
“+SUCESSO@UPTUCALENSE”: GUIDING PRINCIPLES OF A TEACHER-STUDENT MENTORING PROGRAM TO PROMOTE FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS’ SUCCESS

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Abstract. Faculty-student mentoring programs can be integral part of institutional approaches to facilitate students’ transition and adaptation to higher education. This paper presents an outline of guiding principles for the implementation of a faculty-student mentoring program designed for first-year students. The initiative is part of a broader project called +Sucesso@UPortucalense, funded by the General Directorate for Higher Education (DGES) and the Recovery and Resilience Plan (PRR). Crucial elements of the program include: teacher training, the matching process and group formation, communication and interaction frequency, main focus of the teacher-student interactions, roles and responsibilities, and assessment. The key features of this teacher-student mentoring program are discussed considering the main goals of promoting students’ academic success, personal, social, and career development, and retention in higher education.

Key words: Student success, transition to higher education, adaptation, mentoring, teacher-student interaction

INTRODUCTION

The transition to higher education is a critical period for students, marked by significant challenges that can impact their well-being and mental health, career commitment, and academic success. Due to these many challenges, it is essential to equip students with skills and resources that can alleviate stress related to the transition and facilitate academic success and personal development. Mentoring is positively related to several outcome variables in higher education, ranging from retention and graduation rates to adjustment to the educational environment (Crisp & Cruz, 2009; Jacobi, 1991; Nuis et al., 2023; Sneyers & De Witte, 2018). In addition, the value of mentoring is even more important in the first year, while students adapt to their new roles and responsibilities (Almeida et al., 2016; Araújo, 2017; Cage et al., 2021; Casanova et al., 2024; Li & Lee, 2024; Thompson et al., 2021).

Despite the lack of a universally accepted definition, mentoring in higher education can be understood as a formalized helping relationship between two persons in which one person, the mentor, is more equipped, experienced, and competent, with the aim of supporting the mentee’s success and development (Crisp & Cruz, 2009; Nuis et al., 2023). Mentoring works by providing essential support to students’ development, integration, and well-being.

A recent systematic literature review on this topic (Nuis et al., 2023), identified five characteristics that describe existing mentoring programs: a) mentoring is intentional and designed to achieve student success, competence development, and career development; b) the mentor can be a more experienced peer, a faculty mentor, or a business professional; c) mentoring programs are formalized, translating into specific mentor training and mentor compensation; d) mentor and mentee engage in a developmental relationship that is established through individual or group-based mentoring sessions; and d) the mentor supports the mentee through specific behaviors (e.g., role modelling, assisting in goal setting, encouraging reflection, and providing information, resources, and feedback) and provides cyclical and personal feedback regarding students' development and success.

Students enrolled in mentoring programs are more successful in their transition to higher education, have increased academic engagement and participation, and a stronger sense of belonging within the university community (Crisp & Cruz, 2009; Ehrich et al., 2004; Lechuga, 2011; Queiruga-Dios et al., 2023). Because mentees benefit from specialized guidance and support, materials, and other interpersonal resources, being engaged in a mentoring program may prevent students from experiencing stress related to their role as students, disengagement, and dropping out of university (Jacobi, 1991; Nuis et al., 2023).

Teachers who take on mentoring roles also experience professional growth and satisfaction, related to their roles and responsibilities (Beyene et al., 2002; Lechuga, 2011). Engaging in mentorship allows faculty to develop their supervisory and leadership skills. Mentoring can also lead to increased job satisfaction, relatedness, and a sense of professional development and recognition. Finally, the institution benefits from the implementation of teacher-led mentoring programs (Nuis et al., 2023; Sneyers & De Witte, 2017). A culture of mentorship promotes a supportive and cohesive academic environment, enhancing the overall educational experience for all members.

Due to these widely acknowledged benefits, Portucalense University has invested in teacher-student mentoring programs as a strategy to promote first-year students' academic success and prevent dropout. The initiative is part of a broader project called +Sucesso@UPortucalense, funded by the General Directorate for Higher Education (DGES) and the Recovery and Resilience Plan (PRR). In the following section, we will present the key elements of the program: teacher training, the matching process and group formation, communication and interaction frequency, main focus of the teacher-student interactions, roles and responsibilities, and assessment.

2. KEY FEATURES OF THE FACULTY-STUDENT MENTORING PROGRAM AT PORTUCALENSE UNIVERSITY

2.1. Teacher training

Faculty enrolled in the mentoring program receive training focused on three main topics. First, faculty learn about the challenges students face in their transition and adaptation to higher education, definitions of academic success in higher education, and the identification of risk factors of academic failure, mental health problems, and dropout. Second, faculty learn about mentors' expected attitudes and competence, including setting boundaries,

active listening, promoting inclusive learning environments, cultural competence, active listening, giving constructive feedback, and recognizing when to refer students to other resources, such as counseling or academic support services. Third, teachers receive training focused on the nature of the program, including the program's aims, how the mentoring relationship should evolve, frequency of sessions and milestones, and evaluation of the program. This training is conducted through seminars and workshops.

In the realm of the +Sucesso@Universidade Portucalense institutional program, faculty will also voluntarily participate in a community of practice (CoP) focused on the promotion of first-year students' success. Faculty members participating in a mentoring program can form a CoP to exchange ideas, share experiences, and collaboratively develop strategies for mentoring. The CoP can serve as an ongoing support network, allowing mentors to seek advice and resources from colleagues as they encounter new challenges.

