Want To Leave a Legacy?

Mentor University Students

Recently I attended the funeral of a close friend, Joe Zickafoose. Hundreds gathered to celebrate his life and ministry. I mourned his premature departure. We had been ministry partners and confidants for over 25 years.

Joe is most remembered for his ability to mentor students. Even one conversation with Joe could change the trajectory of a student’s life. At his funeral it was impossible to miss the evidence of his people-building skills. Scores of his previous students, interns, and ministry colleagues paid tribute. They described him as a faithful discipler, humble mentor, honest friend, servant leader, patient guide, active listener, edgy musician, and hilarious hero. Many attendees soberly walked away wondering, Am I able to live up to the investment Joe placed in my life?

John Maxwell wrote Talent Is Never Enough. Maxwell believes talent is not what makes the difference in leadership that reverberated at Joe’s funeral. Do not get me wrong. Joe was amazingly talented. As a public speaker Joe was compelling. He was a brilliant thinker, a passionate and skilled guitarist, an exceptional practical theologian, and a hilarious prankster. Except for a few references to his humor and intelligence, people told how Joe had profoundly left his mark on them by his mentorship. Joe set out to change the world one person at a time. Why did people fly in for the funeral from across America and Europe? They flew in because God used Joe to change their lives.

How did Joe do it? Why is he such a beloved mentor? And how can you have the same kind of impact on the life of a college student? When you meet a student at Starbucks, what do you talk about?

The first question to ask a student is, “Who are you and where did you come from?” People have a story, and they want to tell it. Find out what they think is special about their hometown. Who are their siblings and how do they get along? What did they like and dislike about high school? What do they admire most about their parents? Show interest in getting to know them for who they are rather than what they can do.

Then tell them your story. This subtlety alerts them to think relationship before task. Every truly transformational relationship begins with personal history giving.

The next question to ask a student is, “What are your priorities and how can I help?” The crux of any mentoring relationship is as simple as a more experienced person asking a less experienced person about goals and what course of action he intends to pursue. Maybe the student cannot articulate an action plan, but you can help him define it, and maybe do something to help resource it. No doubt this will lead you to talk about seven key areas: marital, financial, emotional, physical, professional, social, and spiritual development. Mentoring a student to reach his full potential will correlate directly to promoting balanced growth in these areas.

Closely related to identifying priorities is the formation of personal vision. Today’s student is overwhelmed by options and opportunities. There are a million good things a student could
do in life. The hard part is choosing what to do. This often leads a student to paralysis in his decisionmaking. A mentor may come alongside a student and help him identify his core values, help infuse godly character qualities, and in doing so foster greater clarity and purpose. Joe was exceptionally good at helping a student grasp a godly vision for his life and future career.

Then Joe would gather students into teams — missions teams, worship teams, hospitality teams, and leadership teams. He knew success in life depends on a person’s ability to play well with others. Joe defined teamwork as authentic servanthood. He knew that when a student saw the needs of others as important as her own needs, then she would reach out with the love of Christ.

Only when students begin to view themselves as family units will they show deep devotion to each other. When students travel together with a common purpose, they get where they are going with greater trust and thrust. Teamwork is transformational.

Concerning leadership development, Joe recognized two priorities. First, he wanted to train every student to be a disciple maker. He believed disciple making to be the core command of the Great Commission. To Joe you were either a disciple or a disciple maker. He mentored students individually and in groups in the art of making disciples. He directly connected this with Jesus’ model of equipping the apostles for ministry. This captures the imagination of students as they actively serve the kingdom of God.

Second, Joe invented scores of additional servant-leadership roles for students. He wanted to enable a student to flourish in leadership skills. As a student graduates, he will employ these skills for a lifetime as a marketplace minister. To this end a mentor is only helpful when he sees a student operate in her leadership role. Feedback becomes rich and meaningful from a coach who watches from the front row. (When a mentor offers feedback without firsthand observation, the student may feel the feedback is disingenuous). Feedback fosters a personal metamorphosis of self. Mentoring students to become servant leaders is about expanding their capacity to create an extraordinary future. And this metamorphosis lies in the domain of performance and achievement, not in psychology.

An effective pastoral mentor exposes emerging student leaders to other great leaders.

A pastor who offers sincere feedback to a student will begin to see rich benefits in a student’s life. The student will grow in self-awareness, set better goals, become more balanced and less stressed, communicate better, improve health and fitness, and deepen family relationships. As family and friends wrote on Joe’s Facebook page, they thanked Joe for helping them grow in these ways.

An effective pastoral mentor exposes emerging student leaders to other great leaders. Joe refused to permit a student to form a dependent relationship with him. He treated students as equals and deliberately fostered mutually beneficial relationships. He networked students with other students and with people who could encourage them in their spiritual and leadership development. He wanted students to meet people who possessed stories of exceptional courage, ability, and character. Nothing speaks as persuasively as a heroic example.

Most important, a Christian mentor cares for and encourages a student in her spiritual growth. Spiritual growth is not achieved; it is received. A relationship with God is not achieved through techniques, but instead by personal commitment, submission to the Spirit, devotion, and self-surrender. Joe modeled a growing relationship with Christ, and then pointed the way for a student to follow in kind. Nevertheless, he knew for a student to receive grace and truth, it would come only through humble submission to Jesus.

So how did Joe do it? He carefully and intentionally used these relationship-building skills: history giving, coaching, visioneering, teamwork, disciple making, feedback, exposure to heroic people, and spiritual direction.

Stephen Covey writes about living, loving, learning, and leaving a legacy. Joe lived well, loved generously, constantly learned, and at his funeral we all witnessed his legacy as one student after another stood to say, “Thank you, Joe, for your impact on my life. I will never be the same. I miss you and love you.” I echo the same sentiments.

May you be blessed with a legacy of investing deeply into the hearts and minds of college students, and like Joe may you enjoy many great cups of coffee along the way.

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