BUILDING EFFECTIVE PEER MENTOR PROGRAMS

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As the case is made for increased collaboration between faculty and student affairs professionals to improve student learning, an important constituent and resource should not be overlooked—the student. While students are intended as the ultimate beneficiary of collaboration between academic and student affairs, they can also serve as a powerful influence on both the process and positive outcomes associated with learning communities.

Why Peer Mentors?

A persuasive body of research and professional literature (Astin 1993, 1996; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, and assoc. 2005; Kuh, Schuh, Whitt and assoc. 1991; Pascarella and Terenzini 1991, 1994, 2005; Schroeder and Mable 1994) demonstrates the efficacy of collaboration between faculty and student affairs professionals—particularly for learning communities. Included in this research is the significant role that peers play not only in forming supportive networks, but also in enhancing learning and personal development.

> Perhaps the most important generalization to be derived from this massive study is that the strongest single source of influence on cognitive and affective development is the student's peer group. . . [which has] enormous potential for influencing virtually all aspects of the student's educational and personal development. (Astin 1996, 126)

> What the research tells us is that a large part of the impact of college is determined by the extent and content of students' interactions with the major agents of socialization on campus: *faculty members and student peers*. (Pascarella and Terenzini 1994, 31; emphasis added)

From choices involving behavior and conduct to values, opinions, and passions, the student subculture exerts a powerful pressure on

individuals and small groups, a force that can be used to support educational aims. The power of peers in influencing positive learning and developmental growth, or conversely inhibiting it, is well-documented (Whitman 1988). Coupled with the demonstrated benefits of learning communities cited elsewhere in this publication, the use of peers in general, and peer mentors specifically, represents a significant tool for student learning. This has been demonstrated in learning communities on various campuses—particularly at large state universities. However, an effective peer mentor program requires a commitment by both faculty and student affairs professionals to bring together and use the best of their diverse areas of expertise.

What is a Peer Mentor?

The use of peer mentors at colleges and universities is nearly as old as higher education itself. Peer mentors have most frequently been residentially based, as illustrated by the traditional resident assistant/advisor (RA). They have also served as an aid for students in successfully transitioning to college, as typified by peer orientation leaders. Both serendipitously and intentionally, these more experienced student peers have provided support for academic success, and interpersonal development of individual students. Peer mentors have also been effectively used in laboratory or recitation sections of academic courses to further explore or review material when faculty-student ratios don't allow direct faculty involvement. Most commonly these are graduate students, but increasingly there are formal roles for undergraduate students to teach or mentor their peers (Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, and Gabelnick 2004). Peer mentors provide simple tutoring or course assistance as well as highly sophisticated tutoring based on approaches such as the model of Supplemental Instruction developed and employed at the University of Missouri – Kansas City (Martin and Arendale 1992; see also: www.umkc.edu/cad/SI/overview.htm).

While structures, titles, and responsibilities vary widely, the peer mentor role is fundamentally based on having a seasoned peer interact with targeted students, sharing his or her knowledge and experience, and thereby improving students' understanding and learning. Intentional enhancements to this role can increase its effectiveness. The more the target students can identify with the mentor, the more receptive they will be to the mentor's efforts to support and challenge them. Therefore, whenever possible, the peer mentor should share some relevant characteristics of the target group so that students can "see

themselves" in the peer mentor—and the potential for reaching a similar level of success. Utilizing a fellow transfer student to advise new transfer students, a non-traditional-aged mentor for fellow adult learners, or an underrepresented student for a similar group of students are examples of effective pairings that go beyond simply matching students by academic degree program.

