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## **Central Support for Decentralized Mentoring Measures – the Freiburg Approach**

### **Summary**

The Student Mentoring Competence Network is part of the University of Freiburg's central student services. The mentoring measures accompany students throughout their studies, with the goal of lowering dropout rates, enhancing the attractiveness of studies and increasing student satisfaction, easing the burden on teachers, and helping students to develop their personalities and realize their full potential. Initial experiences speak for the effectiveness of our decentralized approach: The departments select their own mentees and develop, organize, and implement their own programs. The network provides central financial resources and personnel to advise the departments on designing and implementing the programs and to ensure that they adhere to interdisciplinary quality standards.

### **Keywords**

Mentoring, higher education development, student satisfaction, student services, decentralized approach

## **Zentrale Unterstützung für dezentrale Mentoringmaßnahmen – der Freiburger Ansatz**

### **Zusammenfassung**

Das Kompetenznetzwerk Studierendenmentoring ist Teil der zentralen Studierendenservices der Universität Freiburg. Die durchgeführten Mentoringmaßnahmen sind ein begleitendes Angebot mit dem Ziel, Abbruchquoten zu verringern, die Studienattraktivität und -zufriedenheit zu steigern, das Lehrpersonal zu entlasten und die Persönlichkeits- und Potentialentwicklung von Studierenden zu fördern.

Die ersten Erfahrungen bestätigen den gewählten dezentralen Ansatz: Die Auswahl der Mentoring-Zielgruppen, Programm-Konzeption sowie Organisation und Umsetzung erfolgen direkt in den Fächern. Zentral werden finanzielle und personelle Ressourcen zur fachlichen und konzeptionellen Beratung der Fächer sowie zur Umsetzung fächerübergreifender Qualitätsstandards bereitgestellt.

### **Schlüsselwörter**

Mentoring, Hochschulentwicklung, Studienzufriedenheit, Studierendenservice, dezentraler Ansatz

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# 1 The Meaning and Value of Mentoring

The roots of mentoring reach all the way back to Greek mythology. In Homer's epic poem the *Odyssey*, Odysseus bids the scholar "Mentor" to look out for and educate his son Telemachus during his absence. Mentor initiates Telemachus into society, placing his experience and his contacts at his disposal and furthering his education as well as the development of his personality.

Today there are many different definitions for the term mentoring (see FRIDAY, FRIDAY & GREEN, 2004). What they all have in common is that they make reference to a relationship involving individual career and personality development. Mentoring is a form of informal learning in which persons on different developmental and hierarchical levels exchange experiences and knowledge.

Mentoring is a highly popular instrument, being used today at almost all large companies and increasingly also at most higher education institutions. In such contexts, mentoring serves to promote potential in the young generation, enabling those who deserve support to profit from the experience and the knowledge of others (MEYERHOFER, 2005, p. 115). Whereas mentoring programs have long been established in business and politics, they have only gained currency at universities since the 1990s, where they have since proven successful as instruments for providing effective and targeted support for young academics and promoting equal opportunities. A recent study conducted by the Stifterverband für die Deutsche Wissenschaft points to the possibilities that mentoring provides in this context (BRIEDIS et al., 2013).

The special value of this instrument lies in the fact that mentees receive targeted professional/discipline-specific and personal support and are introduced to the logic of the next level of expertise by persons with more experience. Relevant publications state that mentoring has the following effects on mentees [see, e. g. ZIEGLER, 2009]:

- strengthening of personal and discipline-specific potential and abilities,
- development of strategic competencies,
- broadening of knowledge on structures, processes, and rules,
- facilitation of networking,
- analysis of personal requirements and possibilities as well as limitations and problems,
- reflection on one's own study and career behavior and its compatibility with one's life plans.

Empirical studies show that many students today find themselves under great pressure to perform and meet deadlines. A feeling of being overburdened is often a reason for breaking off a course of study (SLOANE & FUGE, 2012). Participation in mentoring programs can contribute to an improvement in academic performance and the development of competencies. In addition, mentoring promotes academic socialization and helps students to cope with the stress and demands of a course of study (SLOANE & FUGE, 2012). This has a positive impact on student satisfaction and leads to lower dropout rates (YOUNG & HARRIS, 2012; TERRION, 2012; HARTUNG, 2012). Mentors can support and strengthen their mentees (key-

word: “empowerment”) (HANSMAN, 2012) and serve as a kind of compass, enabling students to “survive in unfamiliar academic terrain” (TERRION, 2012, p. 384). Mentoring programs can also facilitate integration (“student fit”) (TERRION, 2012, p. 385) and “account for the diversity of the student body” (LINDE & SZCZYRBA, 2011, p. 129).

