"If you make a difference, you have changed someone's life": Outcomes from a university student mentor program

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Abstract

Mentoring provides social support as individuals navigate through new experiences and challenges. In higher education it can assist students, especially new undergraduates and those from underrepresented groups, to achieve academic and social success. This paper outlines the mentor program model at Curtin University that invited feedback each semester from participants. Financial costs and benefits to the University as a whole are summarised. The paper then indicates benefits to key stakeholders in the program – mentees, mentors, and coordinating staff in schools involved in the program. For example, student mentors reported a sense of achievement in helping new students, professional and personal development, and feeling that they were building a strong sense of school identity, community, connection and belonging for all participants. A brief discussion of the value of mentoring programs in higher education concludes the paper.

Introduction

Retention

An issue of ongoing importance, both nationally and internationally, is retention of students in the higher education sector. High attrition rates have implications for university funding, course viability, university and course reputation, and the welfare of individual students (Curtin University, 2007). The Australian Government is committed to expanding the university sector and increasing the number of graduates (Australian Government, 2009). Furthermore, a recent priority for the Australian government, as outlined in the Bradley Report, is to increase participation in higher education, targeting those from non-traditional, disadvantaged groups who previously have been underrepresented in higher education (Australian Government, 2008). As well as the need to raise aspirations in such groups, the Bradley Report suggested that, there is a need to "provide academic mentoring and support" (p.xiv), to maximise their retention and success.

There is a wealth of research examining ways to improve retention and graduation rates in colleges and universities (Gansemer-Topf & Schuh, 2003/2004) that highlights the need for academic and social support. The Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ), administered widely across Australian universities, also includes items addressing this issue. Scott (2005) analysed the qualitative data from 95,000 graduates, and stressed that learning is a "profoundly social experience" (p.xvii). With regard to potentially disadvantaged groups, one

U.S. study examined the effectiveness of both academic and social support programs designed for first-generation and low-income college students and found those with higher self-esteem and higher levels of peer support reported better academic and social adjustment and were more committed to their university (Grant-Vallone, Reif, Umali, & Pohlert, 2003/2004).

Mentoring

Mentoring programs have the potential to improve student participation and retention in higher education courses. They provide direct support to students, and in particular, may be a relevant strategy to assist universities to achieve current equity targets. Mentoring is an evidence-based social support strategy that has been shown to be effective in increasing individual achievement in skills and competencies as well as personal and social development of people in various settings (MacCallum & Beltman, 2003; Salinitri, 2005) including higher education (Packard, 2005/2004). A more experienced person, the mentor, meets regularly with a less-experienced individual or group of individuals, the mentee(s) or protégé(s), often assisting with specific skills, but more importantly developing a trusting relationship that enables the mentees to move forward in a particular setting or in their life. As Pascarelli (1998, p. 234) explained, "...a mentor functions as a guide and supporter, establishing trust and demonstrating empathic understanding while at the same time, introducing new and often contradictory ideas and helping the protégé develop a positive sense of the future."

Peer mentoring programs have been found to assist students in their transition to university (Calder, 2004; Husband & Jacobs, 2009) and to have positive academic and social outcomes for students (Dearlove, Farrell, Handa & Pastore, 2007), particularly in first year (Fox & Stevenson, 2010; Glaser, Hall & Halperin, 2006). A recent form of mentoring is e-mentoring and research is beginning to show the potential effectiveness of this (Wright & Simpson, 2010), especially for students in remote locations or involved in distance education (Kennedy & Kennedy, 2002). Students from remote areas as well as from low socio-economic status settings have also benefitted from peer mentoring programs (Hill & Davenport, 1998). Other equity target groups to benefit are students whose first language is not English (Cafarella, 1999; Colvin & Jaffar, 2007), international students (Devereux, 2004), women (Chesterman, 2003; Smit, 2003) and indigenous students (Shotton, Oosahwe, & Cintrón, 2007). In addition mentoring assists students with disabilities into employment (Boardman, 2003).

