

A Creative New Approach to Mentoring

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In August 2011, the School of Social Work at the University at Buffalo, the State University of New York, piloted a creative new approach to student-alumni mentoring in graduate level social work education. The UB School of Social Work MSW Mentor Program provides an avenue for networking and professional engagement by facilitating the development of positive relationships between MSW students and alumni. This relationship building is conducted by reaching into the social work community with an overarching goal of improving student connectedness to the field of social work, alumni connectedness to the university, and mutual engagement among students, alumni, community stakeholders, faculty, staff, and administration. As such, the School of Social Work conceptualized student-alumni mentoring as a creative strategy for strengthening community-university partnership in the Western New York Region.

The notion of mutually beneficial professional relationships is at the core of the UB School of Social Work MSW Mentor Program and acts as a significant factor in guiding the mentoring process. Specifically, students participating in the program have the opportunity to receive information, resources, and professional support from individuals working within the field, while alumni have the opportunity to shape the profession through contributions to the educational environment. Similarly, the School of Social Work hopes to see a comparable reflection in connectedness between the university and social work community as a result of the program's presence in the local region. Enhancing community-university partnership not only would result in direct benefits for students and alumni, but likely in strength and sustainability for the social work profession in the Western New York area, as well as enhanced community and practitioner input into the graduate level educational environment.

The structure of the UB School of Social Work MSW Mentor Program fosters community engagement and alumni participation through outreach, networking opportunities, and non-directive facilitation of professional relationship building. The program matches students entering the UB School of Social Work MSW program with UB School of

Social Work MSW alumni who are working within the field of social work or in a related field. The program was piloted to foundation year full-time traditional students and first-year part-time traditional students in August 2011. It was then made available to first-year part-time advanced standing students in January 2012 and to full-time advanced standing students in May 2012. Students and mentors are matched based on professional areas of interest and populations of interest. Additionally, students have the option to select whether they would be interested in working with a mentor who is located in another geographic location. While the majority of the program's mentors are located in the Western New York region, there are also mentors located in various areas of the United States, such as Atlanta, Boston, Long Island, Naples, Philadelphia, San Diego, and Washington, DC. This may be especially useful to students who are originally from outside of the local area or who are planning on relocating following graduation. The foundation of the mentor program is built upon flexibility, input from students, alumni, and the community, as well as a dedication to continuous improvement.

The UB School of Social Work MSW Mentor Program development process was multi-faceted, consisting of planning, organization, outreach, marketing, maintenance, and evaluation. Initially, program developers reviewed the structure of existing mentor programs in other professions, selecting key elements for adoption. Subsequently, these elements were organized and brief sets of student and mentor guidelines were developed. These guidelines provide a brief overview of the nature of the mentoring process, as well as an outline of the ideal timing in which the various phases of the process occur throughout the academic year. Outreach was conducted via e-mail distributions to the school's alumni and in-person during MSW commencement rehearsal in order to promote the benefits and importance of acting as a mentor to current students. Brief signup forms were then developed and distributed to alumni who had expressed interest in participating in the program. A similar outreach process was adopted for building student interest in the program, including live pitches promoting the mentoring process during incoming MSW student orientation. Several ongoing efforts have been key in

maintaining the organized and fluid nature of the program. These efforts include ensuring effective and prompt matching of mentors and students, conducting regular check-ins with regard to the progress of student-mentor relationships, gaining input and feedback from both students and mentors, and keeping detailed records of the matching and evaluation processes. Through thoughtful implementation and effective maintenance of the mentor program, the UB School of Social Work is working toward promoting a culture of continuous engagement in the university community.

Annual community engagement events are another key component of the UB School of Social Work MSW Mentor Program. Each year, the school conducts a mentor orientation meeting during which new and existing mentors can become more familiarized with the program and with the mentoring process. The school also holds an annual networking event each fall for students and mentors to meet, interact, and engage with university professionals and social work alumni. Additionally, mentors have the opportunity to participate in other university-coordinated events, such as incoming student orientation and True Blue Days, the University at Buffalo's annual homecoming tailgating event. These events not only help to facilitate the development of student-alumni relationships, but also promote the importance of meaningful interaction between the social work community and the university, bridging the gap between education and practice.

