From ‘LOST’ to engaging in uni life: How a pilot student mentoring program is assisting first year students

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Abstract

‘LOST’, along with ‘overwhelmed’, ‘daunting’ and ‘information overload’, are words commonly used by first year students at the University of South Australia when they request a mentor. In 2006 the Division of Education, Arts, and Social Sciences developed a student mentor program that is already showing signs of assisting commencing students to move on from feeling lost to becoming enthusiastically engaged in university life. Thorough research, extensive planning and engaging a range of staff and students in the project have helped create an effective conduit for information exchange and support between campus cohorts. Unique factors such as three-pronged access and intensive, ongoing, multiple-format evaluation have resulted in choice of access to mentors and reliable, regular feedback. An electronic survey sent to all first year students in the Division of Education, Arts, and Social Sciences (N=3565) has supplied an overview of the student mentoring program and its impact on new first year students, student mentors, program directors/course coordinators, and retention rates.

Introduction

……..I’m lost, I’m scared, I’m unsure of uni expectations……..

……..HELP! I’m feeling overwhelmed at the moment…..

……..I’m from the country and I’m lost…..

……..a bit overwhelmed by the amount of work…..

……..I’m a little bewildered…..

‘LOST’ students can become a loss to the university, to themselves, and to society if they withdraw from their university studies. The cost to a university of losing one student is considerable when variables such as the Commonwealth Grant Scheme funding adjustment, initial marketing and orientation are considered. High attrition rates, at Australian universities result in the loss of time, material and money which has been devoted to the education of those students who decide to withdraw (Abbott-Chapman, Hughes, & Wyld, 1992). Students who withdraw from their university studies limit their career development and increase the risk of vocational and personal setbacks (Astin, 1977). Society in general can suffer as a university attrition may represent the loss of an important source of knowledge, talent, and an employee in a skilled work force (Astin, 1977).
Since the 1970s considerable research has been conducted on both student retention and attrition in higher education. Much of this research confirms the negative impacts incurred as a result of student withdrawal from university prior to obtaining a degree and this is evident both nationally (Krause, Hartley, James, & McInnis, 2005; McInnis, Hartley, Polesel, & Teese, 2000; McInnis & James, 1994) and internationally (Tinto, 1975, 1993, 1999; Yorke, 2000). Numerous reasons have been proffered to explain voluntary early departures from university and many models have been put forward as explanations of how student retention/attrition may occur (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Cabrera, Casteneda, & Nora, 1992b; MacKinnon-Slaney, 1994; Neumann & Finaly-Neumann, 1989; Pascarella & Chapman, 1983a, 1983b; Tinto, 1975, 1999; Tinto & Russo, 1994). Countless possible means of reducing the attrition rate during first year have been explored and implemented, practice that incorporates concepts such as student engagement, learning communities, and academic and social integration have been shown to have a positive influence on student retention (Tinto & Goodsell-Love, 1993; Tinto & Russo, 1994; Zhao & Kuh, 2004). Furthermore student mentoring is one means that incorporates these concepts and is proving successful in addressing attrition amongst first years.

**Theoretical Framework**

Social support theory can be used to explain the success of student mentoring. The theory posits that the degree of social support availability is positively correlated with the degree of effective coping measures that an individual employs in response to stressful circumstances. If support is available, coping may be more rational and effective; if support is lacking coping may be absent and the individual may give up. Social support theory encompasses the concept of social integration which is a term used frequently by researchers of attrition and retention in universities (Tinto, 1997, 1998; Tinto & Goodsell-Love, 1993).

