

The Evolution of a University-Based Peer Mentorship Program

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Abstract

The article describes the process of developing an undergraduate peer mentorship program for preservice teachers in response to the dropping numbers of students declaring education as their major and teachers remaining in the profession. The goal of the program was to provide mentoring early on in the undergraduate program to mirror the element of peer support included in new teacher induction programs and to provide ongoing support to new alumni. The application of theoretical foundations for the peer mentoring concept is discussed, and the implementation and evolution of the mentorship model is chronicled. Practical factors that contributed most significantly to implementation of the program, such as types of support, access to mentors, an increase in distance learning, and mentor leadership and initiative, are outlined.

Keywords: Peer mentorship, preservice teachers, professional development school

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Introduction

As Charlotte began the elementary/special education program in her junior year, she learned of a peer mentorship program that would match her with a senior who could help guide her throughout her junior year. She entered the elementary school a little unsure of what it would be like, having not been in a school before this as an intern. She was relieved and appreciative when she met her senior mentor, Mary, who was also placed in the same school and whom she saw each week. Mary offered advice about how to juggle placement and classes and gave her encouragement through the adjustment to a heavy workload because she had just been through that adjustment the year before. Charlotte learned there was a social event organized by a senior group in the program, and she was able to go and talk to other seniors and some of her junior peers about her experiences. This helped her realize she was not alone in how she was feeling and that it would get better.

In the field of education, peer mentorship has existed as a major part of new teacher induction programs in an effort to support fledgling teachers and reduce attrition rates. Though the models may vary, the primary goal is for more experienced peers to provide professional support to novices entering the profession. These experiences have been shown to decrease attrition rates (Sutcher et al., 2016; Woods, 2016) over the first several years of teaching.

While mentoring has been demonstrated to have a positive impact on new teachers, research over the last two decades has indicated a need for more robust support and authentic experience that extends to the level of preservice teachers (Latham, Mertens, & Hamann, 2015; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2020; National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, 2003; National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education, 2010) to better prepare them for their future careers and retain more prospective teachers for the profession. In 2016, only 4.5% of students surveyed planned to study education, which is down from 7.2% in 2010 and 11% in 2000. Nationwide, the drop in enrollment in teacher preparation programs between 2009 and 2019 was over 30% (Partelow, 2019; Sutcher, Darling-Hammond, & Carver-Thomas, 2016). According to the most recent AACTE (2025) federal data analysis, "after growing slightly in recent years, enrollment in comprehensive teacher preparation programs fell in 2022-23 to the lowest level recorded." In our southern state alone, enrollment in traditional teacher preparation programs has dropped 15%. Of the preservice teachers who are enrolled in programs, fewer are completing them (Derringer, 2017; AACTE, 2025). According to

recent statistics from the Pew Research Center (Schaeffer, 2022), the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic included a further decline in the number of bachelor degrees conferred in the field of education. This underscores the importance of providing early and continuous support for those entering the profession like Charlotte, the preservice teacher.

As part of a high-quality teacher education program, peer mentorship at the preservice level can be an important element of support as prospective teachers form the foundation of their attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors about the field of education and themselves as teachers. However, few examples of peer mentorship programs and research at the preservice level have been discussed in the current literature (Caplan & Bedir, 2019; Faucette & Nugent, 2012; Heirdsfield & LeCornu, 2007; Walker et al., 2008). Of those described, the elements of shared responsibility, consistent peer support and active observation, and learning within a community have been highlighted as important.

Purpose of the Article

In this article, we seek to provide an overview of the theoretical understandings and research which grounded the development of a university-based peer mentorship program for undergraduate students in a dual certification program in Elementary and Special Education (ELE/SPED). We will share the evolving program's nature, challenges throughout the years explored, and practical considerations when developing a mentorship program.

