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ABSTRACT

This article examines causes of the high rate of attrition of college freshmen during the first few weeks of school and describes a plan for mentorships between successful college students and college-bound secondary seniors prior to entrance into college. In discussing the challenges facing freshmen, the article suggests that many suffer stress due to shock, competition, and independence, and that if they were guided through this transitional time the "sink or swim" approach could be avoided. It also discusses the cultural emphasis on independence which leaves students feeling alone, and is particularly difficult for minority group students who feel they have entered an alien culture. The paper suggests a program that would target college-bound high school seniors in a collaborative mentoring program between colleges and schools. College students would facilitate the transition of college-bound high school seniors from high school to college by assuming the role of teacher, guide, counselor, role model, and friend. Through participation in concurrent courses offered by the community high school and nearby colleges, mentors and proteges might address topics such as career options and majors, university procedures, student life, student support services, library orientation, student skills and time management, test taking strategies, and common problems of freshmen. (Contains 24 references.) (JB)

Mentoring College Bound High School Seniors

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Running Head: Mentoring

Abstract

College attrition is heaviest at the freshmen level. Generally, it occurs during the first few weeks of the first semester with only 20-25% of the freshmen leaving for academic reasons. This article examines causes of freshmen attrition and describes a plan for mentorships between successful college students and college-bound secondary seniors prior to entrance into college.

College Bound Mentoring Program

The notion of mentoring has its origins in mythology: the hero Ulysses asked his friend Mentor to guide and counsel his son Telemachus while Ulysses was away on his 10 year sojourn. Upon reviewing the literature on mentoring, Merriam (1983) discovered that there is no one agreed upon definition. Mentoring appears to be defined by the function of the mentor/protege relationship or by a particular setting where it occurs.

Educators generally define a mentor as a person who: has a special interest, skill, or talent which they share with a younger person; who serves as a role model for the learner; is interested in the younger person beyond the immediate classroom environment; and who guides the learner towards rewarding experiences, solving problems, developing new skills, and establishing new relationships (U.S. Office of Education, 1979). A protege is someone engaged in learning from, and working with a mentor. Typically, the protege is younger than the mentor; however, the more important variable is that the protege desires to learn something from the mentor. Learning from the mentor may take the form of role modeling, skill building, or guided personal and career development.

Since its inception, mentoring has been employed within educational settings utilizing a variety of

formats: (1) career mentoring of students by the business community; (2) mentoring programs designed to aid the first year teacher; (3) peer mentoring akin to cooperative learning; and (4) mentoring within specific groups such as at-risk, minority, disadvantaged and gifted and talented students.

To date, the greatest body of literature focuses on mentoring programs designed to aid at-risk students, elementary and secondary students and gifted students. Little has been done to examine the effect that mentoring of college bound seniors might have relative to the transitions they must undergo as college freshmen; transitions which possibly influence the "staying power" or survival of first year students. Attrition is heaviest at the freshmen level (Pascarella & Terengini, 1980) with only 20-25% of the drop-outs leaving for academic reasons.

First, consider the social and emotional forces that are converging upon these students. Pellegrino (1980) suggests that at this time in their lives, students are confronted with making decisions regarding who they are, and what they will become. According to Pellegrino, this process of identity formation continues through life but there is a convergence during this period, of a number of factors which makes this a crucial time. First, the student is leaving the familiar influence of family and high school, and must

confront multiple and sometimes inconsistent value systems of his or her peer groups and foreign cultures. During this period, the student invests much of his/her time to academic achievement and is required to make job decisions and decisions regarding interpersonal relationships. Developmentally, they may be ready to deal with abstract questions, to formulate answers and to assimilate and synthesize theories and ideas (Piaget, 1977) but all of this is greatly complicated by the "rite of passage" so to speak, into the unknown; the university. Think about the student going to college for the first time. The people at the school are unfamiliar and behaving in ways that almost seem foreign; and the college freshman doesn't really have a clear idea of what is expected of him or her. To many students, this is a form of culture shock which renders the student anxious and leads to a reduced sense of self confidence. The myth of the university as an "Ivory Tower" adds additional pressures to the student who is possibly suffering the trauma of leaving home for the first time and being relocated demographically. This trauma or culture shock can lead to poor academic performance in addition to confusion and loss of self esteem (Boen, 1989). It is further suggested that people who have low self-concepts tend to lack confidence in their ability to function effectively. The most successful academic programs are those which

are targeted at developing a student's sense of self-esteem (Bushnell, 1991). Programs founded upon collaboration and support serve to foster feelings of acceptance and self-confidence.

