

Academic to Student Mentoring within a Large Australian Business School

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Abstract

This paper presents an overview of the options available to universities to employ mentoring by academics for the successful academic transition of students to university. Much has been written about the use of peer mentors to assist with the personal transition to university however students crave personal contact with their professors. We review the literature on mentoring; the social and institutional factors that impact upon first year attrition, the merits of mentoring interventions and the impact these have on a student's sense of belonging and ultimately retention. We describe a pilot implementation of First STEP Mentoring in a large Australian business school.

Keywords: higher education, retention, first year, transition, student experience, formal mentoring, peer relationships, academic success

1. Introduction

The focus of this paper is on a formalized Academic to Student Mentoring Program piloted in a large Australian business school at Macquarie University ("Macquarie"). Macquarie is located in Sydney, Australia with approximately 38,000 students enrolled. Of the total student load, 22 per cent are in higher degrees and 78 per cent in bachelor degree (including honours) programs. In terms of the gender mix, approximately 56% of students enrolled (2011) are female and 44% male. Approximately 12,500 are international and the balance domestic students. Approximately 15,000 are enrolled in a Management/Commerce discipline.

One of Macquarie's strategic aims is to provide an inspiring educational experience for students. The Faculty of Business and Economics' mission includes investing in the experience of students and staff. Achievement of these strategies/aims is dependent on the implementation of development programs.

In Australian higher education the highest rate of student attrition occurs in the first year of undergraduate study. The research shows that mentoring programs have a positive effect on students' transition to university, sense of belonging, retention and skill development (Galser, Hall, & Halperin, 2006). This first year research together with the strategic aims of the University were the primary drivers in support of the implementation of First STEP Mentoring into the Faculty of Business and Economics at Macquarie.

2. Background

Macquarie University has experimented over the years with a number of different peer mentoring interventions as a way to assist first year students as they transition into the University. Very little has been done around academic to student mentoring in a formalized sense. Recently, Macquarie's Faculty of Business and Economics ("FBE") received some grant monies to implement a Mentoring Program between academics and students. The Program is called First STEP (Striving Towards Excellence Program) and it is being piloted in 2012 to first year undergraduate students enrolled in the Business Faculty.

Expected outcomes for the First STEP Program include enhancing the student experience by providing students with the environment and framework to discuss challenges and issues relating to their university experience. Participation in the Program will also increase the sense of engagement that the students have with the academics in the Faculty. Therefore, we expect that these outcomes will improve the overall retention rate of our first year

students.

The earlier research around mentoring in higher education has focussed more on graduate education and how having a mentor assists in the transition into the workforce. However, in recent years there has been a move towards recognising mentoring as a critical component in effective undergraduate education and a growing body of literature supports this.

This paper reviews the literature on mentoring and how mentoring is a critical factor in undergraduate education. The literature shows that although there is a growing body of empirical research in this area, there still remains inconsistencies in how mentoring is defined. The merits of peer mentoring versus academic to student mentoring are also discussed. Next the First STEP Mentoring Program will be described. Finally, some of the challenges around implementation will also be discussed.

3. Literature on Mentoring

Mentoring has long been associated with preparing graduate students for the workforce but it is taking on more of a retention and development strategy for undergraduate students (Jacobi, 1991). There is a growing base of literature that supports the importance of having a mentor at the undergraduate level (e.g., Hughes, 1988; Lester & Johnson, 1981; Moore & Amey, 1988; Moses, 1989; Pounds, 1987; Rowe, 1989, cited in Jacobi, 1991). However, the literature has not kept up with development and implementation of mentoring programs/initiatives and therefore some of the issues highlighted and discussed in Jacobi (1991) are still relevant (Crisp & Cruz, 2009) and referenced in more recent mentoring literature.

One of the most important issues is the fact that there is still no accepted operational definition of mentoring. The lack of empirical and theoretical research to support the link between mentoring and academic success is also a concern (Crisp & Cruz, 2009).

