

Mentoring the Mentor

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Abstract

The increasing use of Peer-Mentors across college campuses is positive as revealed by the students on Academic Probation who are regaining normal academic standing with greater success. However, with this increase in use, peer-mentors should also be made aware of a number of variables that can differently affect each student they mentor, and the likely-unspoken responsibilities entailed. These variables and responsibilities include, but are not limited to, the different types of students and what interactions may result for all individuals involved, the expectations of the students verses the expectations of the institutions, miscommunication challenges between student and professors, and the concern that institutions often live within a bubble which can easily create challenges for all students especially at-risk students. The concept behind peer-mentors is that the peer-mentor acts as a bridge for a student who is struggling with academics, personal concerns and the college experience to cross into achieving academic success.

Keywords: Peer-Mentor, First-Year College Student, Academic Success

Introduction

At a small, rural, non-profit, 4-year college, the student body has the opportunity to utilize peer-tutors and academic coaches to raise their academic standing; however, there is concern for the quality of guidance being provided as the program is not seeing much participation from the undergraduate students, especially from those who would benefit the most from the program.

Mentoring first-year college students is a process where all students, including but not including underprepared and at-risk students, are provided with the opportunity and guidance to define necessary steps, learn to utilize specific strategies, and understand expectations to reach academic success. Some terms that are necessary to define are At-Risk Students, Academic Success, Peer-Mentor, First-Generation Student, Traditional Student, and First-Year College Student (See Table 1 for definitions in Appendix).

Many first-year college students arrive with false expectations and are underprepared for college, overall or in a specific area. This can result in high anxiety, isolation, and/or dropping out completely, leaving a poor impression of college in the students' minds and impacting society's future. Mentors to first-year college students need to be prepared for many possible situations. Many areas of college-related stress are easily viewed as universal (study habits, organization, et cetera), but there are variations in the degree of depth depending on the individual seeking guidance. Another factor is that students may seek guidance from a mentor without truly knowing what they are in search of, and therefore the mentor needs to have general ideas about many alternatives including different forms of anxiety, personality traits, and how those may affect output, expectations of college, and stress.

The purpose of this research is to learn about aspects that can better prepare peer-mentors. The guidance they will provide to mentees may incorporate information that may otherwise be overlooked or may never be expressed by the mentee due to inexperience, insecurity, or personal challenges.

Literature Review

To better understand what potential mentors, primarily Peer-Mentors, need to consider, a review of current literature is necessary. This review offers several valuable insights to ensuring quality guidance from mentors. These insights can be easily categorized in a few focal points which include 1) Preparedness, 2) Stressors students may endure, 3) Expectations and Perceptions, and 4) Benefits of a Mentor Program.

Preparedness

College readiness or academic preparedness varies from person to person. Those who are first-generation students and low-income students are predominantly underprepared in comparison to those who are traditional students. The key differences of first-generation students are that these students come from households with fewer resources, are more likely to be a racial minority, rank lower in their academics (GPA, rigorous course completion, and standardized test scores) as compared to traditional students. They also have a lower level of confidence in their ability (Atherton, 2014).

Their preparedness is also subject to professors who have a fixed mindset about learning the material and underprepared students seeking help (Schademan & Thompson, 2016). A professor who relied entirely on lectures and provided little engagement with the students, had a strict belief regarding the education process within the class: “The problem of student preparedness was located only with students and in no way implicated the instructor’s teaching

practices” (Schademan & Thompson, 2016, p. 201). This comment reflects the belief that when students who are unprepared for college arrive with questions, some faculty from the school feel they could provide minimal guidance. Not all students have the necessary resources to prepare for college, and some have yet to experience positivity within the academic setting due to the idea that underprepared students may take up more time than an educator is able to provide, thus gaining little to nothing. Contrary to this, using the longitudinal approach, continuously working with students over an extended period with a positive approach and engagement, offered the momentum necessary for underprepared students to become successful students because it gave the students time to adjust to new material, methods, exercises, and more (Schademan & Thompson, 2016).