It is beneficial to create as many opportunities as possible to integrate the role of the peer mentor into the daily life of the students, since more frequent contact is likely to lead to more powerful learning experiences. The positive influence of out-of-class experiences, and in particular the residential environment, has also been discussed in this publication (e.g. Meiklejohn's Experimental College) and elsewhere (Love and Love 1995). If a peer mentor can interact with a small group of students in traditional learning environments (the classroom, laboratory, and academic office), co-curricular learning environments (student organizations, field trips and service learning projects), as well as the residential environment, the opportunities for deeper, more integrated learning are nearly limitless. As peer mentor roles are developed for learning communities, opportunities for interaction and integration between the different learning environments should be vigorously explored. Concerns about "interaction overload" and peer mentors' understandable need for privacy can be addressed in the program structure, as well as the training and supervision of mentors. Faculty and student affairs professionals should collaborate in the design, implementation, and adaptation of peer mentor roles, contributing their differing experiences with students to fully realize the potential of these young educators.

Who are the Peer Mentors?

As mentioned previously, the potential for students to identify with the peer mentor and see him or her as a role model are key considerations in hiring students for these important positions. For the traditional-aged college student population, proximity in age is usually taken for granted, but when working with adult learners, age may be less important than shared challenges or life experiences such as juggling a family or job with schoolwork, or adjusting to an unfamiliar role as a student. The accessibility of a successful peer may be especially important for commuter students who do not have as many opportunities as residential students for finding role models or developing a sense of community. For underrepresented groups (women in sciences and engineering, minority

students, international students, first generation college students, etc.), having a role model who is similar to them is extremely reassuring, giving them the message that "if they can do it, so can I."

The characteristics of a successful peer mentor will vary significantly based on the learning community structure and its degree of complexity. In programs that rely on peer mentors in a formal teaching or instructive role, academic experience and teaching abilities are more important than they are for peer mentors whose work will focus more on students' orientation and transition to college. In the former instance, graduate students or academically-strong undergraduates are a logical choice; whereas in the latter, a mature sophomore or junior whose transition to college is still a fresh memory could be an ideal peer mentor. Using the continua discussed earlier in this publication by Smith and Williams, the more a learning community is complex or "high intensity," the more likely it is that peer mentors will be an important element in the overall success of the community.

Given that academic success is a central goal of learning communities, peer mentors should themselves be academically-strong students. Strong academic performance also provides some insurance for the peer mentors themselves since it is not uncommon for students, particularly those in residentially–based learning communities, to experience a slight drop in their own academic performance as they adjust to their new position and responsibilities. Academically marginal students have less of a "cushion" and may have difficulty adding these sometimes formidable duties into their schedules without negative academic consequences. Additionally, students who have a good working knowledge of campus, and are involved in campus activities and organizations, will bring important experience and information to a peer mentor role. You might seek candidates for peer mentors among students previously enrolled in learning communities, or strong students participating in honors programs or service-learning programs. Faculty recommendations are also helpful, since faculty members are apt to recognize students in their courses who possess strong academic abilities and personal maturity. Student affairs professionals, who are experienced in providing support services, can help peer mentors transition to their new role.

How can Peer Mentors be Used?

Recognizing that faculty and student affairs staff interact with students in very different ways, the development of a learning communities

peer mentor program is an ideal collaborative venture. Student affairs professionals—particularly those in residence life, student life and student activities departments—have a long history, a wealth of experience, and many resources for effectively running peer mentor programs. Their experience most likely includes selecting, training, and supervising mentors. In the past, most of these programs' use of peer mentors has been focused on a combination of logistical and operational details, community development, personal development, and other "life skills" education. Residential life or student affairs staff do not generally have much experience or expertise in curriculum development or in the formal support of specific academic programs or disciplines. Conversely, this is an area in which faculty have considerable experience, but faculty are often challenged by the myriad operational details in the coordination of peer mentor programs. Capitalizing on the strengths of these two subcultures can lead to a more effective peer mentor component within a learning community.

While the traditional resident assistant/advisor (RA) can also be a peer mentor, institutions may find more benefit in creating new peer mentor positions that are designed specifically with the unique learning community objectives, structures and desired outcomes of that program in mind. Long-standing perceptions (and misperceptions) about the RA role may inhibit its perceived educational value—for example, an RA may be seen by students as the "dorm cop." And the critical residential hall work that RAs do will limit their "time on task" related to the educational goals and needs of the learning community. It is possible that one position could serve both purposes, but, if an institution is considering combining these two roles, a fresh look at duties and responsibilities is essential.