## 2 Reasons for Introducing Mentoring

In the following we would like to outline the reasons behind the introduction of the Student Mentoring Competence Network at the University of Freiburg.

### 2.1 Societal and Political Situation

Steady increases in enrollment since the 1960s and the resulting challenges in the area of instruction and student administration led in the 1990s to various model experiments (keyword: deregulated university) as well as new higher education legislation. As a result of these changes, the organization and operations of universities have come to be characterized by a larger degree of autonomy (e. g., in the area of professorial appointments), the allocation of global budgets, and more competitive elements (the latest manifestation being the highly publicized Excellence Initiative) (see KÜPPER, 2013).

Besides these changes in higher education policy, two decisive global societal factors have an impact on the audience being addressed by universities today: the networking of knowledge and science on the one hand (internationalization, interdisciplinarity) and negative demographic developments on the other. In particular, more attention is being paid to international students and people who already have work experience. This places the university in a permanent process of development characterized by a “dynamics of diversity” (BRUCHHAGEN, 2007), tightening competition, and restructuring measures. Expressions of these dynamics in the area of instruction may be seen in the way the course offerings have become further differentiated and qualified (not least in the course of the switch to modularized degree programs). In connection with the aforementioned diversification of student target groups, this makes it necessary to offer more comprehensive and more customized student orientation *before* the beginning of studies and more supervision and support *after* the beginning of studies in order to enable as many students as possible to succeed in completing their degrees (see also EMPFEHLUNG DES DEUTSCHEN WISSENSCHAFTSRATS ZUR QUALITÄTSVERBESSERUNG VON LEHRE UND STUDIUM, 2008; HARTUNG, 2012).

### 2.2 The Realignment of Central Student Services at the University of Freiburg and the Role of Mentoring

The University of Freiburg welcomes diversity among all of its members with regard to their cultural, professional, and social backgrounds. In order to ensure that this does not remain an empty phrase, it is absolutely imperative to provide systematic and individual support:

- in the student orientation phase,
- in the phase of “administrative” access to study (applying, admissions, enrollment),
- at the beginning of studies,
- during studies (particularly during examination phases),
- in the transitional phase leading to postgraduate studies or career entry.

As an initial fundamental step toward the goal of improving central student services, the University of Freiburg integrated the various organizationally and spatially separated departments that perform services for students into a central Student Service Center. However, detailed studies conducted within the context of a SWOT analysis (method used to evaluate Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) initiated by the Rectorate revealed a need for additional action with regard to special target groups. For instance, international students who begin their undergraduate studies in Freiburg have a much lower rate of success in completing their degrees. In addition, it was found that other groups of students, such as those with a disability or a chronic illness, those with a child or those from educationally disadvantaged households also have special needs. Also in need of special attention are female students in the so-called STEM fields (science, technology, engineering and mathematics).

These are the areas in which the measures implemented by the Student Mentoring Competence Network take effect. Mentoring at the University of Freiburg serves as a low-threshold, potentially comprehensive instrument for supporting students individually in all phases of their studies.

### **3 Student Mentoring Competence Network**

#### **3.1 Concept, Organization, and Funding**

The Student Mentoring Competence Network of the University of Freiburg is supported by funding from the Quality Pact of the Federal Ministry of Education and Research. It is designed as a decentralized measure: The individual departments decide for themselves which target groups should profit from mentoring. They often choose to concentrate on first-year students or international students.

Personnel and materials are allocated directly to the faculties to provide support for the individual measures. The precondition for receiving support is prior agreement on a suitable concept and a target agreement that is evaluated at the end of the term of the grant.

Experienced specialists from the Student Mentoring Competence Network aid the departments in developing new mentoring concepts or revising existing concepts, coordinate common quality standards, and advise them on various forms of mentoring. The network also places all necessary materials for realizing the mentoring measures at the disposal of the departments and offers training courses for mentors and coordinators from the departments.

### 3.2 Project Description and Realization

After developing the conceptual framework – central support, decentralized implementation – we informed all of the university's 11 faculties about the program, invited them to participate in advising sessions to learn more about mentoring, and assessed the extent of the demand in the individual departments.

The comprehensive assessment of demand confirmed the efficacy of our conceptual framework and enabled us to more precisely determine where action was needed. At the same time, the assessment provided us with information on the various conditions and needs in the individual departments as well as the diverse definitions of target groups for mentoring.

