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Graduates giving back – a mentoring program for MBA students

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to discuss the challenges and obstacles encountered in the implementation of a mentoring program for Master of Business Administration (MBA) students at the University of South Australia (UniSA) Business School. The paper starts with an exploration into the need for a mentoring program, the trial and subsequent four years of implementation. The paper also explores the network model of mentoring and the reasons why this, rather than a more traditional model, was chosen for the program's implementation.

Design/methodology/approach – This exploratory case study uses data from over 600 students and their alumni mentors over a five-year period to evaluate and improve the program as well as cultivating a critical community of adult learners.

Findings – Feedback from students indicates that the mentoring program is regarded by most as a value-added feature of their early learning as it offers support, if and when it is required, from those who have been there before.

Research limitations/implications – Results are limited to one institution. However, as research into mentoring for higher education students is thin on the ground, this study contributes to our understanding of the positive impacts of mentoring on student success.

Practical implications – This paper emphasizes the importance of business leaders giving back to their alma mater through mentoring current MBA students. It shows how mentoring can support learning and management development.

Originality/value – This is an original study which explores ways to increase the learning of higher education students for positive social outcomes.

Keywords Work-based learning, Business education, Communities of practice, Adult learning, Mentoring, Leadership development, Higher education, Learning communities, Mentoring and coaching in HE, Life-long learning, Learning culture, Network mentoring model

Paper type Case study

Introduction

Mentoring has long been regarded as an effective means of cultivating good practice in work settings (Clutterbuck, 2014; Kram, 1988). The purpose of this paper is to explore the benefits of formal mentoring for higher education business students. Over 600 students and graduate mentors participated in the study and findings indicated that the program achieved its purpose of providing new students with the opportunity to work with alumni mentors and hence, add value to their Master of Business Administration (MBA) experience.

Conceptual framework for mentoring

Throughout history, mentoring has been associated with transitioning – an experienced person aids the transition of a less experienced person in moving from one place or state to another (Daloz, 1999). In most instances the mentor appears at the start of a journey and takes on the role of wise guide. Thus, mentoring can be the impetus for transformation and growth in a mentee. In contemporary business settings researchers support the notion that having mentors increases one's chance of leadership success and the benefits of



mentoring have been articulated by a number of studies since the late 1970s (Clawson, 1989; Clutterbuck, 2014; Ragins and Kram, 2007). Roche (1979) published an article describing the results of a study he conducted with top executives mentioned in the “Who’s News” column in the *Wall Street Journal*. He concluded that two-thirds of the respondents reported having a mentor and that these respondents earned more money and were happier with their career. This led to an awareness of mentoring in the business world as well as prompting increased research into mentoring.

Mentoring has long been regarded as an important role for teachers in fostering the intellectual and personal development of students (Daloz, 1986). The impact of formally introduced mentoring programs in higher education has been the focus of numerous studies and researchers have increased our understanding of mentoring and reported positive results (Beltman and Schaeben, 2012; Crisp and Cruz, 2009; George and Mampilly, 2012). However, the focus of the majority of empirical studies centered on undergraduate students (Crisp and Cruz, 2009), with fewer studies focussed on the implementation of formal mentoring programs by business schools. In a sample of 150 university business schools in the USA, less than half (41 percent) had a formal mentoring program for business students (Schlee, 2000). Few mentoring programs were targeted to graduate students (8 percent). Mentoring support was, in most cases, provided by alumni. Career development was the main focus, with leadership development a poor second place (Schlee, 2000). Further, there appeared to be a lack of understanding on the part of the students as to why they wanted a mentor and “many students sign up for mentorship programs simply because it seems like a good idea” (Schlee, 2000, p. 330). One reason for the lack of emphasis on experiential activities, such as mentoring, in business schools was offered by Cunningham (1995) who posited that, unlike schools of education and other professional schools, business schools focus on academic, classroom-based training rather than on professional preparation of students.

