

Helping Students Become Self-Mentors: Implications of a Goal Setting Assignment

Sarah E. Schoper, Western Illinois University

Author's Contact Information

*Sarah E. Schoper, Assistant Professor
Western Illinois University
115B Horrabin Hall, Macomb, Illinois, 61455
Phone: 309-298-1183
Email: se-schoper@wiu.edu*

Abstract:

*This personal reflection describes influence of a goal setting assignment titled *Effective Engagement in Active Learning* on the ongoing professional development of those who have graduated from a student affairs graduate preparation program. I share the experience of students post graduation, which reveals the assignment appearing to provide long term structure for the professional development of new professionals. After sharing the assignment structure and several student reflections, I note potential implications and future areas of research.*

Key Words:

goal setting; student affairs; graduate students; mentorship; achievement gap; professional development.

Effective Engagement Goals and the Mentoring Gap

“You need a mentor if you are going to be successful in higher education” is a common piece of advice offered to the graduate students I teach and a piece of advice they are encouraged to share with the undergraduate students with which they work. Indeed, scholarship regarding student success identifies mentoring as an approach to student success (Martínez Alemán, 2002; Smedley, Myers, & Harrell, 2010). What I find interesting is not how students find mentors, but rather a familiar narrative often heard amongst the students. I teach in a student affairs graduate program, which prepares graduates to work within higher education. The story that I am often told is that the students decided to work within higher education so they themselves could be the mentor they were unable to find. And, I am offered this explanation when the students share their concerns with their ability to be successful working within higher education due to their own lack of a more formal mentorship relationship.

This fear is not surprising given that there is much conversation about the need for diversity, specifically for mentoring purposes in order to expand the pipeline to success within higher education (American Council on Education & American Association of

University Professors, 2000). Women and individuals of color are still greatly underrepresented in higher education as professors, staff, or administrators. Add to this dilemma that most students seek out mentors who are the most like them (Turner, González, & Wood, 2010), and a challenge is presented at institutions of higher education to meet the mentoring need amongst all students, in particular those from underrepresented student populations. Furthermore, simply because individuals find mentors at their current institution does not mean future mentorships will be readily available as they progress in their career. Indeed, as Cook (2012) surmises, the higher up one goes in higher education, the less likely one is able to find a mentor that is not a White male. So, what can be done to meet the need for mentorship within higher education? Beyond positively influencing an institution's commitment to increase diversity and assigning mentors, which may not result in a genuine mentor relationships, I assert that setting goals, through a process I refer to as effective engagement goals, with students can assist in filling the gap created by a lack of mentors in higher education.

Effective Engagement Goals

At the beginning of each semester, I ask students to complete an assignment titled: Effective Engagement in Active Learning. If they take more than one course with me, I ask them to think about both courses, and consider what they know about how they best learn. My decision to engage students in this activity stems from my belief that it is important for students to understand that learning is not a passive process, and that their participation in it will enhance their ability to do it. Furthermore, by understanding how they learn, students can facilitate for themselves opportunities they might otherwise have only acquired through insight from a mentor. Moreover, Tinto (2005) shared that, "Involvement, or what is increasingly being referred to as engagement, matters. Less clear is how to make involvement matter and how to make it matter in different settings in ways that enhances the retention of all students, not just some" (p. 3). Thus, the creation of effective engagement goals is one example of how to make engagement happen in the classroom for students who might otherwise see their role in the learning process as passive receivers of knowledge from a mentor.

In order to fulfill the assignment requirements, I first host a class discussion in which the students and I create a list of norms that shape the learning environment we want in the classroom. Often norms include such comments as, "Be attentive to whoever is speaking, and listen fully to what they are sharing", and "Be mindful of over participation", as well as norms such as, "Physically structure the class in a circle" (Schoper, 2013). After class, I type up the list and send it to the students. The students are then asked to consider the norms list on their own, as well as what they know about their own learning, and develop three to five effective engagement goals for the semester. The specific course assignment description is (Schoper, 2014):

Effective Engagement in Active Learning:

