove the problem out of view rather than use it as a learning opportunity. We stress that we want to hear from them about any difficulties that cannot be resolved with reasonable effort. That does not mean we can swoop in and fix it, but it is not a sign of weakness to turn to the staff for coaching and advice.

I recall the young woman who called to say she was “not happy,” about her assignments and had arranged to meet with the HR director to present her unhappiness. That the HR director might not have this young woman’s happiness as a primary interest never occurred to our student. What might happen, we asked, if instead you talked about your desire to give more to this terrific organization in the short time you had and how your strong writing skills might be of value to her? Such problems or concerns present excellent opportunities for coaching.

3. **Be focused:** The first responsibility, we tell our students, is to bring added value to your mentor organization, but if you are clear about where/how you want to grow and can articulate that to your mentor and to yourself, you increase the odds of having experiences to support this. Working with the students to develop some clear expectations for themselves helps create a more powerful mentorship experience.

Leadership is less magic than many suppose. Vision, preparation, discipline and determination all matter. Their goals should always be theirs; our role is to help them focus on what will bring the successes they want.

4. **Be open to feedback:** We teach that the capacity most associated with leadership is learning agility. If, when we get feedback, we are defensive or argumentative, two things are likely to happen. First, we will learn less and second, we will run the risk of missing out on further feedback. Live in questions rather than answers, we counsel. and ask questions for clarity. Remember that we purposefully put you in challenging situations. If you feel flummoxed, breathe. Get centered. Remember that criticism is criticism of work or behavior but not of you as a person. Constructive criticism can be a stepping stone to better work. Be grateful to hear it directly rather than have it said behind your back. And remember what you learned about type and temperament and the different ways people make meaning in the world.

If we can help our students listen, question, consider; if we can help them maintain composure in difficult moments; and think structurally rather than personally, we are developing people with learning agility who can develop and lead others.

## **Weekly Email Questions for Reflection**

During our April orientation, we place the students in small email groups, usually six students/group. They are asked to respond each week to a question that is aligned with our

teaching objectives. They send the response to all those in the email group and to the Leadership Rice staff. Writing for peers and reading the responses of peers to the same question turns out to be an excellent tool for reinforcing learning. One student, commenting on the value of doing an internship as part of Leadership Rice, wrote, "...there are very few instances in my life when I've felt such a strong desire to really understand leadership, motivation, and people as much as I do now."

The weekly responses also allow me and my assistant director to monitor students' experiences and to praise, question or counsel as needed. It is certainly time consuming to read 40-60 emails each week, but knowing we read them and hearing comments from us occasionally increases the sense of urgency students feel to hold to the goals they set at the start of the summer. Sometimes, just a small note assuring a student that her feelings are natural and normal help a student settle in more quickly.

It has another benefit. In The Courage to Teach, Parker Palmer wrote:

Mentors and apprentices are partners in an ancient human dance, and one of teaching's greatest rewards is the daily chance it gives us to get back on the dance floor. It is the dance of the spiraling generations, in which the old empower the young with their experience and the young empower the old with new life, reweaving the fabric of the human community as they touch and turn. (P. 25)

These emails teach me. They focus my attention and help me think about what and how to present material in the classroom. They also enliven my summer by giving me a small window into places like the Pentagon and Planned Parenthood, entrepreneurial start-ups and large corporations. Reading about the students' adventures keeps me excited about identifying new mentorships the coming year.

At the end of the summer, each student writes a reflective essay and works with our writing consultant on polishing it for publication in a monograph in that comes out at the end of the fall semester. These essays are eagerly read by the next group of students and mentors and, again, focus attention.

## **Meetings and Site Visits**

We site-visit most of the students in the middle of the eight weeks. Both the weekly meetings when students share and the site visits help students figure out what they want to be doing. Again, quoting Parker Palmer, "...the human soul doesn't want to be fixed, it simply wants to be seen and heard. (p. 151)." Hearing each other figure out how to make their way in their jobs seems comforting to highly competitive young people used to getting A's on their tests. And sometimes a question here and a suggestion there can provoke an important AHA.