Concept of Peer Mentorship

The concept of peer mentorship is closely connected to the constructivist perspective, which emphasizes the active role of the learner in constructing meaning and knowledge. The importance or benefit of social interaction is also explored as a means for further cognitive development. Palincsar (1998) describes the concept of "sociocognitive conflict," based on the cognitive constructivist theory of Piaget, indicating that learners actively involved in peer interactions may experience more cognitive growth than when learning from adults. Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivist theory also emphasizes the social setting and environmental supports as major catalysts to cognitive development and learning. His concept of the "zone of proximal development" naturally applies to hierarchical or tiered models of peer mentorship, in which a slightly "more knowledgeable other," who has recently experienced the same context, interacts with and participates in the development of a mentee.

Kram (1983) articulated a model of traditional peer mentoring in the business arena that could be applied and adapted to peer mentoring in higher education. According to this model, the peer mentorship context serves two purposes or functions. The function of psychosocial support includes acceptance, counseling, role modeling, and friendship provided by the mentor to increase self-efficacy and confidence. The function of career development involves sponsorship, protection, gaining access to challenging work assignments, and coaching within the organization that exposes the mentee to essential elements of the profession in an environment that supports their practical application and development.

Terrion and Leonard (2007) expanded on this framework to provide a taxonomy of valuable peer mentor characteristics in a higher-education setting based on the two functions outlined by Kram (1983). In terms of the career-related function, these researchers indicate the most important characteristic in a peer mentor is a shared program of similar experiences from which to draw and model, followed by motivation toward self-enhancement or advancing their career goals that would lead to the mentor focusing on career aspects of mentoring rather than primarily friendship. Taxonomy characteristics within the psychosocial function include, in descending order, elements that allow the mentor to contribute to reducing stress in the midst of uncertainty, often with the goal of reducing attrition. These characteristics include effective communication skills, supportiveness and trustworthiness for reducing stress and anxiety, empathetic response, an attitude of interdependency in forging a collegial or reciprocal relationship between mentor and mentee, the personality match between mentor and mentee, enthusiasm for and perseverance in the mentoring process, and flexibility in respecting differences in values or mentor expectations toward the mentee. In addition to the mentor characteristics that were categorized by Kram's two functions, Terrion and Leonard (2007) also outlined five characteristics that could be considered general prerequisites fundamental for mentor applicants to possess in order to provide an effective and impactful mentorship experience. These include willingness for the time commitment required for the process and experience navigating the university context or the program in which mentorship is occurring. Factors with more limited or conflicting research evidence also include gender and race in terms of matching by these characteristics in contexts in which the culture or demographics of the setting may suggest a need for more support. In addition, academic achievement or expertise and prior experience as a mentor were identified as po-

tentially important characteristics to consider in mentor applicants, though research support does not indicate they are as crucial.

Other researchers have reinforced similar elements important in supporting these students in their transition to higher levels of learning. Nora and Crisp (2007) summarized four variables involved in the concept of mentoring, which directly coincide with some of the aspects described as needed for preservice teachers to be more effectively prepared. These specific elements include psychological and emotional support, goal setting and career support, support in academic content knowledge, and presence of a role model. While other mentors, such as university faculty and mentor teachers in the school environment, provide more support in some of the areas (academic content knowledge, goal setting and career support), peer mentors can play a major role in psychological and emotional support, by listening to the preservice teacher and relating their own experiences. They can also serve as role models to preservice teachers who are learning at the level they have just successfully completed and provide assistance in key skills involved in the development of teaching.

In addition to modeling and socioemotional support, McLean (2004) validated the importance of knowledge of the context in which the undergraduate mentee is participating. In a study of whether or not experience with a similar curriculum made an impact on the undergraduate mentoring process, McLean found that, indeed, a match between the curricular experiences of the new undergraduate mentee and the senior mentor led to a deeper understanding of the problems being explored and, thus, a stronger connection. With this kind of shared experience and knowledge, a more reciprocal or collective sense of responsibility may also be facilitated.