Another important sub-category in preparedness is where underprepared students place value on the teaching tools to which they are exposed. Traditional teaching tools, such as lectures, textbooks, instructors, in-class demonstrations, discussions, and more are perceived as less helpful by underprepared students while nontraditional tools such as podcasts, clickers, and online resources are rated as more valuable. Distinctly, underprepared students valued textbooks and the pace of the class less and placed a higher value on course related links and frequently asked questions (FAQs) as compared to their counterparts. This difference is likely due to the factors that students who felt prepared for college used these traditional tools in high school and were successful. This also shows that innovations may help underprepared students, but that traditional teaching tools are important to students’ learning because their successful use predicts overall learning gains for all students (Henriques & Kusse, 2011). However, these situations and tools can cause quite an amount of stress for students, especially underprepared students.

Stressors Students May Endure

Underprepared students, often classified by scoring below college standard performance in math, reading comprehension, and/or writing skills, face many challenges and are often required to take remedial courses that do not count towards graduation credits. Along with this stress, personality traits should be considered as they affect an individual's outcome as well. Underprepared students are more likely to feel as if they have little control over what occurs in their lives, are unrealistic about their abilities and what they need to do to prepare, express less guilt per the lack of expectation of success, and/or are less likely to seek emotional and academic help (Melzer & Grant, 2016).

Another likely stressor, while associated with college drinking, may also be affecting students academically through other ways. The fear of missing out (FoMO) is a subtype of anxiety that is likely linked to the high use of social media. "FoMO [is] uniquely associated with future intentions to drink over and above relevant demographics [like sex, race, age, self-reported importance of Greek life involvement], previous drinking, test anxiety, and clinical anxiety" (Scalzo & Martinez, 2017, p. 945). With FoMO playing such a large role in many students' lives, those who are underprepared for college may be far more likely to feel the pressure of FoMO because of their inexperience, and the notion that rate of anxiety on college campuses seems to be increasing overall (Novotney, 2014).

Expectations and Perceptions

Adjusting to academic challenges, independence, the separation from friends and family, and new expectations can be sources of stress for all students. The first two semesters can be traumatic for underprepared students due to their lack of available resources, but "may be less dramatic now as students have multiple sources of information about college life and the specific

colleges they have chosen to attend” (Krieg, 2013, p.636). The area of expectations can be quite stressful for students when their somewhat idealistic expectations are not met.

These expectations can include academics, social and family adjustments. A student would withdraw or continue with their education based on their ability to adjust. Top high school students may find themselves in competitive college positions where they are not doing well and may be experiencing failure and disappointment for the first time. As the students exit the classroom, they enter their social surrounding. Peers may influence positive and negative behaviors which can range from academic achievement to disregarding policies. When peer expectations are not met, some may find themselves pushed outside the circle of friends. These isolated students may seek support from their family but feel embarrassed about it. Being financially dependent, but responsible for personal needs can reveal even more stressful situations for these students as well. However, what was discovered in the research is that when an experience, academic or social, is better than what was expected, the stress level is much lower. If an experience is below expectation, academic or social, the stress level rises (Krieg, 2013).

Benefits of a Mentor Program

These expectations and perceptions can leave first-generation students, underprepared students, and at-risk students feeling isolated, but peer mentoring programs do provide some advantages. “Students benefit from peer mentoring by receiving social support, skill development, access to information, and a sense of belonging” (Gunn, Lee, & Steed, 2017, p. 15). Through mentoring, students learn about strategies related to retention and skills as related to work and life in general. However, there is little focus on peer mentoring, and there are several definitions for mentoring. The capabilities of these programs, from providing individual growth

and overall development, are important because they are some of the most influential sources for undergraduates (Connelly, Flynn, Jemmott & Oestreicher, 2017).

Four components of mentoring that establish a basis for a well-established mentor program are psychology/emotional support, support for goal setting and career choice, academic support, and role modeling. Psychology and emotional support are determined by “a sense of listening, providing moral support, identifying problems and providing encouragement, and establishing a supportive relationship in which there is mutual understanding and linking between the student and the mentor” (Crisp & Cruz, 2009, p.539). Goal setting and career path involves determining strengths and weakness, assisting with establishing goals, and assessing achievability. Academic support is taking the position of being the in-between individual, where the mentor accepts responsibility for negative outcomes while positive outcomes are shared as an accomplishment. Lastly, role modeling is indicated by peer-mentors displaying the nature of being a successful student and presenting their shortcomings and personal experiences with mentees to promote new learning experiences (Gunn, Lee, & Steed, 2017).

