

Peer Mentor

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1. Introduction

This semester I conducted my internship course with Lenora Thorbjornsen as a Peer Mentor. I first met with Lenora about the internship here at Old Dominion University inside Monarch Hall where we had an initial discussion and orientation meeting. From there, Lenora paired me up with students who were just being introduced to the cybersecurity curriculum and who may require supplemental guidance and encouragement. On the ODU academic advising website, ww1.odu.edu, peer advising is explained as a select group of undergraduate students receiving training to help other students navigate and access the necessary resources to help them with their academics.

Throughout this semester, I was instructed to assist Lenora in any cybersecurity projects and events that were held by her or by ODU. Additionally, in the role of peer mentor, my responsibilities included academic advising, course selection, help studying for classes, giving encouragement to continue studies, and providing advice—whether it be personal, work-related, or academic. Prior to this internship, the only experience I had in one-to-one mentoring was through Army ROTC (AROTC) here at ODU.

Since this internship mostly focused on the development of soft skills and learning how to be an effective mentor, I knew that this would benefit me greatly in my future career and in my day-to-day life. After graduating from ODU, I will commission as a U.S. Army Infantry Officer and begin training in June. Being an infantry officer requires you to know how to work well with others and to know how to develop/mentor people mentally, emotionally, and physically. Noticing these skills and attributes being practiced in this role is what drew me to choose this internship.

In this internship, I focused on achieving better communication skills, fulfillment of helping others, and gaining experience as a mentor. I aimed to achieve better communication and interpersonal skills by meeting with the mentees. This entailed being able to understand and communicate solutions to problems quickly and effectively. Achieving the fulfillment of helping others would come with spending time with the mentees and seeing a positive change in their academic or personal life. The only way to gain experience in any discipline is repetition, which is what I planned to do in this program. Most importantly I aimed to act as a mentor that is flexible, patient, and passive, by acting as a role model to them. I understood that I would not be able to solve all of my mentees' problems, but I intended to point them in the right direction if there was a problem or issue I could not tackle.

Many topics will be covered in this essay to examine all aspects of the internship, such as the beginning of this internship which will also include a description of the organization I am with and details of my training. I will then discuss my major work duties and responsibilities, my use of prior skills and knowledge and things I learned, how the ODU curriculum prepared me for the internship, if the goals I set out were fulfilled or not, the

most motivating aspects of the internship, the most discouraging aspects of the internship, the most challenging aspects of the internship and recommendations for any future interns. I will finish off with a conclusion discussing any takeaway thoughts how this internship has prepared me for my future career.

2. Beginning of Internship

This internship was hosted by Old Dominion University's cybersecurity advising department. The advising department is in charge of monitoring academic progress and helping students with any questions they have about scheduling classes or accessing available resources. The advisors are split up by department and specialty. First Year Student Success is a method that is mainly aimed at helping freshmen successfully complete their first year. From the ODU academic advising website, www1.odu.edu, four goals of the first year student success are discussed. These four goals are as follows:

1. To empower students to take responsibility for their academic careers.
2. To assist students with understanding academic requirements and University expectations.
3. To support the intellectual engagement and critical thinking of first year students.
4. To help students develop an awareness and promote the utilization of campus resources.

From the first orientation meeting, these goals aligned perfectly with what was taught to us. It is then explained that these goals are intended to be achieved through various tools like the Early Alert Response System (EARS) which is a system where freshmen are contacted by their advisors if they are below a C- by midterms. Another service that is used is an actual class that is "UNIV 110/ACAF 100 - Academic Success". This class helps students that are struggling get back on track and it teaches them how to manage their time, learn skills to study, and plan for success.

My advisor, Lenora Thorbjornsen, held an orientation meeting aimed at training for the role of peer mentor to the selected students in order to familiarize and inform us with what we would be expecting as mentors and what is to be expected of us. We covered topics such as what is and is not academic advising, goals of advising, the relationship and characteristics of effective teaching and advising skills, available tools for the students (these tools consisted of degreeworks, student success services, and LeoOnline), the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974 (FERPA) which discussed the privacy rights of students concerning their grades, different majors within the cybersecurity department, and lastly what to expect with our incoming mentees.

3. The Management Environment

Throughout this internship, Lenora acted as the manager for the student peer mentors. She gave us our orientation, coordinated us for events, and gave us advice along the way. She had us submit a schedule outlining what times we were available during the week and weekends. This schedule was not only for her but also for our mentees to communicate our availability to them. Even though we practically made our own schedules, it was encouraged of us to always be available to our mentees.

During the semester Lenora was never a demanding manager and always appreciated our help. This method of management proved very effective as this motivated the other peer mentors and I to reach out to our mentees and reach out to Lenora for questions regarding any upcoming events.

