

# **A taxonomy of the characteristics of student peer mentors in higher education: findings from a literature review**

Jenepher Lennox Terrion\* and Dominique Leonard  
*University of Ottawa, Ontario, Canada*

Peer mentoring in higher education is regarded as an effective intervention to ensure the success and retention of vulnerable students. Many universities and colleges have therefore implemented some form of mentoring program as part of their student support services. While considerable research supports the use of peer mentoring to improve academic performance and decrease student attrition, few studies link peer mentoring functions with the type of peer best suited to fulfill these functions. This literature review categorizes the abundant student peer mentor descriptors found in mentoring research. The result is a preliminary taxonomy that classifies ten peer mentor characteristics according to mentoring function served (career-related or psychosocial). The proposed taxonomy and the discussion developed in this article help shed light on the dynamics of successful student peer mentoring relationships in higher education.

University and college administrators have long sought to identify the support mechanisms necessary to improve the retention, academic success, and educational experience of their students. Peer mentoring, in which qualified students provide guidance and support to vulnerable students to enable them to navigate through their education (Kram, 1983), is regarded as an effective intervention to ensure these outcomes (Freedman, 1993; Johnson, 2002; Kram, 1983; McLean, 2004; Pagan & Edwards-Wilson, 2002; Topping, 1996). Given this potential, many universities and colleges have implemented some form of peer mentoring, peer helping, or tutoring program as part of their student support services (Jacobi, 1991; Johnson, 2002; Tinto, 1998).

Peer mentoring is based on the traditional mentoring model, in which an older, more experienced person serves one of two main functions: a task-related or

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\*Corresponding author. Department of Communication, University of Ottawa, 554 King Edward Avenue, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada, K1N 6N5. Email: [jlennoxt@uottawa.ca](mailto:jlennoxt@uottawa.ca)

career-related function (providing advice, support, and information related to task accomplishment, professional development, and career success); or a psychosocial function (providing emotional and psychological support) (Kram & Isabella, 1985). In her review of the literature on mentoring, Jacobi (1991) supports this dual-function model of mentoring and reports that the studies she reviewed also tended to group functions in two similar categories, with some variation in the labels given to the functions. For example, the career-related function has also been referred to as the instrumental and vocational function, while the psychosocial function has been alternately described as the intrinsic function. Jacobi also notes that dissent exists about the nature of role modelling in mentoring: Some researchers, such as Kram (1983), place it under the psychosocial function, whereas others recognize it as a distinct function, thereby according it an entirely separate category.

The traditional form of mentoring consists of a hierarchical relationship in which the mentor is considerably older and more experienced than the mentee. However, Kram and Isabella (1985) have described peer mentoring as a valuable alternative to the traditional concept of mentorship. Unlike traditional mentoring, peer mentoring matches mentors and mentees who are roughly equal in age, experience, and power to provide task and psychosocial support (Angelique *et al.*, 2002).

Kram and Isabella (1985) have studied the differences between traditional mentoring and peer relationships in terms of the mentor functions served and the relationship outcomes. Although their study was conducted in a business rather than an educational setting, their findings point to several important differences. Specifically, in peer relationships career-related functions are limited to information sharing and career strategizing, whereas traditional mentoring enables a greater variety of these functions, namely sponsorship, coaching, exposure and visibility, protection, and challenging work assignments. However, there is greater similarity between the two in the psychosocial functions of the relationships. In peer relationships, psychosocial functions are characterized by confirmation, emotional support, personal feedback, and friendship. Traditional mentoring relationships are similar in that they offer acceptance, confirmation, counselling, role modelling, and friendship.

Interestingly, although much research supports the use of mentor and peer mentor relationships to improve academic performance and decrease student attrition, few studies link peer mentoring functions with the type of peer best able to fulfill these functions. This literature review attempts to establish a taxonomy of the student peer mentor by seeking, from the research, a list of mentor characteristics most often associated with positive outcomes from the mentoring relationship for both mentor and mentee.

The following definition, based on Kram (1983), is used herein: *peer mentoring* is a helping relationship in which two individuals of similar age and/or experience come together, either informally or through formal mentoring schemes, in the pursuit of fulfilling some combination of functions that are career-related (e.g. information sharing, career strategizing) and psychosocial (e.g. confirmation, emotional support, personal feedback, friendship).