The traditional paradigm of mentoring focussed on knowledge transfer and wisdom-passing from old to young is changing (Darwin, 2000; Harvey and Buckley, 2002). Today one of the biggest challenges is mentees’ capacity to remain open to learning new skills and ways of doing things. Often this demands “unlearning.” Different forms of mentoring, such as peer mentoring and group mentoring, have been implemented in workplaces and higher education institutes, in order to better fit the contemporary landscape (Ambrose, 2003; Darwin and Palmer, 2009). Peer mentoring circles move away from the traditional dyadic model and, instead, use an innovative, group mentoring model (Darwin and Palmer, 2009) with support coming from peers as well as more experienced students and business leaders. Research into higher education students learning from each other has been the focus of recent peer mentoring studies (Boswell and Irby, 2014; Clark and Andrews, 2012).

Higgins and Kram (2001) advocate the development of a constellation of diverse mentoring relationships or networks. Higgins and Thomas (2001) state that if individuals develop good quality networks of developmental relationships they are more likely to benefit from long-term career outcomes than those who have a one-to-one mentoring relationship. Kram and Higgins (2008) liken this constellation to having one’s own personal board of directors and just as a company carefully chooses a diverse and experienced board of directors, so too does the mentee. He or she works out personal and professional goals and purposes for mentoring with the help of the mentor who acts as a guide (Zachary and Fischler, 2009). The mentee then goes about building a high-quality network which is regularly assessed and modified according to changing needs and achievement of goals, as outlined in Table I.

	Traditional	Developmental network
Mentor	Individual	Group
Role of Mentor(s)	Expert passing on knowledge	Co-learners sharing knowledge
Relationship(s)	Hierarchical Stable Within the organization	Hierarchical and peer Changing Within and outside the organization
Individual Outcomes	Enhanced performance Career accomplishments Career satisfaction and advancement	Enhanced performance, learning Self-awareness, social skills and leadership capacity
Organizational Outcomes	Enhanced performance and retention	Enhanced performance, retention, organizational learning, innovation and leadership capacity

Table I.
Beyond one-on-one

Note: The network model of mentoring compared with the traditional model
Source: Kram and Higgins (2008)

Whereas the traditional view of mentoring was one-to-one, face-to-face and exclusive, today mentoring is more likely to be undertaken in groups of peers and available to everyone, with reciprocity supplanting hierarchy (Darwin, 2000). Angelique *et al.* (2002) explore alternative mentoring models and use the term “musing” to complement the term “mentoring.” They claim “musing” is a hybrid of the peer and collective mentoring model and emphasizes the role of mentors as change agents and critical friends. Like the original mentor, muses are also part of Greek mythology. They were nine in number and were the daughters of the Titan Mnemosyne (Goddess of Memory) and Zeus. They were the goddesses of all arts and sciences and gave the artists and scientists their inspiration.

To conclude, there is limited research into mentoring for higher education business students, although there has been a flurry of activity in recent years to introduce mentoring support for postgraduate students. Most formal programs concentrate on career functions and use the traditional mentoring practices which are resource intensive and rely on one-to-one matching of students with members of the alumni and business leaders. Few experiment with more contemporary models of mentoring. The conceptual framework used in this program was a developmental networking model that changed to meet the unique needs of each group of new students.

The beginning: exploring the need for a mentor program

In 2010, the University of South Australia (UniSA) Business School was committed to providing students with opportunities to develop management skills they could apply to their workplaces. The MBA Program Director sought funds from the teaching and learning unit to explore best practice and consult with relevant stakeholders to trial a mentoring program. He saw mentoring as a potential critical ingredient to enhance the learning and leadership development of MBA students. As I had expertise in facilitating mentoring programs internationally, as well as research, course design and teaching experience, I was invited to manage the project. My brief was to research background information and explore best practice in higher education mentoring activities; to collect data; develop a conceptual framework; write a discussion paper on findings and design a program.

