Introduction:
Tutoring and Mentoring Students who are Academically Challenged

A. Tutoring/Mentoring

This is an introduction to either the entire tutorial. This module introduces the general goals of the activity: Promoting academic achievement and instilling positive academic attitudes in children and adolescents who are underachieving academically. The module also addresses the unique social role of a mentor/tutor.

Module Goals

A. To appreciate the importance of an academic safety net for poor and minority children and adolescents.

B. To learn about who drops out of school, why they do it, and the consequences of having done so.

C. To grasp the importance of promoting positive academic achievement, beliefs, and attitudes.

D. To understand the distinction between tutoring and mentoring.

E. To comprehend the social role played by a tutor/mentor to a child or adolescent.

A. Academic Safety Net

The statistics are well known: Poor and minority American children and adolescents perform more poorly in school than do others.

Prior poverty status (number of years in poverty) predicts decreases in later math and reading scores and increases in antisocial behavior (Bubow & Ippolito, 1994).

Hispanic and African American students, who are disproportionally represented in poor schools, scores of Non-Hispanic White and Asian American in a assessments of math, reading, science, and problem solving (Lemke et al., 2004).

With regard to Hispanics, the performance gap begins as early as kindergarten, only to increase by the end of the elementary, junior high school, and high school (National Task Force on Early Childhood Education for Hispanics, 2007).

As part of your Weber State Education, you will serve as a part of an academic safety net for these students to improve their academic achievement in school and instill positive academic attitudes.

B. Consequences of Academic Failure

A safety net is needed for students at risk for poor academic performance in part because they are at risk for dropping out of school.
Approximately 20% of students do not graduate high school, and at least for late dropouts, they typically drop out for school-related (82%) as opposed to employment- or family-related reasons, which included truancy, poor/failing grades, dislike of school, and homework completion problems (Dalton, Glennie, & Ingels, 2009). As a percentage of each ethnic group, the rate of dropping out is much higher for poor and minority students than non-Hispanic whites (Dalton et al., 2009). But, these statistics should not blind you to the characteristics of actual dropouts. Nationally, 66% of dropouts are White, 17% are Black and 13% are Hispanic and most are not poor, from broken homes, or pregnant (U.S. Department of Education, 2000, p. 1; as cited in Sardash & Smink, 2001).

A student's decision to drop out of school has long-term consequences that can contribute to juvenile delinquency, welfare dependency, or, in the worst cases, prison (EdVoice, undated).

C. Promoting Positive Academic Attitudes

The safety net we hope to create is not just to prevent students from dropping out, but to promote college participation.

This means not only helping students remove academic challenges they face, such as truancy, poor grades, and homework problems, but also instilling positive academic values, beliefs, and attitudes which would promote excelling in school.

Positive academic values, beliefs, and attitudes towards school subject matter are related in improved academic performance. For example liking math and wanting a job that involves the use of math is related to higher math performance in school, independent of other variables. The same was found for attitudes about science and high science performance.

The values, beliefs, and attitudes likely index student interest in the subject matter. As further evidence of this, students who say they seek to understand not simply memorize math and science information is related to higher performance on math and science.

Your challenge is to provide students who are facing academic difficulties with support to not only overcome their immediate academic problems instill in them the kinds of positive values, beliefs, and attitudes which will sustain their interest and achievement all the way to college.

D. Distinguishing between Tutoring and Mentoring

Tutoring is defined as to teach or guide, usually individually, in a special subject, or for a particular purpose. The definition can be applied to the present context to specify a process which is narrow in scope (to address students’ weakness in a particular academic content area, e.g., mathematics) and with short-term goals (help students improve their performance in an academic area)

Mentoring is defined as serving as a wise and trusted counselor or teacher to others. The definition can be applied to the present context to specify a process which is broad in scope (to offer a wide range of advice about academically-related topics, e.g., college participation) and with long-term goals (help them adopt academic values, beliefs, and attitudes to form and reach academic goals).
The two processes of mentoring and tutoring seem conflicting and perhaps difficult to perform simultaneously. To some extent this is true. As a tutor/mentor your attention and energy must be focused primarily on the task at hand, which is to tutor the student. But at the same time, there will be opportunities to offer academic advice, promote positive academic values, attitudes, and beliefs, and generally counsel students regarding their academic goals.

Consider tutoring and mentoring processes as interrelated functions in your work with students. Tutoring is the direct and clearly defined work to support the student’s acquisition of specific academic skills. Mentoring is the more indirect work which is attempting to instill academic attitudes which will promote academic achievement and participation.

E. The Social Role of a Tutor/Mentor

Working as a tutor/mentor with a student is a very odd social role which needs a little discussion. The social role of a tutor/mentor is unique and ill-defined as you are not a friend, teacher, powerful adult, peer, or like any other person in the student’s life. However students know a couple of things about tutors/mentors. Students likely know that you have no power to make them talk to you or engage in a process. They also know that by being asked to visit a tutor/mentor, they are likely seen as having academic problems. Finally, they also know that that your “job” is to offer them short-term help. There is no reason to pretend any of these features of your relationship with students is false.

The students’ expectations that a tutor/mentor provides temporary help to students may provide a certain limitation in the form of relationship that can be constructed. Some students may think that they control the relationship, and can tell you what you can do to help them. Other students may not want to engage with a tutor/mentor at all, being wary of the temporary nature of the relationship or not wanting to admit they have an academic problem.

By recognizing students’ expectations and overcoming some of the limitations that they pose, a tutor/mentor has the opportunity to forge an effective relationship with a student that is different than any other relationship they ever had. We will discuss how best to forge such relationships with students in subsequent sections, but for now recognize that you and your students will have to negotiate a relationship, which in and of itself is a valuable experience for students.

References


