

Exploring Student Perceptions and Expectations of Peer Mentoring: A Study of the *Lobomentoría* Program at Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla, Mexico

ABSTRACT

This study explores the perceptions and expectations of applicants aspiring to join the "Lobomentoría" University Peer Mentoring Program at the Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla (BUAP), Mexico. The research aims to identify the key factors influencing their preparedness for the mentoring role, particularly in addressing challenges related to dropout rates in higher education. Using a mixed-method approach, a questionnaire and follow-up semi-structured interviews were conducted with 54 participants to examine their understanding of the lobomentor role, the necessary skills, and their anticipated outcomes. The findings reveal that applicants have a clear grasp of a lobomentor's functions and recognize essential skills such as providing assistance and support to incoming students. Additionally, they express a strong commitment to fostering an inclusive environment, promoting a sense of belonging, and reducing dropout tendencies. This study enhances the understanding of peer mentoring programs within Mexican higher education institutions. To complement these findings, it is recommended that future research focus on long-term studies to assess the impact of the Lobomentoría program on student retention and academic success.

Keywords: School dropout, Mexico, Northeastern Puebla, University Peer Mentoring.

1. INTRODUCTION

The development of mentorship programs within university settings primarily aims to facilitate students' transition into higher education by offering support throughout their adaptation process and fostering a sense of belonging to the institution. Additionally, these programs seek to aid students in their personal and professional development, guiding them in overcoming challenges that may jeopardize their educational, social, and individual progress, such as early school dropout [1-3]. According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), 30% of students who begin their university studies do not complete them. In countries such as Mexico, New Zealand, Sweden, and the United States, this percentage increases to 40%.

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 (USO), aims to facilitate both academic and social integration for students, particularly those from backgrounds less familiar with the university environment.

According to Ortiz-Lozano, Rua-Vieites, Bilbao-Calabuig & Casadesús-Fa (2018) 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-method 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 Secretaría de Educación Pública (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, Moreno, Álvarez-Miranda & Pereira [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 Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (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, Colomo & Ruiz [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]. This is a typical case with peer mentoring programs [17-19], which consist of a support process aimed at personal and

professional **development 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 Secretaría de Educación Pública (2000) 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].

In line with these assertions, the 2021-2025 Plan de Desarrollo Institucional (Institutional Development Plan) of BUAP (2022), 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, USO 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 USO[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.

Research question

What are the perceptions and expectations of applicants who want to join the Lobomentoría group at the Complejo Regional Nororiental of the Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla?

Method and instruments

A mixed-method approach was employed to identify the key factors influencing participants' willingness and readiness to assume the role of mentors. A 21-item questionnaire was administered to analyze participants' availability, prior experience, perceptions of mentor responsibilities, as well as the strengths, weaknesses, and personal skills necessary for fulfilling the role of lobomentor. This questionnaire was developed based on a comprehensive literature review of mentoring and validated by experts in the field at the university. Additionally, it was piloted with a population similar to the target group to ensure that the questions were appropriate and aligned with the study's objectives. Subsequently, interviews were conducted with the participants to delve deeper into the responses provided in the online questionnaire.

Participants

A convenience sample of 54 applicants who registered for the Lobomentoría group during the Fall 2024 and Spring 2025 semesters was used. The participants were students from various undergraduate programs at the Complejo Regional Nororiental, of which 12 were men and 42 were women. The ages of the participants ranged from 19 to 21 years. First-year students were not included, as the program is specifically designed to create a support network for new students at the university. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, with strict measures in place to ensure both confidentiality and anonymity.

Procedure

The registration period for individuals aspiring to join the Lobomentoría group for the Fall 2024 and Spring 2025 semesters was held from April 22 to May 3, 2024. Following this, a 21-question survey was administered via the Microsoft 365 Forms platform, with an estimated completion time of 10 minutes. 54 brief semi-structured interviews were conducted to gain deeper insights into the survey responses. These interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using thematic analysis. Participants were assigned code names consisting of three elements: "P" for participant, followed by "M" for male or "F" for female, and a unique number. For example, code names such as PM1, PM2, or PF3 were used. Descriptive statistics and thematic analysis were used to analyze survey and interview data, respectively.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

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%) 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.

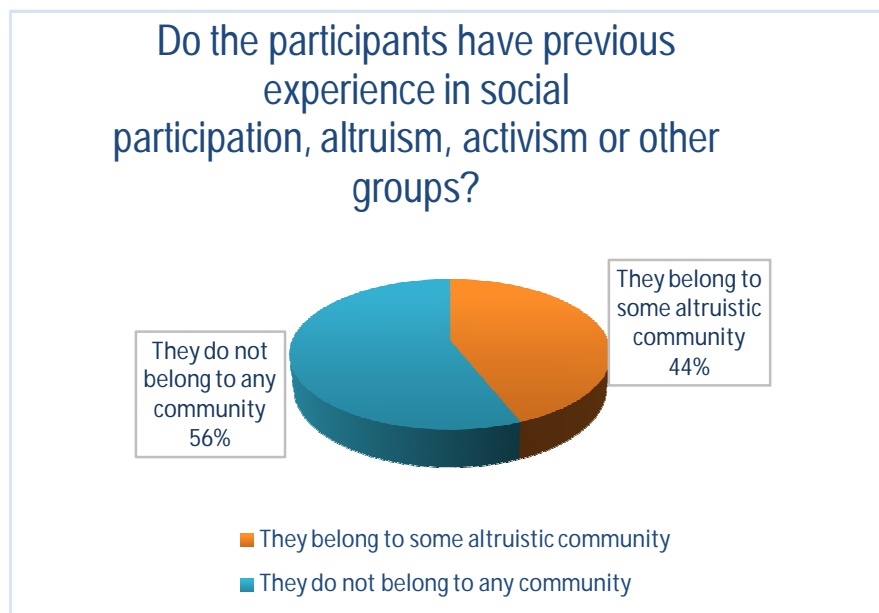


Figure. 1. Previous experience in social and community participation
The Role of a Lobomentor (Own elaboration)

