Mentoring matters: Embedding peer support frameworks into first year undergraduate programs.

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Abstract

The Faculty of Computing Health and Science (FCHS) Learning and Teaching Office at Edith Cowan University (ECU) and academic staff in six schools have developed and participated in a holistic, strategic whole-of-faculty mentoring initiative specifically to support students in their first year in FCHS as identified through action research and the quality review process. The Peer Mentoring Program provides a supportive network of friendly and encouraging peers from their own discipline, and a non-threatening environment which encourages students to ask questions, seek advice test ideas, and solve problems. Additional complementary workshops which allow students to develop skills and successful learning strategies will also be described. These demonstrate the collaboration between academic staff and learning advisers. This session outlines different mentoring options: internal, external, online mentor support which has been extensively researched and evaluated by the team. The team will present the contextual nature of the programs, the challenges and successes.

Ethos of the Program.

Peer mentoring projects that utilise second and third year students have been shown to reduce attrition amongst first year students and assist in their transition to university (Hill & Reddy, 2007; Hixenbaugh, Dewart, Drees, & Williams, 2005). In addition, peer mentoring has a positive effect on student learning (Anderson & Soden, 2001; Helman & Horswill, 2002; Rae & Baillie, 2005; Spouse, 1996). Mentors also report positive benefits associated with mentoring include increased confidence, building support networks and better developed communication skills (Allen, Poteet, & Burroughs, 1997; Breen, Drew, Pike, Pooley, & Young, 2001; Cahill & Kelly, 1989; Glass & Walter, 2000; Hill & Reddy, 2007).

An international student's study experience is contingent on two factors: namely, academic achievement (objective) and quality of the overall experience (subjective) (Ying, 2003). Therefore, an international student who achieves academic success may still have an unsatisfactory university experience, unless the perception of personal growth and achievement accompanies the academic results. While a peer mentoring program may provide some assistance with respect to academic achievement, it is likely to contribute to a student's positive formative experiences in the transition to university by providing a support network. This is particularly true of peer mentoring programs for students from Non English Speaking Backgrounds (NESB) that might enhance cultural knowledge and sensitivity (Geelhoed, Abe, & Talbot, 2003).

Research suggests that university students Australia-wide want peer support (Krause, 2005). Other Australian universities have reported success in their peer mentoring programs (Dearlove, Farrell, Handa, & Pastore, 2007; Glaser, Hall, & Halperin, 2006; Treston, 1999), and, indeed, evaluations of the peer mentoring program for Edith Cowan University's psychology students' demonstrates consistent success.

Overview of the Mentoring Program

The mentoring program has its origins in a Retention and Persistence Transition Support Program initially developed by the School of Psychology at ECU. The Quality and Equity Unit at Edith Cowan University (ECU) supported the development and extension of the program through Higher Education Equity Support Programme (HEESP) funding. It was decided to adopt one mentoring model and pilot the program in different areas across the University to increase participation, impact and collaboration. Although a generic model was proposed, each discipline area would contextualise the program. Mentors, who were second and third year students, were recruited by each learning area to voluntarily mentor a group of up to five first year students. First year students (mentees), were recruited by each learning area, and matched to mentors via a questionnaire.

The staff members and mentors from each learning area were trained by the Project Co-ordinator and the Project Manager prior to program commencement. Each mentor and all staff members were provided with a training manual. Mentors were required to meet with their mentees a minimum of four times over the semester (either individually, as a group, or a combination of these). Mentors were provided with suggestions for (but not prescribed) activities and topics for discussion. The school or faculty contact person liaised with the Project Co-ordinator regularly throughout the semester on operational matters. Several equity groups were targeted in this pilot program. These were NESB students, students from rural/remote areas, students with a disability, and students who face equity issues due to gender. The program has now been expanded to all schools in the Faculty of Computing Health and Science as outlined below.

School of Psychology and Social Science.

Edith Cowan University's Peer Mentoring Program for psychology students was initially established by the School of Psychology in 1999, in response to rising attrition rates. It is a national award winning program (AAUT, 2004). Initially, it was offered to internally enrolled students, and operated as an opt-in program. The program has evolved to an opt-out program for all first year students both internal and external.