However, traditional college curricula emphasize independence and competition. Philip Slater (1970) in his book **The Pursuit of Loneliness**, discussed cultural differences between the United States and Western Europe. In Western Europe, he said, dependence has been a highly valued concept, whereas the United States is a country that places a high premium on independence. Cooperation has been the cornerstone of Western Civilization versus the competitive milieu of the United States. Western societies are founded on principles of community whereas the United States has increasingly moved toward individualism. As a result, according to Slater, many American adolescents and adults have suffered a loss of relationship and a loss of the value of nurturing. The Japanese, both in Japan and in the United States, exhibit superior performance over American students. It is suggested, (Bracey, 1991) that the socialization of Japanese students has a lot to do with their school performance. This socialization process is called "osmosis" and it involves nurturance, interdependence, and close physical proximity to adults though not typically in the role as "teachers" but more as "mentors".

I suggest that incoming freshmen suffer stress due to culture shock, competition, and independence and if we were to guide them through this transitional time, the notions of "trial and error" and "sink or swim" need not apply to their academic lives. Concentrating on survival skills leaves limited time and energy for learning and impedes their educational process.

Cultural factors also address the need for mentoring in that minority college-bound students frequently come from backgrounds different from those of the traditional college-bound population. Drop-out rates are highest for Hispanics, African Americans, and Native Americans (Renden & Mathews, 1989). Many lack the basic skills necessary for college success. Many have poor study strategies and rely solely on memorization. Often, college instructors believe that college students should already have learned these skills and are reluctant to address these needs. Some of the programs in the Southwest for first generation Mexican-American students have been very successful. They bring together faculty and counseling staff and financial aid people. They use a collaborative approach in dealing with the needs of the individual student. Bartell (1980) found the following:

> This simple method of pulling together resources of rather small institutions has reduced drop-out rates by as much as seventy percent. Pressures

> against perseverance are high in this culture. There is often not much family support for young people leaving home and going off to college, because of the economic necessity for their labor in agriculture. In addition, the student is confronted at college with an unfamiliar Anglo environment, so the high dropout rate is understandable. (p. 210)

The traditional American values of competition and individualism place Spanish, Mexican, Asian, and Native American students in a double bind with respect to their own cultures. In lieu of the increasing number of minority students within the United States, we need to prepare them with skills and strategies to insure their academic success on the post-secondary level.

Unfortunately, the student/teacher ratio does not lend itself to providing a mentor for every college-bound student. Traditionally, high-school guidance counselors would provide study strategies in addition to career guidance. Helping the college-bound student select a career and declare a major, is critical to their survival as a first year freshmen. There is a 62% drop-out rate for freshmen who do not declare a major versus a 38% drop-out rate for freshmen who do (Clagett, 1982; Willner, 1982). Without a career goal, freshmen have difficulty identifying with a curriculum, courses have little personal relevance, and students

become bored. Today, few counselor training courses address pre-college guidance. Furthermore, in 1986 there were 70,000 counselors and this figure hasn't changed since 1976. The shift in counselors from the secondary to the elementary schools has reduced the number of professionals who are available to work with students in transition to college (NASFAA/ACE Symposium, 1989). Allocation of limited resources and funds does not permit the hiring of professionals to "mentor" students in college preparatory skills. During the period from 1963 to 1968, President Johnson appropriated more money for education during that 5 year period, than the entire amount appropriated over the entire history of the U.S.. This permitted an incredible period of expansion for constructing an extensive system of universities, high schools and elementary schools. Now, many of these institutions are failing since they can't be maintained on the basis of their incomes (Eurich, 1980). During this time of economic recession, we can't expect financially struggling colleges and universities to finance mentors for incoming freshmen from the secondary schools. Many institutions, however, have utilized the wisdom and experiences of the elderly in the community or emeritus professors, but their availability is limited and in many instances, the generation gap is too great to be of benefit. In order to mentor somebody in their development, you have to

have been there yourself. When the mentor-protege gap is too great, you can't help the person develop. Still, the mentoring idea needs to be carried beyond the volunteer sphere to the institutions where students spend most of their time.

Peer advising appears to present a partial solution to the problem of limited faculty, limited resources, and addresses some of the needs of incoming freshmen. Forrest (1982) reports that academic advising is one component of students' academic experiences that significantly affects persistence. Of 146 freshmen who completed an evaluation of peer advisement groups (Hirschberg, Fallon, & Rosenblum, 1983) 92% reported that the peer advisors had helped them adjust to campus life and 91% said the program reduced the need to seek other counseling services. Students reported that although faculty were helpful with general academic and career related issues, the peer advisors were most helpful with social and adjustment issues. The notion of peers assisting peers is not a new idea, and the practice of peer tutoring and collaborative learning and has been shown to improve the academic performance of all students involved (Greenwood, Carta, & Hall, 1988; Slavin, 1986).