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 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 Plan Institucional de Mentoría yLobomentoría(Institutional Mentoring Plan)[11] the objectives of lobomentoría include fostering university identity, providing guidance on university life, participating in activities organized by the USO 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 Plan Institucional de Mentoría y Lobomentoría[11], the skills required for the role of lobomentor include empathy, assertiveness, solidarity, and receptiveness. A

lobomonitor 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 lobomonitor. Skills like leadership (96.3%), creativity (90.7%), assertiveness (90.7%), entrepreneurship (72.2%), personal initiative (98.1%), emotional intelligence (96.3%), and resilience (90.7%), these was agreed by the majority. 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 lobomonitor must possess, as outlined by the BUAP (2022).

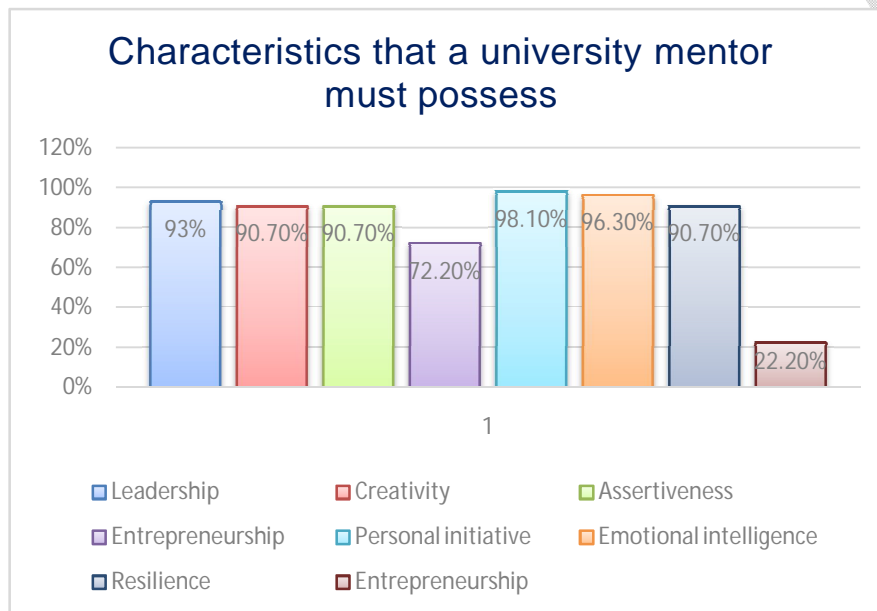


Figure. 2. Skills required for the role of lobomonitor(Own elaboration)

Collaborative Work

Another key feature of the Plan Institucional de Mentoría y Lobomonitoría 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 Lobomonitoría Program

Finally, the expectations of those interested in joining the Lobomonitoría 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, help to prevent school dropout, and above all, making this institution a safe space for all students, where no one feels alone or being an outcast; by helping them to adapt to school and being useful for their academic goals" (PM5).

Some applicants also expressed interest in promoting extracurricular activities:

"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).

The ideas gathered from prospective Lobomentoría participants highlight their strong commitment to supporting new students in their transition to university life. These applicants consider their roles not only as guides in academic matters but also as advocates for an inclusive community. Their aspirations to create a trusting environment through various extracurricular activities, along with their dedication to addressing student concerns, reflect a profound understanding of the importance of holistic student development. Finally, the Lobomentoría program has the potential to foster a supportive cultural atmosphere within BUAP, making it a place where students feel empowered and connected beyond the classroom.

5. CONCLUSION

The interested students in BUAP's Lobomentoría program have very positive expectations and perceptions about it. The main acts of 'helping' and 'guiding' new students are what is expected from the mentors. 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. On a concluding note, 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. However, a potential limitation of this study is that only participants with a strong interest in mentorship or prior experience in leadership roles were

included in this study since they were interested in taking part in the study and in the Lobomentoría group. Finally, as a suggestion to complement the findings of this research, it would be beneficial to conduct long-term studies on the effects of the Lobomentoría program on student retention and academic success. By analyzing data over several semesters, researchers can gain valuable insights into how mentorship influences students' integration and overall university experience.

Consent

As per international standards or university standards, Participants' written consent has been collected and preserved by the author(s).

Disclaimer (Artificial intelligence)

Author(s) hereby declare that generative AI technologies such as Large Language Models, etc. have been used during the writing or editing of manuscripts. This explanation will include the name, version, model, and source of the generative AI technology and as well as all input prompts provided to the generative AI technology

Details of the AI usage are given below:

1. Model: GPT-4
2. Version: GPT-4 (2024)
3. Source: OpenAI
4. AI was used to translate the text into English and to conduct a grammar review in that language.

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