Just as we focus the students' attention, we find that our visits help to focus the mentors' attention on the students' growth and success. That it is important for a staff member to visit and hear about a student's progress makes that progress more important. It also helps students who need a boost find the courage and confidence to make a step they may have been delaying. A few years ago, we placed a student with a group doing work on Latin American foreign policy, a

group the student had identified as a place she would live to work. The student was very reluctant to help us arrange a staff visit, insisting that there really wasn't anything to discuss. We insisted. The true story was that the student had not been given much work and was embarrassed. Her mentor was new, did not grasp the purpose of the program, did not recall the student was being paid and, in the end, with a bit of conversation, came up with a couple of excellent projects that benefited both student and organization. The student benefited by having a better summer but, more importantly, by seeing how effective communication could impact on a situation..

## **Finding Mentorships**

Leadership Rice finds the mentorship opportunities and offers students we would like in the program a contract for a placement with an organization. The students can accept or reject the offer. An investment banker from whom we were seeking a mentorship told me, "Hey, I only want kids who can find their own mentorships. Doesn't that show leadership skills?" Sometimes it does. But sometimes all it shows is a familial sphere of influence, early closure on career decisions, or a willingness to take parental or peer direction.

I am not smart enough to know which students are going to become recognized as leaders, but I do know that some of those on whom I would be most willing to bet my own money cannot find their own mentorships. Last fall, we had an exceptional student from Singapore in class. He is a physics major with an interest in Buddhism who started a wine-tasting society on campus and is learning Aikido. This summer, he is working with small think tank in the Washington, DC area that works on future scenarios related to global mind change. It is unlikely that he could have identified this group, seen the aptness of the fit and, had he gotten that far, sold himself directly.

Because we know our students from class and have read their applications with personal questions before spending 30 minutes interviewing them, we have the luxury of intimacy when considering mentorship placements. We certainly seek the students' input on what kinds of work they would like – but we do not feel limited to what they report. Leadership Rice has now placed hundreds of students with over 100 mentors. Well over 90% of mentors and students report high satisfaction each summer – but they are not always sure they will be satisfied at the start of the summer. We want to place students in situations that will not only help them learn things of interest to them but will broaden their horizons. We look to match them with mentors who are likely to develop capacities that the students aim to develop and/or we consider advantageous for them to develop.

It is my observation that most students do not know exactly what they want to do for the summer, and many who report that they do, end up having experiences they perceive to be excellent when offered something different. The arena of work is less important than the mentor and the subject area is less important than the skills the student can acquire. It is great when we help a student build relationships with influential people in an area of interest to the student – but it is also great when we open up a new area of possibilities and place them in life situations that help them grow in ways just right for them.

Through this summer, I found a new interest in city politics; before my mentorship, I had never paid attention to the decisions that City Council was making or took an interest in local elections.

Because of my experience in a public-private partnership, I will be paying very close attention to the elections this November and will do my homework on which candidates I will be choosing. I really appreciate that I was given the opportunity to widen my knowledge and personal interest in areas that I would have never looked at on my own.

Mentors tend also to be narrow in the way they choose candidates. Frequently, mentor organizations want course work or experience in subject areas Rice does not provide. Experience shows that encouraging reluctant mentors to try a smart, disciplined and, curious student who is well-prepared by Leadership Rice to be effective does not in any way jeopardize the likelihood of a highly successful match.

## **Benefits to Mentors**

When mentorships are really working, the mentor benefits as well as the student. One mentor wrote, "*Looking at what I did for my student made me ask why I wasn't doing this for my whole staff.*" Certainly, feeling that you have helped to shape a life in a positive way is a great feeling for most of us. But beyond the good feelings, mentoring is also a powerful tool for helping successful professionals grow their own leadership skills. In focusing the attention of mentors on the skills we want students to learn, we are also focusing the attention of the mentor on his or her own capacities. I have come to see structured mentoring as one way to increase further the leadership capacity of those at the mentor stage.

Leading Leadership Rice has had a huge impact on my own growth and development. In trying to figure out what to teach and how to teach it, I have learned to be a more effective leader and mentor. Structured, intentional mentoring offers us a powerful vehicle for increasing leadership capacity in both young people and experience and successful professionals.

Endnote: To look at the handouts we provide students during orientation and to mentors and to see the weekly email questions, visit our website, [www.rice.edu/leadership](http://www.rice.edu/leadership) and browse the mentorship section.