



In the past few years, universities have enrolled an increasing number of non-traditional students.<sup>1</sup> Such students do not have a fixed set of characteristics,<sup>2</sup> as criteria used to identify them may vary depending on the country and context.<sup>3</sup> However, they do share a few common characteristics: Non-traditional students are at least 24 years old, financially independent, have one or more dependents, work full time, and study part time.<sup>4</sup>

• Non-traditional students also have unique needs related to character traits. Vu et al.<sup>5</sup> suggest that these students are characterized by their ability to take part in self-directed learning, and are more independent, autonomous, self-sufficient, and goal-oriented. These authors also suggest that non-traditional students

- have unique learning needs since their schedules vary greatly;
- have had a variety of life and work experiences;
- can learn better when new knowledge is integrated with

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real-life contexts; and

- show a strong determination to solve important problems in their lives.

Online education is an attractive option for non-traditional students since it offers greater accessibility and flexibility in academic load and schedules and can be more readily adapted to meet their needs. Research seems to suggest that non-traditional students show a significantly greater preference for the flexibility and convenience of online courses.<sup>6</sup>

The profile of university students, in general, has changed in the past few years, as options in course delivery methods have expanded. The question is, are institutions of higher learning adopting *effective* strategies to ensure that non-traditional students stay enrolled and succeed in online programs?

**Mentoring as an Intervention Process**

Tinto<sup>7</sup> claims that a student's decision to stay in a university program depends on his or her ability to integrate and

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adapt to the school, as well as to the ability of the school to adapt to the needs of the student, whether traditional or non-traditional.

Likewise, Forbus, Newbold, and Mehta<sup>8</sup> suggest that colleges and universities must adapt to the needs of non-traditional students to improve these students' satisfaction with and involvement in the university experience. This will help the university ensure that these students persist until they reach their academic goals.

Several research studies have highlighted the essential role of mentoring programs to target the needs of the various types of students enrolling in university courses to ensure their ongoing enrollment and academic success.<sup>9</sup>

Tierney, Corwin, and Colyar<sup>10</sup> observed that students who receive care through mentoring programs tend to show greater focus and motivation to reach their academic goals. Mentoring programs also impact students' ability to persist<sup>11</sup> and help to foster their academic success. These programs also have positive effects on their professional performance after graduation.<sup>12</sup>

In their role as mentors, teachers—in addition to effectively fulfilling their duties related to instruction and upholding the reputation of the school—must take into account the greater good of students as individuals. They must also consider the duties life will impose on the students, the service that will be required of them, and the training they will need. Christian educators believe this influence will extend and strengthen to the end of time.<sup>13</sup> Mentors who through their lives and daily interactions with students model Christian principles, can help draw them toward Christ, stirring within them a desire to walk with Him, even while still in school. Thus, mentors who develop strong relationships of trust and goodwill with their students can more significantly and powerfully influence them in their roles as guides, supervisors, counsellors, role models, and advisors.<sup>14</sup>

### Characteristics of Effective Mentoring Models

Given that well-designed mentoring programs can impact student retention and program completion, colleges and universities can take several steps to ensure that faculty are trained to provide good support to non-traditional students. Below are characteristics of student-oriented mentoring programs for non-traditional students online.

#### 1. Addresses students' specific needs

Mentoring models, according to Soto et al.,<sup>15</sup> must be developed to address students' specific needs, which can vary according to their age, level of proficiency when starting their studies, previous formative experiences, their motivations and personal expectations, as well as their approach to studying and organizing their schedule, their use of technological resources, and their ability to adapt to the demands of non-traditional teaching models. Additionally, since they are adults, they will frequently face the challenge of balancing work and family responsibilities.

