

Peer Mentoring: An Intrusive Approach

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Abstract

The profile of the postsecondary student is changing. Support services must be willing to change and adapt in order to better serve students. One possible method for meeting students' diverse needs is through peer mentoring. The following article is a peer mentoring program administered through a federal grant program for disadvantaged students as defined by the Department of Education's TRiO programs. The participants and peer mentors are students at a Master's College and University I institution as listed by the Carnegie Foundation. The results listed are from the 2003-2004 academic year, with findings of the majority of students responding to intrusive mentoring techniques as demonstrated by three two way communications between student and mentor during a semester, and results evidenced by successful persistence, good academic standing, and eventual graduation.

Introduction

A colleague and I were discussing the surge of non-traditional students and their apparent attitude towards education. My colleague used the term "drive-through education" to describe the college experience these students are looking for. The term is fitting. Non-traditional students are busy with many external commitments, such as work and family; and are looking to come to the academic institution, place an order, have it filled as quickly and as cheaply as possible, and leave.

The profile of post-secondary students is changing. The U.S. Department of Education stated that in 1995, 44% of all college students were over the age of 25, 54% were working, 56% were female, and 43% were attending a post-secondary institution part-time (Levine, 1998; Whiteman, 2002). When Levine (1998) translated these statistics he discovered that less than one in six undergraduate students fit the "traditional" profile of a student. In this study, Levine surveyed the older, working, part-time students and found they were looking for a different type of relationship from their higher education institution than those historically cultivated in the past. These non-traditional students are seeking a relationship similar to the one they have with their bank, their grocer, or their telephone company (Levine, 1998). A relationship comparable to one with the bank would imply easy access, convenience, no lines, superior customer service with efficient staffing, and a high quality education at a low price (Levine, 1998; Whiteman, 2002). A banking relationship does not include services the student is not interested in, such as softball leagues and health services. The attitudes of non-traditional students are mirroring the consumers' attitudes toward commercial institutions. Consumers do not care to run the bank; they want the employees of the bank to do their jobs and not bother the customer with any

hassles or headaches.

So how do higher education institutions connect with students? Is there a support service that can be provided to assist students to navigate through academia? How can student affairs practitioners better serve students? One possibility is mentoring.

Mentor was originally found in Homer's poem the *Odyssey* (Asbee, Simpson, Woodall, 2000; Cross, 1998; Woodd, 1997). The original Mentor was a friend of Odysseus and a tutor to his son Telemachus. The word "mentor" has always had connotations of advice and support from someone who is older and more experienced, in a friend capacity rather than as a teacher (Asbee et al., 2000; Campbell and Campbell, 1997; Cross, 1998; Good, Halpin, and Halpin, 2000; Redmond, 1990). Good et al. (2000) noted mentoring became popular over two decades ago. Mentoring became an approach used to provide role models and leadership; therefore, it has been adopted and adapted for use in higher education to help students transition into the academic institutional environment (Good et al., 2000). Woodd (1997) cited three areas of mentoring that could be observed in further and higher education. The first is the mentoring of students; the mentor forms a link between the workplace experience and the theoretical study of the student (Woodd, 1997). Next is the mentoring of trainees studying for a qualification, such as student teaching (Woodd, 1997). The last area described by Woodd (1997) is support for the mentee as they enter a new establishment.

Typically, in a mentoring role, there is an absence or at least decreased hierarchical level and less of an age difference between the mentor and the mentee (Allen, McManus, and Russell, 1999; Angelique, Kyle, and Taylor, 2002; Grant-Vallone and Ensher, 2000). According to Redmond (1990) and Grant-Vallone and Ensher (2000), mentoring has two major components; one addressing the transference of marketable skills and the other addressing social and emotional interactions that makes the transfer of knowledge and skills possible.

Redmond (1990) stated human interaction is the most important component of a mentoring program and is extremely labor intensive. Effective mentoring involves academic skills, attitudes, interaction, trust, communication, and student empowerment (Redmond, 1990). Peer mentors may be more empathetic and able to offer emotional support to their mentees because they may be in similar places in their own lives, in regard to education and personal relationships (Angelique et al. 2002). The motivation of a mentor is intrinsic and the mentor will use the same skills employed by a counselor (Cross, 1998). Peer mentorships may last three to six years, according to Allen et al. (1999).

