

# Original Research Article

## University Peer Mentoring Program: Perceptions and Expectations of Aspirants at BUAP, Mexico

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### ABSTRACT

Mentoring programs were initially created to address challenges related to school dropout. The aim of this research is to explore the perceptions and expectations of applicants seeking to join the peer mentoring group known as “Lobomentoría” (University Peer Mentoring Program) at the Complejo Regional Nororiental of the Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla (BUAP), using a mixed-methods approach to identify key factors influencing their readiness and preparation for the mentoring role. A questionnaire with 21 questions was administered to explore various aspects related to the role of the lobomentor (student mentor), followed by interviews to delve deeper into the responses. The collected data was then analyzed, organized, and categorized for interpretation. Among the most notable findings, applicants clearly identified the functions of a lobomentor and recognized and agreed upon the necessary skills they must possess, such as assisting, guiding, and supporting incoming students in any situation they may face, both inside and outside of school. Additionally, the applicants expressed a strong desire to adequately fulfill these responsibilities, while also creating and fostering an environment of respect, integration, culture, and inclusion to develop a sense of belonging to the BUAP community and reduce behaviors that could lead to school dropout.

*Keywords: University Peer Mentoring Program, school dropout, higher education, Northeastern Puebla, Mexico.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The development of mentorship programs within the university setting aims primarily to facilitate students' transition into higher education by providing support throughout their adaptation process and fostering a sense of belonging to the institution. Additionally, these programs seek to assist students in their personal and professional development, as well as guide them in overcoming challenges and difficulties that may jeopardize their educational, social, and individual progress, such as early school dropout [1-3].

The term “Lobomentoría” (University Peer Mentoring Program) in the context of the Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla (BUAP) refers to students who act as mentors or “Lobomentores” (student mentors) for new entrants, offering support and guidance in their adaptation to university life. This Lobomentoría program, which began in 2014 and is under the supervision of the University Support Office (DAU by its initials in Spanish), aims to facilitate both academic and social integration for students, particularly those from backgrounds less familiar with the university environment.

University dropout refers to the discontinuation of studies before completing a degree, without the student resuming their education. This issue transcends the educational sphere, as it is multicausal, depending on economic, social, contextual, and personal factors. Although dropout rates have significantly decreased in Mexico over the past three years, it remains a significant challenge within the country's higher education system.

Peer mentoring programs, such as Lobomentoría, are designed, among other purposes, to reduce dropout rates by focusing primarily on the first two years of study, as this is the period in which higher dropout rates are observed. In this context, the aim of the present research is to explore the perceptions and expectations of those aspiring to join the Lobomentoría group at the Complejo Regional Nororiental of the Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla, using a mixed-methods approach to identify key factors influencing their readiness and preparation to assume the role of mentors.

## **2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The purpose of higher education in Mexico goes beyond training competent professionals for the labor market; its goal is also to build a generation of citizens with critical awareness, capable of facing present and future challenges with a vision of equality and justice. To achieve this, the government and various educational institutions are implementing actions to increase university enrollment, promote student retention, and prevent dropout.

According to the Mexican Ministry of Public Education [4], during the 2021-2022 academic year, the dropout rate in higher education decreased to 8.1%, marking a historic drop from 8.8% in the 2020-2021 period. For the 2022-2023 cycle, the dropout rate declined even further, with an enrollment of 4,623,933 students in undergraduate programs, of which 277,435 dropped out, equivalent to 6.0% of the student population. Despite these encouraging figures, students still face risks that may lead them to abandon their studies. Fonseca and García [5] and Opazo et al. [6] mention that university dropout refers to the discontinuation of higher education studies before obtaining a degree and without re-enrolling. Furthermore, university dropout is multicausal, meaning that it does not stem from a single reason, making it one of the most significant problems for the education system; thus, it becomes a topic of discussion and, as a result, must be studied, understood, and addressed from its various angles.