## **Method**

A term search using ‘mentoring’ was conducted using the Ontario Scholars Portal (OSP) search engine. OSP provides access to all electronic articles available through the Ontario Council of University Libraries as well as the Canadian Research Knowledge Network. Search results are presented by database. For the purposes of the current study, results from the following databases were used: Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC), Proquest ABI/INFORM Global, and Education: A SAGE Full-Text Collection (includes 26 peer-reviewed journals published by Sage). The search returned a total of 677 articles. To be considered for inclusion in this review, articles had to satisfy these criteria:

1. The article could not be a case study (i.e. focusing on a single mentor).
2. Mentoring had to be the focus of the article.
3. Mentoring had to occur directly between people (i.e. not be computer-mediated).
4. Regardless of industry, any mention of mentor selection criteria was included.

A total of 54 articles met all four criteria and were thus reviewed.

To ensure inter-rater reliability, the articles were coded using the following procedure: One researcher assessed the articles for explicit statements of mentor characteristics that were associated with positive mentoring outcomes; then both researchers met to discuss and reach consensus on categorizing the characteristics. The first step in establishing the taxonomy was to group synonymous terms (e.g. ‘empathy’ and ‘empathetic’) and like terms (e.g. ‘communication skills’ and ‘understanding of verbal and non-verbal behaviours’). The second step was to take the newly grouped characteristics and categorize them further according to one of Kram’s mentoring functions, either career-related or psychosocial. The authors agreed that characteristics would only be classified under a single function; disagreements during both steps of the process were resolved through discussion. In this manner, the researchers reached 100% agreement on the grouping and categorization of characteristics.

## **Findings**

The last two parts of this section are structured according to Kram’s two-function model of mentoring, with one part listing characteristics most connected with the career-related function of the peer mentor and the second listing characteristics that support the psychosocial function. It is understood that not all characteristics fit exclusively into one function, but for clearer findings, all characteristics have been assigned to one function or the other.

Before presenting the characteristics of student peer mentors under each of Kram’s mentor functions, we discuss five characteristics that could not realistically be assigned to just one function. We decided to create a third category of characteristics: prerequisites for the student peer mentor applicant. These are characteristics that are fundamental in that mentor candidates must possess them in order to be considered as suitable to fulfill the mentoring role.

*Prerequisites for the Student Peer Mentor*

*Ability and willingness to commit time.* The ability and willingness to commit time was cited in 26% of studies reviewed as critical in assessing the suitability of mentor candidates. This characteristic is especially relevant to university mentoring programs, as students are typically still learning how to juggle competing priorities. Accordingly, efforts should be made to help peer mentor applicants realistically appraise their ability to commit the time required to be a mentor.

Programs that rely on university students as mentors tend to be more successful when mentors are required to show how they intend to fit the mentoring hours into their schedules (Pitney & Ehlers, 2004; Sipe, 1996; Tierney & Branch, 1992). A mentor's ability to consider how mentoring activities will fit into a schedule presupposes Johnson's (2002) and Tindall's (1995) assertion that successful mentors recognize limits to the time and resources they can allocate to mentoring. Highlighting the importance of ability to commit time, a number of the reviewed articles specify that mentors and mentees often use lack of time to explain problematic outcomes of mentoring relationships (Ehrich *et al.*, 2004; McDougall & Beattie, 1997; McLean, 2004; Noe, 1988).

The importance of a mentor's ability to fit mentoring into a busy schedule is also reflected in studies that show how mentor accessibility to students directly influences the level of satisfaction reported by both mentees and mentors (Allen *et al.*, 2000; Ehrich *et al.*, 2004; Mee-Lee & Bush, 2003). In a similar vein, some researchers note the importance of mentor 'accessibility' (Pitney & Ehlers, 2004), while others note the importance of mentor 'availability' (Lawson, 1989), especially during critical times (Allen *et al.*, 1997b). Accessibility is particularly relevant in the case of university peer mentoring because certain program models encourage mentors and mentees to set their own meeting times.

Interestingly, although peer mentors must be able to commit a certain amount of time to mentoring responsibilities, research has shown that mentee satisfaction with the relationship does not increase as time spent with the mentor increases, as long as there is general satisfaction of the career and psychosocial functions (Allen *et al.*, 1997b). Stated differently, if a mentee is satisfied with the career and psychosocial functions provided through the mentoring relationship, increasing the time the mentor spends with the mentee will not lead to higher satisfaction. Very few authors specify the optimal amount of time for mentors and mentees to spend together, the exception being Ferrari (2004), who indicates that weekly contact is ideal.

