

Win-Win-Win

Mentoring programs can positively affect students, alumni, and institutions

By NANCY MANN JACKSON

Two years ago, members of a strategic planning committee at Woodberry Forest School set a goal to re-engage African-American and Hispanic alumni, many of whom had lost touch with the Virginia boarding school for boys. One of the committee's ideas was to launch a mentoring program to connect current minority students with minority alumni. Two years in, the program has 26 mentors for 34 participating students, and more minority alumni are visiting campus, forging connections, and making gifts to the school.

"The purpose of the program is to give the boys a sense of legacy that many of their white peers enjoy and to provide them with African-American and Hispanic males who know what it's like to attend boarding school," says Mary Coleman, director of donor relations at Woodberry.

Another goal, Coleman says, is to engage a disengaged group and to affirm the school's commitment to welcoming all alumni and students. "It has been a rousing success for friend- and fundraising," she says.

Like Woodberry, a number of colleges, universities, and independent schools have created student-alumni mentoring programs. "Mentoring [programs are at] the very heart of alumni relations' core activities," says Pirita Posti, alumni relations manager for the School of Arts, Architecture and Design at Aalto University

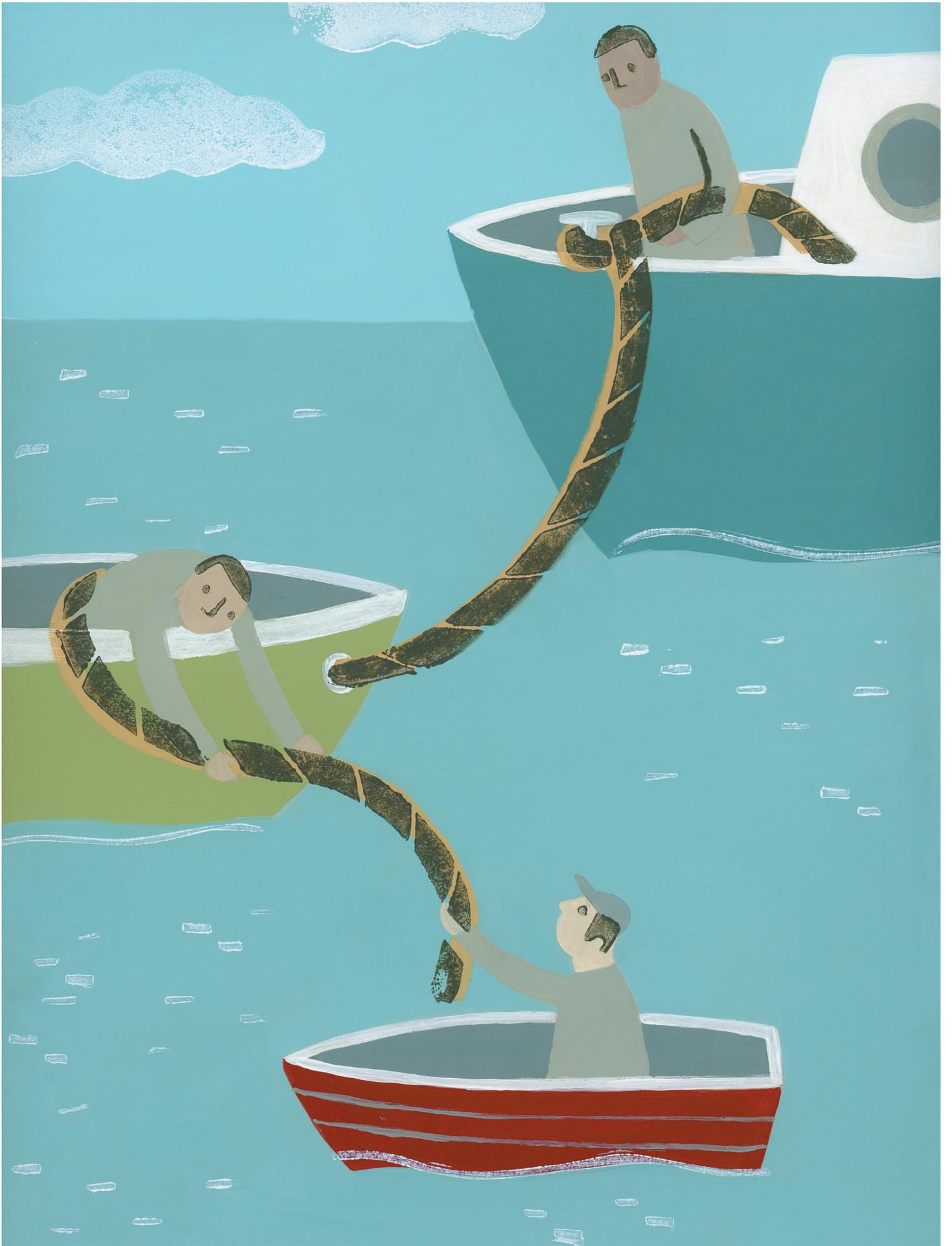
in Finland. "When done right, the impacts of [a mentoring program] can be huge to all: students, alumni, the university, and the fields it represents."