Call for Quality Teacher Education to Better Prepare New Teachers for the Profession

Considering the completion of an education degree as compared to other degrees, in 2019-2020 only 4% of the total number of bachelor's degrees conferred at colleges and universities were in education, compared with 19% in 2000-2001. (Schaeffer, 2022). The American Association of College of Education's 2022 report *College of Education: A National Portrait* indicates "many of the challenges affecting colleges of education that were identified in the first edition [2018] of the National Portrait remain and have been heightened due to the coronavirus pandemic" (AACTE, 2022). In addition to fewer teacher graduates, statistics show that 40-50% of new teachers leave the field

within the first five years (Heider, 2005; Ingersoll & Smith, 2003; Sun, 2012). Teacher shortages in 2022 revealed that 44% of all public schools experienced vacancies in part-time and full-time teaching positions (NCES, 2022).

Part of the attrition seems related to the nature of the job. The first years of teaching are intensely demanding, and the existence and type of mentorship new teachers receive varies widely from district to district and state to state. Novice teachers often report feeling unprepared for the demands of the first years, including not only content knowledge and workload, but also the emotional intensity of managing daily challenges and tasks within the classroom and profession (Liston et al., 2006). Some reasons cited for new teacher attrition include stress (Darling-Hammond, 2001), feelings of isolation (Heider, 2005), lack of support from colleagues and administration (Ingersoll, 2001; Khan, 2019; Sun, 2012), lower levels of self-efficacy and socioemotional development (Khan, 2019), and classroom management issues, in addition to juggling the variety of curricular and professional duties the job entails. While induction programs are essential in developing and supporting new teachers in these areas and moving beyond “survival mode” in the first years, universities have been playing a role in further developing preservice teachers.

Issues with new teacher attrition and lack of preparedness have resulted in renewed interest in assuring high quality teacher education programs, providing practical experience and socioemotional support to preservice teachers to allow them to learn to address the challenges and rigors of the profession within an authentic, scaffolded environment (Hammerness et al., 2005; Liston et al., 2006). Studies have indicated that teacher preparation programs with extended field experiences, especially within a collaborative, partnership-based environment, produce teachers who are more likely to remain in the teaching profession (Darling-Hammond, 2001; Hammerness et. al., 2005; Latham et al., 2015). In addition to the support provided by faculty and mentor teachers in such a collaborative environment, peer mentors can support preservice teachers by providing a relatable perspective and practical guidance based on their own experiences along the same path.

Nature and Value of Peer Mentorship for Developing Teachers

The process of peer mentoring can result in benefits for both the mentor and mentee. Mentors are often eager to share their own experiences and advice (Faucette & Nugent, 2017; Heirdsfield et al., 2008), while mentees value the experience of peers who have recently com-

pleted the same requirements and experiences (Faucette & Nugent, 2012; Vaughn et al., 2016). Mentees seem to build a sense of confidence in their abilities from the support of peers (Faucette & Nugent, 2012; Heirdsfield et al., 2008) and begin to develop a mutually respectful professional support network (Vaughn et al., 2016). The positive encouragement of the mentor is clearly valued by mentees (Heirdsfield et al., 2008; Vaughn et al., 2016), with peer mentoring creating a type of psychosocial and emotional support not provided otherwise (Collier, 2015; Faucette & Nugent, 2012; Heirdsfield et al., 2008), in addition to the positive impact of the mentoring experience on academic persistence (Collier, 2015).

In a review of the research, peer mentoring incorporated as part of a course assignment has an appeal as a model due to the convenience of an established time and place for mentoring. Faucette and Nugent (2017) designed an assignment for senior-level Physical Education students to mentor juniors in the same program. The four sessions had a focus on lesson planning, classroom management, and specific aspects of the physical education curriculum. Vaughn et al. (2016) designed a blended peer mentoring program embedded within a semester-long, education technology course assignment. First-year students were provided with online and face-to-face support from second-year education students for their journal and portfolio requirements.

