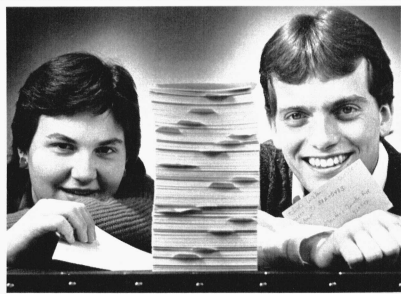


STUDENT MENTOR Gary Taylor, above right, shares practical advice about college life with freshman Todd Miller during a trip to Shakespeare's, a popular Campus pizza parlor.

Julie Hill and Tim Petersen, right, organized the student mentor program, using a card file to match new students with upperclassmen.



Student to Student:

Mentor Program Helps Freshmen Adjust

By CAROL HUNTER

A MONTH AFTER ARRIVING at Mizou to study computer science, his longtime ambition, Todd Miller was ready to go home. For good. But his folks would be so disappointed. Miller, one of four children, was the first member of his family to go to college.

He had scores of acquaintances in his hometown of Camden, Mo. But in Columbia, Miller could cross the Campus twice and not recognize a soul. Then, there were his classes. A good student in high school, Miller was struggling to earn average grades. "I didn't think I was doing well in any aspect of college. It was horrible."

Enter Gary Taylor, student mentor. "I told Todd to relax and be patient," says Taylor, one of 400 upperclassmen who volunteered to assist freshmen and transfer students in the student mentor program that began this fall. During Summer Welcome and registration, some 1,200 freshmen signed up for the program, which matches upperclassmen by gender and major, as much as possible, with new students.

"It eases the transition from high school to college," says Julie Hill, a junior history and Russian studies major and Alumni Scholar from Springfield, Mo. She is one of three students who organized the program. "It helps them to know they're not alone." Retention was a prime concern, Hill says. Mizou's freshman attrition rate is about 24 percent, equivalent to the national average. "We're after people who should have made it but gave up too soon."

Taylor, an orientation assistant, met Miller during Summer Welcome. A junior in food service and lodging management from

Portageville, Mo., Taylor volunteered to be mentor to Miller and four other students. Typically, each mentor was assigned three freshmen.

WHEN MILLER TOYED with leaving school, Taylor intervened. "I told him not to be afraid to pull out of computer science. Change majors if it's not for you."

Taylor spoke from experience. Though he came to Mizou on a \$3,500 minority engineering scholarship, he switched majors after his first semester. "My grades weren't the greatest," he explains. Since discovering another field, Taylor's grades have climbed steadily.

The mentor urged Miller to talk to his adviser and professors about his interest in commercial art. Marilyn Holsinger, assistant professor of art, and Birgit Wassmuth, associate professor of advertising, recommended a double major. "I was talking to Ms. Holsinger when I met a senior in journalism who was just starting his second major in art," Miller says. "He said he wished he'd known about a double major when he was a freshman."

Talking with faculty eased some of Miller's worries, but not all. "You just can't say to your adviser, 'I have no friends, help me,'" he says. Taylor understands. "Students relate more to other students. They know their peers have gone through this way."

An extroverted member of Marching Mizou, Taylor helped the reserved Miller make new friends. "The biggest thing I helped Todd with was confidence," Taylor says. He also supplied practical information, such as initiating the freshman to Columbia traffic. "If you know Stadium Boulevard, Providence Road, College Avenue and Business Loop 70," Taylor says, "you've got it made."

The two enjoyed the collegetown ambience of Shakespeare's Pizza, 225 S. Ninth St., and joined the throngs for Columbia Mall's grand opening. Miller's habit of going home every weekend abated.

For his 19th birthday in September, Miller received four cakes, one baked by Taylor. Early in his second semester, Miller realized he'd said hello to five people as he walked across Campus one afternoon.

"I like everything about school now," he says. This semester, Miller's aiming for a 3.5 grade-point average. Though he's comfortable with school now, he and Taylor continue to keep in touch. His mentor, Miller says, has become his friend.

A mentor can become a best buddy, says Hill, one of the program's originators. "Or, it can be someone you hear from a few times a semester to say, 'Are you OK?'" Just knowing someone cared would help."

THE DEGREE of participation, she says, was up to individual students. Taylor met three of his five proteges in person. Since the other two readily adjusted to college, his only contact with them was by phone.

The student mentor program, Hill says, evolved from discussions in her Chancellor's

Leadership Class, a group of freshmen awarded scholarships on the basis of high-school leadership and academic ability.

"A lot of us were overwhelmed by the size of the University," she remembers, "and the red tape. It was frustrating. You get an image in your head that college is the best time of your life. Then you get here and the people down the hall play weird music, or your history professor wants a research paper, and you get lost in Ellis Library."

With Tim Petersen, an electrical engineering major from Fayette, Mo., and Bob Steinmetz, a computer science major from Mexico, Mo., Hill began organizing the student mentor program last spring. "Being a freshman at the time, I knew the needs of new students," Petersen says.

Together with a Missouri Students Association committee, they recruited upperclassmen as mentors. Hill and Petersen matched the mentors with new students who signed up for the program. Participants were then sent letters with the name of their mentor or new student.

Mentors and freshmen had a chance to meet at a reception in Memorial Union during the first week of school. About 400 students attended, enjoying music and jugglers provided by MSA. Refreshments were courtesy of the Student Development office, a unit of Student, Personnel and Auxiliary Services, which funded the program with a \$750 grant.

WITH KNOWLEDGE gained from their initial effort, the organizers' goal is to make the program even more responsive to the needs of new students next year. Through a random survey sent to freshman participants, "We found out that some mentors didn't follow through as well as we thought they would," says William Seymour, assistant director of Student Development. "But even those who didn't hear from their mentor thought the program was a great idea. It just needs more structure."

The cream of the future mentors may be freshmen who participated in the program as new students. Says freshman Miller, "I'd like to help people with problems as my mentor has helped me."

To help them do their best, mentors selected for next year might receive a handbook describing their responsibilities, Hill says. "It could include a checklist of activities to ensure that mentors follow through with contacting freshmen and establishing a relationship," Seymour says. Tips on spotting a serious problem that may require professional intervention also might be included, Hill says.

Mandatory training sessions will be conducted this spring for all upperclassmen selected to be mentors. Meanwhile, Hill and Petersen have organized a student committee to direct next year's program.

"The program will be really useful when it fully develops," Hill says. "Nobody can tell you everything, but it's nice when you want some reassurance or advice to be able to call somebody who's willing to help." □