Peer Mentoring Roles

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Because students starting college are not always prepared to succeed, colleges and universities frequently offer courses designed to help students who need remediation in mathematics, reading, and writing. At Utah Valley University (UVU), peer mentors are integrated into the University Student Success course to help first- year students learn the skills needed to be successful in college. This research suggests that the more peer mentors, students, and instructors each understand the peer mentor's role, the more successful the peer mentoring relationship with students will be.

Utah Valley University (UVU) is a large western university with over 30,000 students. For the past 10 years, UVU has been using peer mentors in the University Student Success course which focuses on helping first-year students make the transition to college, and provide learning experiences for students who mentor as well. Over the past 10 years more than 15,000 students have been served by approximately 400 peer mentors. Both the mentee and the mentor have benefited. As Goodlad (1998) suggests, by giving the learners responsibility for their own and their peers' education, students move beyond "compartmentalized" schooling to a place of engaged and empowered pedagogy. The UVU mentors go through a series of training classes throughout their tenure. The first class focuses on the theory of mentoring. After successful completion of this class, they are eligible to apply to become a UVU mentor. If they are selected, they take a second training class during their first semester of mentoring where they learn the application of mentoring. For each semester UVU mentors serve, they attend a practicum class in which their mentoring skills are

continually being sharpened. UVU mentors serve a maximum of 25 students in the University Student Success class where their purpose is to connect students to campus and to encourage them to persist through graduation.

As the peer mentoring program has grown, faculty and staff at UVU have continued to evaluate the effectiveness of peer-student interactions. A particular issue that concerned UVU staff was the potential for confusion about the role that peer tutors and mentors play in higher education classrooms. Colvin (2007) found that sometimes students saw a peer tutor as someone who could help them in the classroom or as someone who was taking over for instructors and who themselves had mixed perceptions. Some instructors saw peer tutors as an asset while others did not know how to use the peer tutors in the classroom. Tutors, on the other hand, perceived themselves as leaders, guides, assistant instructors, and/or friends to students.

In order to provide increased understanding of mentors and how they and others see their role as well as extend Colvin's study of peer tutors, research was conducted to examine peer mentors, their interactions with students and instructors, and their understanding of their role in and out of the classroom. For purposes of this study, a peer mentor is defined as "a student who has learned from experience or has developed skills to successfully guide other students through college" (Sanft, Jensen, and Mc Murray, 2008, p.5). It should also be noted that UVU mentors typically help students with not just academic but also social competencies.

Method

Data collection started in late Spring 2008 and continued through Spring 2009 utilizing observations and interviews.

Observations

As faculty researchers, we engaged in participant observation throughout the entire study and collected extensive field notes. Observations were collected at UVU mentor activities, weekly classes and meetings, and other interactions in both formal and informal settings.

Interviews

The researchers interviewed 12 UVU mentors that had been part of the program for one year or longer, eight newly selected UVU mentors, 10 instructors of the University Student Success course to which the UVU mentors were assigned, and 10 students who attended the University Student Success course with a UVU mentor in their class. The interviews ranged from 10 to 30 minutes. Interviews with UVU mentors and students were held in the UVU mentor lounge, and interviews with instructors were held in faculty offices. Student researchers conducted ten of the interviews. These student researchers first observed how professional staff conducted interviews, practiced with each other using the structured question list, and when they could demonstrate inter-coder consistency, conducted their own interviews. All interviewers used structured questions with unstructured follow-up questions. All of the interviews were transcribed and measures were taken to verify accuracy. Table 1 provides an outline of the interview questions.

Table 1. Outline for interview with instructors, student peer mentors, and students

1.How would you define a peer mentor?
2.Do you see the role of mentor as being any different from that of a TA or peer tutor?
3.Do you see any benefits for being/having a mentor at UVU?
4.Do you see any risks/challenges?
5.What are your impressions of the mentor program so far? (admin?)
6.Have you worked with a mentor before?
7.Is there anything that needs to happen for the mentors to be more effective?
8.What role do you think mentors should play in a university?
9.Can you think of any specific incident where you interacted with a mentor that sums up how you feel about the experience?
10.Anything else that you want to add?