Mentoring at Curtin University

At Curtin University in Western Australia, concerns about student retention led to the development of a Student Retention Implementation Plan in 2007 and its formal adoption in 2008, comprising a number of interventions (Curtin University, 2008). Developing a Student Mentor Program was considered to have strong potential as an intervention that would impact on student retention measures, and was further linked to a number of other key retention initiatives such as early identification of students who are at-risk, improving orientation and transition, and connecting students to sources of help in a timely manner. There was a particular focus on ensuring these interventions targeted first year undergraduate students. The key intended outcome of the Student Mentor Program was therefore to reduce attrition rates amongst beginning undergraduate students. As will be seen, this outcome has been achieved – but there have also been a range of other outcomes, beneficial to all participants.

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By 2009, the program was extended to cover approximately half the University, and from 2011, the program will include every beginning undergraduate on the main university campus. The fundamental goal of the mentor program is to engage senior students to assist new students to make a successful transition into the University during the first semester of study (Curtin University, 2011). Mentors provide a welcome at orientation, act as a positive role model, are available as a contact for support/advice, and generally enhance the experience of the new student. The basic structure of the model adopted includes the following features:

- Senior students act as mentors to beginning students in the same course
- A centrally managed training and preparation program for all mentors is run by START (Student Transition And Retention Team)
- A coordinating academic staff member (usually the 1st year coordinator) in each participating school works with the mentors
- On-going support for mentors is provided by START and the coordinating staff member in each participating school as the mentor program is delivered
- All new students are assigned to a mentor - they may choose to opt out of the program
- Each mentor has 10-15 mentees
- The precise delivery of the program will vary according to the needs of the participating schools but is over the period of one semester
- A structured evaluation occurs at the end of each semester of the program with mentors and mentees, and a qualitative evaluation by participating staff
- Student mentors' contribution is formally recognised by the University e.g. an honorarium payment, presentations and comments on their academic transcript.

Aim of paper

The aim of this paper is to present a summary of key evaluation data from the program for 2009 and 2010. Findings regarding financial benefits to the university and outcomes for all participants that have contributed to the ongoing expansion of the program will be presented.

Methodology

Design

The program has been offered every semester since 2007 and evaluated through qualitative and quantitative data collection. In every semester all participants are invited to submit feedback. For mentors this is a required part of their role, but is voluntary for others. Ethics approval for use of this data was obtained from the university and individual participants also give consent. Evaluation forms for mentees are distributed in regular classes usually by the relevant subject tutor. Mentors and staff complete their evaluations online. Staff provide feedback through meetings and email. Given space constraints, only aggregated data for semester 1 of 2009 and semester 1 2010 are presented in this paper.

Participants

In 2009, the program was available to approximately 2600 new students, and the 2010 group of mentees was approximately 7000 beginning students. The number of students who formally or informally opt out is unknown. Other students withdraw or defer and some tutors may not distribute or return surveys. Table 1 indicates the number of student surveys

received. Some mentors remain in the program so could have submitted surveys in both years. There were 24 staff coordinators in 2009 and 45 in 2010.

year	mentee surveys	mentor surveys
Sem 1, 2009	1460	251
Sem 1, 2010	1632	419
total	3092	670

Table 1: Number of participant surveys analysed

Instruments

Mentee survey

Mentees were asked about the extent of contact with their mentor, then responded to statements about the nature of their interaction with their mentor using a five point scale (1: strongly disagree; 5 strongly agree). Items had the same stem of "My mentor...":

- provided me with useful information about the University
- helped me with study tips
- gave me confidence and reassurance in beginning University
- helped me feel I belong at Curtin
- was always available if I needed help or advice
- was friendly and approachable
- directed me to appropriate resources at Curtin

Students were asked if they had considered withdrawing from university, and if so, to what extent and how their mentor had affected their decision to stay. They were asked how their mentor could have improved and why they had not communicated with their mentor if this was the case. Open-ended items for comments on positive or negative points about the program and suggestions for the future concluded the survey.

In 2009 a further source of feedback data was provided whereby mentees could nominate their mentor as an Outstanding Mentor. It was encouraging to the program facilitators to see the kind of public comments posted by mentees about their mentors. Whilst the data are not reproduced here, readers may wish to inspect some of the citations at http://mentoring.curtin.edu.au/mentors/citations.cfm.

Mentor survey

Mentors rated a series of factors related to their mentor role on a five point scale (1: strongly disagree; 5 strongly agree). The rating scales were largely concerned with the management of the program and related to the:

- quality of selection processes to become a mentor
- clarity of information provided on the role of mentor
- preparation and training provided to mentors
- frequency of meetings between mentors and coordinating staff
- efficiency of meetings between mentors and coordinating staff

The mentor survey also included open-ended questions on positive and negative aspects of the program.