Other peer mentoring programs occur during a field-based internship. Heirdsfield et al. (2008) developed a mentoring program that utilized third and fourth-year students serving as mentors during a 13-week internship for first-year alternative entry students. A major obstacle to mentoring was scheduling mentoring sessions with mentees. Finally, Faucette and Nugent's (2012) study utilized seniors as mentors to juniors during their fall seminar and spring internships. Their study found the junior-level students who continued in the program had contrasting views of the purpose of mentors from those who left the program. Those who left the program saw mentors as merely aides or helpers whereas those who continued saw mentors as guides and developers with knowledge they needed to grow in the program. While the nature of the mentorship experience varies in the above examples from the literature, the nature of the elements of shared responsibility and learning within a community have been highlighted as important.

The Unique Role of Peer Mentors

The idea of providing support and guidance to pre-service teachers is rooted in scaffolding. Scaffolding in content knowledge and its

practical application within a teacher preparation program is typically provided by faculty within courses, as well as supervisors and mentor teachers in the field experience. While traditional, hierarchical mentorship experiences produce benefits for both the mentee and mentor, at times this context can overlook the value the mentee can bring to the table and assign “power” to the expert mentor. In a peer mentoring relationship, there is a closer match in age and power, while still offering opportunities for support and role modeling. (Colvin & Ashman, 2010). Recent research and practice in peer mentorship have discussed a more collaborative approach to the mentoring process for both in-service and preservice teachers (Cuddapah & Clayton, 2011; LeCornu, 2007; Meyer, 2002). This reciprocal, collaborative process has been described in a variety of ways within the teacher preparation and professional development setting, whether it be pairs of peer mentors or a broader learning community, providing reciprocal support and constructing learning and meaning together.

Peer mentorship can provide further scaffolding and socioemotional support to supplement the mentorship received from cooperating teachers and supervisors. Sparks (1986) and Hammerness et. al. (2005) indicated the nature of various types of support is a crucial element in preservice teacher learning, with mentorship and support from experts and peers playing a key role. As preservice teachers meet new challenges in the authentic, extended, collaborative setting described as most beneficial (Darling-Hammond, 2001; Latham et al., 2015), socioemotional support is also needed earlier as they develop their sense of self-efficacy. Sparks (1986) found that observation from and discussion with a peer was sometimes even more effective than that of a trainer or coach in a professional development setting.

For new preservice teachers, as with novice in-service teachers, the transition to a rigorous, more intense professional program is often daunting, and a more knowledgeable peer can ease the transition and provide modeling, information, and socioemotional guidance. In addition, collaborating with peers within the teacher education program can prepare preservice teachers for collaboration within the school setting. Extending the mentorship experience to include new teachers who have just completed the teacher preparation program and are employed within field placement school systems can also provide information and emotional support to those preparing to graduate from the same program.

With peer mentorship provided at both the preservice and in-service levels, in addition to professional development, new teachers could be more emotionally equipped to anticipate and meet the challenges they

face. Hammerness et. al. (2005) discuss the value of preservice teachers learning within a more comprehensive, supportive community, stating that learning about the practice of teaching “is strengthened when it is embedded within a broad *community* of practitioners – experienced teachers, other student teachers, teacher educators, and students, so that they can gain access to the experiences, practices, theories, and knowledge of the profession” (p. 405-406). LeCornu (2007) goes further to say preservice teachers need to be provided with opportunities to engage in and learn the skills of collaborative mentoring during their initial teacher education program to prepare them to participate in learning communities in their future educational setting. Such skills include the attitude of mentoring, or valuing one’s own learning and the learning of others, as well as interpersonal skills and the ability to critically reflect. Faucette & Nugent (2012) confirm the importance of the reciprocal relationship, discussing the fact that those who come to the mentoring process as both active givers and receivers and with an attitude of responsibility are more likely to continue with and gain positive results from the process. Both LeCornu (2007) and Faucette & Nugent (2017) discuss the process of a reciprocal peer mentorship process in which both participants engage in shared decision making about the mentorship experience, including goals and communication.

Implementation of a Peer Mentorship Program

Context

Students in the ELE/SPED program are dually certified in elementary education and special education. The initial peer mentorship program was formed as the result of student requests for additional support from other students in the program. Students believed others a year ahead of them in the program could help with adjustments related to the nature and workload of the program and field of teaching. As such, each phase of the program was developed as a stand-alone opportunity and was not connected to a course or field internship requirement.