4. Major work duties and responsibilities

As a mentor, I was required to reach out to my mentees, provide my availability, and encourage them to meet with me. I began by providing a short biography about myself, detailing some of my home background, academic history, as well as personal interests and hobbies. I also provided my schedule to my mentees so they could plan for meetings accordingly.

My primary role was to provide academic advising. The main goal of working with my mentees is to ensure they are on track for a successful academic career. This included helping with course selection and discovering the best studying or learning methods for individual mentees. I also provided insight into university resources that should be taken advantage of to make the most of their time at ODU.

In addition to academic advising, I was also present to answer any non-academic questions. This could include topics such as finding extra-curriculars that matched their interests or balancing hobbies or work with school.

My responsibility as a mentor was to provide a comfortable and information-rich place for mentees to come to. I wanted to make sure that every mentee knew that all questions are good questions and that they should use every resource they have available to them. It was important to me that my mentees leave our meetings feeling encouraged and optimistic about their education. Having access to an education is a privilege. I wanted my mentees to understand that and know the value of pursuing a degree.

5. Use of prior skills and knowledge and skills learned

This internship mostly focused on the use of soft skills like interpersonal communication and emotional intelligence instead of more technical skills such as knowing coding languages or tests of memory. As I mentioned before I am involved in Army ROTC here at ODU. In the ROTC program, there is a large emphasis on developing the right skills to become a strong leader. One of the main methods that they highly suggest is gain experience as a mentor to others. Since the students are freshmen and majoring in cybersecurity, most of the classes that they are taking are what I have taken in the past. I'm able to use the knowledge that I gained from going through these classes and give recommendations on how to navigate through the classes or give the tips on what/how to study. For example, early on in the semester one of the mentees contacted me talking about if she should join ROTC and how she would balance ROTC, classes, and personal life. I used my knowledge from how I balanced it and gave her suggestions and reassured her that it could definitely be done.

6. How did the ODU curriculum prepare you for the internship?

During my time at ODU, I have had several mentor-like figures who have guided me through coursework as well as extracurriculars. In the role of mentor, I was able to pull on these prior experiences and use them to guide my mentees. I took note of what helped me connect with my mentor, rather than seeing them as an all-knowing figure who might think some of my questions were ridiculous. I also remembered how my past mentors had gone out of their ways to find me certain resources, links, and opportunities, or helped me network and connect with individuals who could provide me assistance.

I was also able to use my general knowledge of the ODU curriculum, course requirements, and school resources to provide guidance to my mentees. For instance, one of my mentees was unsure of how to approach course selection. As a first step, I was able to help them determine their remaining course requirements and navigate the course catalog to filter for courses that meet those requirements. From there, I gave them resources to research those classes, finding topics that would interest them and professors who would suit their learning style.

7. Did this internship fulfill your objectives?

Through email communication as well as mentee meetings, I was able to improve my communication skills. To minimize the number of emails I was sending to my mentees, I worked on writing concise and straightforward emails. With mentees that are busy students, I knew that emails could not be too long or drone on as they likely had more important matters to tend to. In mentee meetings, it was not like a college course where I

am able to prepare for discussions by reading assigned materials. I learned to be a good listener and respond accordingly, as well as think on the spot for any questions I was asked. Additionally, I felt well equipped to help with their questions. The purpose of this internship was to take advantage of our positions as students and connect with the new cybersecurity students. Since we were in their position not too long ago, we are able to understand most of what they are experiencing.

I felt the fulfillment of helping others after every meeting with my mentees. There was a gratifying feeling of satisfaction knowing I was able to answer the questions of students that I was once just as confused as. I know that college can be daunting and unique sets of expectations weigh on each student. It was nice knowing that mentees left our meetings a bit more confident and ready to work.

I definitely gained experience as a mentor throughout this internship. It is not surprising that going through the program and having this hands-on experience helped me develop as a mentor and a leader. In this internship, I was pretty much left to my own devices. I was able to make decisions as to how I wanted to mentor my group of students and how often I needed to follow up with them. This independence and autonomy played a major role in my growth as a mentor.

8. Most motivating and exciting aspects of the internship

The internship provided me opportunities to build on my own skill set, improving my interpersonal skills, as well as testing my knowledge. Although the purpose of my mentor role was to help other students, it also proved to benefit myself in a variety of ways. This role greatly improved my time management skills as I learned to make time for others and prioritize certain tasks throughout my week. However, I also improved my objective thinking skills as I was required to give advice and opinions that would best suit my mentee, rather than my own personal preferences.

Throughout this semester, I learned about my mentorship style and my ability to truly listen to others. As a mentor, I had to remember that someone else was depending on and trusting me to help them out. For example, if I promised to look into a resource or opportunity for my mentee, it was not just another item on my to-do list, I had to put it ahead of some of my own tasks for the day. I did not want to let any of my mentees down and wanted them to know that reaching out for help pays off.