Consideration of the peer mentor to student ratio in light of the program's educational goals is strongly encouraged. During the 1950s and 60s when many current residence halls were constructed, there was often an emphasis on efficiency, resulting in a limited number of staff rooms per floor and staff/student ratios that seem unmanageable by today's standards. As a result of financial decisions that have been made in the last few decades, more responsibilities have been added to existing positions, the number of peer mentor positions has been reduced and staff/student ratios have been increased at some institutions. For peer mentors to be able to focus on the learning community goals, objectives and tasks, and be available to students, they must be responsible for a manageable number of students. This need must be balanced with economic realities and appropriate consideration of maximizing the

costs, benefits, and return on investment for peer mentors. There are no "golden rules" but many programs set goals for staff/student ratios ranging from 1:20 to 1:40.

Some institutions have created new peer mentor positions for learning communities while maintaining separate RA positions (examples include Iowa State University and the University of Michigan); others have fundamentally redesigned the RA role to meet a new set of learning-centered objectives (University of Missouri - Columbia, and University of Delaware). Institutional characteristics and financial realities will often influence these choices, but institutions are advised to avoid simply "adding on" to the traditional RA role without jettisoning some current priorities. This process will require questioning fundamental assumptions and ways of thinking. Student affairs professionals, with their long history of using student peers in leadership roles, may find this critical examination to be challenging.

When developing peer mentor positions, there are some fundamental roles and responsibilities that should be considered, but not necessarily included, in every role. Both institutional and learning community idiosyncrasies should be taken into account when evaluating the relevance of the different peer mentor roles described below.

Socialization: Coordinating activities and initiatives to encourage students to get to know each other; developing strong interpersonal bonds and a sense of community; and helping address potential conflicts or concerns between members, or between students and faculty.

Orientation: Familiarizing students with institutional systems; identifying resources, key personnel and processes; and helping students make sense of what can seem like a huge bureaucracy (particularly at large institutions) for first-generation students, minority students, or new adult learners.

Mentoring: Fulfilling a complex role aimed at guiding students to expand their learning and participation in educational and developmental opportunities; transferring one's own knowledge, experience, and "lessons learned"; challenging students to engage in different or more expansive ways of thinking and to discover the interrelationship of relevant subject matter; helping students understand the broader aims of higher education; and providing support and encouragement.

Advising: Providing fundamental or specialized academic advising. (Whether part of a formal role with appropriate training or not, mentors

will be questioned by students about classes to take, which professors are "best," courses of study, majors, and even career options. Providing some basic training and knowledge of campus resources in this arena to peer mentors is strongly recommended.)

Supervision: Supplying relevant institutional oversight of and guidance to other students—in other words, being "in charge" and responsible for fellow students. (This need may be greatest in residential settings and may involve students' personal behavior.) Peer mentors must receive clear direction and expectations about their responsibilities to ensure students' compliance with policies, course requirements, or other expectations of the learning community. Clear guidelines about acceptable and unacceptable behavior by peer mentors themselves should also be established and communicated regularly.

Instruction: Being involved in teaching students in a seminar, discussion or laboratory section; and tutoring students individually, in study groups or through formal supplemental instruction. The use of peer mentors as teaching assistants in a first-year seminar can be very powerful in helping new students connect with the institution and retaining them.

Coordination and Leadership: Having primary responsibility or assisting with organizing activities, study groups, programs, or events, including facilitating students' participation in co-curricular educational experiences that supplement in-class instruction; and serving as a catalyst or advisor for student-initiated projects and programs. Leadership may be part of a peer mentor's formal responsibilities or may be an informal role.

