Online Mentoring

Carole Duff

When Ursuline Academy girls need career advice, guidance about classes, or personal support, they e-mail their mentors—professional women whose knowledge of the "real world" helps the students make informed choices.

You mention your struggle between the arts and math and science. I can identify with that. I see no reason that you shouldn't take classes in ceramics and English and still be a reputable mathematician.

—A telementor to student

At least as old as the ancient Greeks, the practice of mentoring creates a sustained relationship between a trusted teacher and a student. Today, in the classroom, on the athletic field, or in internship and shadowing programs, mentoring or coaching is a common instructional tool. The growth of technology brings new opportunities for mentoring; the Internet can offer online tutoring, ask-an-expert coaching, and e-mail linking of students with successful professionals in careers of mutual interest. At Ursuline Academy, our telementoring program creates an online environment for communication between Ursuline students and professional women.

The Need for Mentors

Established in 1874, Ursuline Academy of Dallas, Texas, is a private, Catholic, college-preparatory high school for girls. Drawing from a diverse population in the greater Dallas area, students enter Ursuline Academy as 9th graders from a wide variety of feeder schools. Students graduate having experienced a strong, progressive, academic curriculum, including an emphasis on leadership and community service. Over the years, however, we noticed that our students needed encouragement when deciding to take more advanced classes that would prepare them for higher-level professions. We also realized that a college-preparatory curriculum, regardless of the advanced academic content, does not provide much applied, on-the-job experience or guidance.

To address this need, we established a summer internship program with professional women as on-site mentors. These internships provide our students with women role models, a real-world focus, and support. However, the program is an option for seniors only. In many cases, senior year is too late for students who want direct information about careers and coursework, let alone students who need a little encouragement. And such encouragement often makes all the difference along the road to self-discovery.

Two years ago, Ursuline Academy inaugurated a telementoring pilot program modeled after a
National Science Foundation program. We started by matching 14 upper-level math and computer-science students with women engineers at Texas Instruments. By spring 2000, we expanded the pilot to include students from all four high school grades. The students communicate through e-mail with mentors from all around the world and in a wide variety of career areas.

A student is matched with a mentor on the basis of her career interest. Weekly e-mails build a sustained relationship, breaking down the isolation that physical distance usually creates. The technology also creates a mechanism for outreach and collaboration. Students receive personal guidance and encouragement from knowledgeable and successful women who have similar interests.

**A Mission**

Although we used the National Science Foundation's model, we first constructed goals and objectives centered on our mission statement. The main focus of the Ursuline mission is student-centered learning—supporting and encouraging students in terms of each individual's talents and interests. Another goal is to reach out into the global community and to expose students to wider experiences beyond the classroom.

The motto of Ursuline Academy is Serviam—"I will serve." By creating an online environment for students to receive personal guidance from practicing professional women, we established a network for those dedicated to community service. As one mentor wrote, "Thanks for introducing me to a wonderful opportunity to give back what I have already taken." Mentors who might otherwise be too busy have the necessary flexibility to participate through e-mail.

Telementors are either alumnae or part of Ursuline's worldwide network of professionals. We use a variety of methods to build a pool of mentors, from contacting those professional women with whom we have established connections to sending a brief recruiting message to alumnae's e-mail addresses. Typically, the message is circulated among alumnae listed in the directory by profession, and we target those in high-interest or under-represented fields for women.

We inform the prospective telementors that we look for practicing, professional women who would be willing to communicate through e-mail once a week with a current Ursuline student. We also tell the mentors that they will be matched with a student who has similar career interests. In addition, we ask all prospective mentors to forward the original recruiting e-mail message to classmates who might be qualified and interested. If the prospective telementor responds with interest to the recruiting message, she receives a mentor application and further information.

Most of the mentor application and orientation process occurs online. At the prospective mentor's request, we send instructions and a one-page application document to fill out and send back to the recruiter. With mentor applications in hand, we start the process of finding a student with similar career interests.

**Matching and Orientation**

The expansion of the Ursuline telementoring program happened easily because of two factors. First, most of our students are now connected to the Internet either through the school network or at home. Second, we implemented an advisory system, which included interested faculty advisors to monitor students from all four grade levels. Five of us formed a telementoring expansion committee. We offered the opportunity first to our advisees and then to other students who expressed interest in telementoring. All students in the program receive three documents: a letter to parents explaining the telementoring program; the telementoring agreement, including objectives, requirements, and "netiquette" guidelines; and a brief autobiography form. Once the
student returns the signed agreement and her autobiography, we match each student with a mentor.

Upon being assigned their mentors, students watch a 15-minute telementoring orientation video, available from Education Development Center's Center for Children and Technology. They then copy the name and e-mail address of their mentor and the school e-mail address of their advisor. All e-mails between students and mentors, whether initiated by students or mentors, are copied to the advisor. Thus, the advisor acts as a fly on the wall, getting better acquainted with the student and responding immediately in case of questions or concerns. For her records, the advisor keeps the copy of the telementoring agreement and the form with the student's and mentor's names and e-mail addresses, but she returns the student's autobiography for the student's first communication with her telementor.

