Outreach Mentors with High School Mentees: Co-creating Engagement, Belonging and Loyalty in Higher Education

Sonal Singh and Ruth Tregale
Widening Participation, Macquarie University

Abstract

Peer mentoring in higher education is regarded as an effective tool in retaining students. While various researchers have provided support for this, limited studies have looked at outreach mentoring programs as a satisfaction-creating service experience offered by universities for their students. This study examined the benefits of the LEAP Macquarie Mentoring program to first year university student mentors who are mentoring high school students from refugee backgrounds. Three focus groups with 21 university mentors, an online survey with 33 university mentors and written surveys with 365 high school mentees were carried out between 2011-2013. Preliminary findings illustrate that for university mentors who are in their first year, the mentoring program fosters a sense of belonging with the university community as well increasing their academic self-efficacy and perceived value in education. A sense of belonging with the university in their first year is critical in shaping a student's journey at university.

Introduction

“Repeat business or behaviour can be bribed; Loyalty has to be earned”

Janet Robinson

In the marketing literature, it has been highly researched that retaining existing customers and building strong customer–provider relationships is a more cost effective approach than continually seeking and acquiring new customers (Anderson & Mittal, 2000; Reichheld, 1996). Over the years, peer to peer mentoring has been part of universities’ initiatives to foster smoother transitions as part of the first year experience and retaining students. Mentoring is often defined as a one-to-one interaction between peers or an academic to peer interaction to develop in the areas of self-esteem, connectedness, identity, and academic attitudes. The retention of students is now considered equally as important as the attraction of them (Helgesen, 2008; Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006). The Macquarie University LEAP (Learning, Education, Aspiration, Participation) Mentoring program is one such partnership, recognizing the need for ongoing support of targeted high school students from refugee and humanitarian backgrounds to enable and support their successful transition into higher education. The program is run in partnership with the NSW Department of Education and Communities (DEC). The Refugee Council of Australia has described mentoring as ‘a mutually beneficial relationship that involves a more experienced person (or ‘mentor’) helping a less experienced person (or ‘mentee’) achieve their goals’ (RCA, 2005). While there are studies in the field of mentoring, they generally address only the perceived quality and benefits of peer mentoring on mentees; therefore, the present study focuses on first year university mentors and the benefits associated with the mentoring program for mentors in terms of increasing overall sense of belonging, engagement and loyalty with the university. To provide value and satisfaction to students, it is vital universities understand first year
students’ needs and provide opportunities to students to optimize their learning experience (Ledden, Kalafatis & Samouel, 2007).

**Mentoring Context**

Each semester, approximately 52 volunteer student mentors from Macquarie University provide weekly mentoring support for 104 high school students from refugee backgrounds at six to eight schools over a 12-week timeframe. The program includes visits to the university campus and on-campus activities, and also engages the students’ parents and/or caregivers.

**Research Questions**

Based on a literature review, the three research questions developed were:

1. What are the key benefits derived by university mentors from the outreach mentoring program?

2. How the above identified benefits build on to the mentors’ individual needs and goals?

3. What is the outcome of the above identified benefits and attainment of individual goals and fulfilment of individual needs?

The above questions guided the discussion guide for focus groups and survey instrument.

**Method and Data Analysis**

Data collection started in 2011 and continued through until 2013, encompassing three focus groups with 21 outreach mentors, online surveys engaging 33 mentors and written surveys with 365 mentees. Based on the grounded theory approach of Glaser (1978), themes were identified based on the mentors’ responses in the focus groups. This paper covers preliminary findings from the mentor evaluation.

**Results and Discussion**

The main themes identified were: benefits associated with peer mentoring, individual needs and goal attainment through peer mentoring, and long term outcome of these needs being fulfilled.