Research suggests that social support does not need to be tangible to have an effective positive outcome. In other words the knowledge or perception of support availability if needed can be enough to alleviate anxiety regarding a stressful situation (Wethington & Kessler, 1986). In a mentoring example this could mean that the knowledge that a student mentor is available to a new student is enough to alleviate feelings of being lost, overwhelmed or isolated and encourages them to persevere. Comments by mentees include:

*I just want to know there is help available if I need it*

*it’s a good feeling to know I have someone out there if I want to approach and to send me in the right direction*

*it’s just reassuring to know that someone is there to help me just in case I need it*

Additionally it has been suggested that the most effective ‘helpers’ are those who have successfully navigated stressful circumstances similar to their ‘helpees’ (Thoits, 1995). This can be easily applied to the concept of student mentoring as student mentors have successfully completed their first year at university. In addition self-concept researchers have described the Big-Fish-Little-Pond-Effect, which describes how students form their self-concept in part by comparing their academic ability with the perceived abilities of other students in their reference group.
group (Marsh, 1993). And so a student mentor as part of a mentee’s reference group is likely to increase the self esteem and confidence of their mentees.

University students arguably differ from school students in regards to both the time of the day and venue they learn best and this is one proposal of adult learning theory. This theory suggests that adults learn better by incidental learning as opposed to both formal and informal learning (Lieb, 1999). Incidental learning is learning that takes place at a time and venue that is best suited to the learner (Marscick & Watkins, 2001) – the theory suggests that the learner will retain the information better if they can access it at a time and place when they need it most – ‘I want it and I want it now’. They want ‘at call information’ and a mentor program that offers assistance and information readily and in multiple formats would presumably fulfill this need.

**Student mentoring program in the Division of Education, Arts and Social Sciences (EASS) at the University of South Australia (UniSA)**

In 2005 the Dean Teaching and Learning in the Division of EASS decided to revitalise the Division’s limited peer support program and increase its relevance to the current cohorts of commencing students. Based on extensive research a number of innovations were implemented, including developing comprehensive, interactive websites for both student mentors and mentees. Methods of recruiting student mentors were designed to enable recruitment of a large number of suitable potential mentors. The intensive two day training program for student mentors was planned with detailed precision so that it specifically addressed the various issues that student mentors were likely to encounter as a result of multiple schools and programs within EASS and different equity groups that existed among potential mentees. Data regarding mode of study and load of study at UniSA, as well as external responsibilities and commitments were used to inform the mentor program coordinators in which format the mentoring program could be best offered. Program format decisions were also informed by research conducted on apprehensiveness to ask for help. Program evaluation was another very important aspect considered when developing the student mentor pilot program for 2006, with great attention given to the design of various means of gathering timely, useable feedback.

**Student mentor program websites**

The student mentor program has utilised the web to provide information about the program, to facilitate the lodgement of applications and to provide training modules. Initially a site to distribute information to staff and prospective mentors was developed with an outline of the aims, objectives and ethics, answers to questions frequently asked by commencing students and a link to an application form for prospective mentors. The site also had a discussion page for mentors where they could ask questions and share information with each other. Later schedules for mentor activities were attached to this site. The mentee site was developed to provide information about the program to commencing students and to enable them to apply online for a mentor. This site also had a ‘meet the mentor’ page on which photos and information about all mentors were displayed and an ‘ask a mentor’ page where commencing student could post a question which would be answered by a mentor within hours.

**How student mentors were recruited**

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To make current students aware of the student mentor program and to encourage them to participate coordinators embarked on an intensive week of recruitment in October 2005. A two-page overhead was designed that contained information about the role of student mentors and possible rewards. In addition to general rewards (e.g. being formally acknowledged by the University, increasing skills for cvs) individual program directors were contacted and asked what program specific enticements might be used to attract potential student mentors from their programs. This information was included in the verbal spiel that the coordinators delivered at lectures when recruiting mentors.

Student mentor training – on campus two day and online interactive.

Sixty plus student mentors were initially recruited, screened and given the opportunity to attend a two day student mentor training workshop at the end of January 2006. Apart from welcomes, introductions, overviews and ‘icebreakers’ the student mentors were presented at intervals over the two days with general detailed information (followed up with interactive discussions) on items such as:

- loyalty to UniSA
- avoiding harassment charges
- the theory of ‘burnout’ and its possible effects on them
- how to avoid mentee over – dependency
- how to ‘wean’ a mentee.

Additionally student mentors both learnt about and practiced in small groups:

- problem solving (role play at being mentors and mentees)
- working in teams
- active listening
- reflective responses.

