

Mentors Speak:

Lessons from the Front Line of the Learning Community Movement

Presented by

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Program Outcomes

- Participants will gain knowledge of the peer mentor experience at ISU.
- Participants will learn supervision practices which strengthen the mentor experience.
- Participants will discuss research questions which have emerged as a result of the ISU Peer Mentor Study.

Rationale for the study

- Accountability-A significant amount of funding is directed to peer mentor salaries.
- Assistance to Mentors-How can we aid them in their role?
- Assistance to Supervisors-Focus the study on topics of interest to supervisors.

Population

- The university employs 100 mentors.
 - Residential
 - Non-Residential
 - Classroom Facilitators

Research Process

- Use existing data to inform process
- Consult with others in the university
 - Assessment Committee
 - Learning Community Advisory Committee (LCAC)
- Determined the research methodology
- Generated questions

Research Process

- Received approval from Human Subjects Committee 11/6/00

Research Design

- Electronic Survey
- Focus Groups

Electronic Survey

- Developed 13 thirteen open-ended items
- Administered survey via e-mail 11/7/00
- Set 11/17/00 return date
- Thirty-six of 100 peer mentors responded.
- Data is transcribed by 12/01/00.

Electronic Survey

- Used data for direction in the development of focus group questions
 - Out-of-Class Experiences
 - Supervision
 - Improvement Areas
 - Development of Mentors
 - Parting Thoughts

Focus Groups

- Two were conducted on 1/21/01 and 1/25/01.
- Seventeen peer mentors participated.
- Tapes were transcribed throughout the semester.

Study Limitations

- Response rates were lower than expected.
- We did not draw distinctions between mentor types. (residential, non-residential, classroom facilitators)
- Equipment failures impacted transcription process.

Methods used to choose out-of-class activities

- Brainstorming
- Surveys
- Assessing character of the group
- Using program and personal goals

Attendance at out-of-class activities

- Poor at the end of the semester
- Influenced by when mentors established the relationship with students
- Is best when students choose the activity

Strategies used to encourage attendance at out-of-class activities

- Timing -- late afternoon
- Include food
- Have the activity as part of a mandatory meeting

Successful out-of-class activities

- Students respond with enthusiasm and positive feedback
- There is increased participation
- Individual growth occurs ->
 - simply helping someone is success
 - one-on-one time is valued
 - students can be ok with the mistakes they make
 - students can find what they want for themselves (even if that includes not staying in the program)

“ . . . [T]hey enjoy it to the point that they tell someone else. And they get students who didn't participate wanting to participate.”

Benefits of out-of-class activities

- Application
 - They see future possibilities/job prospects.
- Collaboration
 - Find study partners
 - Improve communication
 - Share varied points of view
- Transition
 - Reduces transition issues through interaction

Out-of-class activities contributing to student learning

- Social/community component to student learning is valuable -- connect social to academic
- Interaction with other community members leads to persistence

“ . . . [T]hey hang out together.
I think that’s really, really
important ‘cause it makes them
happier and makes them feel
[like] ‘I see other people doing
it, I can do it too.’ I think
that’s one of the biggest parts.
. . .keeping them going. If
they’re more comfortable,
they’ll stay.”

Supervision

- Constant communication and guidance is needed from supervisors
 - Answers to questions
 - Expectations/objectives
 - Resources
- Mentors seek help when:
 - They can't answer questions
 - The personal and/or academic problems are beyond their range

“I mostly just want concrete objectives for what you want. Something physically that I can do, not just some abstract goal. We want to make it more comfortable for them at Iowa State. Well, that’s kinda hard to quantify. I want something I can do: meet with the student once every two weeks or something like that. . . A goal I can accomplish.”

Improvements

- Have purposeful activities - maybe include “credit” for attendance at activities
- Meetings for mentors - opportunities to meet and discuss mentor issues
- Transitions
 - For students - programs end abruptly.
 - For mentors - documentation/history to pass onto new mentor(s)

Development of Mentors

- Greatest challenges
 - Participation
 - Ideas generation
 - Diversity
 - Balance of approaches - “happy medium” between directive and non-directive
 - Outreach vs. waiting

“I think one of the tougher things is definitely knowing when enough is enough in trying to enforce something or trying to motivate a student. . . . I know from experience the hardest thing about being a peer mentor or a seminar leader is getting to those who won't come and ask.”

How mentors benefit

- Interpersonal development
 - More open
 - Accepting of different personalities
 - Developed sociability
- Teaching/learning - discussing/teaching material helped mentors learn it better
- Student development - learned how first-year students change over the year

Advice for new mentors

- Relationships
 - Meet students right away
 - First impressions count
 - Develop friendships
- Involvement
 - Get students involved
 - Maintain balance

“. . .[S]ometimes you may get sidetracked but you gotta keep it balanced, your school work. . . with social life. Your time gets constrained and you have to find a balance.”

“Don’t be afraid to pass the buck if the buck gets too big. There are other people to help you do your job. You are never on your own.”

Reasons to continue mentor program

- Most responses focused on continuing learning communities
 - Impact on grades and admission into professional programs
 - Helps with transitions
 - Retention
 - High demand for learning communities

Reasons to continue mentor programs

- Mentors ease anxiety.
- Mentors are voices of experience.

“I think a voice of experience in the same practice or areas is good. That’s another way that students learn - from other people’s experiences as well as their own.”

Future Research Questions

- In what ways does type of mentor role impact mentors' perceptions?
- How do learning community students perceive the mentor role?
- How do we measure the growth that mentors experience as a result of serving in this role?

Future Research Questions

- In what ways do first year mentors differ from mentors who have served in the role multiple years?
- How do learning community coordinators view the mentor role?