Coordinating staff feedback

Informal and formal feedback was obtained from staff through emails, feedback sessions and personal conversations with the university coordinators about the:

- recruitment and selection process for becoming a Student Mentor
- student mentor training and preparation program
- issues related to the workload aspects associated with the Student Mentor program
- student mentor support meetings (quality, relevance, frequency, content etc)
- how the student mentor program has been coordinated/supported by START
- frustrations or problem areas that could be improved
- positive outcomes: benefits for the school, things you have enjoyed etc

Data analysis

Summative evaluation concentrated on financial costs and benefits. The continuation and expansion of the program required funding so it was necessary to provide the university with an indication of financial benefits. These were calculated in some depth based on mentee responses to the questions about potential withdrawal. The remaining evaluations, while identifying areas of success, were primarily formative with the aim of improving the program to maximise its effectiveness and impact. Overall means for the various quantitative items were calculated and the qualitative responses across participants examined to identify key areas of program success and areas where improvement could occur.

Results

Financial Costs and Benefits

Estimating the cost of losing students is difficult, but it is clear that the financial loss is significant. Certainly the loss of a student entails the loss of subsequent fees that he/she would have paid (and consequently any Commonwealth support associated with that student). This may be estimated at perhaps $10,000 per full-time student per semester. There are also other less easily quantified losses such as the costs associated with recruiting the student, and the effects on the University's reputation, and on staff and student morale.

In 2009, of the 151 mentees who considered withdrawal (about 10% of the total respondents), 47% acknowledged the impact of their mentor on this issue. In 2010, 4.4% of mentees indicated that they had considered withdrawal and that their mentor had been influential in their decision to remain – which, if extrapolated, equates to a little over 300 individuals. These findings represent approximately $6 million annually (at a rate of roughly $10,000 per student per semester) in student-related income that may have been at risk.

The total budget for the mentor program for 2010 – including mentor payments, dedicated staff salary and other costs - was approximately $250,000. Whilst we cannot be sure whether or not the students would indeed have withdrawn or persisted, these students certainly attribute an impact on persistence which indicates a very healthy return on investment of the program costs.

Feedback from Mentees

Figure 1 shows the mean ratings by mentees (*N*=2217) across the seven scales. Overall ratings of mentor impact were positive, with the friendliness and approachability of the mentor the highest rated item, and the provision of study tips the lowest.
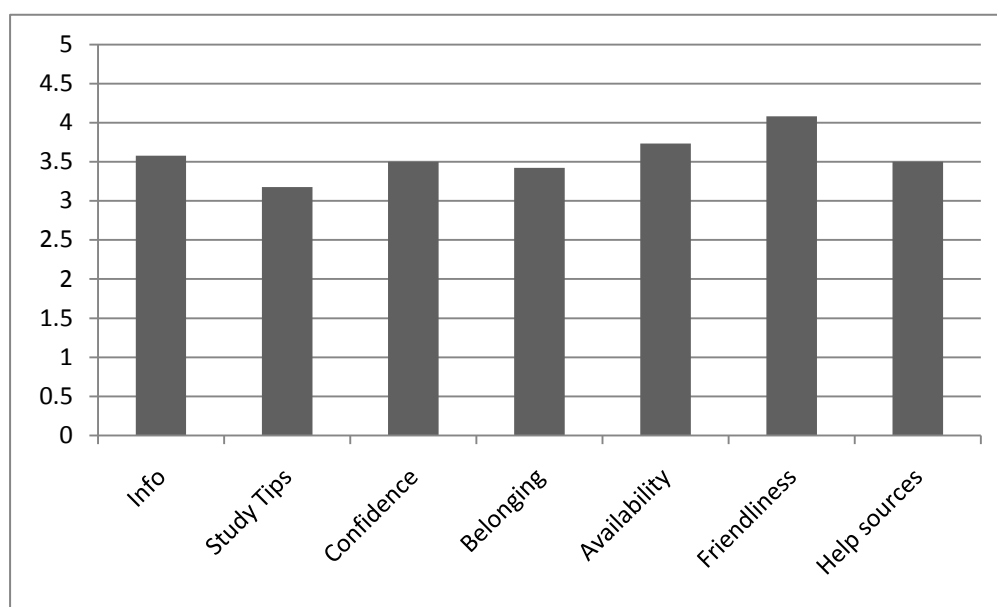