*Gender and Race.* A considerable body of research exists on the issue of gender and race matching in mentoring relationships, with 18.5% of the articles reviewed referring to this issue. Some studies have found that matching increases mentee and mentor satisfaction levels (Bowman & Bowman, 1995; Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 2004; Sands *et al.*, 1991). These findings also show that the career-related and psychosocial needs of under-represented or marginalized groups can be best responded to through race and gender matching. However, an equally compelling

body of evidence points to the contrary: that matching is not a critical factor and that the mentor's approach can override specific demographic preferences cited by either the mentor or the mentee (Ehrich *et al.*, 2004; Jacobi, 1991; Mee-Lee & Bush, 2003; Olian *et al.*, 1993; Sipe, 1996; Wallace *et al.*, 2000). In fact, one study found that cross-gender mentoring dyads exchange greater amounts of psychosocial support than same-gender dyads (see Sosik & Godshalk, 2005).

The conflicting findings on the importance of gender and race matching in mentoring outcomes make it clear that the effectiveness of race and gender matching may depend on contextual factors such as the culture of the university, the characteristics of the student population served by the university, the structure of the mentoring program, and so on. The question of gender and race matching is clearly an area for further research.

*University Experience.* As described earlier, peer mentoring is characterized by closeness in age between the mentor and mentee. However, the nature of mentoring requires mentors to be suitably positioned to assist another student, something feasible only when the mentors themselves have some working knowledge of how to navigate the university environment. Without such experience, a mentor's ability to fulfill the two functions of peer mentoring, in particular the career-related function, is compromised. It is important that student peer mentors have certain knowledge of the university environment, something acquired through successful completion of at least a portion of their university studies. University experience was cited in 13% of the articles reviewed.

McLean (2004) found that student mentees look for senior students in whom they can confide because they feel that senior students are better able to 'provide valuable advice in terms of how to work through issues and whom to consult regarding more serious concerns' (p. 182). Likewise, research has also found that having a higher level of education than mentees can help mentors feel more proficient in their role due to a 'more developed knowledge and skill base from which to draw' (Allen *et al.*, 1997a, p. 18). In one case, selection criteria for peer mentor candidates included the completion of at least one year of university study prior to application (Vanderpool & Brown, 1994).

Other researchers, too, point to the importance of selecting mentors who possess life experience (Gibb, 1999; Johnson, 2002), maturity (Lawson, 1989) or practical wisdom (Awayaa *et al.*, 2003). Tindall (1995) supports this view, stating that a mentor's diversity of experience and background is essential to establishing a successful mentoring relationship. Johnson (2002) also notes that excellent mentors must typically be more experienced than their mentees.

*Academic Achievement.* The available research does not clearly demonstrate how much a mentor's academic achievement affects the ability to carry out mentor functions. Nonetheless, 9.26% of the reviewed articles cited academic achievement, or 'expertise in the field,' as important in establishing mentor credibility (Johnson, 2002;

McLean, 2004; Mee-Lee & Bush, 2003; Ragins & Cotton, 1999; Schmidt *et al.*, 2004). Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that student peer mentors should have achieved a level of academic success that gives them credibility in the eyes of the students they will be mentoring. However, further research into this area is warranted and could be of considerable value. For example, what happens to peer mentoring outcomes if the mentor is a student who has failed or struggled early in their academic career but has since learned to succeed? In such a case, the potential mentor may possess enough experience to be an effective mentor but may not have the grade point average typically associated with the student role model.

*Prior Mentoring Experience.* Only 1.9% of the reviewed articles specifically mentioned the effect of prior mentoring experience on a candidate's suitability. One study found that mentees who have had a positive experience in their mentoring relationship are likely to be more willing to become mentors in the future (Allen *et al.*, 1997a). However, this study did not look at whether prior mentoring experience affects a person's likelihood to take on a future mentoring role.

Since many students begin their university years with limited work and volunteer experience, it would be unrealistic and unfair to screen out students who wish to be mentors but have not yet accumulated mentoring experience. Schmidt *et al.* (2004) found that the majority (75%) of university students who were mentors reported that aside from tutoring experiences, they had no prior mentoring experience. It appears, therefore, as though effective student peer mentors, at least in the university environment, need not have acquired formal mentoring experience to present themselves as candidates.