Role-modeling: Serving in a capacity that is similar to mentoring, but often more informal—the routine behavior of the peer mentor serves as a living example of a dedicated learner and member of a learning community. This influence can be even more powerful when the peer mentor shares characteristics with the target student group (having the same major, being a member of an underrepresented group, etc.).

Benefits of Peer Mentor Programs

Beyond the demonstrated value of providing support, guidance, and a positive role model to a targeted group of students, peer mentor programs also yield additional side benefits not always directly related

to the learning community outcomes. These include the educational and developmental gains for the peer mentor, as well as benefits for faculty and the institution.

Frequently peer mentors are among the most talented students at a given institution and represent the "ideal" or "model" student. Serving as a peer mentor can prove to be an enriching educational experience, providing these students with an additional level of educational challenge. Many students who serve as peer mentors find this work to be one of the most powerful and memorable experiences of their collegiate career. They often describe the experience as "life-changing." The opportunity to participate in peer mentor programs can be a useful tool in the recruitment and retention of these highly-desirable students.

Peer mentor programs also provide outstanding leadership development training that is unmatched in the typical student experience. The number of former peer mentors who now serve as national leaders in business, government, and industry is impressive—including Hillary Rodham Clinton, David Boren, Donna Shalala, and Katie Couric. A former governor described his years serving as a peer mentor as the best training for public service that he ever received.

Academic programs and faculty have also benefited from using peer mentors in ways that go beyond the additional support and instruction they provide. Peer mentors can serve as a liaison between faculty and students. At the University of Missouri-Columbia, "peer advisors" working in the Freshman Interest Group (FIG) program meet with the faculty members who teach the three courses in which their FIG students are co-enrolled. In addition to collecting the syllabi for each course, they discuss the intended outcomes and experiences of each course with faculty. Using this information, the peer advisors attempt to integrate and support these objectives in the FIG seminar course they co-teach with a faculty member, as well as the out-of-class experiences they coordinate. As the semester proceeds, peer mentors also provide feedback to the individual faculty members about topics students are struggling with, and identify potentially burdensome testing or assignment conflicts with students' other courses. For faculty teaching large lecture sections, this opportunity for regular, timely and ongoing feedback can be very useful.

Peer mentor positions can also awaken interest in a particular field. Frequently these students will turn this interest into a career goal and begin to seriously consider further education in order to become a professor or student affairs professional. Thus, peer mentor programs can serve as recruitment tools for both academic and student affairs.

In times of stagnant or diminishing financial resources and increased benefit costs for full-time employees, peer mentors represent a cost-effective way to meet educational goals and address retention issues. Depending on the level of compensation and mentor/student ratios, peer mentors can be relatively inexpensive, compared to the cost of using full-time faculty or staff to provide a similar level of service. Institutions have taken different approaches to providing "compensation" to peer mentors, sometimes offering "benefits" that are of relatively little cost to the school, but are of high value to the mentors. For example, peer advisors with the University of Washington's FIG program receive academic credit instead of a stipend for their work. Other institutions have provided textbook scholarships, premium parking assignments, or free participation in university programs as incentives. Most residentially-based peer mentor programs offer some sort of room and board package as compensation, which is not counted as income on students' taxes; for the institution, this is not typically a "full-cost" item and often utilizes vacant space in residence halls. Creative use of resources in both academic and student affairs, and consulting with students about what they value, can yield extremely cost-effective peer mentor compensation strategies.

Challenges and Opportunities for Success

A strong case exists for using peer mentors in learning communities that are a collaboration between faculty and student affairs. Nevertheless, there are some inherent challenges that come with this valuable opportunity. The years of experience that make student affairs professionals such an asset in this process can also be a liability, if they lead to a tendency to reproduce familiar models rather than designing anew for peer mentor roles and contexts. Also, faculty and student affairs professionals, who work with students in such different ways, may have very different opinions and viewpoints. Given these differences, it is helpful to develop a common understanding of desired peer mentor qualities well before the recruitment and selection process begins.