Figure 1: Mean ratings of mentor impact for 2009/2010

Mentees were asked to comment on any positive points of the program and many focused specifically on the qualities of their own mentor. There were a large number of positive comments about the mentor program which could be clustered into three categories relating to providing useful information, providing reassurance and emotional support, and simply being available (see Table 2).

positive category	illustrative mentee comments
1. Mentors valuable in providing useful information	"It was helpful when first becoming familiar with the university setting." "Coming to Curtin for the first time, it was great having someone show us around campus."
2. Mentors valuable in providing reassurance and emotional support	"Made me feel comfortable at Uni and less nervous." "My mentor was really supportive: always asking if I needed help with anything. It was nice to have her there in case I needed anything."
3. Mentors valuable in their availability to new students	"Always willing to offer time & assistance – easy to contact." "I really loved the fact that there was continuous contact from my mentor."

Table 2: Positive comments from mentees

Mentees were also asked to comment on any negative points of the Student Mentor Program. There were very few negative comments and these could be grouped into three categories related to difficulties associated with organising meetings, to the lack of a need for a mentor and to individual mentors' abilities or effort (see Table 3).

negative category	illustrative mentee comments
1. Difficulties associated with meeting the mentor	"Difficult for both sides to choose a suitable time for a meeting."
2. Student saw mentor role as unnecessary for them	"Never really needed to contact my mentor."
3. Limited of skills or effort of mentor	"didn't help at all - just was someone to talk to on O Day, then disappeared from existence".

Table 3: Negative comments from mentees

Feedback from mentors

Figure Two indicates the mean ratings by the mentors for 2009 and 2010 ($N=670$). On average, all items related to the mentoring role were rated favourably. Mentors were most positive in their feedback about the selection process and least satisfied with the frequency and effectiveness of their meetings with their local staff coordinator.
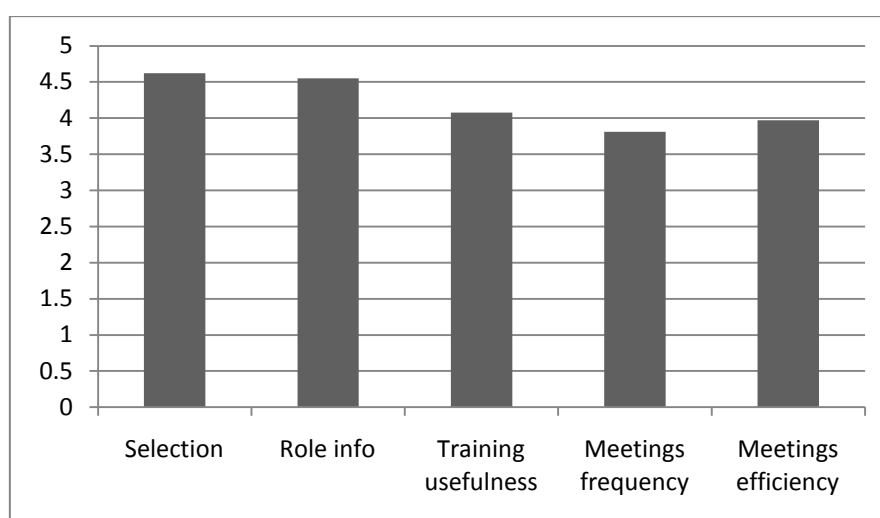

Figure 2: Mean ratings of factors relating to mentor role for 2009/2010

Mentors were asked to comment about things they had enjoyed, found satisfying or beneficial about being a student mentor. The quality of feedback from mentors in this part of evaluation was strongly positive, indicating a largely unintended positive benefit of the program. The program's initial focus was the experience of mentees, but it is manifestly the case that this is a very valuable program for mentors as well. Benefits fell into several categories as illustrated in Table 4. Mentors were also asked about problem areas and responses primarily reflected concerns about lack of response from mentees: "Lack of response from (some) mentees. Didn't even know if they were alive!" Although some lack of response would be expected in a program with an "opt out" possibility, one consequence of this feedback has been to modify information given to commencing students to raise awareness of the program, but to date we do not have data that demonstrating the impact of this.