Several definitions of mentoring from the field of higher education are outlined below:

“...when a professor takes an undergraduate or graduate student under his or her wing, helps the student set goals and develop skills, and facilitates the student’s successful entry into academic and professional circles” (Moses, 1989 p. 9 cited in Mee Lee & Bush, 2003)

“First, it is an intentional process of interaction between at least two individuals....Second, mentoring is a nurturing process that fosters the growth and development of the protégé....Third, mentoring is an insightful process in which the wisdom of the mentor is acquired and applied by the protégé...Fourth, mentoring is supportive, often protective process. The mentor can serve as an important guide or reality checker in introducing the protégé to the environment he or she is preparing for. Finally...an essential component of serving as a mentor is role modeling” (Shandley, 1989, p.60 cited in Jacobi 1991).

The differences in how mentoring is defined is further complicated by the differences in the characteristics of a mentor in relation to the protégé. For example, Levinson et al. (1978) cited in Jacobi, 1991 suggests the mentor is typically 8-15 years older than the protégé, however, others have placed less importance on age (e.g., Kram, 1985; Zey, 1984, cited in Jacobi, 1991). Some researchers suggest that the mentoring roles and functions a mentor performs are more important than the actual age of the mentor (e.g., Phillips-Jones, 1982, cited in Jacobi, 1991).

According to Jacobi (1991) the majority of researchers have “...defined mentoring in terms of the functions provided by a mentor or the roles played by a mentor in relation to a protégé” (p.508). The table in Appendix 1 provides an overview of 15 functions or roles attributed to a mentor. The authors cited appear frequently in the literature on mentoring. These 15 functions can be categorized into “...three components of the mentoring relationship: (a) emotional and psychological support, (b) direct assistance with career and professional development, and (c) role modeling” (Jacobi, 1991, p.510).

3.1 Higher Education and Mentoring

In higher education the greatest rate of attrition occurs at the first year of undergraduate study (McInnis, Hartly, Polesel, Teese, 2000, cited in Heirdsfield, Walker and Walsh, 2008). In Australia, the student attrition in first year is between 24-30% (Strahm & Danaher, 2005) and in fact a third of students who enroll in university programs do not graduate. There are a number of factors that influence the academic and social integration of students into the university environment (Heirdsfield et al., 2008).

Institutional variables were found to influence a students’ progression through university (Harvey, Drew, & Smith, 2006; Metz, 2004-2005; Wilson, 2005-2006). Heirdsfield et al (2008) defined institutional variables as

“...faculty-student interaction, peer group interaction, and extra curricular involvement...” (p.2). Institutional factors were also linked to student attrition and retention (Heirdsfield et al., 2008).

Helland, Stallings and Braxton, 2001-2002, cited in Heirdsfield et al., 2008 found social expectations played a “...direct and positive influence on social and institutional commitment which, in turn, was found to influence the decision to withdraw” (p.2). Feelings of isolation and disconnection were also found by researchers to be associated with the likelihood of withdrawal (Peel, 2000; Tinto, 1995, cited in Heirdsfield et al., 2008).

Krause (2005b) cited in Heirdsfield et al., 2008 suggested “...universities should assist with the transition to university life by creating a sense of belonging within learning communities” (p.2). A number of institutions have implemented transition programs to help facilitate the transition to university for first year students. Mentoring is one type of transition program employed by institutions (Drew, Pike, Pooley, Young & Breen, 2000; Fowler, 2004; Pollock & Georgievski, 1999, cited in Heirdsfield et al., 2008).

3.2 *Types of Mentoring*

3.2.1 Formal versus Informal Mentoring

Researchers differ on their views around the effectiveness of formal versus informal mentoring relationships (Jacobi, 1991). Formal mentoring programs are those where a mentor is formally matched with a protégé as opposed to the relationship developing naturally between the two. There has been growing interest and popularity of formal mentoring programs in both the higher education and business sectors and as a result we are seeing an increase in the number of formal programs being implemented (Jacobi, 1991). Many of these formal mentoring programs are implemented for a range of reasons including career development, leadership development and retention (Jacobi, 1991, cited in Mee Lee & Bush, 2003).