During the initial years, the mentorship program was implemented within a traditional cohort model. Junior and senior-level students attended classes on the university’s campus and students’ internships were spread across a variety of school districts for placements.

In the fifth year of the program, the College of Education’s direction changed to one that was modeled after the Professional Development Schools concept (Holmes, 1986). The Professional Development Community (PDC) included multiple schools, and oftentimes, schools across two neighboring counties. Juniors and seniors were placed to-

gether at PDC schools for their year-long internships. University courses were housed within or near local elementary schools for each PDC. These factors resulted in students having more access to each other, greater opportunities for mentors and mentees to discuss issues and for mentees to see practices modeled by the mentor.

As the program and number of partner school districts grew, the PDC model was dissolved. A number of special programs were also being implemented in which ELE/SPED senior students and current paraprofessionals were teaching during the day and taking courses simultaneously. This necessitated an increase in online learning, and the fact that students were spread across a wider span of locations made it more difficult for mentors and mentees to communicate in person. Thus, a pivot was necessary to incorporate more distance-based mentorship.

Evolving and Responsive Peer Mentorship Models

When the peer mentorship program was originally developed within the ELE/SPED cohort model, a more formalized and personalized format was possible in pairing mentors and mentees and providing scheduled time for meetings. Junior mentees submitted a list of compatible and preferred mentors and were matched with one after having an opportunity to get to know the seniors. Monthly socials allowed the pairs to discuss questions, successes, and challenges.

Email check-ins and exchanges between the advisor and mentees throughout the mentorship year, and informal discussions during meetings, indicated a varied pattern of mentor engagement. With the contextual understanding of a heavy workload within the certification program and varied levels of leadership capacity in the mentors, the model was revised into a *peer mentorship leadership team*. Nine seniors, each mentoring 2-3 juniors, were nominated by faculty based on their success with time management and peer support, for example. Seniors checked in on their junior mentees periodically to provide support and visited junior classes to offer advice and assistance with junior level skills like lesson planning. The seniors who were not selected were asked to identify areas of strength, resulting in a senior expert list that was distributed amongst the junior mentees. Juniors were encouraged to utilize this list as a resource when they encountered difficulties in a certain academic area. Check-ins throughout this phase of the program indicated a pattern of more engagement between mentors and mentees, with juniors feeling positive about their interactions with seniors, feeling there was clear communication to support their challenges. Both juniors and seniors enjoyed the whole group skill sup-

port experience during classroom visits. This model continued to prove challenging for many of the participants to balance with their ELE/SPED program responsibilities.

Recognizing this legitimate concern, the program moved to being completely *volunteer based* for both juniors and seniors. For example, seniors were given the opportunity to apply to become a mentor or serve on a committee in another area of support, including morale boosting, communication, and social planning. Juniors were offered a choice in participating and were asked to indicate their level of interest in receiving a mentor. Each mentor attended a brief mentorship training, during which they received information about positive mentoring practices. Seniors who applied to one of the other support “jobs” worked collaboratively in small committees to discuss and fulfil the recommended duties. For example, the communication committee created monthly newsletters that were emailed to all juniors.

The junior-senior pairs determined goals for the year and checked in with the faculty advisor to update their progress and goals. The concept of reciprocal support was also encouraged, and junior mentees were asked to discuss with their mentors any ways in which they could contribute to the mentorship experience. Junior mentees were encouraged to spend a day in the student teaching classroom of their senior mentors or allow their senior mentors to observe one of their lessons and provide feedback. Within the PDC model, the proximity of mentors and mentees made more of these opportunities possible, but it also allowed for juniors outside of the mentor-mentee pairs to informally seek advice from seniors in their placement schools without the monitored mentorship experience and the perceived pressure related to it.