Before the student's first contact, the advisor e-mails the mentor to give her the name of her student so that the mentor can look out for a message. If contact does not happen within the next week, the mentor alerts the advisor so that she can address the problem. Telementors also receive program guideline information, and they agree to communicate with their students once a week and to copy all related e-mails to the students' advisors.

Telementors know that the students will introduce themselves using their autobiographies and are likely to talk about school, outside activities, and their families—plus ask many questions about career paths, education, and perhaps even family- and career-balancing decisions. We ask mentors to be honest, realistic, positive, and encouraging, and we suggest that they visit the telementoring Web site (www.edc.org/CCT/telementoring/index2.html).

**Monitoring Communication and Evaluation**

We have found several special advantages to giving students contact with professional women at some point during their high school years. Although the telementoring program is primarily career-focused, younger students tend to write about their adjustments to the demands of high school and the sometimes painful journey during which they discover their interests and talents—making friends; joining clubs and activities; or trying out for cheerleading, plays, or leadership positions. As one student remarked, the program gives her "a person to talk to who went through the same experiences I am going through now."

The mentors support and encourage the students and share their own experiences. "It sounds like you're having a demanding year academically," a mentor related. "I remember the shock of my first year or two of high school. I can't say that it gets easier, but you do learn better how to deal with it." Another telementor wrote,

> As you are just starting your high school years, it would be fairly unusual to know what sort of adult life you wanted to follow. The best thing to do is to take the opportunity to try various things that catch your interest—for example, try out for the play. Remember, you won't be the only one who is not sure of herself. The only thing certain is that you will not get to participate if you do not try. Let me know what you decide to do.

Students also ask about classes they should take, colleges their mentors attended, and their mentors' jobs. Students usually start with general questions but quickly look for more specific information:

- "How did you decide what you wanted to do?"
- "How long have you been a pediatrician, and are you happy with your work?"
- "So, as an attorney, do you go to courtrooms or just do legal work? What do you do on a
typical day, or is it always different?"

- "What kind of art classes would you suggest? I would like to go into either oil painting or still-life class. Can I practice at home? Is it better to paint from real life or a photograph? Do art colleges require an interview?"

- "How feasible do you think it is for someone to major in a field other than the sciences or biomedical engineering but to still try for medical school?"

The answers are always interesting, but not always what we teachers would have expected or known. One mentor reminded her student, "Medicine uses a lot of math, believe it or not. Some medication dosing is quite intricate, especially for pediatric patients!" Another remembered, "When I was in high school, I liked studying biology and math. I never was a fan of English, either. I wish I had been, though, because of the number of papers that I had to write in grad school."

One student who was interested in engineering received this advice:

Get all the math you can now, but don't ignore speech class or English. After all, you can do the most brilliant work in the world, but if you can't tell people about it, then all your hard work will be for nothing. So work hard on your essays and oral presentations and ask your teachers for feedback on what you do well and how you can do better. By the way, writing was not my strong suit either—keep plugging away at it!

Another mentor urged,

Another thing that is important, and probably helped me get into medical school, is volunteer work. It doesn't have to be in the medical field, but at some point you should volunteer in a hospital. When I did my community service teaching first aid to kids at the Red Cross, it was really fun.

Overwhelmingly, the mentors enjoyed their participation and often commented on the time factor and rewards. One mentor said in her evaluation, "E-mail is fast and convenient for both the student and the professional, which makes it easier to communicate on a regular basis." Flexibility is also important to a busy professional: "I could send off a quick note between tasks or during my lunch hour."

Interestingly, we've discovered that telementors derive a personal satisfaction from their communication with students. "I am grateful to the many mentors I have had along the way," wrote a mentor, "and hoped that I could pass that positive experience on to others." When asked about the strengths of the program, one mentor stated,

I loved being able to connect with a young woman across the country, to hear about her daily activities, and to add a bit of information about what "grown-up" life was like for me. I hoped it opened up her eyes a bit, and it definitely was a breath of fresh air for me. Overall, it was a fun, engaging, and endearing process.

**Future Expansion**

Next year, we plan to offer this experience to any interested student and advisor. Also, given our growing pool of online experts, we envision a more traditional ask-an-expert program designed for students who need coaching for short-term projects or online tutorials and forums.

Our goal is to meet the students' needs to ask questions to professional women—as our students say, "to find out about future fields I might enter" or "to get in touch with 'the real world' and better understand what is expected out there." As one student stated, "Books or articles never answer everything I want to know, but with a telementor, I can be curious and receive an
Author’s note: Susan Bauer (Director of Technology and Academic Dean), Margaret Noullet, Ann Middendorf, Pat Medina, and I were members of the telementoring committee.

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