3.2.2 Peer Mentoring

Peer mentoring programs “provide an avenue for new students to be supported by more experienced mentor students to make social connections with other new students” (Glaser, Hall & Halperin, 2006; Muckert, 2002 cited in Heirdsfield et al., 2008, p.3). Drew, Pike, Pooley, Young and Breen (2000) findings support the position that peer mentoring programs reduce student stress and attrition. Stress and anxiety can interfere with learning and academic progress and when students are unsuccessful in adjusting to university they decide to leave (Jones, 1997, cited in Drew et al., 2000).

Even though universities offer a large number of support services, research shows that utilization of these resources is very low and there is reluctance in using these services (McKavanagh, Coonor, & West, 1996, cited in Drew et al., 2000). Research supports the fact that other students can prove to be a valuable information resource for new students (Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994; McKavanagh et al., 1996, cited in Drew et al., 2000). Hall (2000) also conducted a study that showed students reported that other fellow students were their most used form of support (Hall, 2000, cited in Glaser et al., 2006).

There are a number of benefits for first year students and the peer mentors that participate in peer mentoring programs. Some of the benefits for first year students include reducing the negative effects of stress (Jacobi, 1991, cited in Glaser et al., 2006); enhancing the sense of belonging and identity with the university, school or faculty (Evans & Peel, 1999, cited in Glaser et al., 2006), early access to information about resources on campus (Clark & Crome, 2004, cited in Glaser et al., 2006); academic success (Rodger & Tremblay, 2003, cited in Glaser et al., 2006), social connections (Pope & Van Dyke, 1999, cited in Glaser et al., 2006), skill development (Treston, 1999, cited in Glaser et al., 2006) and improved retention (Jacobi, 1991, cited in Glaser et al., 2006).

Gilles & Wilson, 2004, cited in Heirdsfield et al., 2008 also highlighted the benefits for mentors including a sense of satisfaction and self worth, enjoyment in sharing expertise and gaining new personal insights. As a result of this work, Australian universities have moved into peer mentoring as a key strategy to improve retention in first year university.

3.2.3 Peer Mentoring versus Faculty to Student Mentoring

As Jacobi (1991) points out there is little empirical evidence to support the direct association between mentoring and academic success, however he suggests that there are some related areas of study that provide indirect support. A large body of literature supports the relationship between contact with faculty and academic success (e.g., Astin, 1977; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1977; Tracey & Sedlacek, 1985; Wilson et al., 1975; cf., DeCoster & Brown, 1982, cited in Jacobi, 1991). These researchers also imply that mentoring relationships positively impact retention and achievement. However, these studies have limitations in that they fail to investigate some important factors such as the functions of a mentoring relationship that are important to success (Jacobi, 1991).

Peel (2000) suggests that the "...quality of relationships with university teachers is a potentially important factor in successful transition..." (p.27). McInnis (1996) cited in Peel 2000, says "the first step in improving the first year experience involves attending to the fundamentals of good teaching, those fundamentals include a commitment to welcoming, knowing and in some way connecting with each student early in their university experience" (p.553). Research in other universities in Australia and the US supports the contention that faculty-student interaction is crucial to persistence and commitment (Gillespie and Noble, 1992; Neumann et al, 1990; Pascarella and Terenzini, 1977; Stage, 1989; Theophilides and Terenzini, 1981, cited in Peel, 2000).

Peel (2000) emphasises the fact that student to student interaction counts for little if the student feels that the teaching staff do not care enough to offer encouragement and support and it is important that the emphasis on peer mentoring does not ignore academic involvement. Krause (2005a) supports this in her paper when discussing the critical features of a successful first year experience and suggests that it is important for students to be known by at least one of their teachers as they progress through their first year.

Peel (2000) cites as an example, the Arts Faculty at Monash University (Clayton Campus), where they introduced a series of strategies to increase the level of interaction between academic staff and students and identify early those students that were experiencing academic difficulty. Of the students that were identified as being "at risk" feedback was sought, one quarter of those were first year students. Approximately half of the first year students that were surveyed responded explaining the reasons for their poor performance. Many cited "...isolation, lack of contact with teachers and a feeling of anonymity" (Peel, 2000, p. 29). "The most common requests from the students were for advice from course advisors and academic staff and academic mentoring by a lecturer, in other words, for direct human contact" (Peel, 2000, p.29).