Data collection from students was in two stages, with one stage informing the other. Stage 1 involved collecting ideas from students. The purpose of this stage was to look broadly at the mentoring landscape in order to find out how current students perceived

mentoring and what kind of mentoring program they envisaged. I liaised with course facilitators and personally addressed students attending on campus classes during the study period to invite them to take part in one of four focus group meetings. I made it easy for them by holding these meetings prior to classes (as well as providing refreshments). From a total of 192 students, 79 students (41 percent) attended the focus group meetings and generated a large number of ideas for a mentoring program. At the meetings I asked students to respond to the following scenario: "It is 2011 and you are invited to participate in a mentoring program for MBA students. You are excited about the innovative program and want to participate. What is so good about this new and innovative activity that you are willing to spend valuable time taking part in it?"

Stage 2 involved categorizing these ideas and placing them in an online survey. The purpose of this stage was to take the most frequently cited ideas and find out which of these ideas were given priority by current students. Respondents were asked to list their top three preferences. In all, 618 students were sent a link to this survey with 186 responses, a response rate of 31 percent. While acknowledging that data collected in stage 1 may be considered leading and potentially influence the validity and trustworthiness of the data generated, I hoped that the initial scenario would generate more creative ideas than a survey on its own.

An advisory group of interested students and staff was formed to respond to the findings and shape recommendations. The main ideas generated included the importance of introducing the program early, preferably during the commencement seminar. Networking with other students, increased awareness of current leadership challenges and opportunities to share thoughts were three key purposes cited for the program.

Key recommendations were to design mentoring workshops for new MBA students to be conducted at the start of each study period. At these workshops students would be introduced to the program and, most importantly, meet the mentors. Virtual or e-mentoring for business students is a recent phenomenon (Whiting and de Janasz, 2004) and as there has been a shift toward online studies in the past few years, a recommendation also included a virtual classroom for online students.

The design and trial of the program

The design

Data collected from 265 students during the exploratory stage of the program informed the vision, aims and key platform for the program. The program's goal was to provide all new MBA students with the opportunity to add value to their learning, with the support of fellow students and mentors. According to one student:

I found adjusting to being a student again a great challenge. Mentoring could aid the transition and kick start the successful move to becoming and remaining a student with UniSA.

The purpose of the program was to give students the opportunity to: maximize their learning in the program; develop a support network of peers and graduates early in the program and participate in a professional networking forum to enable virtual as well as face-to-face meetings, depending on location and circumstances. The advisory group felt that it was important to raise the profile of mentoring so that students would see the benefits of it both for study and at work. For this reason, I liaised with course facilitators to encourage them to incorporate the support of a workplace mentor for early assignments. We designed an initial four-hour mentoring workshop for on campus students and online students who could attend. The workshop started with

an introduction to mentoring, followed by a discussion about their challenges and fears and a Q&A session with the mentors. At the conclusion of the session students met in smaller groups, with one or two mentors.

Exploring the type and scope of support that mentors could offer was important, hence the design of a mentoring guide-book. Video clips with mentors outlining the type of support students could expect to receive from them were also developed and loaded to the online site. This support included assisting with networking, personal and professional development, or simply being a critical friend as they get started in the academic writing process. Although students were encouraged to attend the initial workshop, their ongoing participation in the mentoring activity was optional. For those who wished to continue their involvement after the initial session, a number of options were available to them: for instance, they could form mentoring circles (a blend of face to face and virtual meetings) with fellow students and either one or two mentors; they could ask for one-to-one support from a mentor; or they could use the resource site to ask questions, access mentoring resources and keep in touch.

The trial

The design of the mentoring program relied on finding alumni to become mentors. I wanted to work closely with mentors to fine tune the program and collaborate with them to form a critical community of adult learners. After forming a mentoring team we commenced the trial in 2011; in all, 80 students participated in the trial mentoring program with the support of six mentors. We explored various ways to enact the mentoring program. In the first study period a four-hour mentoring workshop was conducted. Students were divided into four groups, each with a graduate mentor. Next the mentors worked in pairs with larger groups of students. Mentors thought that two mentors per learning group would offer participants more variety and make it easier to work in the circles. Student feedback from the first semester workshop resulted in a shorter workshop (three hours) with less input and more time spent with the mentors. Finally we decided not to form groups at the initial session and instead, participants had the opportunity to meet the mentors in a more informal space. Approximately one-third of the students followed up with the mentors with a request for a face-to-face meeting, phone call or e-mail contact.