Extending the Peer Mentorship Experience

Throughout the evolution of the junior-senior peer mentorship program, alumni have been invited to “give back” to graduating seniors through more informal opportunities, such as serving on a panel of new teachers to offer advice on successes and challenges and what to expect during the first years of teaching, as well as volunteering to be a point of contact or host seniors for a day in their classroom to get a glimpse into the first year of teaching. Upon graduating from the program in which they received and offered support, first-year teachers are often anxious to advise those preparing to follow in their footsteps. Informal opportunities have been well received by seniors, with the panel often being embedded within a seminar session and the classroom visits being conducted via voluntary sign-up.

Since the level and type of induction support for new teachers may vary by district, and the transition to the first years of teaching can be overwhelming, the College of Education and the ELE/SPED program have strived to maintain outreach efforts and provide ongoing connection opportunities for recent graduates. In response to this, an alumni teacher group was developed, providing a network and community of faculty and peer teachers and opportunities for workshops, socials, and resources. In its first two years, participating alumni attended semi-monthly meetings, in which they shared successes, challenges, strategies, and camaraderie and participated in workshops and book clubs on requested topics, such as behavior management and writing strategies. Organic conversations between the alumni about instructional methods also led to reciprocal classroom visits, in which two alumni visited each other's classrooms to observe strategies in action and take them back to utilize in their own schools.

While the activities of this alumni group were engaging and productive, schedule challenges and increasingly more widely spread teaching locations, in addition to the COVID pandemic, made it difficult for many of the alumni to meet in person. Activities such as the alumni panel and periodic alumni meetings were moved to a virtual format, which continued to involve a committed small group of recent graduates (10-15) and a more limited number of senior students at various events.

Connecting in the Era of Distance Learning and Social Media

As all or most courses moved online in the early 2020s, in-person mentorship opportunities became more difficult to coordinate, and students and alumni were spread across a wide variety of locations. In 2021, the alumni office at the university was seeking a more relatable and wide-reaching method of providing networking, mentoring, and information to graduating seniors and alumni in the community. Partnering with select colleges, including the College of Education, they piloted a networking platform connected to the university. In the College of Education, this resulted in over 100 senior students and alumni joining the platform and engaging with the content, including celebrations of alumni impact in the community, activities of senior students in the College of Education, and notifications of job postings. In addition, a pilot group of five mentor-mentee pairs was established between Elementary/Special Education seniors and first or second year alumni teaching in elementary classrooms. These pairs communicated at least twice during the semester and confirmed their meetings via

the platform. The following year, the focus was on engaging current students and alumni with broader content on the platform, and as fewer continued interacting, the platform was eventually dissolved. In communication with alumni who had participated on the platform, the primary reason for decreasing usage was that it was another platform to learn, rather than those they already typically utilized. The College of Education moved to the social media platforms most widely recognized and used by undergraduate students and alumni, Facebook and Instagram.

The move to social media outlets has proven successful in reaching and gaining participation from a wider range of graduating seniors and alumni from more COE programs and from an increasingly larger radius of districts and locations. The College of Education and COE Alumni pages are linked to cover the interests and needs of undergraduate students and new and established alumni. Graduating seniors are invited to join the COE Alumni page, and their accomplishments and future classroom contexts are shared and celebrated. These graduates are also surveyed about what they would like to see on the COE Alumni social media pages. The most common responses have included sharing of classroom themes and strategies, updates and spotlights on alumni, and information on graduate school and expanded career opportunities.

As the school year begins, alumni share their classroom layouts and strategies for the first weeks of school. As the year progresses, they are invited to do “story takeovers” and share their school day, methods, and resources. As Teachers of the Year for partner districts and schools are announced, alumni receiving these distinctions are celebrated and asked to share their experiences and advice to current seniors in the program as virtual guest speakers. The most recent virtual panels offered to COE seniors involved new alumni sharing advice for the first year of teaching and established alumni in various leadership roles, including administration, community leadership, and graduate school sharing their journey to their current position.

While COE seniors signed up for the virtual panels and indicated an interest, the final attendance for some events was lower due to workload issues during the school year. As synchronous scheduling continues to be a challenge but engagement in polls, posts, and stories on social media is thriving with two years of implementation, the ongoing asynchronous engagement of both seniors and alumni on social media will be emphasized and used as a springboard for connecting individuals or small groups who share similar locations, classroom contexts, or interests.