During the training the student mentors devoted time to working in their school groups to compile an ‘A to Z’ directory that included both generic and school information. The purpose of this exercise was two-fold, it enabled the student mentors to re-familiarise themselves with the ‘wheres’, ‘whys’, ‘hows’, and ‘whens’ of UniSA, as well as supplying themselves with an electronic reference list (that could easily be added to or updated) they could use to assist mentees. ‘Homework’ for the student mentors involved keeping a reflective journal regarding their mentoring experiences.

A third website was developed out of a need to provide training modules to prospective mentors who were unable complete all the on campus two day training. This site included much of the information and activities used at the two day training. A discussion page for each module was used to facilitate interchange between mentors and student mentor program coordinators.

Engaging with various cohorts and individuals to obtain current school specific information

During the training when the student mentors were in their school groups they made appointments and approached their Program Directors to gather school specific information to assist them in their mentoring. Between the various schools and programs within EASS there are

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numerous differences in how things are done, for example – different referencing methods, different means of submitting essays, different grievance processes. School specific information was collated and added to the A-Z directory.

**Student mentor involvement in recruitment of mentees during O Week**

The student mentors asked their program directors for inclusion in, and invitations to, introductory lectures and social events that targeted first year students. At these occasions they took the opportunity to introduce themselves and explain what a student mentor could do for them as well as show them the mentee website where new students could link to (apply for) a student mentor. This proved very popular at some of the social events - for example six School of Psychology student mentors mingled with over 100 new psychology students armed with hard copies of link forms which resulted in the successful linking of more than forty commencing students with mentors.

**Three pronged access to student mentors**

Both research and anecdotal evidence suggest the greatest number of commencing students will gain relevant information if they can access it via a variety of modes. It can be inferred from research by (Edwards & Fritz, 1997) that given the diversity within current first year student populations there is a need to deliver information to students at the time and place where that learning is most relevant and convenient. With this in mind it was decided to offer access to a student mentor in three different formats. New students could link directly to a student mentor either in person, by telephone or by email; they could ‘drop in’ to a student mentor designated room that was staffed by a roster of student mentors and they could log on to the ‘ask a mentor’ discussion page on the Mentee website, to ask a question or seek advice from a student mentor. Mentors were rostered on to the ‘drop in’ room and the discussion board.

An additional reason for the decision to offer three pronged mentoring access was a result of research into apprehensiveness regarding asking for help. Often there is a stigma associated with student help requests, studies have indicated that students are less willing to seek help in response to negative situations (Haaga & Hartman-Hall, 2002), and can regard help-seeking as a sign of weakness and shame and reserve formal help seeking only for serious conditions (Lin, 2002). Offering access to a student mentor in the more anonymous format of online, or the more confidential format of a private room, may encourage those students who feel apprehensive about requesting help a less confronting alternative.

**Program evaluation : student mentor focussed**

The student mentor coordinators wished to incorporate a variety of different means to evaluate the program. Reflective journals kept by the student mentors were one way the coordinators could evaluate the program. Reflective practice is well documented as a strategy to increase the skills of practitioners (Boud, 2001; McEntee, 2003). Requiring the mentors to create and maintain a reflective journal for the student mentor program had three intentions – to assist mentors to increase their consciousness about their mentoring practices, to assist student mentor coordinators to monitor the interactions of mentors as well as being an evaluation tool. In addition because of the nature of many of the programs on campus – social work, psychology,
education, journalism, architecture, the hope was that reflective journaling would build on, and increase, skills being developed within courses.

Brief electronic surveys have been used a number of times to not only allow student mentors to voice their concerns, opinions, criticisms and ideas in an anonymous, non-judgemental format but also to reassure them that the program coordinators ‘know’ what they are doing, how well they are doing it, what issues they are facing and how well they are coping. Apart from these benefits for the student mentors, the surveys are invaluable to the coordinators as a means of identifying common issues and planning interventions that may be necessary.

A third means of regular program evaluation involves debrief meetings with the whole group of student mentors; this allows for issues to be raised and addressed immediately.