Data were collected at the end of each study period. Overall, comments were positive, with the most frequently cited benefits listed as: exchange of information; understanding that others had the same concerns; increased confidence; opportunity to discuss common challenges and ways to overcome them; being able to “pick the brains of our mentors”; and expanding their network quickly. Students appreciated the safety nets of having guides who had “been there” before, and were available if required, as illustrated in this student’s comment:

The exercise really worked well for me and I love this idea. This gave me a good opportunity to understand the nature of the course, level of expectations from students and assignment tips through directly talking to the people who have already completed the course.

Mentors reported, in the follow up after the workshop, that students approached them for a variety of reasons including questions about career development pathways, how to achieve work-life-study balance, help with writing the first assignment, ways of building self-confidence and asking advice about subsequent courses, and overseas options and networking.

During the trial we also developed a mentoring activity for online students – a one hour virtual classroom during which time new students were introduced to the program,

their mentors and the virtual site. Bierema and Hill (2005) posited major e-mentoring challenges – these included slower development of relationships than face to face; computer malfunction and technology problems. Unfortunately, these problems were encountered at our online trial, with poor attendance and technical problems. As a result of this, we recommended the development of a web site and encouraged students to participate through virtual forums, ask questions, or simply to contact the mentors by phone or e-mail, rather than participating in a virtual classroom. The possibility of live streaming for both online and on campus students was also explored. The mentors worked on this site to include mentor profiles, Q&A, resources and opportunities for students to ask questions and use an interactive forum.

Choosing the mentors

Throughout the trial there were six mentors and, in order to keep the pool of mentors current, new mentors came on board each year until, in 2015, there were 15 mentors participating in the program. These mentors were recent MBA graduates who volunteered their time supporting new students when required. They also supported the Program Director at marketing dinners as well as offering their management expertise as guest speakers for relevant MBA courses. Mentors were invited to take part in the program because they attended alumni events and were keen to remain involved with the University. Traditional mentoring programs usually involve the selection of mentors and the matching of mentors to mentees. In this program there was no vetting of mentors and the onus was given completely to the new students to choose whom they thought would give them the support they required. Hence, it was a personal approach to selection without formal form-filling or specific guidelines. This is in line with Darwin's (2004) view on mentoring – that there is no one with a magic formula on what makes for a competent mentor:

In our search for the “perfect mentor” we may have been too quick to judge people from a set of positive qualities and fallen into the functionalist trap of using mentoring to maintain the status quo. There is a need to construct new maps that value difference and utilise these differences so that all employees, regardless of their personality differences, can play an important role in workplace learning (Darwin, p. 41).

Implementing the program

A successful trial in 2011 resulted in the program's implementation in 2012 and beyond. Mentoring workshops were conducted for on campus students (approximately 25 students per workshop) at the commencement of each study period. Students were able to choose their own means of mentoring support as if they were forming a board of advisers. Evaluation of the program was positive and showed that students were becoming more conscious of mentoring as a management tool as a result of this program, as stated by one student:

The importance of having a mentor in other aspects of work and study was another benefit of the program.

Clearly, students appreciated the initial workshop most, gaining the knowledge that help was there if required. Feedback forms included statements for the students to choose from the following: I gained useful knowledge; useful skills; felt more confident; understand how mentoring can support our learning and feel confident about contacting mentors for support. Further questions asked students to evaluate the format of the session and

whether they would recommend this workshop to others. In all workshop evaluations, scores of over 4.5 out of a possible 5 were achieved. The reality is that students are challenged with their tight time commitments, as reflected in these comments:

Keeping up with the MBA has been a challenge outside of work and personal commitments.

I just didn't have the time to fit it all in. I had a very good group for our group assignment and we helped one another out (almost like a mini mentoring group). I did read the material that was posted and it was helpful but I didn't have the time to participate actively in the mentoring groups.