#### 2. Supports wholistic development within a functional structure

A mentoring model must nurture and support students'

wholistic development, personalize instruction, and direct students toward personal maturity as well as promote intellectual growth.<sup>16</sup> In a mentoring model for Seventh-day Adventist schools, wholistic development includes the whole person, since education is “. . . the harmonious development of the physical, the mental, and the spiritual powers. It prepares the student for the joy of service in this world and for the higher joy of wider service in the world to come.”<sup>17</sup>

Currently, it is possible to find mentoring models designed for specific audiences and purposes, such as mentoring models for Latinos, distance-education students, women, and first-year students, as well as models that seek to facilitate college entry. All of them share essential elements that help to ensure their effectiveness.

From these models, it is possible to incorporate essential elements into a successful mentoring program, such as (a) identifying the profile of students targeted; (b) developing specific goals; (c) identifying interaction strategies used successfully by other programs; (d) making the strategies operational; (e) developing appropriate training for every participant; (f) choosing methods for regular assessment; and (g) ensuring that the organizational structure follows the strategy.<sup>18</sup>

#### 3. Prepares mentors for systematic and intentional implementation

The effectiveness of a mentoring program depends on the skills of the mentors and the degree to which they seek to identify and meet students' needs. The profile for a successful mentor includes (a) the ability to express qualities such as empathy, authenticity, maturity, responsibility, and sociability; and (b) possession of organizational and planning skills (coordination, motivation, and evaluation, as well as technical and educational psychology expertise).<sup>19</sup>

Mentors must develop strong relationships of trust and goodwill with learners in order to enhance their mentees' professional development. They should model commitment, efficiency, and enthusiasm, since in each interaction they have the opportunity to exert a significant influence on the learners' development.<sup>20</sup>

To achieve optimal results, mentors must keep in mind the development of the relationship; the exchange of information and the setting of goals; the work directed to reach stated goals and deepen commitment to completion; and the ongoing assessment of the formal mentoring relationship, along with planning for the future.<sup>21</sup>

#### 4. Provides opportunities for assessing model development and implementation

The effectiveness of a mentoring model becomes clear only after its development and implementation. Sánchez García et al.<sup>22</sup> suggest that assessment of a mentoring model should take into account three dimensions: (1) context assessment (whether the model fulfills the students' needs); (2) process assessment (the quality of interactions and exchanges, as well as the participants' satisfaction with the activities, resources, and specific experiences); and (3) product assessment (how well the program affected participants' mo-

tivation, fulfilled their expectations, and benefitted them).

### Case Study: Virtual UM Comprehensive Mentoring Program

Mentoring models require concerted efforts to launch, organize, and maintain. Defining a local model that can cater to the specific needs of the school demands a structured approach. Montemorelos University in Nuevo Leon, Mexico, underwent this process when developing the Virtual UM Comprehensive Mentoring Program (Virtual UM). The development process discussed below may be useful for other schools as they seek to develop their own programs. See Box 1 for discussion on the best practices followed in developing the program.

### Background Information

Montemorelos University's online education unit, Virtual UM, includes totally online academic courses and offers four undergraduate degrees: theology, business administration, public accountancy, and music. There are five graduate programs: an MBA with concentration in finance or human resources; a Master's in family counseling; and a Master of Education (MEd) with concentrations in educational administration or teaching. It also includes a wide range of continuing-education courses in health, education, management, family, and evangelism.

One hundred percent of students currently enrolled in Virtual UM can be described as non-traditional. Thus, to support their learning experience and wholistic development, the school constructed and implemented a specific mentoring model. The model is based on the eight steps suggested by the Applied Statistics Association (ASA) community.

### Virtual UM Mentoring Model

1. *Purpose of the model.* The model is designed to provide a frame of reference that informs tutoring efforts in order to aid the students' academic, personal, professional, and career development. Wholistic learn-

## Box 1. Best Practices for an Online Teaching Model Mentoring Program

1. *Define the Scope of the Mentoring Program.* Every school should define the scope and goal of its mentoring program. Effective strategies must focus in academic, personal, professional, and career development.<sup>23</sup> For example, academic mentoring should focus on providing students with support and direction regarding issues related to learning.<sup>24</sup> In relation to the students' personal growth and development, the mentor's actions provide support to develop abilities such as time management, self-efficacy, communication, leadership, and a sense of personal purpose.<sup>25</sup> Career mentoring helps students develop skills such as collaboration and an in-depth understanding of the work ethic needed in a professional context.<sup>26</sup>