The causes of school dropout include not only individual or family factors but also socioeconomic, contextual, and educational elements [16]. According to the OECD [7], social, gender, and geographical inequalities in Mexico, as well as students' social environment, have a great influence on their chances of entering higher education and succeeding. Arismendi Vera and González Catalán [8], in a study on Student Dropout in Technical-Professional Higher Education in Mexico City, identified three variables that influenced dropout: the first was the school schedule, whether morning or evening; the second was gender, as 57% of women dropped out compared to 43% of men; and the third was the level of maturity, as they mention that dropouts had not yet clearly defined the field in which they wanted to work. On the other hand, Calderón et al. [9], in a study on the causes of dropout in electronics and computer engineering at the University Center of Los Valles at the University of Guadalajara, Mexico, found that dropout factors had a greater impact on students in the first four semesters, which could represent a key stage for preventing dropout in higher education.

To reduce dropout within universities, institutions have opted for the development and implementation of programs designed to tackle the problem during the early years of study, as early interventions have been found to be more effective [10]. Such is the case with peer

mentoring programs [17-19], which consist of a support process aimed at the personal and professional development of students through the exchange of knowledge and experiences between a student mentor and a new student [11].

As a reference framework for developing programs that address school dropout, the Sustainable Development Goals stand out, particularly Goal 4, which seeks to “Ensure inclusive, equitable, and quality education, and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all”; Goal 5, which aims to “Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls”; and Goal 10, which seeks to “Reduce inequalities”[12]. Likewise, the 2020-2024 Sectoral Education Plan of the Ministry of Public Education establishes within its priority strategies the 2.4 strategy, which seeks to “Consolidate accompaniment and school coexistence schemes aimed at reducing dropout and improving graduation efficiency, favoring the transition between types, levels, and modalities of the National Educational System”[13].

Finally, the 2021-2025 Institutional Development Plan (PDI by its initials in Spanish) of BUAP, in its third objective, “Education as a Driver of Transformation,” highlights the need to redesign support and tracking strategies to improve retention and provide support in cases of early dropout and lag [14].

All these objectives align with BUAP's proposal for its mentoring program, whose goal is to support new students to ensure a successful adaptation process and, as much as possible, prevent school dropout. This is achieved through solidarity-based, inclusive, and holistic work that reduces gender barriers, while fostering a sense of belonging and personal development through the empowerment of students' intellectual capacities.

The Lobomentoría program was proposed by BUAP in 2012, and since 2014, (DAU by its initials in Spanish) has been responsible for its implementation. Its primary goal is to establish voluntary collaboration networks between experienced university students and new students, thereby facilitating their integration into the university community. Through this program, the aim is to promote solidarity, mutual support, and guidance, facilitating a smoother adaptation to university life. The name Lobomentoría refers to wolves, social animals that live in packs, reflecting the community spirit that the program seeks to cultivate, as well as symbolizing values such as courage, intelligence, and strength. A lobomentor is a student in advanced academic cycles who has the right profile to guide and support new students. Their role includes advising, sharing knowledge and experiences, and actively participating in programs promoted by the DAU [11].

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

#### ***Objective***

The objective of this research is to analyze the perceptions and expectations of applicants seeking to join the Lobomentoría group at the Complejo Regional Nororiental of the Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla. A mixed-methods approach was used to identify the key factors that influence their willingness and readiness to assume the role of mentors.

#### ***Instrument***

A 21-question survey was administered to explore availability, prior experience, perceptions of mentor responsibilities, as well as the strengths, weaknesses, and personal skills needed to fulfill the role of lobomentor.