A four year college in a geographically isolated, western state is a prime candidate for a mentoring program, as the majority of students are non-traditional. This particular institution is comprised of two campuses. The senior campus is a four-year institution located in the downtown area, the other is a two-year campus located approximately five miles west of the senior campus. The office of University Relations reported during the fall 2002 semester there was a total headcount enrollment of 4,407. Ninety-one percent of students enrolled at the institution were from in state and 64% of students were female. The average age of students on the senior campus was 28.4 years of age. Slightly more than 6% of students were Native Americans. The Hispanic population was the fastest growing ethnic enrollment, with an increase

of 41%. Fifty-eight percent of incoming freshman were first generation students; 33% of students were married, separated, divorced or widowed with children; 3.5% of students were disabled; and, 48% of students worked 20 hours or more per week.

A Student Support Services program created from the 1965 Higher Education Act and the formation of TRiO operates a peer mentoring program available to participants. Students enrolled in the program must meet at least one of three eligibility criteria: first generation, low income, or disabled. The purpose of the program is to increase retention and graduation rates among disadvantaged students. The program serves approximately 5% of the student body at the four year institution. Services offered include tutoring, supplemental instruction, access to cultural events, workshops, information on financial aid and scholarships, membership in a student club, a two-day college success strategies seminar (Return to Learn), and peer mentoring. Of the program services offered, tutoring and mentoring comprise the two strongest components of the program. The mentoring program requires much more time and effort than the tutoring program due to the consumer-based, drive-through attitude of students.

The program employs eight, paid, peer mentors. Each mentor is responsible for 30-45 mentees, depending on the number of hours the mentor works per week. Mentors assist students in a variety of ways, ranging from academic needs to personal matters. Mentors are trained in campus resources, community resources, and life skills techniques. A student may meet with a mentor to develop a tentative course schedule that may then be taken to his or her advisor; seek assistance with campus concerns or questions, such as studying techniques, campus services, general "how to" questions; or inquire about community resources, such as day care, housing, and other subsidies. Mentors specifically address areas such as goal setting; heightened awareness of campus deadlines; attention to campus logistics, such as repeat cards, financial aid applications, plan of study, and graduation preparation; poor midterm grades and possible remedies; career exploration; and provide a general element of care and connectedness.

The demographics of the mentors are:

- Mentor A is a 30-year-old white female. She is married with one biological child and one foster child. She is attending college through the vocational rehabilitation program. She is a senior, majoring in Human Services; she is taking 17 credits during fall 2003, and has a 3.62 GPA. She joined the program on 9-20-02, she is eligible because she is low income and disabled, she has previously attended college, and was forced to switch majors because she was diagnosed with epilepsy.
- Mentor B is a 37-year-old white female. She is married to her third husband with three biological children and one stepchild. She is attending college through the vocational rehabilitation program. She is a sophomore, majoring in Human Services; she is taking 14.5 credits, and has a 4.0 GPA. She joined the program on 8-19-02, she is eligible because she is disabled, and she has not previously attended college.

- Mentor C is 35-year-old white male. He has never been married and has two biological children. He is attending college through the vocational rehabilitation program. He is a sophomore, majoring in Health Administration; he is taking 18 credits, and has a 3.85 GPA. He joined the program 1-14-03, he is eligible because he is disabled and first generation, he has previously attended college and prior to his injury he owned his own business.
- Mentor D is a 47-year-old white male. He is divorced with no biological children. He is a sophomore, majoring in Sociology; he is taking 17 credits, and has a 3.84 GPA. He joined the program 8-17-02, he is eligible because he is first generation and low income, he earned a GED, and he has previously attended college before and is a transfer student.
- Mentor E is a 26-year-old Mulatto female. She is married with three stepchildren. She is attending college through the GI Bill. She is a freshman, majoring in Human Services; she is taking 13 credits, and has a 4.0 GPA. She joined the program 9-15-03, she is eligible because she is first generation and low income, she has not previously attended college prior to her enrollment at this particular institution.
- Mentor F is a 48-year-old white female. She is married with two biological children. She is attending college through the vocational rehabilitation program and worker's compensation. She is a senior, majoring in Human Services; she is taking 13 credits, and has a 3.55 GPA. She joined the program 1-14-02; she is eligible because she is first generation, low income, and disabled; she has attended college prior to her enrollment.
- Mentor G is a 54-year-old white female. She is married with four biological children. She is attending college through the vocational rehabilitation program. She is a senior, majoring in Human Services; she is taking 12.5 credits, and has a 3.47 GPA. She joined the program 10-29-03; she is eligible because she is first generation, disabled, and low income; she has attended college prior to her enrollment, and suffers from post polio symptoms.
- Mentor H is a 47-year-old white female. She is married, but separated for the past nine years, with two biological children. She is attending college through the vocational rehabilitation program. She is a sophomore, majoring in Human Services; she is taking 13 credits, and has a 3.69 GPA. She joined the program on 7-9-02, she is eligible because she is first generation and disabled, she has attended college prior to her enrollment.