This assignment is intended to help you structure your active learning using the knowledge you gained about yourself as a learner. It offers an opportunity for you

to reflect on your progress and synthesize what you gained through your experience in the program so far. The assignment includes two parts:

1. Develop a few (between 3-6) important goals that will help you engage effectively in our learning environment. These should reflect the norms developed for your cohort, and discuss briefly your plan for reaching them. You may choose to continue a goal from the previous semester providing specifics ways in which you will improve upon achieving this goal. Please attach a one-page bullet point list of your goals with your name at the top. Just like last year your goals will be shared with the other program faculty. **Due September 10** (2-3 pages)
2. Write, and submit on **December 17**, a narrative that assesses your progress on the goals in part #1 over the course of the semester. Speak to what you accomplished on each goal as well as what you did not accomplish and your thoughts on why. **Due December 17** (5-7 pages)

Effective Engagement in Active Learning Grading Criteria:

Each part of the Effective Engagement in Active Learning assignment demonstrates your commitment to the learning community. As a whole, it reflects what you see as your responsibility to the learning process, and your efforts to fulfill that responsibility. The Effective Engagement in Active Learning papers will be evaluated in regard to authenticity, as well as both content and mechanics. Furthermore, effort made toward fulfilling the goals established in Part #1 will be considered. Each paper will receive a grade and will be averaged together. (p. 4-5).

Early on, students typically respond to this assignment with minimal enthusiasm:

When I was initially asked to establish effective engagement goals for my own learning I was a little surprised. Shocked could be a good word to describe it as well. I think until that point in my education I had been told what I was going to learn or what I was going to work on each semester or in each position. Never before had I been asked what I wanted to focus on or learn.

At mid-semester, I remind students of the norms, as well as the effective engagement goals they established. I then facilitate an in-class discussion on what they could do better, as well as what was going well for them. Periodically, I remind students of their goals as they connect to an assignment or a conversation we have during my office hours. At the end of the semester, the students reflect on their progress toward each goal.

At the beginning and end of each semester, the students are also informed that they will continue to set effective engagement goals for themselves throughout their time in the program. By being asked to complete the effective engagement assignment each semester, students soon begin to be more specific and attentive to their own skills and abilities, and although I only have preliminary data at this time from recent graduates, it appears as though through this goals assignment students are able to provide for themselves some of the mentoring experience they are otherwise missing:

Once I started to understand the importance of the process of goal setting, it helped me realize the importance of my role in the learning process. It was giving me a chance to have ownership over my own learning and development.

Establishing effective engagement goals helped me to see that my developmental process was my responsibility—nobody else could do it for me. I got to decide for myself what was important to work on, so I was the only person who could be held accountable for that.

The preliminary data, although small in size, appears to support recent research conducted by Schippers, Scheepers, and Peterson (2015) that indicated that a short writing assignment on goal setting nearly erased the achievement gap for 700 students over the course of two years. Although the connection between my exploratory research data and Schippers et al.'s, research is promising, I still find myself curious as to the more long-term impact of effective engagement goals. Even though a small sample, eighty-eight percent of those who responded indicated that they continue to establish effective engagement goals for their own professional development. The total population for the study was only 43 students. One participant shared:

Currently, I spend time looking at the different demands and opportunities I am facing and try to gauge where I am in relation to those demands and opportunities in front of me. My most recent round of effective engagement goal setting was focused intensely on the transition to my new position.

Another participant stated, "I have created goals at 6 months and 1 year into the job. Moving forward they are formally part of the annual review of my job performance. I also create effective engagement goals when assigned a new project."

Conclusion

Overall, the process of goal setting seems to benefit the students asked to engage in it, not only for their own personal learning while in graduate school, but also as professionals working within the field of higher education in various positions. As one participant stated, "Effective engagement goals are a simple concept but rarely done." Yet, the idea of goal setting for one's professional development can transfer to a wide variety of environments. By the time students who once were concerned about finding a mentor graduate they, "now realize how important it is to be involved in and to direct [their] own learning." Thus, through the use of goal setting, students are helping themselves to successfully navigate the system of higher education instead of relying solely on finding a mentor.

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