## **Procedure**

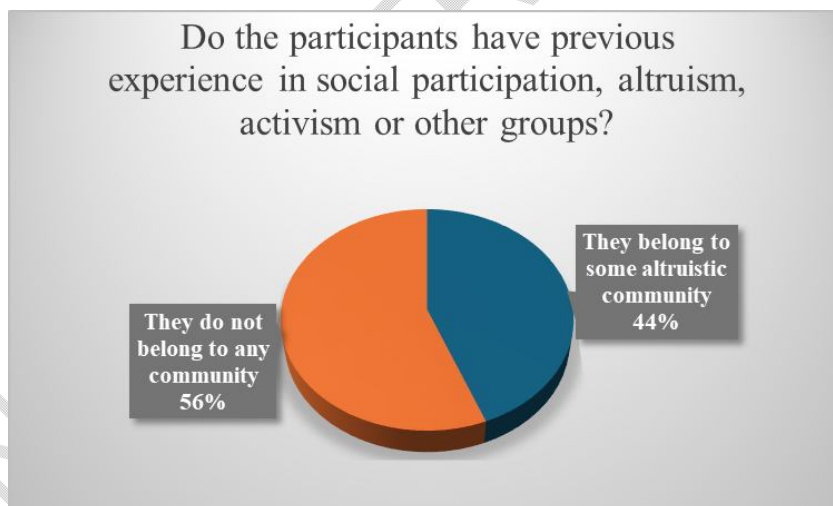
The registration period for those aspiring to be part of the Lobomentoría group for the Fall 2024 and Spring 2025 semesters took place from April 22 to May 3, 2024. Subsequently, a 10-question survey was administered via the Microsoft 365 Forms platform, followed by interviews to delve deeper into the responses provided by the applicants in the survey. Afterward, the collected information was analyzed, organizing the data and creating categories for interpretation.

## **4. ANALYSIS AND RESULTS**

The following presents the analysis of the quantitative and qualitative data collected from the participants.

### ***Previous experience in social and community participation***

Initially, it is noteworthy that participants have previous experience in social participation groups, altruism, activism, or other forms of community involvement. Forty-four percent (44%) mentioned having had the experience of belonging to some type of community, with the most prominent being groups focused on altruistic or religious work. Some participants reported having experience as leaders of school groups, while others have experience participating in sports clubs or engaging in cultural activities. On the other hand, 56% of the participants reported not having had any involvement or being part of any organization or society, as shown in Figure 1.



**Fig. 1. Previous experience in social and community participation.**  
***The Role of a Lobomentor***

The questionnaire also included questions regarding participants' perceptions of the functions of a lobomentor. In this context, the applicants described the activities of a lobomentor as follows: "(A lobomentor) is interested in the participation and contribution of the group, and also analyzes areas of opportunity and potential challenges for students in order to make their school experience less stressful through mutual support (PM5)"; "(A lobomentor) accompanies peers entering the university, providing guidance to answer questions related to the institution, based on previous experience and some prior training

(PM12)”; and finally, “(A lobomentor) guides and supports their university peers throughout their academic journey, helping them in both academic and, at times, personal matters (PF11).”

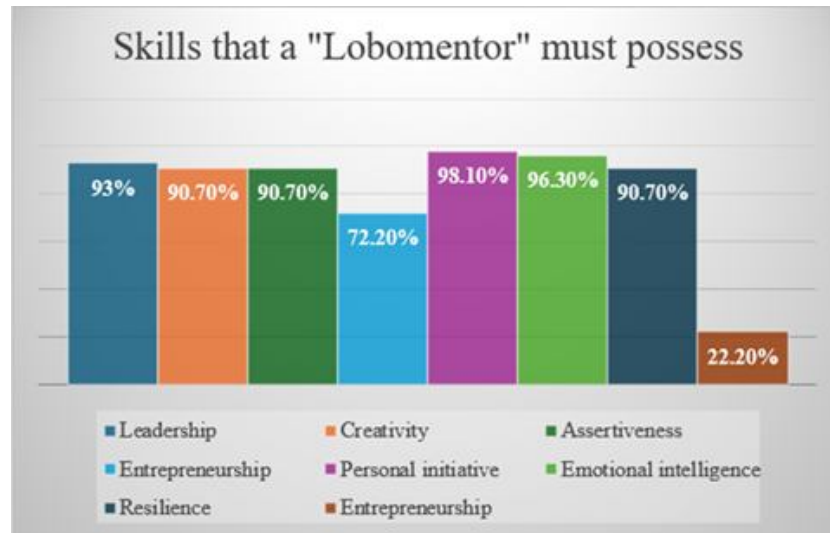
According to the Institutional Mentorship Plan [PIML by its initials in Spanish] [11] the objectives of lobomentoría include fostering university identity, providing guidance on university life, participating in activities organized by the DAU and Academic Units, as well as supporting student groups during their induction (up to two semesters), exchanges, and the disciplinary period. In this sense, it is important to highlight that the applicants clearly identify the expected functions of a lobomentor, such as helping new students integrate adequately into the institution, as well as guiding and supporting those in need of help with both academic and non-academic matters.