#### *Characteristics of the student peer mentor serving the career-related function*

The following section describes the two characteristics of the student peer mentor that relate most specifically to ability to carry out the career-related function of mentoring: program of study and self-enhancement motivation. They are presented in descending order of frequency.

*Program of Study.* Mentees' satisfaction with the mentoring relationship is affected by whether they share the same program of study as their mentor (McLean, 2004; Wallace *et al.*, 2000). Program of study was cited as a characteristic in 13% of the articles reviewed. McLean (2004) found that university medical students who were mentored by a more senior student in the same program reported greater satisfaction with the relationship than those with a mentor in a different program. This study points to the link between program of study and the mentee's perception of the mentor as a reliable source of advice. According to the mentees in this study, only a mentor sharing the same experiences and type of learning could provide the soundest advice. Similarly, other research has shown that mentees generally tend to seek out mentors with expertise in the desired field (Allen & Potet, 1999; Ragins & Cotton, 1999).

Quinn, Muldoon, and Hollingworth (2002) point to the difficulty a mentor would have trying to teach a mentee or impart study skills in isolation from content, further supporting the idea that a mentor with content knowledge is important to the success of the mentor relationship. Research by Mee-Lee and Bush (2003) found that subject-specific knowledge is related to mentor credibility, with mentees generally looking for mentors with a good grasp of an academic subject. According to the researchers, sharing the same program of study leads mentees to attribute greater credibility to their mentor.

Considering that one of the most commonly cited positive mentor and mentee outcomes in the educational context comes from sharing content knowledge (Ehrich *et al.*, 2004), it is not surprising that program of study is an important consideration in understanding the student peer mentor profile.

*Self-enhancement motivation.* Self-enhancement motivation, or sources of motivation related to ‘personal learning and gratification’ (Allen, 2003, p. 139), were cited in 5.5% of the articles reviewed. In a study looking at motivations for mentoring, Allen (2003) found that mentors who are motivated for self-enhancement reasons typically provide greater amounts of career-related support to the mentee. Allen explains this finding by reasoning that a mentor with self-enhancement motivation would find it less valuable to focus on the friendship and counselling aspects of mentoring because neither directly supports the mentor’s own career goals. Although Allen’s study was conducted in a business, not post-secondary, setting, it is reasonable to assume that mentors motivated by self-enhancement would be more likely to focus on the immediate benefits of mentoring for their own goals, regardless of the context in which the mentoring occurs.

In an earlier study, Allen *et al.* (2000) discovered a positive correlation between a mentor’s *advancement aspirations*—‘strong, personal career advancement goals’ (p. 273)—and willingness to assist mentees needing or soliciting help. This seems to indicate that a mentor with stronger advancement aspirations is more likely to select a mentee who may not have the highest ability or potential but who nonetheless can benefit from a mentor’s help. This finding is particularly relevant to mentor selection for programs in which mentoring for remedial action is a primary objective.

Although Allen’s (2003) research confirms the importance of selecting mentors with self-enhancement or advancement aspirations, some authors point to the possible dangers of self-enhancement as the primary motivator. For example, Awayaa *et al.* (2003) believe that poor mentors display too much eagerness to assert authority and power (p. 55), a tendency more likely among mentors who have unreasonably high expectations for mentoring outcomes.

#### *Characteristics of the student peer mentor serving the psychosocial function*

The importance of psychosocial functions in the mentoring relationship is apparent when one considers that it is the subjective, humanistic qualities of a mentor applicant

that often form the basis of selection criteria. Several studies have shown that the psychosocial function of mentoring may be more important to younger student mentees than the career-related function (Allen *et al.*, 1997b; Rose, 2005). This can be explained by the observation that younger students are more likely than their older counterparts to experience greater 'uncertainty about expectations and requirements' (Allen *et al.*, 1997b, p. 500). Supportive relationships in university are one of the most important ways of reducing stress (Tinto, 1993). Therefore, the mentor who provides psychosocial support can serve as one source of support to reduce the stress experienced by a younger and less experienced student. If the university's objective in implementing a peer mentoring program is to decrease student attrition, partially reducing student stress by providing support via peer mentoring relationships may help achieve this objective.

This section describes eight student peer mentor characteristics related to the psychosocial function. They are presented in descending order of frequency: communication skills; supportiveness; trustworthiness; interdependent attitude to mentoring, mentee, and program staff; empathy; personality match with mentee; enthusiasm; and flexibility.