2. *Train the Team of Teachers Involved in the Mentoring Program.* As more non-traditional students enroll in online programs, changes must be made in the way instruction is delivered. This requires training and engagement of teachers who facilitate online courses.<sup>27</sup> Research suggests that the quality, frequency, and duration of the training provided to teachers and auxiliary staff serving as mentors lead to greater involvement and support of institutional strategies, and greater satisfaction in the mentor-student relationship.<sup>28</sup>

3. *Define an Operational Model.* Mentoring must become one of the central elements in the students' learning experience. Schools need to be committed to designing and implementing mentoring programs that provide wholistic intervention. Wholistic programs that support students' needs increase the likelihood that they will stay enrolled at the school; these programs also improve their professional performance once they leave school.<sup>29</sup>

The American Statistical Association (ASA) community, a group of scholars involved in research on mentoring, suggests an eight-step guide to create and maintain a mentoring model: (1) define the purpose of the mentoring model; (2) form a mentoring committee; (3) create the model structure; (4) recruit participants; (5) connect mentors and mentees; (6) guide participants, keeping communication open between them; (7) request participant feedback; and (8) assess outcomes.<sup>30</sup> These elements should be included in each model.

Table 1. Description of UM Wholistic Learning Experience

A Wholistic Learning Experience	Program Values
	Awareness of the need for well-being and positive quality of life
	Research for ongoing improvements, developments, and innovation
	Ability to persevere, sustained over time
	Preparation to fulfill one's life mission
	Commitment to selfless service
	Advent hope for a brand-new world

ing is the goal of this program and it is expected that learning experiences will help participants achieve this goal (see Table 1).

2. *Mentoring Program Committee.* Within the Virtual UM organizational structure, the Coordination Office of Tutoring and Student Services is responsible for the program’s operation and implementation.

3. *Model Structure.* The Virtual UM mentoring model includes four sections: (a) the model participants; (b) definitions of the scope covered by the model; (c) an outline of actions involved in its operation; and (d) a description of how to integrate faith into the tutoring model. Participants in the model include students, academic tutors, mentors, and the Tutoring and Student Services Coordination office (See Table 2). The model is designed to address four dimensions:

tion. The goal of this dimension is to motivate students at the beginning of the course, keep their interest, and make sure that they finish on time. Mentors are encouraged to create environments that facilitate trust environments through communicating a personal interest in the students and providing spiritual support. The ultimate goal is to foster more effective learning through self-regulation and communication.

The professional and career-development dimension seeks to help students understand work in its professional context and to develop a strong work ethic. This is accomplished through interactive learning, active participation, and collaboration in video conferences, topical discussion forums, question-and-answer forums, and online chapels.

Faith integration occurs throughout the entire process.

**Table 2. Virtual UM Participants in a Mentoring Model**

Roles in the Mentoring Model			
Student	Academic Tutor	Mentor	Tutoring and Student Services Coordination
Acquires skill in applying learning techniques	Instructor who is an expert in his or her field	UM support faculty or staff	Support and follow-up team for the mentoring model
Builds knowledge based on his or her learning experiences	Facilitator in the various aspects of tutoring	Facilitator in the personal-development dimension	Provides guidance, support, and follow-up to participants
Integrates his or her learning experiences	A tutor/mentor assigned to course	Associate mentor	Support programs and coordination

academic development (the facilitation of learning); wholistic personal development; professional and career development, which includes the understanding of a work ethic and the professional environment; and faith integration, which is woven throughout the entire process.