**Benefits of Mentoring to Outreach Mentors**

A total of 33 comments from the online survey with mentors revealed the three main perceived benefits of being a mentor as: increased motivation, confidence, and a feeling of empowerment. Involvement and interaction with faculty and staff members at university allowed mentors to feel better about themselves as they felt part of the institution, as was evident in the Goodlad (1998) study. For first year mentors, the LEAP Macquarie Mentoring program was consistent with their expectations of a university mentoring program which created a conducive environment of mutual values being shared by both parties. This was supported by the discussion in the focus groups with mentors. Comments included:

“I am really happy and proud that my university cares about the refugee situation and is doing something to help”
“Helping out those in need and encouraging them to be their best and to create goals and always strive to achieve them”

“Has given me a broader understanding of students within a refugee background and has provided me with the ability to help those who truly deserve it”

Fulfilment of Needs and Goal-Attainment

First year mentors also indicated that having shared values and interaction with faculty staff members’ made them aware of their purpose in life and university, increased their academic skills, increased their positive perception about value of higher education and overall provided a sense of satisfaction. Comments included:

“It gives me an opportunity to give back to the community and in return my mentees provide me with new perspectives”

“Seeing the value the mentee gets from their participation, formal recognition of participation in the program useful for job applications, testing my own communication and planning skills”

“Giving back and broadening my horizons”

This was supported by previous studies where mentors reflected on their roles as leading to new understandings which provided satisfaction (Ledden, Kalafatis & Samouel, 2007). Satisfaction is important in predicting students’ intent to remain at the university.

Outcomes

Once needs are fulfilled, to understand the overall outcome of the mentoring program, respondents were asked to explore what they had gained from these benefits. Bronfenbrenner (1979) described an ecological transition, in which first year students experience challenges as they are separated from most high school friends and former school life and have to adapt to a new environment at university. Sense of belonging is defined as the experience of personal involvement in a system or environment so that persons feel themselves to be an integral part of that system or environment. The LEAP-Macquarie Mentoring program helps students in this phase of transition as it creates a sense of belonging to the university for mentors through an alignment of values. This co-creation of value by universities and first year mentors, in their support of high school mentees, engaged the mentors in university life and studies and resulted in an enhanced desire to complete their courses. This was illustrated by the following quotes:

Keeps me grounded, and provides great experience out of my own comfort zone, makes me so grateful for the blessings I have been given”

“It’s a great chance to help others at a critical point in their lives where they are thinking about what they want to do when they leave school”
Students feel like an accepted, respected, and valued part of their academic context (Goodlad, 1998). Students’ development of a sense of belonging is key to their success in higher education as illustrated by Figure 1 below:

**Figure 1: Outcomes of Mentoring Program for First Year Mentors**

Benefits from outreach mentoring programs paved the way for fulfilment of needs and goal attainment, which resulted in the overall outcome of a sense of belonging, engagement and loyalty for first year mentors.

**Discussion and Recommendations for Fostering Sense of Belonging**

Preliminary findings suggest that the LEAP-Macquarie Mentoring program is promoting a sense of belonging throughout the mentors and mentees involved in the program. Such findings offer universities validation for the strategy of supporting first year students, as well as evidence for ongoing student development throughout their courses. The process of going to university for first year mentors is not a simple linear transition, but is a fragmented approach that involves understating one’s place in a new environment and feeling part of that environment which underpins overall engagement in higher education. A heightened concept of community spirit within the university will help attract and retain new students. The LEAP-Macquarie Mentoring program is a partnership program that recognises the need for ongoing support of targeted refugee high school students to enable and support their successful transition into higher education. This program has also raised awareness among staff and students about the issues refugees and asylum seekers face in their everyday lives in Sydney. This program sees the student and the institution as being in a dynamic and mutual process of co-production and value exchange (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). Some caution is needed in interpreting findings given that only preliminary analysis has been carried out to date. Although the intended outcome is of successful transition and retention, further analysis of data needs to be conducted. Further study of the progression of first year mentors in their university courses will help strengthen first year experience programs on transition and retention. This paper has put forward two key arguments: First, that engagement of mentors in outreach mentoring fosters a sense of belonging and that mentors should be seen as co-producers in creating the overall university experience; and secondly that this research contributes to the existing literature on peer mentoring by incorporating relationship marketing elements of trust and loyalty. Just as successful customer-organisation identification can lead to longer lasting relations, student-university identification translates
to long term student-university relationships. We suggest universities should focus on the development of higher education services which meet and potentially exceed students’ expectations, and which provide students with an enriching educational experience. A community spirit within the university is critical in shaping a student’s journey at university.

**Key questions for discussion**

1. Are there other examples of mentoring programs by first year students as a means of strengthening transition into university life?
2. How can we best link outreach programs into continued support during the First Year Experience?
3. What are other avenues of research into the effects of outreach mentoring programs on mentors?

**References**