*Communication Skills.* Over 35% of the reviewed articles identified communication skills as an important component of effective mentoring relationships. According to Tindall (1995), a mentor applicant should already display effective communication skills, including the ability to listen and to understand others. While some articles allude simply to the importance of communication skills (Good *et al.*, 2000; Lawson, 1989; Mee-Lee & Bush, 2003), other articles provide more in-depth descriptions of mentor communication skills: listening skills (Allen & Poteet, 1999; Holbeche, 1996; McLean, 2004; Randels *et al.*, 1992; Schmidt *et al.*, 2004), clarifying behaviours (Holbeche, 1996), and understanding of verbal and non-verbal behaviours (Awayaa *et al.*, 2003). Other studies cite similar skills required of mentors, namely advising and counselling skills (McLean, 2004; Pitney & Ehlers, 2004; Wallace *et al.*, 2000), ability to provide honest and constructive feedback (Lawson, 1989; Rose, 2005), teaching and explanation skills (Pitney & Ehlers, 2004), and ability to express oneself in an open and clear fashion (Ehrich *et al.*, 2004; Sands *et al.*, 1991; Schmidt *et al.*, 2004). Rose (2003) found that the majority of graduate students asked to name mentor characteristics of greatest value to them as mentees identified good communication skills as the top quality of their ideal mentor.

Similarly, a study looking at mentor and mentee perceptions of the most desirable characteristics of a mentor found that a mentor's ability to 'communicate well' was highly ranked by both groups (Mee-Lee & Bush, 2003). Specifically, mentors ranked good communication skills third in a list of ten characteristics, outranked only by 'understanding and sympathetic' and 'accessible to students.' Mentees ranked communication skills even higher, second only to 'mentor enthusiasm.' Another study describes an effective mentor's communication style as 'non-threatening' (Pitney & Ehlers, 2004). The issue of communication style is also noted by other



authors who state that suboptimal mentoring outcomes may occur if a mentor is unable to communicate at the level of the mentee (McLean, 2004), an idea reflected by Lawson's (1989) belief that effective mentors should be able to make others comfortable and Pitney and Ehlers' (2004) assertion that mentors should be willing and able to communicate on a personal level with their mentees.

Other studies have identified mentor attributes and characteristics that are closely linked with communication skills. For example, some researchers (Johnson, 2002; Pitney & Ehlers, 2004) describe desirable mentors as being appropriately humorous. Similarly, Apter and Carter (2002) describe the 'playful state' as most conducive for the mentee because it is 'easier to think about and face up to problems in a detached, non-anxious way than in the serious state' (p. 294).

*Supportiveness.* A concept important to the mentoring relationship is supportiveness, a characteristic identified in 30% of the articles reviewed. As mentioned previously, it is vital to provide younger university students with a supportive environment to reduce their stress and anxiety. A relationship with a supportive mentor can be an important instrument in achieving this goal.

Ehrich and her colleagues (2004) examined 159 research-based articles in the field of education to identify the positive and problematic outcomes of mentoring for mentees. The authors found that the most commonly cited positive outcomes for mentees relate to the support they received from the mentoring relationship (42.1% of studies), whereas the third most common problematic outcome relates to mentors perceived as critical or demeaning (10.7% of studies).

Supportiveness was identified in a number of the articles reviewed (Awayaa *et al.*, 2003; Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 2004; McDougall & Beattie, 1997; McLean, 2004; Mee-Lee & Bush, 2003; Sands *et al.*, 1991). However, as with some of the other characteristics in this section, the attribute was often referred to in different terms, including endorsing (Johnson, 2002), accepting (Johnson, 2002; Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 2004), encouraging (Mee-Lee & Bush, 2003; Pitney & Ehlers, 2004; Schmidt *et al.*, 2004; Wallace *et al.*, 2000), caring (Ferrari, 2004; Pitney & Ehlers, 2004; Schmidt *et al.*, 2004; Wallace *et al.*, 2000), and nurturing (Pitney & Ehlers, 2004). Without always using the term supportive, many articles describe actions of support by the mentor, such as providing words of encouragement (Awayaa *et al.*, 2003) and demonstrating an eagerness to help (Noe, 1988; Pitney & Ehlers, 2004).