Redmond (1990) and Cross (1998) both agreed that mentors need training. The mentors received two days of training and a handbook. The first day of training consisted of an icebreaker; an overview of program; introduction of program staff and a description of their responsibilities; training on documentation procedures; training on mentor responsibility and a clear expectation of intrusive approach; and, training from departments on campus about academic advising, financial aid, and paraprofessional counseling. The second day of training

was comprised of visits to Health Services, Multicultural Support Services, Career Services, Disability Support Services, Academic Support Center, Campus Police, and the Child Care Center so the mentors could view the locations, meet with department supervisors, obtain brochures, and ask questions. Training on day two concluded with the administration of the Myers Briggs Type Indicator to both the mentors and the mentor supervisor by a qualified campus employee. Ongoing training was provided during weekly mentor staff meetings. Topics covered during the semester included stress management, disability etiquette, a speech from the Student Resolution Officer, a presentation by the campus attorney for students, the availability of community resources, internships/Co-op education, graduate school, and student loans.

After applying to the program, each student meets with the program director for an intake interview. During the interview the director assigns a mentor to the student. The assignment of a mentee is based on objective and subjective criteria. Objective criteria may include factors such as age, chosen major, time schedule or interests. Subjective criteria are a little harder to judge and explain, but one aspect considered is a student's personality. If the student is young and/or immature, he or she may need a more nurturing mentor. A student may have a demanding personality, thereby requiring a mentor that can be firm, but tactful. Alternatively, a student may be shy and need an outgoing mentor in order to have a successful interactive relationship.

Redmond (1990) observed programs with an intrusive approach—aggressive efforts to maintain communication and involvement—were successful with underrepresented groups, as the underrepresented groups perceived the actions of the mentors as caring. Intrusive mentoring in this program is any attempt to reach/encourage students to meet with their assigned mentor, such as letters, phone calls, or emails. The mentor takes the first step in helping the student with the transition into the higher education environment. The first contact is made through a letter introducing him or herself as the student's mentor, letting the student know when the mentor's posted office hours are, asking the student to come in for a mentor visit, and adding a handwritten note of encouragement. If a student does not respond to the initial letter, the mentor telephones the student to remind/encourage him or her to come in for a mentor meeting. If the phone call does not result in contact, the mentor follows up with a letter or an email. Additionally, reminders for students to meet with their mentors are sent out in the monthly newsletter; signs are posted around the office area; and when the staff see students, they verbally remind students to come in to see their mentor. Further attempts to initiate contact include speaking to mentees when they are seen on campus, whether it is in the dining hall, parking garage, or in class. Lastly, every other week the staff meeting is devoted to mentors reviewing their contact logs and determining which mentees are "missing". As a group, the peer mentors may then discuss who they know, if they see them regularly, or know them personally. If so, the mentor makes a note to talk to the "missing" mentee, using an aggressive approach to contact and connect with the student.

The results of using intrusive techniques during the 2003-2004 academic year were that 243 eligible students were enrolled in the program during fall 2003 semester. Of those 243, 70.3%, or 171 students, did have two way communication with their mentor at least three times during the semester; 10%, or 24 students had contact with their mentor twice during the semester, and the remaining 19.6% of students, or 48 students, had discussion with their mentor once or less during the semester. During the spring 2004 semester, 269 eligible students were

enrolled in the SOS program. Of those 269, 76.2%, or 205 students, did have two way communication with their mentor at least three times during the semester; 5.2%, or 14 students had contact with their mentor twice during the semester, and the remaining 18.5% of students, or 50 students, had discussion with their mentor once or less during the semester. There are two important things to note here; first, there is continuous, rolling, enrollment in the SOS program, students may be allowed to join the program as late as the 10th week of a 15 week semester; and, secondly, these are all contacts with mentors, these numbers may not reflect contact with the professional staff.

In conclusion, the program served 282 eligible participants during the 2003-2004 academic year. Overall the program logged 6,841.9 hours with students, specifically the mentoring component of the program comprised slightly more than 2,848 of those hours. As a result, 75%, or 191 of eligible students persisted to the fall 2004 semester (eligible to persist does not count graduates or transfer students); 91%, or 256 students, were in good academic standing; and, 100%, or 28 eligible participants, graduated (all 28 students who were slated to graduate, did). Providing a comprehensive, tailored, support system for students is essential to student success. Addressing students' academic and personal needs has often proved to be a challenge, but there is overwhelming evidence that using aggressive, intrusive techniques help to connect students to the institution, help them to navigate the waters of academia, and provide a support system to overall success.

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