So what were the benefits for students? During the initial workshop mentors asked students to think about their fears and challenges at the beginning of the program. Here is a sample of their answers:

- As an international student English could be a fear if I cannot understand the language adequately.
- Lack of time management and not being organized enough to handle the work load as well as staying motivated – workload vs a need for a life.
- Writing assignments and group presentations. To finish my assignments. As I have not studied for many years I am afraid that my writing skills will not be strong enough.
- My greatest fear is that I would not finish the MBA successfully.
- Accounting and finance modules.
- The MBA and how it can help my career.
- Staying motivated – workload vs a need for a life.
- Researching online.
- Not having enough management experience to bring to my studies.
- To finish my assignments effectively and correctly.
- Not familiar enough with the Australian society and business environment.

The mentors addressed these concerns during the workshop and shared their own challenges and how they overcame them, providing strategies about the course and tips on how to succeed. They also offered their ongoing support and reminded students that their contact details could be found on the mentoring online site. Students appreciated the early support, as summarized by the following comment:

It was a helpful introduction to the MBA program. The mentors were welcoming and gave good information to start my study. They set out a question and answer forum that helped us to work through the teething issues of becoming a student again. They made themselves available for further information which I found to be reassuring even though I didn't use the offer.

Most students agreed that it was useful to know that help was available from those who had been there before, if required. This sentiment was reinforced up by the following comment: "It's great to see alumni being keen to give something back."

Reflection and review

Our work with students was under constant review. In addition to questionnaires distributed at mentoring workshops, we sought feedback from students at the end of

each study period. These feedback forms were distributed directly to students at their final class so the response rate was high (98 percent). Questions asked were: did you continue to participate in the mentoring circles after the initial mentoring workshop? What were the benefits? What were the limitations? What can we do differently to make the program more effective? We met each quarter to critique the program, share strategies for working with mentoring groups or individual students and plan for the next workshops and mentoring activities.

The students' reflections

Approximately 400 new students participated in the program from 2011 until 2015. Comments were always positive. The most frequently cited benefits were:

- exchange of information with fellow students and graduates;
- understanding that others had the same concerns;
- helped to boost level of confidence as a beginner to the course;
- discussed common challenges and ways to overcome them;
- appreciated comments and additional support offered by the mentors;
- being able to “pick the brains” of the mentors;
- expanding my MBA network quickly;
- being able to draw on the mentor’s experiences; and
- knowing “the support is there if I need it.”

The value of these meetings for students is reflected in the following comments:

I found the program useful and helpful. Our mentors were a wealth of knowledge. It was helpful getting through the first subject.

Our mentors were very supportive and have kept in contact on a regular basis. It is up to the individual if they wished to be involved or not. For those who were involved there were huge benefits to the networking.

The program has made the difference between me being an ordinary to an extraordinary student.

The mentors' reflections

The purpose of the mentoring program was shaped over time as we constantly asked ourselves how we defined mentoring and if we were making a difference. So, during each meeting we challenged each other on our perspectives on mentoring and what it could or should be. We came to see the program as an intellectual insurance policy for students. Many may not use the insurance often, some not at all and some may need to more than others. Those most likely to use it would be experienced managers without an undergraduate degree; those who had not studied for a decade or more; or international students. We agreed that our program needed to be dynamic, flexible and interactive. Further, the real value of the mentoring program is in the first workshop. This enables new students to meet with the mentors and know that support is available, if required. Approximately two-thirds of the students did not connect with mentors after the workshop and, further investigation showed that it was because of time constraints as indicated by this student: “I didn’t take advantage of the mentoring. Availability of time was the barrier.”

What do mentors get out of the program?