CHOOSING A STRUCTURE

There is no one effective way to arrange a student-alumni mentoring program. Each institution must determine what works for its students and alumni. At Tennessee's Vanderbilt University, for instance, the alumni office has experienced long-term success with an online-only program. Rather than matching individual students with individual alumni, those who want to be involved in the program join an online forum where students can ask questions or request help and alumni can respond to the queries that fit their expertise.

"This system works for our audience because they want on-demand, transactional help, not ongoing mentoring relationships," says James Stofan, Vanderbilt's associate vice chancellor for alumni relations. "Plus we don't have the manpower for a personal, long-term matching program."

At the other end of the spectrum are one-on-one mentoring programs with handpicked matches, such as the one-year-old Career Alumni Mentoring Program at Delaware County Community College in Pennsylvania. Director of Alumni Programs Doug



Ferguson recruits alumni whose jobs align with the career interests of participating students. The program runs for six weeks during the middle of the semester, and students are required to complete certain tasks, such as asking about the best majors for a certain career path. For their first meeting, the student-mentor pair is encouraged to meet in person or talk on the phone for half an hour to an hour, Ferguson says.

At other institutions, such as Southern Oregon University, mentoring programs are driven by events. SOU's Alumni Education Mentor Program brings 15 to 20 School of Education alumni back to campus to meet with current graduate students for three voluntary sessions during the winter and spring terms. Alumni who work in human resources and as principals and superintendents at educational institutions present the programs. The first session focuses on who's hiring and how to get hired, the second session covers mock interviews, and the final session is about "how to prepare for your first year," says Doreen O'Skea, former director of alumni relations at the SOU Foundation and currently the director of individual giving at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival. In addition, alumni review students' resumes and cover letters at each session, she says.

During the nine years this program has been available, 100 alumni and 2,700 students have participated. Alumni mentors are often very committed and return as mentors the following year, explains O'Skea.

While most mentoring programs are open to any

student who wishes to participate, the University of Birmingham offers a competitive program. The Alumni Leadership Mentoring Programme started at the U.K. university in 2011 with 15 alumni who are well-known in their fields; this year, the program expanded to include 20 alumni. ALMP is open only to final-year students who must complete an application and, if selected for the short list, interview for a slot. Students who make the short list receive presentation-skills training and then give a short presentation on what they want to gain from the program.

Alumni office personnel select the most promising students and match them to a mentor. Both are expected to commit a minimum of one hour each month throughout the academic year. The actual program is unstructured—how the pairs spend their time together is up to them, says Kerrie Holland, volunteer relationship manager. Designed to be elite, ALMP will probably not grow beyond 20 mentoring partnerships, Holland says.

GETTING STARTED

Alumni relations professionals who lead successful mentoring programs recommend starting slow. SOU's O'Skea suggests starting with a small beta group to test the program, holding focus groups, and using that feedback to expand to a larger second-tier beta group and then a third. "Don't announce the program until you have gone through at least three cycles quietly and have worked out the bugs," she advises.

in short

HANDY HANDBOOK. If you don't already have a mentoring program in place or if you are looking for ways to tweak your current program, check out *Elements of Effective Practice for Mentoring* (bit.ly/mentor_rpt) by MENTOR: The National Mentoring Partnership. The 28-page report offers advice on six areas of mentoring program operations: recruitment, screening, training, matching, monitoring and support, and closure. It also provides advice on all aspects of a program, from design and planning to management and evaluation. In the introduction, Tonya T. Wiley, chief administrative officer at MENTOR, writes that the publication is meant to serve community-, corporate-, school-, faith-, and Internet-based mentoring programs.

MENTORING AND MONEY. Paying it forward pays well, according to a report from nonprofit Catalyst. Research published in *High Potentials in the Pipeline: Leaders Pay it Forward* (bit.ly/catalyst_rpt) found that those who serve as mentors or otherwise develop talent in their offices earned \$25,075 in additional compensation between 2008 and 2010. The report's authors surmise that developing other talent creates more visibility and a following within the organization, which leads to greater reward and recognition. The authors also found that women are more likely than men to develop other talent: 65 percent of women who received career-development support are now developing new talent, compared to 56 percent of men.