	positive category	illustrative mentor comment
1.	sense of achievement felt in helping new students	"I feel satisfied just knowing that I've been there for my mentees if they needed help."
2.	enjoyed receiving feedback from mentees	"…I helped out 2 girls in particular who were really struggling & their gratitude has made me feel very valued as a mentor. I recently received an email from them thanking me & commenting that they don't know what they would have done without my help. This was really satisfying."
3.	especially rewarding when an individual student really needed the focused help that a mentor could provide	"… at the end of the semester one of my mentees emailed me and told me they were having difficulties getting good grades and felt that it wasn't worth carrying on. I organised to meet and discuss where she felt she was falling down then referred her on to speak to her lecturers and other services to help her make up her mind. It was extremely satisfying!"
4.	valued the professional and personal development gained from the program	"It has enabled me to reflect on my own university journey and in doing so assist others to reach their full potential. I have also developed further skills in the areas on organisation and communication through this role."

Table 4: Positive comments from mentors

Feedback from coordinating staff

Staff were invited to comment on the program. An intention with respect to the participating staff was to avoid anything that might materially add to their workload. Fortunately, this result was largely achieved, but there were a number of other unintended outcomes for the staff and the teaching areas involved in the program. The impact on staff workload is of special importance. No staff member observed that there had been a deleterious increase in their own workload. In some cases, there had been some "front loading" of work associated with Orientation and getting the mentor program organised – but the subsequent workload implications were within controllable limits. "The workload associated with the mentor program is manageable and I certainly would not like to see it increased for me (as I am an Academic & very busy with my own unit co-ordination, teaching & PhD research!)".

Some comments showed staff found the role much more workable and effective in the second year of the program as their own first experience had given them some insights and ideas for future mentor programs. There was a perception that there was much to be gained from having staff continuity in the role. Participation in the program gave coordinating staff some sense of ownership, and a belief that it was worthwhile investing some creative ideas. Staff participation in the training program and the subsequent meetings with mentors reinforced the message that mentor contributions were valued. A sample comment from one school was:

> "The School of Pharmacy has benefited enormously from participating in the mentor program as commented upon in the mentee evaluation survey. I also believe that less stressed students are more comfortable & confident and therefore, are more successful academically speaking - overall, they enjoy being a student here at Curtin! The mentors also feel extremely proud that they have helped the 'fledgling' first year students and they have told me, that they also thoroughly enjoy themselves at the same time!"

Participating staff indicated that they had enjoyed the role. There were a number of benefits noted. These included building a sense of community within the school (with a perception that more students seem to be spending time together at the school); some perceived qualitative improvement in relationships between student mentors and staff; the development

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of an informal line of communication between students and staff; a much improved Orientation program which had the credibility of using existing students to advise incoming students; active engagement of mentors in other activities of the school (such as Open Day); and early intervention with students who were struggling.

Discussion and Conclusion

It is clear that the mentor program contributes strongly to the major objective of influencing student retention, in line with current national and international imperatives. The evaluation data has revealed that this result is achieved by providing a range of benefits not only to mentees, but also to mentors and coordinating staff members. Mentoring builds a sense of community <u>between</u> teaching areas, particularly during the shared preparation and training program. The program also builds a sense of community <u>within</u> a teaching school as staff, current and new students form stronger relationships with each other. These findings are consistent with the literature that indicates a range of positive outcomes from mentoring programs that benefit all participants and stakeholders, not simply the mentees.

Our challenge is to take advantage of the findings that have emerged from the evaluation. It is clear that many of the mentor programs had the effect of building a greater sense of community within the participating schools, with the consequence of qualitatively improving the student experience. This had not been an explicitly stated goal of the mentor preparation and training. Rather, the preparation provided to mentors had tended to emphasise a role in identifying and assisting individual students who may be struggling. Whilst retaining the latter as an important task, it is useful to more explicitly include a community building goal into the mentor role.

We also note that the value of mentor programs increases over time. In the longer run, students who have participated in mentor programs are likely take their place in their profession and continue to use the skills they have gained. We anticipate that the greatest impact of the mentor program will be realised in several years when there are mentor groups who experienced being mentees, and there are graduates who have experienced being mentors. The participating staff likewise gain from the experience and are able to include more "value-adding" into their own programs. It is clearly a triple-win intervention.

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