4. Description of the FBE First STEP Mentoring Program

In support of the research that mentoring programs have a positive influence on transition to university, sense of belonging, retention and skill development (Galser, Hall, & Halperin, 2006), Macquarie University made a decision to implement an academic to student mentoring pilot into the Faculty of Business and Economics (FBE). This Program is called First STEP (Striving Towards Excellence Program).

The First STEP Mentoring Program was developed in support of the Faculty and University strategy to create an inspiring educational experience for students. Through the Program students would not only be able to discuss issues and challenges around transitioning into the University environment but would also have the opportunity to build closer relationships with academics within the Faculty.

The Program was designed along similar lines to a corporate formal mentoring program. Although the environments are different a lot of the principles that support formal mentoring programs are common to both. It is more about ensuring that the formal mentoring program resembles the features of an informal mentoring relationship. Some of the principles around matching and making the Program voluntary are discussed.

The process of the First STEP Program involved academics within the Faculty (FBE) being assigned a small group (Success Network) of up to 5 first year students. The Success Network also included an upper year (2nd or 3rd year student) peer mentor. The peer mentors were recruited from another internal mentoring program called Mentors@Macquarie which is a cross faculty student to student program that supports first years as they transition into the University.

The plan is to run the First STEP Mentoring Program as a pilot in Session 2, 2012 and provided the outcomes for the Program are achieved it will be rolled out more broadly across the Business Faculty in 2013.

4.1 Process

4.1.1 Pre-program

Initially the Program organisers (which included the Executive Dean, Associate Dean, Learning and Teaching and the Program Manager) decided to pilot the Program in the Applied Finance Department. The intention was to build more of a "cohort feel" among the first year students enrolled in a couple of the degree programs within that Department.

The Associate Dean, Learning and Teaching (FBE) in conjunction with Head of Department for Applied Finance, nominated a list of suitable mentors. Foundation Year lecturers from outside the Department were also invited to participate with the intention of cross selling the benefits of the Program. Once the list of potential mentors was finalised, an email was sent inviting the academic mentors to formally register through the Faculty's intranet site.

The Program Manager then provided an orientation to the materials and gave the academic mentors access to an iLearn unit (internal platform) that was specifically developed for the purposes of the Program. The orientation

involved providing an overview of the materials including participant roles and responsibilities, the actual mentoring process and a discussion around available online tools and resources. The feedback from the academic mentors was very positive. A similar process was also run for the peer mentors.

In terms of the student mentees, the initial focus was on first year students enrolled in either the Bachelor of Applied Finance or the Bachelor of Applied Finance with the Degree of Bachelor of Economics. A registration process was set up through the Faculty website and students were sent emails with a link to the site inviting them to register. The Program was also advertised through the Faculty Facebook page and a flyer was created by the Marketing Department. The goal was to attract between 50-70 first years into the Program.

The initial marketing to students and the development of the registration process was completed a week prior to the Session 1 exams. The timing was not ideal given students were more focussed on their exams and the mid-year break. This combined with the fact that the Program was voluntary meant student registrations were low. The reason for making the Program voluntary is that mentoring theorists advocate that formal mentoring programs be designed in a way that is more aligned to how informal mentoring relationships develop (Burke & McKeen, 1989; Ragins et al., 2000, cited in Allen et al, 2006). If students feel they are being forced to participate in a Program, they are less likely to be committed and ultimately resent their involvement.

The Program Manager tried a number of different strategies to raise awareness and interest including sending a text message to students. This was the first time that the Faculty used texting as a “call to action” strategy. This generated a negligible response. The only remaining option was to market the Program to new students during mid-year enrolments. The Business Faculty had opened mid-year enrolments to domestic students for the first time. The organisers saw this as a great opportunity as these students would be newer to the University. The timing of enrolments (week before the commencement of Session 2) and the fact that the launch of the Program was moved back a week provided the organisers some more time to build student numbers.