Program evaluation : student mentee focussed

It is planned to invite all 3565 commencing first year students in the Division of EASS to complete an electronic survey designed specifically to be the first major evaluation of the student mentor program. As students would have been at university for three weeks it is envisaged that information can be gleaned regarding their initial experiences of university life and if the student mentor program had assisted them to engage more fully with the university. Traditionally at UniSA in the Division of EASS the response rate to electronic surveys is high so it is hoped the data will be rich and plentiful. It is anticipated that at the end of study period 2, 2006 (semester 1), exit statistics will be examined to ascertain the percentage of students who withdrew from study who did not utilise the student mentor program and correlate them with those students who had. This data is eagerly awaited and there is hope that it will support anecdotal observations that indicate that some schools that had a high percentage of new students utilising the 2006 mentor program achieved a lower attrition rate than they had experienced at the same time in recent study periods. Apart from examining the data for evidence of the direct impact that the student mentor program has had other demographics will be looked at to gauge their influence. Some research indicates that male students are less likely to seek academic assistance as a result of the stigma involved and hence a disproportionate number of women seek academic assistance from student mentors (Wright & Cropanzano, 2004). As such the student mentor coordinators will look for this gender bias in their evaluations. Also characteristics of mentees such as levels of self-efficacy will be examined as research suggests that some students decide not to seek help, when they know they need it, as a result of low self-efficacy (Schunk, 1991).

This initial major survey to all commencing students invites them to include their email address if they wish to be take part in further research. It is hoped that from these respondents focus groups can be organised to garner some qualitative data on the student mentor program.

Future directions

Planning has already begun that looks at ways of implementing an even more effective student mentor program for 2007. The intensive, multiple format evaluation has returned dividends in respect to providing rich information to inform future directions of the program. Ideas already tabled comprise assigning each new first year within the Division of EASS a student mentor. This would involve recruiting in excess of 300 student mentors and allocating each a maximum
of ten new students. In turn experienced student mentors from 2006 could act as team leaders for groups of 20 mentors, thereby making the logistics of running this aspect of the program more streamlined. The need to ‘ask for help’ should be markedly reduced as a result of automatic student mentor assignment, for new first years, and therefore it is hoped that any stigma associated with asking for help will not be an issue. While it is assumed that some new students will only have the initial contact with the student mentor, meet the other nine students in their group and go on the campus tour, some will use this first important engagement with their peers to build a beneficial relationship both with their student mentor and the other people in their group.

It is envisaged that the 2007 student mentor program will contain additional information within the websites, such as a number of video clips, produced using current student mentors and mentees, demonstrating accessing information, common ‘Q & A’ and presenting general personal feedback.

Another major objective in preparation for next year will be the building and maintenance of even stronger relationships with the various program directors, course coordinators and other key personnel within different schools and faculties in the Division of EASS. By creating these relationships it is hoped that the two way transference of information will become even more evident and valuable.

In the medium term it is hoped that a ‘mentor centre’ can be created that will allow a linkage and consistency between other existing programs that aid new first year students (eg. enrolment buddy program). It is anticipated the mentor centre and all the programs, processes and procedures it will offer will be easily identifiable by new first years as an initial ‘port of call’ (both physically and electronically) that will assist them to be ‘pointed in the right direction’ for what ever their concern or enquiry may be. It hoped the mentor centre in one respect could be likened to the ‘I’ on signs representing tourist information centres that lost tourists immediately seek out when in foreign countries.

Conclusion

Even at this early stage in the implementation of the student mentor program in the Division of EASS at UniSA feedback is indicating positive outcomes for commencing first year students, such as:

"...thanks, my mentor, is like having someone sitting on my shoulder showing me the way"

"...it's so good to know that people like you guys are here for us"

"...thanks for your help it makes sense now, thanks heaps now I know what to do"

Much has been gleaned on to how to improve and extend the program for 2007, so as to assist more first years to hopefully not experience the feeling of being ‘LOST’ and enable them to experience the sense of enthusiastic engagement with university life.

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