Implementing the decentralized concept, which is currently voluntary, was admittedly time-consuming and not always straightforward as it involved close coordination between actors on various levels – faculty heads, employees at the departments, departmental student committees, disseminators. In most cases, a lack of knowledge and experience in mentoring generated great interest in the instrument and a willingness to try it out but also led to incomprehension and hesitation with regard to establishing it in their own courses of study. In several cases, we also experienced that mentoring measures were confused or mixed with tutoring courses, writing workshops, or private lessons. In order to ensure that all participants in the competence network met the same quality standards (“If it's labeled mentoring, it should actually contain mentoring.”), we had to persuade several faculties to rework their concepts. Thus, the first measures could not start until half a year after the project was launched. Notwithstanding the relatively large amount of time and effort invested in these persuasive efforts, however, they led to the implementation of mentoring measures that are ultimately more sustainable than they would have been had we simply dictated a mentoring concept to the faculties without allowing any room for conceptual flexibility.

The conceptual framework enables the departments to adapt the individual mentoring measures to their sometimes very different conditions and needs with regard to goals and target groups and allows for individual designs with regard to the following aspects:

- selection of mentees and mentors,
- size, composition of groups, matching,
- term of the programs,
- duration, frequency, content of the meetings,
- conception and realization of field-specific events.

Notwithstanding this freedom, however, the measures must meet the following standards:

- advising sessions/application as a basis for receiving central resources,
- convincing concept for defining target groups and measures,
- implementation of standards for a successful mentoring relationship,
- routine evaluations/reporting.

These guidelines are based on a notion often touched upon in the literature: “Mentoring [...] doesn’t run ‘of its own accord’, but requires clear objectives, planning, and preparation. [...] Great importance should therefore be attached to the (1) selection and (2) preparation of the mentors as well as the (3) design of the program.” (SLOANE & FUGE, 2012, p. 105).

In order to support the first mentors, and even more so the coordinators at the departments, we offered various training courses and continuous consultation hours as well as network meetings once each semester for the participating coordinators.

Our experiences have been highly positive so far: 28 different projects at all 11 faculties are receiving central support or have in the past – with an upward trend, benefiting over 1000 students.

## **4 Practical Examples from the Faculties**

In the following we present two examples of mentoring measures established with the help of the Student Mentoring Competence Network.

### **4.1 Computer Science and Microsystems Engineering (Faculty of Engineering)**

Females are still underrepresented in the STEM fields. This also holds true at the Faculty of Engineering of the University of Freiburg, only 14 % of whose students are female. Therefore, the Faculty of Engineering developed an individual concept for three crucial phases of the student lifecycle: the transition from school to the university, the introductory phase of studies, and the transition from the university to a professional career.

The first round of mentoring for female school students began in April 2013 with an informational event that brought together school students and university students each month over eight months for an informal exchange of knowledge and experiences. Following the successful introduction of the mentoring program for school students, the second phase will be implemented in winter semester 13/14; and that focusing on female students approaching the career entry phase in winter semester 14/15.

### **4.2 Psychology (Faculty of Economics and Behavioral Sciences)**

Roughly 15 % of each class of psychology students are in a different phase of life when they begin their studies as they come from different circumstances than the majority of students. Often admitted through the waiting list, these students already have initial work experience under their belt, are considerably older, work a full-time job, or have familial responsibilities. Experience shows that despite a high level of motivation and more life experience, students from this target group often have trouble coping with their studies and sometimes drop out even before the end of their first semester. Besides the double burden the main reason for this is that

these students are no longer used to studying for exams and, more generally, to taking on the role of a student.

The mentoring program offers guidance for first-year students through group meetings every two weeks until the end of the first semester, the goal being to acclimatize this group to daily life as students and enable them to produce the necessary results for the successful continuation of their studies. In addition trained assistants were available to meet with the mentees outside of the group mentoring meetings to advise them on individual issues (which proved to be a useful combination of group mentoring and one-to-one mentoring).

## 5 Conclusion

A consistent conceptual framework that leaves the faculties ample creative leeway in combination with central services makes it possible to adapt mentoring measures in a purposeful and efficient way to the various conditions and needs of the faculties at a comprehensive university like the University of Freiburg. Implementing this approach and persuading the relevant actors of its efficacy admittedly involves considerable time and effort – compounded by the fact that it can be difficult at times to navigate the paths of coordination between departments at a university. All things considered, however, we are convinced of its sustainability.

The work of the Student Mentoring Competence Network supports existing structures and facilitates the development and implementation of new mentoring programs.

The great variability of the individual measures with regard to format, target group, and length shows how strong the concept is at integrating completely different mentoring formats, target groups, and matching approaches tailored to the specific situation at each of the faculties: General programs for first-year students in small groups led by older students, measures addressing specific student groups with special needs, or mentoring in tandems to support selected students approaching graduation can only be developed and successfully realized with the help of a flexible conceptual framework.

The central guidance by specialists, the adherence to quality standards, and the funding enable the departments to successfully implement mentoring measures benefiting a large number of students with a relatively low amount of resources.

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