### ***Skills Required for the Role of Lobomentor***

The main strengths highlighted by the participants include responsibility, empathy, creativity, sociability, and leadership [20]. In terms of weaknesses, there is a tendency to point out difficulty with public speaking, though this is minimal, as most participants mentioned specific weaknesses that are not significantly related to those of others.

According to the PIML [11], the skills required for the role of lobomentor include empathy, assertiveness, solidarity, and receptiveness. A lobomentor must also be able to communicate effectively, possess emotional intelligence, practice active listening, know how to work in teams, respect diversity, be inclusive, entrepreneurial, and demonstrate leadership.

All participants agreed (100%) that empathy and active listening are essential skills for a lobomentor. Regarding leadership (96.3%), creativity (90.7%), assertiveness (90.7%), entrepreneurship (72.2%), personal initiative (98.1%), emotional intelligence (96.3%), and resilience (90.7%), the majority also agreed. The exception was “entrepreneurship,” with 22.2% of participants being uncertain about this skill. This suggests that most participants understand and agree with the skills a lobomentor must possess, as outlined by the BUAP (2022) in its PIML.



**Fig. 2. Skills required for the role of lobomentor.**

### ***Collaborative Work***

Another key feature of the PIML from BUAP [11] is “to foster and strengthen solidarity, support, and guidance within the student community, establishing voluntary collaborative networks” (p. 4). For this reason, it is essential to clearly define the concept of collaborative work. The interviewed students agree that collaborative work involves joint effort to achieve a common goal through support and cooperation. PM4 defined it as follows: “(Collaborative work) is carried out among several people who share ideas, tasks, and learning, and work together to strengthen the tasks they are developing in order to achieve the expected results.”

### ***Expectations of the Lobomentoría Program***

Finally, the expectations of those interested in joining the Lobomentoría group regarding their contributions to the program were explored. The applicants primarily expressed a desire to support new students in their adaptation processes. They hope to be a source of guidance for these peers, helping them with paperwork, answering their questions, and, above all, creating a trusting environment through activities such as clubs. This way, new members of the BUAP community will view the university not only as an academic space but also as a cultural one.

Some students expressed it as follows: “I hope to guide my new peers with their questions and concerns, and I hope that Lobomentoría will be more than just an educational intervention; that it will be something more dynamic. I hope to help many students” (PM1).

“Participating actively in everyone’s school life, helping to prevent school dropout, and above all, making this institution a safe space for all students, where no one feels alone or has a sense of not belonging. Helping them adapt to school and being useful for their academic goals” (PM5).

Some applicants also expressed interest in promoting extracurricular activities, as one participant noted:

“Additionally, on a personal level, I would like to promote the creation of a dance group within the university, so that my peers can feel that the university has more to offer besides academic services and education. I believe extracurricular activities have a great impact on people's holistic development” (PF11).

On the other hand, some applicants view the mentor as a spokesperson and bridge to address any grievances that may arise during their time at the university, advocating for student causes and seeking the best solutions for their peers. One student expressed it as follows:

My expectations of Lobomentoría are high, as I consider it a group that is not only involved in improving and supporting the student community but also in advocating for disagreements related to the facilities or opinions about them, which are considered to provide solutions and improve the school's perception (PF9).

## 5. CONCLUSION

The students interested in being part of BUAP's Lobomentoría program have very positive expectations and perceptions about it. “Helping” and “guiding” stand out as the main actions they expect to carry out with new students. They also express enthusiasm for proposing and carrying out various activities that contribute to the integration of the university community, such as cultural clubs that foster student talent, as well as social events within the institution. They also express a desire to provide the support that many of them would have liked to receive, such as emotional attention, answering questions, and assisting in the adaptation process. Furthermore, they recognize the importance of being spokespersons for the challenges students may face, proposing improvements for the institution, and contributing to reducing school dropout rates.

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