9. Most discouraging aspects of the internship

With a large group of mentees, it was not surprising that each one had a different level of desired interaction with me. Upon initially reaching out to my mentees, it was a bit

discouraging to only get one or two responses back at first. I had to remember that some may have been too busy to respond, did not see my email, did not know their schedules far enough ahead of time to select a meeting time, or simply did not wish to formally meet with me. It was easy to feel as though my efforts were not being put to use when I had offered up much of my personal time.

What I took away from these experiences is that not everyone wishes to take full advantage of their resources and you can only do your best to encourage them. Certain mentees desired more interaction with me, while some planned on meeting less frequently, if at all. There was not a one size fits all approach for mentoring a group of individuals with diverse backgrounds and needs. It taught me to be adaptable and be able to cater to the needs of unique individuals to provide the appropriate guidance required. I think this is something I can carry with me into my next experience in a mentor or leadership role.

10. Most challenging aspects of the internship

There were some habits that required adjusting during my time as a mentor. Stepping into the role of mentor forced me to become an active listener at all times, staying engaged and prepared to offer solutions and guidance to my mentees. While listening seems like an obvious piece of mentorship, it was a noticeable adjustment from my typical day. To truly utilize my time, I had grown accustomed to micromanaging my day and, in doing so, disassociating from certain environments and conversations. When meeting with my mentees, my mind could not be wandering into my weekend plans or making a mental checklist of all the tasks I needed to complete for the day.

Along the same vein, I truly tested my time management skills. My own schedule seemed hectic enough to manage by balancing ROTC morning physical training, my class schedule, and personal hobbies. With a group of mentees, it took a lot of planning and coordination to take into account their own commitments and personal time. I honed my time management skills. With a busy schedule always on my mind, I knew that I could not use mentee meetings as a time to multitask or mentally plan my coursework for the day. I became more efficient at blocking my time for the day and managing my schedule.

I found that it was most effective to narrow down availability from the start, including blocks of time I would always be busy. I also maintained flexibility in my schedule to accommodate mentees. For example, every evening I go to the gym but it does not have to be at a specific time. I was prepared to shift those gym sessions around if a mentee wanted to meet in the evening.

In addition to establishing clear time ranges, I also padded these times to take into account anything unpredictable. For instance, I am required to attend several meetings

and classes each week related to ROTC, and sometimes those commitments run past their scheduled times. I wanted to make sure that I was truly able to commit to the times that I offered my mentees to avoid future scrambling or back and forth.

Upon offering these time ranges, mentees were able to easily communicate a time slot that they were available to meet. Rather than suggesting times back and forth to find what worked, they knew that the time they selected would be available for me. This was efficient and stress-free for both myself and my mentee.

11. Recommendations for future interns

Creating a comfortable and judgment-free environment is key to developing a strong and trusting relationship with your mentee. Rather than coming from the role of mentor constantly, it's important to also be their friend.

Instead of diving straight into any questions or concerns regarding coursework and career plans, which likely already stress your mentee out a bit, it can be nice to have casual conversations about everyday life. For instance, having a conversation about weekend plans, hobbies, interests, friends, and family can make meetings a lot less formal and create an open space for mentees to express themselves.

While it is important to get to know your mentee, it is just as beneficial for them to get to know you. By sharing your own personality and life, mentees may find a shared interest or something that creates a comfortable atmosphere for them. Common ground allows for bonding to occur naturally, whether it is a favorite food, genre of music, hobby, etc.

12. Conclusion

My time as a mentor was well worth it as I learned so much about myself as well as how to help others. It was fulfilling to help out students as someone who was once in their shoes. The experience that I was able to gain from conducting this internship helped me immensely. I learned from this internship that being a mentor requires effective communication. Prior to this internship my communication skills were subpar although I put forth most of my focus towards thinking how I should word a sentence in the most constructive and efficient manner which helped me drastically. Another key takeaway I have from this internship is to be adaptable. It's extremely important to learn how to be adaptable to whether you are in a situation like this mentorship where you're dealing with different people with different backgrounds, or if you are dealing with . It teaches you to manage your time effectively, be more resilient, and become a more efficient problem solver.

After I graduate, I will commission as a U.S. Army Infantry officer. This job entails a lot of planning, problem solving, and leading by example. I know I'll be able to use the attributes learned such as time management, problem solving, and most importantly clear and concise communication. I hope to apply what I've learned to future roles, whether I am leading a platoon, in a senior position in a company after the military, or acting as a mentor to anyone who wishes to seek out my advice and experience.

References

ODU. (n.d.). *Undergraduate students*. Old Dominion University. Retrieved April 28, 2023, from <https://ww1.odu.edu/success/academic/advising/undergraduate>