Building partnerships across campus can also ensure that a mentoring program will be a success. The University of Birmingham’s mentoring programs, which include an open program for all students as well as the competitive program for final-year students, are a joint effort between the university’s Development and Alumni Relations Office and Careers and Employability Centre. “We cover the alumni side of things, sourcing the mentors and stewarding the mentors, and CEC works with the students,” Holland says. “They manage all the recruitment, training, and briefing of the students and all the matching of mentors and mentees for the open scheme. We collaborate on interviewing students for the ALMP.”

As with any other program, it’s important to be flexible and willing to make changes if they are warranted. For instance, when the University of New South Wales’ Australian School of Business launched a student-alumni mentoring program last year, mentors and mentees were asked to spend one hour each week together during a six-week period, says Brooke Robinson, the school’s alumni communications coordinator. But in response to participant feedback, the timing is different this year. “In 2012, the program runs over three months and is flexible, meaning mentors and students can spread their six contact hours out over the full three months or complete them in a more condensed period of time,” Robinson says. The change has meant that mentors can participate in the program even if they travel a lot for work. “A more

rigid six-week program would lock some of these alumni out who simply aren’t in Sydney enough reliably to meet their students,” she says.

At Loyola Law School at Los Angeles–based Loyola Marymount University, organizers’ willingness to be

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flexible led to the complete restructuring of the mentoring program. Originally, the program was available to graduating students only. But after evaluating the program’s goals, the alumni office revamped it to serve first-year students, helping them “navigate the often-daunting challenges and adjustments they face in their day-to-day life while attending law school,” says Adrianna Correa, assistant director of alumni and donor relations.

MANAGING EXPECTATIONS

When students and alumni commit to a mentoring program, they need to know what they’re getting into—what is expected of them and what they can expect to gain from the program. The most successful programs clearly communicate this information to both groups.

SOCIAL MEDIA SHARING. Want to know how other student-mentoring programs are run? A few months ago, CASE members all over the world discussed their student-alumni mentoring programs on the CASE LinkedIn group. The discussion was started as a search for sources for this article, but it took on a life of its own. Sixteen different people from institutions in the United States, Canada, the U.K., Austria, Portugal, Finland, France, and Australia chimed in about their programs. If you are a member of the CASE LinkedIn group and missed this discussion, find it by searching on its title “Student-Alumni Mentoring Programs.” Not a member of the group? Join by going to www.case.org/People_and_Communities and clicking on the LinkedIn icon on the right.

PUBLIC RECOGNITION. Former Spelman history professor Howard Zinn was Children’s Defense Fund founder Marian Wright Edelman’s mentor. High school journalism teacher Fred Birney was newsman Walter Cronkite’s. High school band director Virgil Spurlin was former U.S. President Bill Clinton’s. If you are curious about the mentors of Oprah Winfrey, Maya Angelou, Clint Eastwood, and many more, go to the Who Mentored You website at www.hsph.harvard.edu/chc/wmy. The site is part of the Harvard Mentoring Project, which has been conducting videotaped interviews and collecting written essays from prominent people about their mentors. But this site isn’t just for the famous: You can submit your story and publicly thank your mentor.

At Upper Canada College, a primary and secondary independent school for boys in Toronto, the alumni relations office runs a mentoring program called Common Ties that pairs young alumni with older alumni. Upon registration, mentors and mentees receive a handbook outlining the expectations for them. “One item that has proved challenging in some cases is when a mentee is simply looking for a job,” says Lindsay Tarvit, manager of alumni relations and Common Ties. “When matching, if I get the sense that that is the only goal, I reiterate and look back to this handbook to tell the mentee that that is not the point of the program. They must treat this more like an informational interview than something that will guarantee them a job in the end.”

At SOU, mentors and mentees are also given a handbook, as well as a workbook “so they can spell out expectations together,” O’Skea says.

If written expectations don’t seem like enough, some institutions incorporate in-person training or meetings. At Delaware County Community College, Ferguson sits down individually with each participating student to discuss the program. “I talk to them

At that launch event, program organizers discuss their expectations. “This year we focused on communicating to both parties that the emphasis of the program is on broadening students’ horizons, getting them exposed to career paths they may otherwise not have considered, not just narrowly matching students to an alumnus working in their desired professions,” Robinson says. “We want the students to gain as broad a perspective of the workplace and business world as possible. It’s also about boosting the students’ confidence and ability to set goals and improve their networking skills.” The school surveys students after their participation in the program and has found that for some, “their expectations of the workplace and business world are reset, which is a good thing,” she says.

