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ABSTRACT

A study explored the impact of participation in a peer mentoring program upon student retention at a small liberal arts college in the Midwest. Previous studies linked communication competence with participation in a mentoring relationship and student retention, so students' communicative adaptability scores were utilized to discover antecedent conditions which predict participation in a mentoring program. Because of the longitudinal design of this project and the lack of student participation in the early phases of the program, results indicate that the measurement of communicative adaptability of first-year students and the formal nature of this program provide unique challenges for institutions implementing formal mentoring programs. Proposed is that the role of the communication faculty member is central to the investigation of student retention issues. Communication faculty can provide formal interventions prescribed by the mentoring literature (i.e. communication skills training), while mentoring the effects of communication behavior upon the development of formal mentoring relationships and student retention rates. (Contains 33 references.) (Author/NKA)

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by Mary P. Lahman

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Dr. Mary P. Lahman

*This study explores the impact of participation in a peer mentoring program upon student retention at a small liberal arts college in the midwest. Previous studies linked communication competence with participation in a mentoring relationship **and** student retention, so students' communicative adaptability scores were utilized to discover antecedent conditions which predict participation in a mentoring program. Due to the longitudinal design of this project and the lack of student participation in the early phases of the program, the results indicate that the measurement of communicative adaptability of first-year students and the formal nature of this program provide unique challenges for institutions implementing formal mentoring programs. The author proposes that the role of the communication faculty member is central to the investigation of student retention issues. We can provide formal interventions prescribed by the mentoring literature (i.e. communication skills training), while monitoring the effects of communication behavior upon the development of formal mentoring relationships and student retention rates.*

Linked to career advancement and job satisfaction, the phenomenon of mentoring surfaced in the 1970s although the term "mentor" originated with Homer's character, Mentor, counselor and teacher to Odysseus' son (Wright, 1992). In the 1980s, organizations created formal mentoring programs to encourage supportive work relationships similar to the informal alliances identified in the early mentoring literature. As this decade draws to a close, the popular press indicates that the percentage of organizations planning formal mentoring programs has doubled (Jossi, 1997), while scholarly evaluation of formal mentoring programs (Morzinski & Fisher, 1996) and White House support of mentoring initiatives is on the rise (Bunk, 1997).

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Organizations of all types have utilized formal mentoring programs to enhance the retention and socialization of organizational members in an effort to more effectively manage a diverse populace (Cawyer & Friedrich, 1998; Heery, 1994; Kalbfleisch & Bach, 1998; Laband & Lentz, 1995; Viator& Scandura; 1991).

In higher education, researchers have discovered that college students participating in formal mentoring relationships reported an increase in satisfaction with college services and in academic persistence, resulting in an overall increase in student retention (Clark, 1995; Campbell & Campbell, 1997). Similarly, communication scholars have found a link between communication variables such as communication competence and apprehension with retention (Hawken, Duran, & Kelly, 1991; McCroskey, Booth-Butterfield, & Payne, 1989; Rubin & Graham, 1988). While several studies have related *faculty* retention to the participation in mentoring relationships (Alexander, 1992; Bullis & Bach; 1989; Cawyer & Friedrich, 1998; Egan, 1992; Hill, Bahniuk, & Dobos, 1989) and other studies have indicated that self-esteem, communication competence, and information seeking strategies were directly related to a protégé's participation in a mentoring relationship (Kalbfleisch & Davies, 1993; Meyers, 1998), few investigations have monitored the impact of ***formal*** mentoring upon ***student*** retention rates.

Noe (1988) suggested that the ability to model another's behavior is what prompted the interest in utilizing mentors to provide advice and emotional support. Social learning theory (see Bandura 1977; Decker & Nathan, 1985) which predicts that individuals learn by observing and modeling others is frequently cited as the most appropriate theoretical framework for understanding mentoring--a process which traditionally included a more experienced senior person helping less experienced junior person. Carden (1990) proposed that these early conceptualizations of mentoring fell on opposite ends of a continuum: the developmental perspective of Levinson, Darrow, Klein, Levinson, and McKee (1978) who felt mentoring relationships provided important

personal and professional development, and the instrumental perspective of Kanter (1977) who credited mentors for the opportunity to reach positions of power within the organization. Kram's work (1985), acknowledged as the most systematic investigation of ongoing mentoring relationships, identified both the career (sponsorship, exposure and visibility, coaching, protection, and challenging assignments) and psychosocial functions (role model, acceptance and confirmation, counseling, and friendship) of mentoring.

Although much of this early research identified mentoring relationships as *informal* alliances that lead to career advancements, many organizations soon developed formal mentoring programs to encourage supportive work relationships. Formal mentoring differs from informal mentoring in that formal programs provide an orientation and a system of monitoring program activities, in addition to organizational support, recognition, and rewards (Chao, Walz, & Gardner, 1992). In their review of the formal mentoring literature, Morzinski and Fisher (1996) concluded that researchers must explore what *causes* mentoring outcomes as well as merely recording the benefits and pitfalls of such relationships. In other words, researchers need to know what interventions occurred so that these issues can be addressed when planning future programs.

In response to the challenges raised by the mentoring literature and the demands that small colleges and universities face to improve student retention rates (Stone, 1998), this project was designed to monitor the impact of a peer mentoring program upon student retention. A peer mentoring program was developed by the institution utilized in this study because they discovered that peer relationships are more readily available and accessible to students, and peers provide a *mutual* exchange of expertise and empathy (Kram & Isabella, 1985; Meyers, 1998).