Data Analysis

Using a grounded theory approach (Glaser, 1978; Glaser & Strauss, 1967), researchers analysed the data. A grounded theory is developed from data obtained through formal and informal research. Informal observations about practice are used to develop the propositions of the theory. Research is then designed to verify elements of the theory as well as to generate new theory in a cyclical fashion. This type of analytic induction does not use a theory as starting point. Rather, meanings are inferred from the data collected. As Smythe and Nikolai (2002) explain, "For instructional planners, the value of a grounded theory analysis is substantial[,] emergent themes are the products of a specific constituent group's perceived needs rather than assumptions or traditions endorsed by administrators or academics" (p. 165). In using grounded theory to inform the study, researchers were interested in identifying emerging patterns in the data that provided an insider's perspective on UVU mentors.

Coding. Coding was accomplished in stages. Initially, using NVivo©, a qualitative software analysis program, each interview was coded for attributes which were consistent across all interviews. As attribute coding continued, one researcher also began coding for themes and dimensions. Only one person did this type of coding so that intercoder reliability was not an issue.

After coding for themes, researchers implemented axial coding (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), which refers to the process of coding around a single category. In this phase, researchers not only identify topics, but they also examine where, when, and why interviewees feel the way they do as relationships both within and between categories emerge. Finally, selective coding was used. Selective coding validates, refines, and develops a code category (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Throughout the process of this research, the instructor responsible for coding shared results with the other two researchers in order to check and validate categories.

The aim was to find overall themes and to discover the relationship between them. After the initial coding and development of themes, the research focus moved to a review of the following research questions (findings are discussed in the next section):

1. How do peer mentors construct and enact their roles?
2. What risks or benefits are manifest (if any) in these peer mentor relationships?

Results of the Study

Roles

There were a total of 96 comments from students, mentors, and instructors about roles and their implications for mentors. In the process of sorting and labeling the roles, researchers found that roles could be grouped into the same categories identified by Sanft, Jensen, and McMurray in their work on peer mentoring. These five roles are Connecting Link, Peer Leader, Learning Coach, Student Advocate, and Trusted Friend. Because we wanted to know if there is a common understanding of each of these five roles amongst students, mentors, and instructors, the 96 comments were analyzed together. Individual comments are listed by student, mentor or instructor.

Connecting Link. Nineteen of the 96 comments on the role of the mentor related to the role of Connecting Link. The majority of the comments focused on the mentor helping the students feel comfortable on campus and knowing the resources on campus. Almost half of the 19 comments referred to the mentor knowing resources on campus. "A mentor is someone who knows the campus very well (Student #36 Interview)." Peer mentors know "little details about the school, about things [students] would never know about (Student #42 Interview)."

Peer Leader. Ten of the 96 comments directly referred to peer mentors as a Peer Leader. "They're not just leaders to the student [in their class], they're leaders to all students… and they're an example to all students not just the ones they mentor [in their class] (Student #40 Interview)." Peer mentors are not just being viewed by the students in their classrooms as leaders but by the institution at large, "[the mentors] are a huge part of leadership [on campus], that's kind of how they support the university (Student #33 Interview)."

Learning Coach. The role of Learning Coach received the most comments of 29 out of 96. There were 13 references within the 29 comments that referred to peer mentors in the role of

learning coach that helped students want to persist through graduation. Mentors "increase the success rate and lower the dropout rate (Student #32 Interview)," they are "students who are helping another student succeed in school (Returning Mentor #30 Interview)," and are "kind of like a team working alongside [students] helping them to pursue an education (Student # 40 Interview)."

Student Advocate. The role of Student Advocate was the second highest in comments with 24 out of 96. Twelve of the 24 comments relate to the peer mentor being a helper, mostly in helping to mediate the relationship between the student and the instructor. UVU mentors help the students during their first year experience to "assist [the students] in figuring things out (Student #40 Interview)," in being "a personal helper… with what's going on (Student #42 Interview)." Other comments (4 of 12) address the issue that students might need "help to have confidence to approach their instructors (Instructor #24 Interview)," "[but] they can turn to the peer (Student #37 Interview)." Instructors said, "By listen[ing] to [the mentor] we can see how the students perceive things (Instructor #24 Interview)."

