

The Importance of Mentoring
in Civil Engineering Education
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Traditionally, the main obligation of an undergraduate advisor in a civil engineering department has been to provide "academic counseling" once a semester, or on some other infrequent basis. The advisor makes course recommendations based upon a cursory examination of the student's academic record and performance in previous coursework. Very little is done to establish personal contact or an ongoing professional relationship with the student. Such an approach inherently assumes that no additional guidance is necessary, nor would it significantly influence the student's academic program. But I believe there is now enough evidence that advising systems of this sort do not fully realize the benefits that can accrue to both participants when a professor and student enter into a substantially more active advising, or mentoring, relationship.

Mentoring has been defined as guidance from a person with experience, perspective, and distance to a less experienced person. Unlike the impersonal interaction of current advising systems, faculty and students in a mentoring relationship enjoy a continuing personal, academic and professional association. In this relationship a mentor is not simply an advisor, a research director, or a teacher, but rather is someone who takes an abiding and genuine interest in the future of the student. The mentor nurtures the student and provides the inspiration, and criticism, necessary to allow the student to fully realize his/her potential. An effective mentoring relationship must include aspects of confidentiality, trust, and mutual respect between the mentor and student and should also include components of networking, coaching, and tutoring, as well as advising. The extent of the mentoring relationship, as well as its duration, is thus much greater than that of the typical advising interaction.

The aim of a mentoring program is to enrich the experience of the involved student through both academic and professional development unattainable in the classroom. Through their mentoring interaction the faculty member and the student hope to fully explore, develop, and evolve the student's educational and professional career goals and aspirations and establish a plan for their attainment. This plan will include a broad array of activities outside the classroom and will be tailored to each student's unique overall academic and professional needs.

I strongly encourage members of the civil engineering educational community to become mentors to our undergraduate students. Mentoring relationships have the potential to positively impact students, both in terms of their success in undergraduate careers and in their desire to pursue graduate education. As a result of my experience with mentoring it has become one of the most effective and rewarding aspects of my educational career. If more faculty members will establish such connections with their students both parties will certainly benefit from the relationship; they will enjoy and learn from a truly rewarding association throughout the students' years as advisees and beyond.