The Peer Mentoring Program relies on second and third year psychology students to mentor a group of first year psychology students. Internally, all first year psychology students are purposively matched with a second or third year mentor. Groups consist of five or six students for each mentor. The mentoring groups meet at least four times per semester or more frequently if they wish. Additionally, mentors are encouraged to email their mentees fortnightly, and also offer support and advice, and to meet at other times if necessary.

In the external program, first year students are purposively matched with second or third year mentors. Groups are formed on a geographical basis to increase the likelihood of meeting face-to-face; however the success of this initiative is dependent on students providing details of their location. Mentors and mentees communicate via an online discussion board and regular emails. The mentors have their own online forum for discussing mentoring issues.

School of Nursing, Midwifery, and Postgraduate Medicine.

The unique demands of preregistration nursing training have highlighted the need to adapt a traditional mentoring framework to best suit the needs of their students. Mentorship has been highlighted within the nursing literature as contributing to early, positive socialisation experiences within the profession. In times of chronic health workforce shortages and issues around retention, initiatives to promote collegiality and support within the nursing discipline are vital dialogues.

Peer mentoring within the School of Nursing has experienced a slow, albeit positive start. Demands of clinical practice are compounded by compacted semesters which, in effect, result in very short periods of on campus time for senior students. This is in addition to a significant final year workload undertaken while working 40 hours a week in clinical practice.

This situation was observed by these academics to hinder the development of peer mentoring relationships and the opportunity to nurture them. To address this issue, the researchers commenced an umbrella 'academic mentoring' initiative, inviting first year students to become 'attached' to a staff academic and have ready access to contact when required. Having an academic mentor created opportunities for students to have a point of contact for concerns but also a forum to develop as caring and nurturing professionals who in turn would be prepared to foster this among more junior students through the lifetime of their degree. In effect the academic mentors are mentoring peer mentors who are being nurtured in their motivation and skill set to mentor junior students.

School of Computer and Security Science.

The School of Computer and Security Science has been involved in the mentoring program since 2009. The school has its own unique challenges in that international students form a large component of the undergraduate program. Additionally, the course is by nature very competitive academically. To that end, it was imperative that the students were welcomed informally, and that the mentoring program promoted unity through social activities.

With that in mind, the program concentrates on bonding students through various social events which are attended by many staff members. All students – mentors and mentees – appreciate getting to know the staff better, find the staff more approachable through the program, and they are more likely to ask for assistance when required. Contact between mentors and mentees is less formal, and often consists of a chat over coffee at the on campus cafe.

School of Engineering.

The School of Engineering is a relative newcomer to the program, having joined mid-2010. One of the issues found in this school is that it is a male dominated discipline; therefore, female students find it quite difficult to find appropriate support. There is also a culture of competitiveness within the School. These issues are addressed by the mentoring program, which has resulted in a more collegiate atmosphere.

Complementary workshops

Additional to the mentoring program workshops were developed to provide the students with transferrable learning processes, strategies and tools for a successful first year experience. The parts fit together like a jigsaw to create a holistic experience for students within their own discipline. Academic staff and learning advisers embedded a series of training workshops into lecture times and related to the content of units of study. The content was determined by the Unit Learning Objectives, specific assessment requirements and student learning needs analysis. It included, listening and note-taking skills, effective critical reading strategies, retention-aiding tools, effective use of resources, and study processes. The workshops were delivered five weeks prior to the assignment due date, with an on-line version available to all students. This workshop embedded program was relevant to and reflective of the current curriculum and student learning needs, enhancing lecturer facilitation of student effective learning. It was student-centred and discipline-specific immediately applicable and the skills transferable to other units of study. The feedback indicated positive outcomes for students (motivation, lower attrition rates, tangible learning support and raised confidence in study success).

Nuts and Bolts Session Plan

Introduction to mentoring initiative and complementary workshops in FCHS (4 Minutes)

This will include a brief presentation of the origin, aims and structure of the program

School Perspectives (6 minutes)
      Challenges
      Rewards

Audience Participation (10 minutes)

Group Work
      Small groups of 3-4
      Discussion of questions (listed below)
      FCHS presenters to work with individual groups

Group Discussion Roundup (10 minutes)

Suggested discussion questions

Discuss whether this faculty wide, context specific program is worth considering as opposed to a university wide initiative.

What are the challenges and barriers to developing a successful context specific mentoring program in your discipline?

What value is there in providing additional embedded workshops to develop first year students' skills? Suggest other ways in which this may be accomplished?

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