The process of identifying and recruiting the right type of students to be peer mentors is an essential first step. Some selectivity is needed to ensure good quality, but the process and standards should not be so restrictive that good candidates who may not fit the traditional mold are screened out; these candidates may prove to be best at meeting the needs of certain populations of students. While the logistics of the selection process can be daunting, depending on the number of positions

and candidates, residence life or student affairs staff will probably have sufficient experience to make this process manageable.

While the power of peers is clearly documented, these programs do require staff and faculty time and effort to provide ongoing training, appropriate guidance, supervision, and consistent evaluation. Here, too, there is a danger that familiar approaches and models, which are not optimal, may creep into these programs. While it is a good strategy to consider "best practices" from traditional peer mentor programs, staff must also challenge themselves to adhere to the architectural principle that "form follows function"; and the functions of peer mentors in learning communities are frequently very different than those of traditional student staff positions.

In addition to time that staff and faculty must spend on the oversight of these programs, there are usually actual costs associated with the programs. Much of this is tied to compensation for the peer mentors. But there are also costs associated with providing peer mentors with training (including food and materials), resources they will use to deliver services, and perhaps even program funds for them to plan events— and what college program can exist without t-shirts? Some learning community programs defray these costs by charging a participation fee, but this can discourage broad participation in program activities. Grants may be available for very specific student groups (e.g., ethnic minorities in specific degree programs). These are typically "seed grants," that come with an expectation that there will be an eventual institutional financial commitment to the program.

If there are other peer mentor programs at an institution, peer mentors will inevitably compare their compensation levels and there will be passionate discussions of value and worth. True equality is rarely achieved, and may not be commonly understood, but attempts at relative consistency and equity should be pursued. Additionally, the ways these different peer mentors interact and interface with each other should be reviewed, particularly if there are multiple peer mentors in a given residential setting. Even if there are no concerns about compensation levels, debates regarding who is responsible for specific duties or issues can arise. What may seem like simple lines of communication can break down to the detriment of the learning community and its students. At the University of Missouri-Columbia, when peer advisors for the residentally-based FIGs program were introduced into a traditional residence life system with peer mentors, it took years of concerted effort and frequent revision of duties and compensation levels to reconcile these issues. While these two distinct

types of mentors continue to serve at the institution today, they now have an integrated job description, receive the same level of compensation, and are all organized in community-based teams.

Challenges will vary depending on the specific responsibilities of a peer mentor in a learning community. If the peer mentors are undergraduates, there may be questions about whether they can issue an academic evaluation or even a grade to another undergraduate student. Also, if there is another peer mentor role within the institution—particularly if both roles share at least one common word in their titles—misperceptions and confusion about these roles can abound. For residential peer mentors the issue of "living one's job" is very real; many find they are rarely able to escape the job and its demands. Learning community peer mentors may contend with this pressure as well as other uncomfortable experiences, such as having to brush their teeth next to someone whom they just issued a poor grade to on an assignment in the seminar they teach. Again, student affairs professionals—particularly those who work in residence halls or with student activities and leadership development programs—have considerable experience in dealing with many of these issues.

Conclusion

Just as learning communities challenge an institution to critically examine the way in which it teaches students and helps them learn, the prevailing view of students as solely the recipients of the educational process also needs to be challenged. The use of peer mentors is a valuable way to help other students learn and an effective use of resources that yields benefits for the target group of students, the mentors themselves, the faculty and student affairs professionals associated with the learning communities, and the institution as a whole. While there are some operational, fiscal and philosophical challenges involved with peer mentors (as there are with learning communities in general), there are many successful models to choose from, as well as a body of experience and literature. The issues that arise also represent a myriad of opportunities in which faculty and student affairs staff can collaborate on solutions and strategies. As with many things in the educational enterprise, frequently it is the process itself, and not the outcome that yields the richest learning experiences. Therefore, when learning communities are developed or evaluated, the use of peer mentors as a component is strongly recommended.

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