More importantly, because the mentoring literature has linked communication competence with participation in a mentoring

relationship ***and*** student retention, the author proposes that the role of the communication faculty member is central to the investigation of student retention issues. As communication scholars, we have critical knowledge concerning interpersonal and organizational relationship development, that can easily be translated into formal interventions (i.e. communication skills training). Consequently, two research questions are posed:

RQ1: Is it possible to utilize individual scores of communicative adaptability to predict involvement in a formal mentoring program?

RQ2: To what extent does a formal mentoring program aid in student retention?

Method

Participants

Participants in this study were first-year college students involved in a study skills course at a small liberal arts college in the midwest. A total 91, out of possible 105 students enrolled in the course, responded to the survey for a response rate of 86%.

Each study skills instructor introduced the survey to his/her students by reading the cover letter attached to the survey. The letter indicated the author's name and departmental position, explaining that this was an investigation of the "communication behaviors of students enrolled in the Study Skills courses during the Fall semester of 1998."

In order to target a sample population of first-year students to participate in the peer mentoring program, college administrators chose all five sections of the study skills classes for investigation. One third of the students in these courses were categorized as needing "academic assistance," while several others had agreed to take this course as a "condition for admission" to the institution. The remaining students self-selected or enrolled due to parental encouragement.

Instruments

Duran's (1992) Communicative Adaptability Scale was administered to participants during the second week of the fall semester. The 30-item instrument has been reviewed by Rubin (1994) and found to have internal consistency with an overall alpha of .79 and strong concurrent validity.

The survey included five Likert-type questions for the following six dimensions: Social Composure (feeling relaxed in social situations), Social Experience (enjoying and participating socially), Social Confirmation (maintaining the other's social image), Appropriate Disclosure (adapting one's disclosures appropriately to the intimacy level of the exchange), Articulation (using appropriate syntax and grammar), and Wit (using humor to diffuse social tension). (Rubin, 1994, p. 120)

In the cover letter attached to the surveys, participants were asked to indicate whether or not they were currently enrolled in a basic communication course and to include the number printed on their survey. They were also required to print their full names and sign the letter in order to indicate their voluntary participation in the study. These letters were detached from the surveys and kept in a separate file in order to match communicative adaptability scores and involvement in mentoring activities.

Participation was determined by attendance at one of the three mentoring gatherings conducted during the fall semester. Activities included an introductory pizza party in September, a writing workshop in October, and a study break party in November.

Results

Preliminary analyses

Seven of a possible 105 students attended the peer mentoring activities during the fall semester, with only four of those seven completing the

Duran (1992) instrument for analysis. Concurrently, no discernable retention data will be available until the end of the academic year.

In light of the longitudinal design of this project and the limited response for this analysis, the research questions remain unanswered and only descriptive statistics will be noted. For example, the average score for communicative adaptability (including all six dimensions) for all 91 participants was 107.8, with 134 recorded as the highest and 76 the lowest scores collected. When participants were sorted by gender, the average male scores were 106.7 (n=45) and the average female scores were 108.9 (n=46). The average score for the four participants who were involved in the mentoring activities was 111.7, four point above the average non-participant.

A factor analysis employed to identify latent variables for future use of the Duran (1992) instrument revealed that eight factors accounted for 70.7 % of the variance. The largest coefficients for Factor 1 included questions from both the Social Composure and Social Experience dimensions, accounting for 23.3% of the variance. Factor 2 consisted of all five questions for Articulation (11.5% of the variance), while Factor 3 included all five questions concerning Wit (9.1% of the variance). The largest coefficients for Factors 4 through 8 included questions from at least three of the dimensions and collectively accounted for 26.8% of the variance.

Discussion

This study explores the impact of communicative adaptability upon participation in a peer mentoring program and student retention at a small liberal arts college in the midwest. Due to the longitudinal design of this project and the lack of student participation in the early phases of the program, the results indicate that measurement of communicative adaptability of first-year students and the formal nature of this program provide unique challenges for institutions implementing formal

mentoring programs.

In light of the limitations of this project, a preliminary analysis of the data indicates that Duran's (1992) communicative adaptability can detect antecedent conditions such as Social Experience, Social Composure, Articulation and Wit. Further analysis may demonstrate that a shorter version of the Duran (1992) instrument in conjunction with scales of communicator style and communication apprehension scores could be a more effective measurement of communication competence (Rubin, 1994). In addition, these instruments could be administered at several times throughout the mentoring program, and be monitored as predictor variables for participation in a formal mentoring program and student retention (Hawken, Duran, & Kelly, 1991; McCroskey, Booth-Butterfield, & Payne, 1989; Rubin & Graham, 1988).

Moreover, the nature of a formal mentoring program challenges the communication scholar to explore communication predictors and inhibitors of successful mentoring relationship (Kalbfleisch. & Davies, 1993; Wigand & Boster, 1991). In other words, formal programming includes an established starting point, comparable access to both mentors and protégés' perceptions as the relationship develops, and the opportunity for observation of mentoring activity within a particular context, thereby providing communication faculty with an opportunity to provide formal interventions recommended by the mentoring literature (Cawyer & Friedrich, 1998; Murray, 1991; Pfleeger & Mertz, 1995). Furthermore, if we monitor antecedent communication conditions and control for communication training interventions, we ultimately can suggest programming that will increase the student retention rates at our institutions.

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