2.2. Matching process and group formation

Mentors and mentees are enrolled in the program on a voluntary basis. Faculty and students are matched based on their interests and academic field. Although it is not mandatory that teachers are the same academic program of the students, it is advisable that they have a good grasp of what are the specific academic challenges related to the students' undergraduate degree. Therefore, students are matched to teachers from their department. Groups of students are established with sensitivity to demographic and cultural factors, such as gender and ethnicity, to make mentees feel more comfortable and understood, an important aspect especially for underrepresented students.

2.3. Communication and interaction frequency

Communication in this mentoring program follows a flexible system that allows mentees and mentors to adjust frequency and form of communication to the needs of the group. Although clear expectations are set from the beginning that students should commit to the scheduled meetings, the frequency of such meetings is set according to perceived needs and goals. Therefore, each group can meet on a weekly, biweekly or monthly basis, depending on the moment of the semester, the number of students enrolled in the group, and the goals that were set for the teacher-student pairing.

Regarding communication means, interactions can be face-to-face or incorporate digital resources, including email, text, or virtual meetings. Although interactions are expected to be mostly held in small groups (4-5 students), when needed mentors may schedule one-to-one meetings with the students to provide more individualized guidance or support. Finally, communication should be focused on quality, not quantity: the main goal is to provide meaningful interactions and assist students' development and adaptation to the many challenges in higher education.

2.4. Main focus of the teacher-student interactions

The mentoring program will evolve throughout the semester to address students' changing needs. At the beginning of the semester, the sessions will focus on building rapport and setting goals for the students' personal and academic development. As the semester

progresses, the sessions will focus on subjects such as the university's resources, time management, balancing academic and extracurricular activities, social integration and collaborative work, discussing strategies to overcome potential learning struggles, stress management, and career exploration. At the end of the semester, students and teachers will reflect on students' successes and challenges, exams preparation, and planning for the future.

2.5. Roles and responsibilities

Teachers serving as mentors in this first-year student mentoring program can serve as academic advisors, by helping students to understand degree requirements and setting academic goals, assisting in developing effective study habits, modeling academic integrity, and encouraging academic interest related to the coursework. Teachers can also act as trusted role models and support, providing encouragement and guidance for self-confidence, and allowing for a safe space to share students' challenges. In the context of this mentoring program, teachers can also play a crucial role in connecting the student to needed resources, for example to assist in financial issues or psychological counseling. Teachers can also connect the students with the course coordinator, to advocate for the students' needs (e.g., to activate student status, including special education needs). Finally, teachers can play a significant role in promoting students' career exploration and suggesting students' engagement in enriching activities (e.g., research, volunteering). In these many roles, it is important to clearly define boundaries, respect confidentiality, and act with integrity.

2.6. Assessment

Assessing the teacher-student mentoring program is a key element to consider in monitoring and promoting its quality, allowing to identify areas for improvement. Students who agree to enroll in the program answer a pre-program survey focused on their main motivations and expectations for the program and report on initial information regarding academic preparedness and familiarity with the university's resources. Post-program, students will also report on their perceptions of the quality of the relationship with the mentor as well as experienced benefits from the program, including personal, social, emotional, academic, and career development. Students and teachers are expected to keep basic logs of the activities developed in the context of the teacher-student mentoring.

The university will also conduct an evaluation of the impact of the program on retention and academic performance (number of ECTS concluded at the end of the semester and academic year and retention rates from the first to the second year of the student's undergraduate degree). Qualitative inquiry is also expected, including individual interviews and focus groups, both to students and teachers, to gain insights into experienced challenges and accomplishments. Finally, reports will gather the different types of information and findings to disseminate with faculty, program directors, and student representatives.

3. CONCLUSION

In this paper, we presented guiding principles for a teacher-student mentoring program with the main goal of fostering student success and addressing the challenges faced by first-year

students. The initiative is part of a broader project called +Sucesso@UPortucalense, funded by the General Directorate for Higher Education (DGES) and the Recovery and Resilience Plan (PRR). By providing personalized guidance, academic support, and emotional encouragement, teachers in this program can help create an environment where students feel valued, supported, and guided. In this program, faculty mentors are trusted advisors, in individualized relationships with students, helping them navigate the challenges of higher education, while promoting their development, self-confidence, and autonomy (Lechuga, 2011; Nuis et al., 2023; Queiruga-Dios et al., 2023). The program is aimed not only to enhance students' academic success and personal, social, emotional, and career development, but also to contribute to build an inclusive academic community. Moreover, the focus on first-year students holds the merit of helping students navigate challenges related to the transition and adaptation to higher education (Almeida et al., 2016; Araújo, 2017).

The multifaceted roles of teacher-mentors we have discussed in this paper, ranging from supporting students' study skills and academic development to helping promote career exploration, underscore the importance of their training and preparation (Jacobi, 1991; Sneyers & De Witte, 2017). Teachers' training is crucial, as in many other pedagogical innovation experiences in higher education (Fernandes et al., 2023).

By embedding mentoring programs into the institutional strategy to promote students' academic success and persistence, higher education institutions can foster a culture that is student-centered and holistically addresses student retention challenges, creating pathways to success for all students, particularly those who may be at greater risk of disengagement or dropout (Crisp & Cruz, 2009; Li & Lee, 2024). Although not exempt from challenges, such as driving students' commitment to the scheduled sessions or balancing multiple forms of communication with the groups of students, teacher-student mentoring programs are a proactive approach to mitigating the high dropout rates that often characterize the first year in higher education (Jacobi, 1991; Nuis et al., 2023). They promote a sense of belonging, encourage adequate goal-setting and academic engagement, and facilitate early intervention for at-risk students. Moreover, these programs can also have positive impacts for teachers (Beyene et al., 2002; Lechuga, 2011) and the overall social environment of the institution, by promoting a culture of shared responsibility for student success.

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