These four categories as expressed in a peer-mentoring program provide some interesting and important realization as they relate to mentor and mentee perceptions. According to mentors, psychological and emotional support occurs most often during peer-mentoring sessions. Mentors found psychological and emotional support significant because it offered them experience but also gave mentees the support they needed. However, psychological and emotional support became a challenge when regular meetings were not offered. Some mentors also noted that being the role model was beneficial as they gained leadership skills but was the most challenging due to lacking self-confidence, failing to establish an interpersonal relationship, or being authoritative when necessary.

From the mentees' perspective, academic support was noted "as the most frequently mentioned benefit" (Gunn, Lee, & Steed, 2017, p. 20). The category's occurrence was also recorded as being the highest based from the mentees' perspective but also was negatively impactful. This was likely the result of some unhelpful information being provided due to a lack of preparation. If mentors are not prepared well, their understanding is incomplete and cannot provide proficient guidance to a mentee (Gunn, Lee, & Steed, 2017).

The benefits that these peer-mentor programs provide are noted. As students become more comfortable, they become more independent as they can rely on their new skills. From the results of the University of Bridgeport campus students who attend these programs have benefitted from them. This can be accounted for by viewing and comparing Pre-Grade Point Averages (GPAs) and Post-GPAs of undergraduate students post participation in such programs (Connelly, Flynn, Jemmott & Oestreicher, 2017). Of course, the results rely heavily on students becoming acclimated with the standards of the college which underprepared students are to struggle with the most.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Mentors need to consider that each student's situation is unique, no matter how much it may mirror another student's or appear universal. Strictly relying on a structured plan may hinder learning opportunities as seen in what underprepared students dealt with when a professor relied heavily on lectures with little engagement and implied that it is the student who is at fault. One underprepared student or first-year student may require support in a different area than another underprepared student, so social interaction and academic support plan needs to be differentiated in accordance with the student's needs.

Because a campus tends to live in a bubble with ideas, expectations, goals, and challenges, it can be overwhelming for a first-year student, especially underprepared students. If a college is transparent about its expectations, goals, challenges, and ideas to potential first-year students, the transition for all first-year college students, from high school to college, could be much more satisfactory for all. There will still be college-related affairs that are difficult due to the necessity of learning first-hand such as living with a roommate, but even within these criteria, information can be made readily available.

Another practice is establishing a peer-mentorship course in which first-year students can enroll. This may provide students the opportunity to see that they are not alone in their struggles or making such a course be mandatory to graduate may reduce the stigma that only struggling students attend such classes. Also, maintaining contact with students as they continue their college career towards graduation will allow mentors to learn of new expectations, and issues that may not have been present for first-year college students or may have been too embarrassing to discuss at such a delicate time of stimuli overload.

Conclusion

In conclusion, a college campus is like its own figurative country with social expectations, academic expectations, role expectations, ideas, challenges, and with its own misunderstandings, concerns and more. For anyone who enters college prepared, it can be overwhelming. For someone underprepared, the journey can be short lived, full of anxiety, and push an individual to question if they will fail college. As with any place, there are rules that need to be abided by. Many fail to follow these rules if they are not clear, or if the rules are related to culture as they may be unspoken. Mentors should be the spoken in-between, bridging

the gap between expectations and college reality, that will benefit the student's success during their time at college.

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APPENDIX

Table 1
Definitions of Terms

At-Risk Students	A student, who requires temporary or ongoing intervention to succeed academically, may be a First-Generation student and/or student of color, and “are considered academically at-risk at the point of admission due to relatively low ACT scores and high-school class ranks” (Olson-McBride, Hassemer, & Hoepner, 2016, p 4).
Academic Success	“...an increase in a student's grade point average...” (Connelly, Flynn, Jemmott & Oestreicher, 2017, p. 4).
Peer-Mentor	A student who participates in student-to-students mentoring and provides “(a) psychological/emotional support, (b) support in goal setting and career choice, (c) academic support, and (d) role modeling” (Gunn, Lee, & Steed, 2017, p. 16).
First-Generation Student	A college student who has parents that never attended college, are the first from their family to attend college, have fewer resources, may be a member of a minority group, and rank lower in GPA, SOL’s, and completing courses as compared to traditional student (Atherton, 2014).
Traditional Student	A college student who just graduated high school, have little to no career experience, and have at least one parent who is college educated (Atherton, 2014).
First-Year College Student	The gender-neutral term many universities are beginning to use for “Freshman” (Turcotte, 2015).