

An exemplar academic and professional partnership: evidence of collaboration to enhance institutional practice.

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Last year this partnership between academic and professional staff at Griffith University presented collaborative research they had undertaken to ascertain the effectiveness of a centrally designed and facilitated mentor training program provided to student mentors participating in a peer mentoring program in the Griffith School of Environment. The training program is an exemplar of collaborative work taking place between academic and central elements at Griffith University aimed at enhancing the student experience. The findings from that research were implemented in the mentoring training program this year. The researchers conducted further focus group research at the cessation of this year's training program to ascertain if those suggestions gleaned from last year's research improved either the training program or the actual mentoring program itself. This session will review the findings from the earlier research, how those findings were implemented in both the training program and the mentoring program, and finally, if these revisions improved the experience for the mentors in this year's mentoring program.

Introduction

This session is a follow up on findings from research conducted last year on the perceived effectiveness of central mentor training in meeting the needs of student mentors in a peer mentoring program conducted in the Griffith School of Environment, Griffith University. Findings from that research were incorporated into the training program for mentors this year and further focus group research was undertaken to ascertain the effectiveness of these revisions.

While the research conducted last year focussed on central mentor training, a centralised support program for school-based mentoring initiatives, anecdotal evidence was also obtained from the mentors on their perceptions of the effectiveness of other aspects of the mentoring program. This evidence was incorporated in the Griffith School of Environment Mentoring and Leadership Program (2010) and was also reviewed in the focus group that was conducted at the conclusion of the mentoring program. Thus the collaboration between Griffith University Student Services staff and academic staff in the review of the mentor training program actually led to improvements in the mentoring program itself and provides strong evidence of how interaction between academic and central elements can contribute to improved practice across the institution.

Background

Griffith University has laudably enacted several initiatives in recent years to improve the First Year Experience for commencing undergraduate students. The development of mainstreamed peer mentoring at Griffith University was one of these initiatives. The benefits of peer mentoring during orientation and transition are well documented (AUQA, 2006; Carafella, 1999; Glaser, Hall & Halperin, 2006; Pope & Van Dyke, 1999). Increased social connection is one of the observed outcomes of peer mentoring and has been identified as an important factor in student adjustment and success in the first year (Glaser, Hall & Halperin, 2006; Kantanis, 2000; Pope & Van Dyke, 1999). Peer mentoring has also been shown to have a positive effect on reducing attrition rates (Bond, 1999; Hill & Davenport, 1998; Stanley & Lapsley, 2008). Mainstreamed peer mentoring at Griffith has proved to be an efficacious tool, with recent survey evidence indicating that commencing students who have access to mentoring are more likely to report a sense of connection; that they know and interact with staff and students; engagement in their program; a knowledge of university services and that they found Orientation to be effective (Griffith University, 2009).¹

The provision of training to student mentors prior to the commencement of their duties is considered best practice across the sector (ANZSSA, 2009). The need for mentor training has been identified as critical by Ehrich, Hansford and Tennent (2004), who cite extensive literature that identifies training as the key to success of mentoring programs. Effective programs note the importance of both training and ongoing support for mentors as a factor in determining program success (AUQA, 2006; MaCallum, Beltman and Tero, 2007). Many school-based mentoring programs at Griffith now utilise the centralised service to train student mentors. The topics covered in central mentor training at Griffith are reflective of the general practice standards across the higher education sector (ANZSSA, 2009; Boyd & Lintern, 2006; Garvey & Alfred, 2000). Mentoring is a complex and skilful task for which training aims to prepare student mentors. Ehrich, Hansford and Tennent (2004) note that rigorous evaluation of both mentor training programs, and mentoring programs overall, is essential, with follow up evaluation at conclusion of the mentoring program the most effective form of evaluation.

Last year, the Coordinator, Student Mentoring and Development from Student Services, Griffith University provided the training for the mentors in the Griffith School of Environment Mentoring and Leadership Program, in collaboration with the First Year Advisors² in that Program, Drs Howlett and Tomerini. At the conclusion of the mentoring program, the student mentors were asked to participate in an evaluative survey and focus group to ascertain the effectiveness of the training program in light of their experiences as mentors.

¹ An overwhelming majority of students within the Griffith School of Environment who completed the “Starting @ Griffith Survey 2009” reported they found the mentoring program to be the aspect of orientation they most appreciated and found useful (Griffith University, 2009).

² In 2006, in response to recommendations by the *Griffith Retention Project* (Lizzio and Peters, 2004), the role of the First Year Advisor was established for all undergraduate programs to address first year student issues at the local level and to initiate and oversee activities to support transition (Burnett & Lamar, 2008; Griffith Institute for Higher Education, 2009). First Year Advisors are members of academic staff and were supported in 2009 by the First Year Advisor Coordinator, an academic position located in the Griffith Institute for Higher Education (Griffith Institute of Higher Education, 2009).

While the research conducted in 2009 demonstrated the overall effectiveness of training, it highlighted several key areas in which mentors suggested further development of the training program, including:

- strategies to maintain engagement and participation of mentees in the program
- further development of inter-cultural skills
- a deeper understanding of the international student experience
- intergenerational interaction, particularly between a younger mentor and older mentee
- promoting positive behaviours amongst students in the face of potential bullying or harassing behaviour
- further elaboration of support services available to students

Anecdotal evidence about the mentoring program was also discovered during the interview, including the following feedback from mentors:

- the mentor handbooks were an essential tool to the program
- mentors would prefer to be assigned to mentees in the same program and with same life experiences (mature age mentors with mature age mentee group)
- after the commencement of the program, mentors would find an informal meeting with program convenors helpful and also requested a forum for mentors to network with each other throughout the program
- mentors suggested the provision of vouchers for coffee for mentoring meetings

All of the issues raised were incorporated in to this year's mentoring program, and the success of these initiatives assessed in the focus group conducted at the completion of the program.

In addition, based partly on data obtained from this program in 2009, Mentoring@Griffith implemented the following improvements across all central mentor training programs in 2010:

- the provision of a mentor training handbook which fully encapsulated all training materials and provided further information for later reference during mentoring duties
- further development of training around intercultural skills and increased focus on the international student experience as it relates to peer mentoring support
- the inclusion of a list of suggested meeting activities in the handbook previously mentioned and training activities where mentors planned and role-played their first contacts with mentees
- more explicit linkages during training between the first year experience literature and peer mentoring activities as a basis for improving mentee engagement with the program
- more time devoted to exploring support services and referral techniques
- an increased focus on group facilitation skills to promote positive peer interactions within group meetings
- the establishment of a Facebook page for use by all Griffith student mentors where regular updates and information was provided for mentors following training

Results from the focus group and survey of mentors as to the effectiveness of the revised training program and mentoring program will be presented at the Nuts and Bolts session.

Session Outline

Presenters (15 mins): Introduction and overview of:

1. the background to the Griffith School of Environmental Mentoring and Leadership Program
2. the history of collaboration between school-based First Year Advisors and centrally-based Mentoring Coordinator
3. the implementation of improvements and how the program was evaluated in 2010
4. the findings from the evaluation

Paired Discussion (5 mins): Participants to consider and discuss:

1. examples of (or potential for) mentoring initiatives within their own institution
2. the options for mentor training within their institution (e.g. the availability of centralised mentor training)

Whole of group discussion (10 mins):

1. presenters to briefly describe their plans to further improve their program
2. question and answer session

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Further Information

Mentoring@Griffith www.griffith.edu.au/mentoring

First Year Advisors <http://www.griffith.edu.au/fya>

Griffith School of Environment Mentoring and Leadership Program
www.griffith.edu.au/mentoring