The Committee for the Student in Higher Education (established by the Hazen Foundation in 1968) has emphasized the significance of the freshmen year for a

successful college experience and urges colleges to make a major investment in the student's initial year. Consistent with this notion, many universities offer classes for incoming freshmen called Freshman Seminar (FS). FS generally includes content related to the transition to college, such as campus resources and study skills. This is a start, however, most FS courses have limited enrollment and can't accommodate but a small percentage of freshmen. Furthermore, most student attrition occurs during the first few weeks of the first semester, and reflects an early decision not to commit themselves to college. "Once this decision has been made, attendance at an orientation course no longer makes sense", (Dunphy, Miller, Woodruf, & Nelson, 1987). Others (Tinto, 1987; Titley, 1985) point out that while orientation programs are designed to assist students in making a transition and adjustment to college, summer orientation programs build student allegiance to the school before the beginning of classes, help integrate them into the academic and social communities sooner, and appear to have a positive effect on first year persistence.

In lieu of these findings, I suggest that we target college-bound students prior to their emergence from high school and develop a collaborative mentoring program between the college and secondary setting. Concurrent courses could be offered by the community

high school and proximal colleges, with equivalent student enrollment within the courses to insure an equal match of mentors to proteges. College-bound students would be eligible to enroll at the secondary level, whereas college education and counseling majors, juniors and seniors with a 3.0 G.P.A. or above, might enroll at the post-secondary level. The first quarter of the semester would be spent orienting the high school students to a variety of career options. This would be accomplished at the high school by high school personnel and community volunteers. For the college mentor, the first quarter of the semester would be devoted to acquiring training in leadership (mentor) roles. Beginning with the second quarter of the semester, mentors would meet during class times with their proteges, discuss weekly topics, and take field trips throughout the university. This program could utilize teacher education majors and counseling majors who would greatly benefit from the practical experience in addition to fostering a cooperative atmosphere within the academic community.

College/High School Mentorship Program: An Overview

Purpose of the Program

For college students (mentors) to facilitate the transition of college-bound high school seniors (proteges) from high school to college by assuming the

roles of teacher, guide, counselor, role model and friend.

Rationale for the Program

1. Foster attitudes of community versus independence and competition.
2. To offer early guidance and preparation to all college-bound secondary students to ease the transition between high school and college.
3. To help college-bound minority students cope with the transition to an academic culture which may be antithetical to their native culture.
4. To reduce the attrition rates of college freshmen.
5. To reduce the financial obligations of academic institutions to hire additional guidance counselors and faculty on the secondary and post-secondary levels.
6. To provide additional benefits to college-bound secondary students, college mentors, and the college institution. (Listed below)

Benefits

For the college mentor: This will provide the college mentor with invaluable experiential learning, the opportunity to develop potential skills and gain competencies in preservice performance; especially if the mentor's academic major is focussed within the areas of teaching or counseling. The mentor will also obtain professional development, prestige, and leadership

capabilities.

For the high school senior: This will assist college-bound students with career options, familiarize them with all aspects of college life and through support, ease their transitions from high school seniors to college freshmen. This will serve to introduce the incoming freshmen to a variety of resources, respond to their informational needs, and enable them to communicate with peers who have already lived through the fear, inexperience, confusion, and self-doubt experienced by freshmen students.

For the university: This will better prepare the students who will be enrolled in university courses, thereby, improving the overall academic experience, increase productivity, and reduce the attrition rate of first-year college students. Additionally, Ramirez (1983) posits that freshmen retention satisfies state accountability demands, improves student self-esteem, and faculty morale.

Implementation

Concurrent courses will be offered by the community high school and proximal colleges, with equivalent student enrollment within the courses to insure an equal match of mentors to proteges. College-bound students will be eligible to enroll on the secondary level, whereas college juniors and seniors with a 3.0 G.P.A. or above, may enroll on the post-secondary level. The

first quarter of the semester will be spent orienting the high school students to a variety of career options. This will be accomplished at the high school by high school personel and community volunteers. For the college mentor, the first quarter of the semester will be devoted to acquiring training in leadership (mentor) roles. Beginning with the second quarter of the semester, mentors will meet during class times with their proteges, discuss weekly topics, and take field trips throughout the university.

Targeted Topics

1. Career options and selecting a major.
2. University procedures and regulations (registration, withdrawal, G.P.A., core requirements, admissions, etc.).
3. Student life (clubs, professional organizations, Greek affiliations).
4. Student support services (tutoring, women's centers, counseling services, computer services, financial aide).
5. Library orientation (research skills, information accessing, etc.).
6. Study skills and time management.
7. Test taking strategies.
8. Common freshmen problems.

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