DEALING WITH CHALLENGES

Even when expectations are clearly stated, there are bound to be some students or mentors who don’t follow through. Student commitment is one of the biggest challenges to producing a successful mentor program, says Cathryn Battersby, alumni relations coordinator at Curtin University in Australia. “Some sign up and then get busy with exams and put the mentoring relationship behind other more pressing priorities,” she says.

To deal with this, Battersby and her team added a workshop as part of students’ registration for the program to see if students would make the program a priority. Half of the students who registered failed to attend the workshop, which is offered 20 times in a month. “Those who attended the workshop clearly feel [the program] is a priority, which we are hoping will convert to a stronger commitment to the program,” Battersby says.

O’Skea found similar apathy among students to meeting with their mentors. She worked with the SOU School of Business to create a professional and career development course, which includes a requirement that students enrolled in the course sign up for the mentor program and meet with their mentor. “We have found that our students have better follow-through if they know that their grade is dependent upon this interaction,” O’Skea says.

Students aren’t always to blame if the mentor relationship doesn’t take off. It can be equally difficult to

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about how it’s a great opportunity and how they can make the most of it,” he says. “I also make sure they know not to misuse the opportunity and how to avoid doing that.”

At the Australian School of Business, students participating in the mentor program attend a mandatory training workshop on “how to manage a mentoring relationship and behave professionally with their mentor,” Robinson says. Then mentors and students meet for the first time at a program launch event, where “the ice is broken and nerves dispelled.”

depend on the commitment of mentors. In some cases, alumni want to volunteer but once the program starts, they don't have the time "due to unforeseen commitments," Battersby says. "We try to educate mentors as to the commitment required prior to commencing," she says. "We also make the commitment based on contact hours and let participants determine when and for how long they meet. They can also back up the meetings with online communication."

At Woodberry, Coleman likewise finds it challenging to ensure that the mentors and mentees are connecting. Some mentors have asked her to remind them to call or email mentees, and some students never hear from their mentors at all. She says patience is important because "nobody is purposely being neglectful."

In the spring, Coleman hosted a mentoring phonthon in her office. She served pizza to participating students and required them to call their mentors. "I told the mentors the times we would be calling, and almost everyone answered the phone," she says. "It was a great exercise in etiquette and building relationships. One senior didn't want to leave a message because 'I don't like to leave messages.' I told him he had to do it because it is a life skill."

For one-on-one mentor programs, another challenge can be finding the right matching system. While some programs, like the one at Delaware County Community College, are still small enough for organizers to handpick mentors for each participating student, larger programs require a more automated solution. At Curtin University, organizers have tried a new computer matching program, including using Excel spreadsheets, in each of the four years of the mentoring program, Battersby says. The alumni relations office has now commissioned a custom solution in Microsoft's customer relationship management software, which helps match participants easily, she says.

Yet another challenge is making sure a mentor program "is fresh and serving what our constituents need," says Upper Canada College's Tarvit. "When the program first began, its focus was on long-term mentoring. Now, the focus from mentees seems to be on shorter-term mentoring, sometimes more similar to basic networking. There is nothing wrong with

this, but it certainly has changed some expectations of what they are offering as a mentor and what they are getting as a mentee." To make sure the program is effectively dealing with evolving needs, UCC's mentor program has an advisory committee that meets four or five times each year to discuss what changes need to be made.

REAPING BENEFITS

Launching and maintaining an effective student-alumni mentor program can be more work than one might initially think, but the benefits make it a worthwhile effort. At Vanderbilt, the online mentoring program is important because it keeps so many alumni engaged. "We currently have approximately 14,800 alumni involved, and we hope to reach 15,300 in the next year," Stofan says. "We have had close to 5,000 transactions this year to date. It's a great gateway for alumni to engage with us, often for the first time, and feel they've made a difference. It's a great offering of service to students and alumni and helps humanize our global network."

After the completion of the first year of the mentoring program at the Australian School of Business, organizers conducted surveys and focus groups with participants to help them tweak the program. Many of the alumni mentors said that "they want to reconnect with the university, give back, and meet and impact the next generation of students," Robinson says. "The mentoring program ticks all of these boxes."

While the relationships or interactions are generally one-on-one, they have a far greater effect. "The alumni mentor program makes our outreach global and, at the same time, brings the world directly to our students," O'Skea says. "The program also helps our university by making those alumni bonds stronger and demonstrating to our students what being an active alumnus looks like. It is all win-win." 

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