It is important to note the role of one kind of support often mentioned in the reviewed articles: empowerment. The effective mentoring relationship is a developmental one for both the mentor and the mentee, although the developmental needs of the mentee are necessarily at the forefront of priorities. The theme of mentee empowerment occurs throughout the articles, including the claim by Awayaa *et al.* (2003) that effective mentors allow protégés to 'show their stuff' (p. 50) or Gibb's (1999) assertion that mentors should emphasize individual action. Likewise, Holbeche (1996) believes that mentors have a responsibility to allow their 'mentee to think through their own solutions to problems' (p. 26) and Rose (2003) notes that

university students look for mentors who allow them to make deliberate, conscious choices about their lives.

*Trustworthiness.* For stable mentoring relationships to develop, mentors must be perceived as *trustworthy*, which is a measure of the degree to which interpersonal partners perceive that it is safe to disclose personal information (Beebe *et al.*, 2004, p. 305). Trustworthiness and like concepts were cited in 30% of the articles reviewed.

In addition to explicitly using the term trustworthy to describe mentors (Bouquillon *et al.*, 2005), the articles reviewed used similar wording such as behaviourally predictable and reliable (Bouquillon *et al.*, 2005), responsible (Good *et al.*, 2000; Lawson, 1989), dependable (Ferrari, 2004), stable (Lawson, 1989; Tindall, 1995), honest (Allen & Poteet, 1999), and loyal (Schmidt *et al.*, 2004). Sipe (1996) points to trustworthiness as one of the foundational elements in establishing trust between mentor and mentee. Some articles do not specify the attribute of mentor trustworthiness but do identify trust between mentor and mentee as being of primary importance in the mentoring relationship (Garvey & Alfred, 2000; Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 2004; McDougall & Beattie, 1997; McLean, 2004; Pitney & Ehlers, 2004). Other concepts closely related to trustworthiness identified in some of the articles are integrity (Bouquillon *et al.*, 2005; Rose, 2005), principled action (Rose, 2003), and professional dignity (Awayaa *et al.*, 2003).

Again, as with some of the other characteristics, many articles failed to describe specifically how trustworthiness impacted on mentor functions, except to say that mentees and program administrators need mentors who are consistent and dependable.

*Interdependent attitude to mentoring, mentee, and program staff.* This characteristic reflects the reciprocal nature of peer relationships and the need for program staff to help the mentors develop themselves personally and professionally. References to the interdependent attitude of a mentor, or to similar concepts of interdependency, occur in 24% of the studies. As stated by Young *et al.* (2004), the personal and professional development of mentors rests partly on their willingness to be continuous learners. A mentor's sense of interdependency is likely to improve collegiality and, according to Tinto (1993), peer mentors achieve this interdependency by supporting the academic and social integration of mentees into the university system.

Although the need to respect ethical boundaries in mentoring relationships should always remain a primary concern (Rose, 2003), Young *et al.* (2004) found that interdependency and ultimately friendship can facilitate a sense of connectedness between the mentor and mentee while still encouraging individual growth.

As with other terms, an interdependent attitude is often described using alternative labels, such as mentors' ability to open themselves to mentees (Allen *et al.*, 2000; Bouquillon *et al.*, 2005), self-disclosure (Johnson, 2002), collegiality (Allen *et al.*, 2000; Scott, 2005; Young *et al.*, 2004), reciprocity (Bouquillon *et al.*, 2005), willingness to learn from mentees or whatever sources are appropriate (Lopez-Real &

Kwan, 2005), interest in collaborative learning (Randels *et al.*, 1992), ability to express personal or professional vulnerability (McDougall & Beattie, 1997; Rose, 2003), willingness to share experiences and be receptive (Pitney & Ehlers, 2004), sharing personal aspects of life (Rose, 2003), sharing personal and professional concerns (Rose, 2005), and promoting an equal and collaborative relationship (Sands *et al.*, 1991).

Developing an interdependent relationship requires a mentor to be willing to engage in the learning experience with the mentee. Therefore, as Awayaa *et al.* (2003) state, a good mentor can 'understand how to deal with periods of doubt and self-questioning' that are intrinsic to the learning process (p. 54).

*Empathy.* Empathy is 'intellectual identification with or vicarious experience of the feelings, thoughts, or attitudes of another' (Lahey *et al.*, 2005, p.106). The importance of an empathetic mentor is highlighted by the fact that 24% of the reviewed articles identified this characteristic, or closely related concepts, as integral to the mentoring relationship.