The non-directive and voluntary nature of the UB School of Social Work MSW Mentor Program has been well received by many students and mentors. At the conclusion of the spring 2012 semester, the program consisted of 90 active full- and part-time traditional student-mentor matches. With the inclusion of full- and part-time advanced standing MSW students, enrollment in the mentor program is expected to grow slightly over the course of the 2012-2013 academic year. The time commitment is flexible, requiring at least one form of contact between the student and mentor per month, which may be in the form of e-mail, telephone contact, or face-to-face meeting. Students are urged to make initial contact with their mentor, preferably by about one month after receiving information regarding their match. A meeting should occur within one month of initial contact, with continuing activities then occurring throughout the academic year. Students and mentors may engage in such activities as agency-sponsored events, research projects, school-sponsored events, volunteering, other social work related events or conferences, professional guidance, and informal conversations. At the completion of the academic year, students and mentors are asked to provide feedback to one another and are each invited

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to participate in evaluating the program via a secure web-based survey tool. This process takes place over an estimated timeline of events while maximizing individual choice over how each student-mentor relationship will unfold and which modes of contact will be most appropriate and effective.

“I am having a wonderful time talking by e-mail with my mentee and I think we are enjoying each other and getting a respect for what we have been doing in the world,” says Pauline Riemer, a mentor and 1957 MSW alumnus of the UB School of Social Work. Riemer and her mentee find that communicating via e-mail is most appropriate for their long distance interactions, as Riemer is not currently living in the Western New York region. Many students and mentors prefer e-mail or phone communication as their primary mode of contact, while many others who live locally prefer to have face-to-face meetings on a more regular basis. “It is almost essential to have a mentor to get through the demands of the MSW program and know what to look forward to,” says Julia Szprygada, a current full-time traditional MSW student. “I also know many peers who have benefitted from the program and who have learned about career opportunities that they did not even know were possible with an MSW,” Szprygada adds.

The multidimensional impact of the program is one of its great strengths. Students and mentors benefit from participating in the program in ways that are specific to their professional needs, interests, and point in their career. Feedback related to how individual students and mentors are finding benefit in their participation is key to refining key aspects of the program over time.

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Through a carefully planned program evaluation component, students and mentors provide feedback and input related to their experiences and satisfaction with the mentor program. The evaluation process consists of short web-based pre-test and post-test surveys for students and mentors from each cohort utilizing the program. The pre-test evaluation survey focuses on student and mentor expectations with regard to the program and mentoring process, including which types of interaction would be most useful and what each individual hopes to gain as a result of participating in the program. The post-test evaluation survey focuses on feedback and satisfaction with the program and with the mentoring experience, while reexamining some of the specific activities and forms of interaction mentioned in the pre-test and in the program guidelines. Additionally, post-tests include a component specifically focusing on community-university partnership, exploring the degree to which students and alumni feel connected to the university and to the social work community as a result of their participation in the program. Through a combination of open- and closed-ended questions and quantitative analyses, the evaluation team plans to measure program satisfaction and effectiveness in multiple domains with the underlying goal of continuous improvement and development. Similarly, the UB School of Social Work hopes to use findings from the evaluation to better build and promote effective strategies for university-community partnership.

After just over one year of development and implementation, the UB School of Social Work MSW Mentor Program is running smoothly and has been a great success thus far. The program included 90 active student-mentor matches at the conclusion of the 2011-2012 academic year and participating full-time advanced standing MSW students will begin the mentoring process this June. Foundation year full-time traditional students, first-year part-time traditional students, full-time advanced standing students, first-year part-time advanced standing students, and alumni of the UB School of Social Work MSW program are now eligible to participate. If you are not currently participating in the UB School of Social Work Mentor Program and would like to participate as either an eligible student or mentor, or if you would like to provide feedback on your

experiences with the program, please contact Denise Krause, LCSW-R, Associate Dean for Community Engagement & Alumni Relations at the University at Buffalo School of Social Work, at dkrause@buffalo.edu.

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