Trusted Friend. Ten of 96 comments referred to a peer mentor being a Trusted Friend. Many of the interviewees responded that the main difference between a peer tutor and peer mentor was that a peer tutor mainly "just helps [the students] in class (Student #33 Interview)," and that the relationship with a peer mentor "is to be a friend for [the students] (Student #35 Interview)." A peer mentor is "someone who is a friend… trustworthy, [and] there for the students… to spend time with [them] on campus, there if they have questions (Returning Mentor #22 Interview)."

Benefits

Research, as well as anecdotal evidence at UVU, indicates some sort of benefit to both sides of a peer mentor relationship. Goodlad lists some benefits for mentors as, "increasing attention to and motivation for the task, and necessitating review of existing knowledge and skills. Consequently, existing knowledge is transformed by reorganization, involving new associations and a new integration" (1998, p. 52). Benefits in this study were found

for all three roles: mentors, students, and instructors.

Mentors. When mentors were asked, "What benefit do you see for being a mentor?" three themes emerged: being able to support students, reapplying concepts in their own lives, and developing connections amongst themselves. Thirty-nine out of 77 comments about the benefits of being peer mentors focused on being able to support, help out, or uplift the students with whom they worked. Mentors said such things as, "[Mentoring] is just a great service opportunity to help others …I like seeing that 'aha' moment… (Returning Mentor #9 Interview)." Mentors also liked being able to help others be successful in their class(es).

Mentors also indicated another benefit (22 out of 77 comments), that of being more involved with other peer mentors, developing friendships, and learning how to interact with others. Comments included such things as, "You make more friends and it's able to help you be more social if you're shy (Student #35 Interview)," and "I think that it's such a good support system. You have the other mentors as a support system, and you are continually growing and learning (Returning Mentor #2 Interview)."

Finally, mentors also felt, as Goodlad (1998) suggested, that mentoring allowed them to reapply concepts into their own lives and helped them become even better students themselves (16 out of 77 comments). "There are principles that are taught in the class and by me mentoring, I am able to continually be refreshed on all those items …. that I've learned that I may not be doing that I need to reapply (Returning Mentor #1 Interview)." Interestingly, even though UVU peer mentors each receive a full tuition scholarship for mentoring for two semesters, only 3 of the 77 responses mentioned this as being a benefit.

Risks or Challenges

Not all experiences related to peer mentoring are positive, however. Instructors, peer mentors, and students all saw some risk or challenge in maintaining a peer-mentor relationship.

Mentors. Comments about risks or challenges for mentors focused on their personal lives, interactions with students, and interactions with the instructors. Thirty-eight of the 70 comments on the risks and challenges for mentors were issues of balancing both the

specific requirements and personal desire to do well as mentors with time and other commitments. One mentor commented, "I think [it is a challenge] just maintaining balance in your own personal life and being able to draw the line between helping other people and taking on their other problems and issues.… (Returning Mentor #34 Interview)."

Others saw risks and challenges in interacting with students (28 out of 70). Comments centered on students either being too dependent on the mentor or, conversely, not accepting the mentors. Students who were dependent were seen as needing the mentor too much. "There is a huge risk of depending on that person too much, using them as a crutch… (Returning Mentor #11 Interview)." Students who did not accept mentors created challenges for the mentors who were supposed to be helping and working with them. Some students feel like "they don't really need [help] or they're going to avoid you and don't really want your help… (Returning Mentor #2 Interview)."

Some light can be shed on risks and challenges for mentors by comparing the amount of time mentors participated in the program. Those who were first- and second-year mentors saw the students as being too dependent as the major risk. By the third year, mentors focused mainly on time management as the major risk.

Conclusion

Just as Colvin found in her study with tutors, it is apparent that stakeholders in the UVU Mentor Program have different definitions and expectations of the peer mentoring role. UVU faculty concluded from this finding that students must be informed of the five roles for peer mentors that emerged from the study, that all of these roles are important, and mentors will likely play each of these roles over time with their mentees. In addition, UVU faculty have concluded that the peer mentor and instructor must receive training together to increase understanding of roles, increase the benefits of mentoring, and lessen the risks that are evident in not knowing what to expect or how to work together. It cannot be assumed that peer mentors and faculty have a common understanding of their roles; training and role clarification can alleviate confusion.

Mentors must also understand that the role of trusted friend must be established early on or the other roles are not likely to emerge. The goal is that as all stakeholders understand the role of a peer mentor, the UVU mentors will be able to better serve the students on UVU's campus and help increase retention and learning rates.

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