The academic development dimension facilitates learning, as each mentor becomes familiar with his or her students’ profiles so that decisions can be made to provide them with optimal support—some need a guide, others need counsel, while others need to be redirected to another supporting arm of student services. This dimension also provides ways for mentors to share data, ask questions, suggest ideas, and redefine roles based on interaction with the students. Mentors are provided with resources that will help them monitor the students’ behavioral triggers and send out early warnings to the ones who may be falling behind. Students receive descriptive, timely feedback that is designed to make a difference in their overall performance—and ultimately their grade.

The personal dimension is facilitated by wholistic instruc-

The instructor integrates personal values and life mission into his or her instruction. This deliberate instruction and modeling help make the most of the online learning environment, and capitalize on opportunities to help students consolidate convictions, value systems, and life mission. Additional elements that ensure that faith integration occurs include the characteristics of the academic tutors and mentors, including their commitment to a biblical worldview and understanding of the philosophical underpinnings of Seventh-day Adventist education. The academic tutor is assigned to a course only after its design is already in place. Each course addresses fundamental topics from a Christian worldview and connects content naturally with the Christian faith, beliefs, and values.

4. *Participant Recruitment.* Academic tutors are Montemorelos University faculty or contract instructors hired for a specific course. They must be experts in their fields who also have experience in teaching at the college or university level. Actions listed above in the mentoring model are part of their job description.

Associate mentors are members of UM support staff who have been invited to get involved in the mentoring program because their personal characteristics align with the requirements for a mentor's profile.

The staff working at the Coordination Office of Tutoring and Student Services have a profile that includes specialization and expertise in student development, retention techniques, student counseling services, online course tutoring, and educational technology. Care should be taken to ensure that all mentors are screened and trained.

5. *Connecting Mentors and Mentees.* The academic tutor serves as a mentor for the students enrolled in his or her courses, or in the assigned courses. The associate mentor is assigned one or two students, and his or her area of involvement focuses on the wholistic and personal dimensions. There are no specific guidelines for assigning an associate mentor.

6. *Participant Training and Communication.* The mentoring model requires specialized training and ongoing communication with academic tutors and associate mentors and is coordinated by staff in the Office for Tutoring and Student Services. In this sense, Virtual UM has designed a training program that develops the abilities necessary to run the model. (See the Training Schedule in Table 3.)

7. *Feedback.* The Coordination Office for Tutoring and Student Services is in charge of ongoing follow-up of students based on the detailed reports of the e42 Platform (UM's learning-management system) and maintains ongoing communication with tutors, teachers, and students. This allows that office to keep track of the implementation process and to make adjustments as needed.

8. *Model Assessment.* Currently, only the students' perceptions of the effectiveness of the program are being assessed. Plans are in place to conduct other types of assessment, such as an evaluation of the mentors' work, based on data collected over time. There are several examples of tools that can be used to help mentors assess their own performance. The University of Wisconsin-Madison has a 26-skill assessment that helps mentors self-reflect. The assessment tool can also be used by programs to help mentees evaluate their mentors (see <https://ictr.wisc.edu/mentoring/mentor-evaluation-form-examples/>).

### Conclusion

The flexibility and accessibility offered by online studies are very attractive to non-traditional students. Their decision to continue with a program, however, may be strongly influenced by their work and family responsibilities. Mentoring is an important strategy that enables the university to meet the specific needs of this group. Montemorelos University's Virtual UM Comprehensive Mentoring Program enables teaching faculty to not only provide participants with aca-

**Table 3. Training Program for the Virtual UM Mentoring Model**

Type of Assistant	Type of Training
Beginner Academic Tutor	Online course: Online training in academic tutoring (15 hours).
Experienced Academic Tutor	Micro-learning: Short videos on effective tutoring strategies (5-7 minutes).
Beginner Mentor	Face-to-face training: Ensuring mentors' competence (2 hours).
Experienced Mentor	Micro-learning: Short videos with strategies on the effectiveness of mentoring actions (7-10 minutes).

demical support, but also offer spiritual support through integrating a Christian worldview, personal faith experiences, and commitment to service and mission into courses and connections with students. Wholistic models are needed to integrate key aspects of the students' learning experiences as they matriculate through their program of study. ✍

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