The benefits of mentoring for mentors and mentees has been widely researched over the past decades and most studies (Clawson, 1989; Haggard *et al.*, 2011; Kram, 1985) conclude that mentoring is a mutually beneficial developmental relationship for both parties, with mentors gaining a sense of personal gratification (Eby and Lockwood, 2005) as well as improving their own learning and communication skills (Rekha, 2012). As part of our data collection, mentors were invited to write a brief paragraph about their role as mentors. Here are some comments from those who have been involved in the program since its inception. These comments confirmed the findings of earlier studies. First, mentors found it to be an enjoyable learning experience as articulated here:

It has been an exciting five years on this mentoring journey for me post the MBA program. I have learnt a great deal about myself in the way I present myself and also the way I can relate to others. The mentoring program posed many difficulties and challenges that I believe we have overcome through continuous feedback and re-evaluating the approach that mentors take with every new study period. I loved relaying our MBA experiences onto new students in hope that it will reassure and calm them before they start their MBA journey. I believe this is evident in the success that the program has been running for the last five years and continues to keep running and also the new mentors that the program has attracted. I feel honoured to be part of this journey with some of the most interesting and amazing people I have worked alongside and learnt from.

Another benefit was the knowledge that they are giving back to fellow learners by sharing their own experiences at the start of the journey, as shown by this comment:

I think we have all agreed over time it is not so much a mentoring program but one of being a ‘buddy’ – a ‘go to person’ for information and help in the early days of their study journey. For me, the most rewarding part of it is seeing the relief on their faces as they realise they are not alone, that there are people around to help, and people that are sincerely interested in them as a student and their journey to complete an MBA. Being able to alleviate road blocks with useful and pertinent information in a timely manner is invaluable as a postgraduate student with time restraints. I just find it so rewarding to know that I have taken the fear of the unknown and the fear of limitations away from students and have given them the confidence to believe in themselves that this is a path they can take with the support of many.

This further comment supports the view that, if new students go into their first course feeling confident that they can achieve their goals they are less likely to suffer burnout or dropout of the MBA program:

I am pleased to have had the opportunity to share my experience of the MBA course with other students and also with future students. I am hoping that my contribution has assisted in recruiting more students to the course and enabling current students to feel empowered to commence the course. I feel that my involvement in the mentor program has made me realise the benefit of having a mentor. Assisting people with their questions concerning the course and making connections with the business community has shown me I can make a difference. I hope the mentor program does continue in some form because from the feedback which has been received from each of the sessions the students seem to see it as a benefit. I think it is reassuring for the students to hear from past students who have gone through what they are about to embark on and have actually survived.

And from a newer mentor:

While I have only been a mentor for a short time, it certainly doesn't feel that way. This program provides the opportunity for many students to connect with alumni and with other students to

maximise their learning experiences in a warm, passionate and embracing environment. It is presented in an informal setting, which encourages open and honest discussion. The mentors come from very different backgrounds and share different experiences, allowing students to gain diverse knowledge in one setting. As a mentor it has given me a sense of achievement and provided another challenge in empowering others to achieve their best.

So it would seem that mentors appreciated the opportunity to give back to the program and felt a sense of fulfilment that they were actually making a difference to others. Students take, on average, five years to complete an MBA. On the way, they make valuable contacts with other students. When they finish the course, becoming a mentor is a way in which they can keep in touch with like-minded others and continue to learn and grow themselves. Some have gone through the MBA linked into the mentoring program and have then become mentors themselves. They have also taken the mentoring culture into their organization. The following student is one of these:

I believe the mentoring program made the practical connection from the MBA teachings to my own world. I'm quite a capable person at work as are all MBA students but the program allowed me to put in practice those qualities to become a real leader. The main benefit I witnessed was a definite relief of anxiety for the new students who attended the program. It's in my nature to become involved, progress from student to becoming a mentor seemed quite natural. The information sessions were a great way to meet new students, make connections and help a number of them through their first subject. All the results were positive and rewarding while at the same time allowing me to develop my own skills further. At the request of the department manager I am now mentoring a graduate engineer, teaching him in a short time the skills that took me years.

Conclusions and recommendations

What were we hoping to achieve? Did we achieve it? These questions were raised during each of our quarterly review meetings. Recent literature about formal mentoring programs is consistent in identifying success factors but less clear in determining how we measure success, particularly when it relates to subjective factors (Zellers *et al.*, 2008). One possible way of measuring success is by the number of students who contact mentors after the initial workshop. If that is the case, we have not been very successful, as less than one-third of students sought ongoing support. Yet the feedback every time, after the first workshop, has been positive – students appreciated this session. So, we accepted the fact that the value was at the beginning and developed a new paradigm for success by using the analogy of an insurance policy – “being there” is a safety net for new MBA students.

