

Math Mentoring: Teaching. Giving. Leading.

The role of Math Mentor is not so simple and ordinary as it might seem.

Although it might sound very similar to simply “helping peers study,” Math Mentoring entails textbook leadership. It is not the frantic interaction between classmates before the test next period, nor is it a laid-back activity. Leadership is inspiration. Motivation. At Math Mentoring during Activity, I (along with the other Math Mentors) help lead the students in their path to mathematical prowess by inspiring them through teaching.

Many of the students that come to Math Mentoring are taking Honors Geometry or another freshman math course. Having recently taken the course, it is still fresh in my mind. Additionally, my memory of the class is from a student’s perspective—the methods and mnemonics I used to study are very relevant. Together, these two aspects allow us Math Mentors to fill in the gaps that the math instructors may have left behind. Rather than being a classmate—who may not have as much experience as those who have already taken the course—or a teacher—who may view the coursework differently than a student—a Math Mentor has the unique in-between position, a true mentor. Not quite a renowned master nor a fellow apprentice, this position of mentor gives a balance between relatability and experience. This balance is what allows the Math Mentors to not only help study, but also teach.

And that’s no simple task, either.

An important facet of leadership is motivation. Whether a student does not understand a topic, or if he or she is apprehensive of a looming test or quiz, they are typically dejected and in low spirits. It is the job of the Math Mentors to solve this: to provide alternative methods of teaching that might help because it offers a different perspective. Because it is not a typical class with a strict agenda, the Math Mentor has the time to work one-on-one with a student until they understand the topic, as well as feel comfortable and confident with it. A mathematics teacher, with whom a similar session might feel more intimidating, might not be able to achieve the same effect. And every student will allow the mentor to grow also as a teacher, improving his or her abilities to help other students and further distinguish Math Mentoring from a basic peer-to-peer study group.

This teaching differentiates Math Mentoring from non-leadership. Math Mentoring can be considered somewhat of a well-established community of students seeking and giving academic aid. There is a sense of formality in the club, even in the name (i.e., “math mentoring” as opposed to something along the lines of “math commons,” “math study,” or “math buddies”) that differentiates it from the characteristic Chemistry cramming crew of classmates in the Learning Commons. That is considerably more chaotic and less effective than a more organized group of Math Mentors.

Another point to consider is that Math Mentoring offers little benefit to the mentor; there is no pay or similar reward, except for the satisfaction of helping others. It is on the mentor’s own initiative to remember the math from freshman year and give their time to help other students, many of whom, being in different grades, are strangers. Math Mentoring

happens both during 30-minute break on Tuesdays and Thursdays as well as X-Periods (Activity) on day-2s, which means free, non-academic time for most students. It is one of the few true academic activities in the Activity period, besides Peer Mentoring and Quiet Study—and these two activities have the same pitfalls that Math Mentoring avoids, namely the use of peer-to-peer (vs. mentor-to-student) teaching and a less established and organized structure, respectively. In the morning, it is presumably the only regularly-occurring academic session as well. I have been going to all of the Activity sessions of Math Mentoring (unless a different activity such as the NHS meeting has a higher priority) and visiting the morning sessions with increasing frequency. To show up regularly, as other Math Mentors and myself have done, to the meetings is a show of reliability and discipline, which demonstrate leadership.

There is also a dynamic mood in the Math Mentoring club. Mr. Barna, the supervisor of the club, decided that the studying of other schoolwork would be allowed, if quietly practiced and non-disruptive to the regular mentoring of mathematics. Similarly, students occasionally require assistance in mathematics in higher grades (i.e., sophomores and juniors). The Math Mentors work together to help everyone, freshman- and math-related or not. If there is a free mentor who understands the subject that is required, then he or she can give assistance just as readily as if math aid was requested. I've answered multiple requests for help for science or English assignments, and I've also delegated other mentors to help when I do not know the content. The ability to respond to different situations is another side to leadership, and is thus fulfilled by the Math Mentors.

The teaching part of Math Mentoring is the central goal of the club, and the Math Mentors are a suitable match for its purpose. But a leader is no leader if he or she does not have the capability to manage the club as well.

During Activity periods, Math Mentoring consists of upwards of forty students and only a few mentors. Mr. Barna can only do so much to organize the crowd. Because of the free nature of the club—students are allowed to do most anything so long as it is academic and productive—the room has the tendency to become loud, creating an unideal study environment. While Mr. Barna does most of the quieting down, the Mentors help when it becomes too uncontrollable or if he leaves the room. Similarly, other simple regulatory activities have to be completed around the room, attendance being the one of them. I was often delegated to facilitate the taking of attendance by creating, passing around, and checking the attendance sheet last year and sometimes this year as well. Being a regular administrative duty of any activity during X-Period, it is important to complete. I also regularly told the students to stop playing video games or to stop straying off task if they were doing so. This includes other Math Mentors, who, bored as they might be, still have the duty to actively participate in the club and answer help right away when help is needed.

Being a Math Mentor, I have answered calls to help from the school community: help for class, for inspiration, for guidance and leadership. I have directly worked with many students and led them towards academic excellence, and I have helped maintain the group that allows this motivating relationship to occur.