Misconceptions about Mentoring

**Misconception:** In a university, you need to be an older person with gray hair (or no hair) to be a good mentor.

**Reality:** In a university, mentors can be young or old. Some of the most outstanding mentors of students are fellow students, or Peer Mentors.

**Misconception:** Mentoring only happens one-to-one on a long-term basis.

**Reality:** At a big university, mentoring occurs in many different ways. Some mentoring relationships are traditional relationships involving a one-to-one setting over a long period of time. But effective mentoring can also occur in a group setting or even through a single encounter with a student. Dr. Gordon Nakagawa urges all of us to see each interaction with students as an opportunity for mentoring and to think about ways to infuse mentoring into our daily work as advisors, tutors and student assistants.

**Misconception:** Mentoring programs at universities only are for high-achieving students, especially those who are on their way to grad school.

**Reality:** All college students need mentors, but according to research faculty in universities spend most of their time working with high-achieving students. In the late 1960s, students and community activists created programs like EOP to open opportunities in higher education for low-income, first-generation college students and to provide students with necessary support services such as mentoring to help them succeed academically and serve their communities. Thus, central to the mission of EOP is the practice of mentoring and to ensure that the university meets this responsibility for all of its students.

**Misconception:** Only the person being mentored benefits from mentoring.

**Reality:** By definition, mentoring is a reciprocal relationship where both the mentor and mentor learn from each other. True mentors are those who have developed the wisdom to learn from those they mentor.
Misconception: Students who work as peer advisors, tutors and student assistants already have a lot of responsibilities and do not have the time to take on extra responsibilities relating to mentoring.

Reality: Mentoring is not a separate set of activities that are different from advising, tutoring or working as a student assistant in an office. Mentoring relates to consciousness about your work as an advisor, tutor or student assistant. Without this consciousness, advisors, tutors and student assistants are perceived by fellow students as junior bureaucrats focusing on rules, regulations, and procedures. Universities don’t need more bureaucrats. Universities do need people who are student-centered and who can see and nurture the potential in others.

Misconception: By calling yourself a “Peer Mentor,” you become a mentor.

Reality: Not all experienced students who work with fellow students as advisors or tutors are Peer Mentors, even if they have that job title. Peer Mentors are those who have developed consciousness about mentoring and in their interactions with fellow students demonstrate respect, patience, trustworthiness, and strong communication skills, especially listening skills.

Misconception: To become a mentor requires a lot of time and a lot of work.

Reality: Becoming a mentor requires a change in consciousness — i.e., how you think about yourself and how you think about others. Workshops and training sessions can help experienced students to develop this consciousness. Mentoring is not a matter of working harder or longer or adding to your job responsibilities but seeing your work differently.

Misconception: At a large university, one Peer Mentor can help only a limited number of students. Although a Peer Mentor may want to help large numbers of students, the cold reality is that she or he can only work with a select few.

Reality: Each interaction with a student is a mentoring opportunity, even a single encounter with a student. The key is to develop consciousness about the importance of mentoring in your interactions with fellow students and to infuse this consciousness in your daily work as a tutor or advisor. Also, it’s important for Peer Mentors to see themselves as part of a network of other mentors — as part of a
Community of Mentors. To effectively help a particular student or a group of students, Peer Mentors can draw upon this network or community. Mentoring occurs in a community, not in isolation.