We also puzzled about the definition of mentors and concluded that we were not really mentors but more like buddies. Also, there was a desire, on the part of the mentors, to assist with careers and leadership growth: According to one mentor:

The actual outcome seemed to be more of a buddy system. The benefit has never really been fully realised as mentoring is an effective tool for the mentors to implementing their leadership learning while preparing mentees for their future roles as effective managers and leaders.

Kram (1988), an early mentoring researcher, unpacked a number of mentoring functions, divided into two main areas of career and psychosocial. Career functions included sponsorship, exposure and visibility, protection and challenge. Psychosocial functions included role modeling, acceptance and confirmation, counseling and friendship. It is not possible to offer a comprehensive list of mentoring functions provided to students at the

beginning of their management course because mentoring relies on building connections with people. If the students ask for practical advice in the beginning, perhaps those relationships will grow over time. Mentoring adds a dimension to the business world as mentors value the contributions of others and it is the generous giving of mentors that probably serves as the greatest role model for our business students. The UniSA Business School places store in the development of student qualities, including the knowledge and skills to become managers of substance. Hence, the environment needs to be a place where graduates will keep wanting to learn after their course is completed. One mentor summarized these sentiments in the following words:

I wish this valuable resource had been available as part of my study program at UniSA. As a mentor it feels like the right thing to do to give back to a program that enabled me to develop and grow as a leader. The mentors' "meet and greet" session at the start of each new course evokes a diverse range of questions, fears and concerns from the student cohort. With such a broad cross-section of mentors the students align themselves with a mentor with whom they feel comfortable. This is the start of the mentor/mentee relationship.

What critical lessons did we learn and what can we advocate to others?

It is important that students perceive mentoring as adding value to their learning rather than as a deficit model of intervention (Zellers *et al.*, 2008). We have tried to infuse the spirit of mentoring across the courses in order to embed it into the management culture. We have done this by including the requirement of a mentor in some of the early assignments, by having an online presence and by valuing the continued involvement of our graduates. This has only come about because senior management has supported the program and embraced the spirit of mentoring as giving back as an integral part of the culture. It cannot work otherwise.

It is important to keep the pool of mentors current. According to one of the mentors who had been involved since 2010:

I saw the benefit of a collegiate approach by an open minded and professional group of people that allowed the program design to change and go in a variety of directions in its attempt to be of most use to the most people. I also learnt the power of renewal when people who had been in the group from the start (me included) took a step back and allowed fresh people with new ideas to take the lead and keep the program moving. It has been a rewarding exercise and an absolute pleasure to be involved.

Finally, we need to re-work the mentoring narrative. Coleman (1988) referred to the personal relationships in a learning community as "social capital" which represents connections among people in a given place that allows them to care for one another and to look out for each other's well-being. He found, for instance, that high school dropout rates correlated not to socioeconomic levels, but instead to students' ties to the community – the more community ties students had, the less likely they were to dropout of school. Perhaps, so too with higher education students, as other studies have suggested (Bell-Ellison and Dedrick, 2008; Crisp and Cruz, 2009; George and Mampilly, 2012). Participating students have reported greater feelings of connectedness and increased confidence as a result of this program, indicating strong links between the forming of networking ties and mentoring (Hezlett and Gibson, 2007). The importance of a support network is captured in the following mentor's comment:

The practical advice, guidance and sharing of our knowledge of how we approached the MBA program was helpful to many students and for students, just knowing there is a support network available to them is reassuring.

This mentoring program has been evolving since 2010 and is a work-in-progress. There are ongoing challenges. One is to ensure that mentors are not under-utilized as the mentoring team becomes larger; another is to maintain a critical community of learners to keep the program innovative and flexible. Feedback from over 600 students is very clear – they value the interaction with credible mentors who have been there before them. Given the potential benefits identified in the present study, which is limited to a single case study institution, further research might usefully explore other contemporary mentoring models and processes for higher education business students.

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