According to Allen (2003), 'highly empathetic individuals may be better able to foster the intimacy and trust that is central to the psychosocial dimension [of mentoring]' (p. 148). However, Allen's study of the dispositional and motivational traits of mentors reveals that empathy does not correlate with greater past experience as a mentor. In other words, participants who are high in empathy do not engage in mentoring relationships any more than participants who score more moderately on the empathy scale. Helpfulness, it turns out, is a greater predictor of engaging in a mentoring relationship than empathy. Allen explains this finding by drawing on research showing that helpfulness is linked to a person's self-confidence and self-efficacy, whereas empathy is not. Therefore, a person who is high in empathy but perhaps not as helpful would feel less confident engaging in the act of mentorship.

The term 'empathetic' to describe mentors was found in only three of the reviewed articles (Allen, 2003; Lawson, 1989; McLean, 2004). However, there is considerable variation in the terminology used to describe an empathetic nature, including sympathetic (Mee-Lee & Bush, 2003), understanding (Allen & Poteet, 1999; Awayaa *et al.*, 2003; Mann, 1994; McLean, 2004; Schmidt *et al.*, 2004; Young *et al.*, 2004), responsive (Scott, 2005; Young *et al.*, 2004), sensitive (Apter & Carter, 2002; Schmidt *et al.*, 2004), compassionate (Schmidt *et al.*, 2004), non-judgmental (Lawson, 1989; McDougall & Beattie, 1997), and concern for the welfare of others (Allen *et al.*, 2000). Three articles identify concepts fundamental to empathy: an alertness 'to mentees' concerns and dilemmas' (Awayaa *et al.*, 2003, p. 53), an ability to recognize mentees' feelings (Mann, 1994), and being in an other-oriented state (Apter & Carter, 2002). Interestingly, Mee-Lee and Bush (2003) found that mentors and mentees differed in how they ranked the importance of the mentor characteristic 'understanding and sympathetic.' This characteristic was ranked first and most important by mentors but only third by mentees (who ranked 'communicates well'

and 'enthusiastic' first and second respectively). Yet even with this difference, empathy is clearly important to both mentors and mentees.

*Personality match with mentee.* Personality has a direct influence, along with self-concept and self-esteem (Beebe *et al.*, 2004, p. 60), on the interpersonal attraction between individuals (Klohn & Shanhong, 2003). Although few studies look directly at how personality match or mismatch between mentors and mentees explains variations in mentor relationship functions, 15% of the articles identified aspects of personality match between mentor and mentee as important for positive mentoring outcomes. Myers (1987) indicates that personality is often used to explain the development and maintenance of interpersonal relationships and, as a natural consequence to this, Noe (1988) and Rose (2003) say that personality inevitably influences a mentee's attraction to a mentor. In a study by Ehrich *et al.* (2004), one of the most commonly cited problematic outcomes of mentor relationships identified by mentors was personality mismatch with the mentee.

Interestingly, this review of articles points to the importance of shared values as an aspect of personality (Bouquillon *et al.*, 2005; Pitney & Ehlers, 2004), a shared world view (Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 2004; Rose, 2005), or congruent beliefs (Bouquillon *et al.*, 2005) as enabling the mentee to identify with their mentor. McDougall and Beattie (1997) describe the concept of complementarity as a shared or common value base between mentor and mentee. Of course, as Johnson-Bailey and Cervero (2004) point out, perhaps this congruence stems from knowledge of, or at the very least appreciation for, the mentee's culture.

*Enthusiasm.* Descriptors of good mentors that fall under the category of enthusiasm were found in 13% of the articles. Enthusiasm, or passion (Lahey *et al.*, 2005), as a desirable mentor characteristic is identified more often in literature dealing with younger mentees, although a number of the articles that look specifically at mentoring for university students also include this trait (Mee-Lee & Bush, 2003; Randels *et al.*, 1992). In their study of the most sought-after mentor characteristics as perceived by mentees in a university setting, Mee-Lee and Bush (2003) found that enthusiasm was the top-ranked trait. Ehrich *et al.* (2004) note that mentees are adversely affected when their mentor fails to show interest. Tindall (1995) describes enthusiasm in terms of a mentor's high energy level, which she then correlates with increased perseverance in the face of struggles in the mentoring relationship. In other words, mentors may need to be perceived as having the energy to continue being supportive even when things are not going well in the relationship. High energy is also identified as an important characteristic by Lawson (1989), and other authors point to the importance of similar descriptors: entertaining (Schmidt *et al.*, 2004), fun (Rose, 2003), and outgoing (Schmidt *et al.*, 2004).