Once students were registered they were sent a link to the online materials through iLearn and were asked to complete the relevant modules prior to the formal launch. While this was occurring the Program Manager carried out the match process. This was another aspect of the Program that needed to simulate informal mentoring (Allen et al, 2006). To achieve this, the Program Manager sought input from both the academic mentors and student mentees in terms of their match preferences. The match process involved aligning the strengths of the academic mentors with the needs of the student mentees. This is a similar process to the one adopted in the corporate mentoring model.

4.1.2 Program

The First STEP Program commenced in the first two weeks of Session 2 with the formal launch. This is where all the participants came together (networking opportunity) to hear about the merits of the program and the importance of mentors in support of lifelong learning. The Associate Dean – Learning and Teaching of the Business Faculty together with the Deputy Vice Chancellor - Student Experience formally launched the Program and all the participants had the opportunity to meet for the first time. The students were broken into their assigned groups and the peer mentors facilitated a fun icebreaker activity.

As part of the overall process the Academic Mentors are required to meet one-to-one with each of the first year students in their Success Network (refer to Appendix 2). The Program guidelines prescribe that there should be at least two meetings within the first six weeks of the session to help build trust and rapport in the relationship. A further meeting is required before the end of the session. The peer mentors are responsible for organising the one-to-one meetings to help leverage the academic mentors. They are also responsible for getting the students together as a group, a couple times throughout the session. The group meetings (Success Networks) are to be arranged around a social activity to encourage bonding and networking.

In terms of the structure of the one-to-one meetings, the student mentees are responsible for preparing an agenda and some specific goals they want to accomplish from their mentoring relationship. The Program guidelines also require the participants to complete an informal mentoring agreement at their first meeting to outline roles/responsibilities, frequency of meetings, preferred forms of communication etc. This helps to provide some structure to the mentoring relationship and manage expectations.

The Program Manager together with the peer mentors will ensure regular touch points throughout the Program. Mid way through the session, the Program Manager will also conduct a progress review and seek feedback from participants on how they are finding the process. A formal evaluation will be conducted at the end of Session 2 when the Program concludes by way of a feedback survey. The Program Manager will be looking to see if the outcomes have been achieved. Modifications and improvements to the Program will be made based on the

feedback received.

5. Conclusion

It is important for universities to continue to experiment with different forms of mentoring interventions whether it is academic to student or student to student (peer) or some combination of the two. Apart from the many benefits of these types of programs to students, there are also the institutional benefits. The research shows that if students have a positive and enriching first year they are more likely to be engaged with their university education and the institution they are attending (van der Meer & Scott, 2009). This has a direct impact on student retention and degree completion. With greater numbers of students entering university than ever before combined with the technological developments, students have less opportunity for personal interaction with faculty staff. This directly impacts their academic success therefore it is critical that universities like Macquarie continue to implement and evaluate transition programs like the mentoring to ensure student's have a positive transition.

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Appendix 1. Mentoring Functions (Jacobi, 1991)

TABLE
Mentoring functions

Functions	Blackwell, 1989	Burke, 1984	Nieva & Gutek, 1981	Kanter, 1977	Kram, 1985	Levinson et al., 1978	Phillips- Jones, 1982	Zey, 1984
Acceptance/support/encouragement	X				X	X	X	X
Advice/guidance	X		X		X	X	X	X
Bypass bureaucracy/access to resources			X	X				X
Challenge/opportunity/"plum assignments"		X			X		X	
Clarify values/clarify goals	X							
Coaching		X		X	X			
Information	X	X	X	X				
Protection	X				X			X
Role model	X		X		X	X	X	
Social status/reflected credit			X	X				
Socialization/"host and guide"	X					X	X	X
Sponsorship/advocacy	X	X		X	X	X		X
Stimulate acquisition of knowledge	X							
Training/instruction	X		X	X		X	X	X
Visibility/exposure				X	X		X	

Appendix 2. Process Map outlining the First STEP Mentoring Program