**Practical Considerations
for Developing a Peer Mentoring Program**

In examining our historical timeline and current evolutions of the peer mentoring program, we believe insights for others developing a similar model can be gleaned. Guerreiro and Neves de Jesus (2025) completed a literature review of twenty-three articles related to the role of peer mentoring in supporting academic success and preventing dropout in higher education. While their review included all mentor programs focused on these criteria, the roots of our program contained similar goals. We believe the common elements of studies with significant results in this review parallel our own review discussed earlier, as well as many of our practices, and would be worthwhile for others to consider. In addition, elements of consideration in implementing peer mentoring programs specifically in higher education, outlined by Collier (2015) can be overlaid to highlight broader implications.

Organization and Design of the Program

The review by Guerreiro and Neves de Jesus (2025) found that programs presenting a formal mentoring model while organized around voluntary participation with like majors matched yielded the most positive results. Collier (2015) indicated the design of the program should also center on overall and specific adjustment issues in transitioning to a specific program or the professional setting, and areas of interest or need within the target population. Methods that proved successful for this peer mentorship program included interest and content preference surveys, use of placement information, and small group discussions for determining needs and selection of appropriate mentors within the same Elementary/Special Education program.

Surveys drove mentor matching and topics to be addressed in meetings and social media content. For example, during orientation at the beginning of the year, both juniors and seniors would complete an interest or personality survey. In one PDC, a district trainer was invited to facilitate a session on a personality survey used widely within the districts during professional development to help teachers learn more about themselves and collaborate effectively. Juniors and seniors utilized their results in rotating discussions as part of a “speed mentoring” process to select their mentor or mentee. Placement proximity was also factored in, which made it easier for mentors and mentees to connect.

Needs and interests of the alumni group during the in-person phases were identified during meetings. These topics were addressed through organic discussions in a co-mentoring type of environment and

through professional development provided at some of the meetings. Topics of interest within the more recent virtual phases have been determined through an initial survey as graduating seniors joined the alumni pages on Instagram and Facebook. These interests are incorporated into content and invitations for story takeovers and videos.

One primary issue consistently raised among new juniors was adjustment to workload and field placement elements. The transition from the first two years of the college experience to the schedule and developing skills of a preservice teacher is often challenging in the first semester, similar to the adjustments required during freshman year in organization, stress management, and problem solving. Senior mentors, having just experienced this transition, were primed and eager to share their strategies for success in these areas. The benefits of this sharing of experiences were heightened when senior leaders were nominated for their high level of competence or volunteered as experts in their areas of strength. The topics consistently identified and discussed by alumni were classroom organization, behavior management, the teaching of writing, and graduate school options. Graduating seniors each year also identified navigating the first year of teaching as an area of concern. This topic has been addressed in all formats of the mentoring program through alumni panels and invitations for classroom visits, whether in person or virtual.

Interaction When Mentoring

Of the studies reviewed by Guerreiro and Neves de Jesus (2025), the most successful programs included a prevalence of organized group meetings rather than students determining their own meetings or only meeting as mentor-mentee, though McConney and Fourie-Malherbe (2022) provide a reminder that individual interactions are still important. Methods that were successful for this peer mentorship program included a blend of individual mentor-mentee sessions and scheduled socials, panels, or alumni co-mentoring meetings, as well as eventual broader interaction with content and each other on social media.

During the in-person phases of this peer mentorship program, mentor-mentee pairs experienced challenges scheduling meetings entirely on their own due to workload issues and proximity and indicated a preference for meetings scheduled by the faculty advisor. These periodic group mentor-mentee socials were incorporated into regular program-wide debriefing meetings. Since the pairs knew this consistently scheduled opportunity was provided, the stress of trying to address all items of interest in their own time was reduced. During mentoring so-

cials, mentor-mentee pairs were also able to talk with other pairs and extend the sharing and supportive experience.