Interestingly, in the study by Mee-Lee and Bush (2003), mentors ranked enthusiasm much lower in importance than did mentees, even though the mentors themselves were of university age. Mentors ranked enthusiasm fourth in a list of ten ideal mentor

characteristics, whereas mentees ranked it first. Clearly, from the mentee's point of view, an enthusiastic mentor makes a difference to the mentoring relationship.

*Flexibility.* Flexibility was identified as a characteristic of positive mentoring outcomes in 11% of the reviewed articles. In her report synthesizing ten years of research on successful mentoring relationships, Sipe (1996) found that mentors who attempt to instill incompatible values in their mentees are often associated with unsuccessful outcomes. Interestingly, this conceptualization of flexibility as a tolerance for divergent value systems is closely connected with the idea of a mentoring relationship as based partially on reciprocity.

In their review of 159 studies on mentoring in education, Ehrich *et al.* (2004) found that unsuccessful matches between mentors and mentees because of ideological differences were reported in 17% of the studies. Sipe (1996) warns against mentors showing authoritative dispositions and, more specifically, notes that mentors who emphasize behaviour change above all else are associated with a higher risk of unsuccessful mentoring outcomes. According to Sipe (1996), the effective mentor should be less task-oriented and more focused on building trust with the mentee. Although her research was in the area of adult-to-child mentoring, there is still some applicability to student peer mentors. The desire to transform others should be, in Sipe's view, a reason to screen a potential mentor out of a mentoring program.

Flexibility refers not only to mentors' tolerance of other value systems but also to their tolerance of failure. According to Johnson (2002), mentors sometimes place heightened performance expectations on their student mentees. This might be explained by mentors' vested interest in seeing their mentees succeed. Mentors can easily begin to see their mentees' successes and failures as their own; in so doing, they may be prone to displaying less tolerance of failure. Therefore, potential mentors should display flexibility not only toward the values of their mentees, but also toward their own expectations for task-oriented outcomes. Likewise, Young *et al.* (2004) note the importance of mentors being able to accept the limitations of their mentees. Patience therefore is an important characteristic of successful mentors, as pointed out by Lawson (1989) and Johnson (2002).

## **Conclusion**

The goal of this literature review was to develop a taxonomy of the characteristics of the student peer mentor. This discussion was structured around Kram's (1983) model of mentoring, which divides mentoring functions into career-related and psychosocial. Although Kram's original work in mentoring research focused on classical (i.e. hierarchical) mentoring, her later research identified how mentoring functions are slightly modified in peer relationships. The review resulted in a taxonomy of five prerequisites for the student peer mentor, two student peer mentor characteristics that support the career-related function and eight characteristics that support the psychosocial function.

Interestingly, despite the multitude of articles examining the roles and functions of peer mentors, it was possible to organize the findings of this research into a coherent framework that describes the characteristics of mentors who are effective at forging satisfying, productive relationships with mentees. This taxonomy is critical to decision making about the selection, training, and evaluation of peer mentors, for without a systematic understanding of the type of mentor best suited to the role, these decisions are left to intuition and personal taste. Future research could examine in greater depth questions related to these important aspects of mentoring program administration. For example, questions remain about the behavioural indicators of these characteristics: What do they look like in practice? Are they innate or learned? How can they be taught to mentors? How can they be assessed? How can they be nurtured in an ongoing manner?

The studies reviewed for this taxonomy were mostly written by researchers in Canada and the United States and therefore reflect a western bias. While it might be possible to generalize the characteristics themselves (e.g. empathy, trustworthiness, and flexibility) to other cultures, it remains to be studied whether the communication of these characteristics is culture-bound (e.g. is trustworthiness conveyed and evaluated differently in different cultures?). The proposed taxonomy may well be worth consideration by universities outside North America, but it would be of great interest to conduct cross-cultural comparative studies to assess the characteristics of effective mentors in other countries.

In closing, we hope that this article provides guidance and insight to both scholars and practitioners in the areas of student support, student retention, and student success in higher education. As the number of young and not-so-young adults entering university and college continues to grow, it is critical that university administrators understand the most effective means of supporting the career-related and psychosocial needs of future graduates.

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