As the emphasis moved to group interaction through social media, engagement among seniors and alumni increased dramatically on a much broader scale. The alumni social media page, with a broader focus and content based on senior surveys about what they would like to see as they became first year teachers, grew quickly to 200 followers in the first year, with consistent engagement, interaction, and participation in content, such as story takeovers, polls, and sharing pictures and videos. This format also provided a foundation for determining smaller group sessions on topics of interest. Voluntary events for seniors, outside of course sessions and seminars, still allowed for more direct and intimate interaction with alumni.

Support for Mentoring and Implementation

Most studies with significant results reviewed by Guerreiro and Neves de Jesus (2025) included mentor training. While no financial incentives were provided, students did receive institutional resources. Collier (2015) outlines a broader range of human and space resources to be considered in developing a peer mentoring program in higher education, including peers to serve as mentors, faculty to serve as advisors, available space for meeting, and, if available and necessary, financial resources for logistical elements. These proved to be areas of both success and challenge for this program, with resources primarily obtained and developed by an individual or small group of faculty advisors.

Regarding mentor training, senior mentors were prepared to offer specific kinds of suggested support, such as lesson planning assistance, invitations to visit their student teaching classrooms, and sharing strategies for organization and management of course and classroom activities. An initial meeting of mentors allowed seniors to discuss what did and didn't work well for them as junior mentees and set goals for themselves as senior mentors, receiving resources for achieving these goals. As a result, junior mentees received communication and support from mentors who were more engaged.

Alumni are often enthusiastic about becoming mentor teachers to new preservice teachers after completing their third year of teaching. Those who do are provided training by the College of Education. The connection they are able to forge with the preservice teacher, having recently completed the same program and their initial years of teaching within one of the partner schools, is meaningful and beneficial to both parties.

An area of needed support on the program side of implementing peer mentoring models and providing training is the human resources required to ensure success. In addition to the need for senior and alumni mentors to engage with mentees, institutional support from faculty advisors and department leaders is essential for developing the organizational structure, monitoring the implementation, and responding to changing program configurations and mentoring platforms. This proved challenging for the mentorship program being discussed here, as the process was being conducted on a voluntary basis by a very small number of faculty advisors. In person implementation required a great deal of coordination, especially when multiple sites and cohorts were involved. The move to virtual platforms allowed for broader outreach, though the consistent communication and posting of content on social media requires constant monitoring and updating of student and alumni lists. Connecting to departmental and college-wide initiatives and outreach, including social media pages and survey data, can be beneficial and offer support in this area.

Conclusion

As Charlotte began her senior year, she wanted to pass along the knowledge she had gained to another junior and participated in the program as a senior mentor herself. After graduation, Charlotte heard of an alumni peer mentoring program being developed within the department, and she was first in line to participate, knowing the impact of the support she had received during her program. She became an alumni leader in the creation of the new mentoring program, continuing the cycle of peers encouraging and inspiring each other.

Students like Charlotte may likely continue mentoring other educators throughout their teaching careers, and experiences that offer support at the undergraduate level clearly matter. With statistics supporting the trend of fewer educators due to attrition rates and fewer undergraduate students toward a need for strong collaborative opportunities and socioemotional support for new teachers, as well as pre-service teachers entering rigorous teacher education programs.

Mentorship programs must be responsive to the needs of the students, alumni, and the profession of education. As a result, change is to be expected. This mentoring program has evolved as the teacher education program, the teaching profession, and new platforms have evolved. Student and program needs have changed so the mentoring experience has changed as well. Had this program not adjusted over time, it would no longer be a part of the educator preparation experi-

ence. Students entering an undergraduate teacher education program with an emphasis on field experiences, such as ours, may find an even greater need for mentors as they adjust to a schedule of a full-time teacher. Newly minted teachers in an increasingly stressful profession and with varied levels of induction support may also continue to find a greater need for support from multiple sources, including their educator preparation program. While participation in peer mentorship over the years has varied, we believe the need to help model and build connections and relationships between our junior and senior-level students and alumni will remain as a pivotal component of this teacher education program and its success if we are to retain students and new teachers continuing their journeys in this field.

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