

Creating an Undergraduate Psychology Peer Mentoring Program: Challenges and Rewards

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One important role of undergraduate-level psychology professors is to advise students, however, it is a role that many faculty struggle to complete. Due to their many teaching responsibilities, service commitments, and scholarly work, student advising is not always as thorough and meaningful as many professors and students would prefer. Indeed, according to Bigger (2005), academic advising can have a profound impact on student learning. Upcraft (1995) further noted that students need to feel important and supported to have a connection to their campus and to cope with the transition to college. Good advising and mentoring creates these crucial bonds. As undergraduate populations increase, faculty members cannot always fully meet the advising and mentoring needs of their advisees; hence, effective additions to the advising process for students by students can provide a great benefit.

In the fall of 2005, several faculty members and students in the psychology department at the University of Wisconsin – Stevens Point (UWSP) created a student peer mentoring program to supplement and enhance the advising and mentoring that psychology majors were already receiving from faculty. Overall, the goals of the UWSP Psychology Peer Mentoring Program are to provide psychology students with vital information regarding: success in the major, course scheduling, study skills and time-management, psychology-related opportunities available on and off campus, campus and community resources, and careers in psychology. Most importantly, this program provides students with a direct and regular connection to another student who has demonstrated success in the program and who is eager to share his or her experiences. In this article, I discuss how to implement a successful undergraduate psychology peer mentoring program, including both the challenges and rewards of putting it together.

Suggestions for Program Leadership and Timeline of Duties

In order to maximize the success of a peer mentoring program, leadership duties should be split among two faculty advisors and four student officers. Recommended student officer positions include the Program Coordinator, the Communications Chair, the Recruitment Chair, and the Organizational Chair. The roles of the faculty advisors include designing and overseeing the program goals and structure, managing the student officers, training the mentors, and keeping lines of communicating open with the rest of the faculty. In terms of student leadership participation, the Program Coordinator manages the roles and duties of the other officers and maintains regular contact with faculty advisors. The Program Coordinator serves as the main contact person for the program and is responsible for matching mentors with mentees, maintaining online resources and mentor resource documents, keeping track of all records of the organization, and examining program evaluation data. The Communications Chair

works with the Organizational Chair to advertise meetings, create and post all advertising for the program, and prepare, collect, and analyze program evaluation data. The Recruitment Chair arranges brief classroom presentations and prepares informational handouts regarding the peer mentoring program in order to recruit mentees from among students in freshman and sophomore level classes. The Recruitment Chair also assists the Program Coordinator in preparing and reviewing mentor and mentee applications. Finally, the Organizational Chair serves as the treasurer for the organization, coordinates meetings (including making room reservations and preparing refreshments), and works in coordination with the Communication Chair to advertise upcoming meetings.

Program Membership

Students who would like to serve as mentors should be junior or senior psychology majors who have completed at least 15 credits in psychology and who have demonstrated academic success. Mentors must be willing to complete a training session at the start of each semester and to maintain regular contact with their assigned mentees. Mentees should consist of any student who is interested in psychology and in having a mentor. Mentees typically are psychology majors or minors; however, any interested student should be welcome to participate in the mentee role.

Training Protocol

All mentors should participate in a training session, during which the faculty advisors and student coordinator discuss the goals of the program, teach basic mentoring skills and motivational interviewing techniques, and review appropriate and inappropriate mentor and mentee behaviors, topics, and interactions. For example, mentees are not allowed to talk disparagingly about courses or professors, as this is not professional behavior. Likewise, mentees are not personal counselors and therefore must be informed about how to contact the faculty advisors immediately if their mentees raise issues related to family or relational conflicts, abuse, psychological disorders, or suicide, for example.

It is useful to invite mentees to the last half-hour of the training meeting in order to be matched up with their mentors. The Program Coordinator determines mentor-mentee pairings based on similarities in interests as reported on sign-up forms completed by interested students prior to the training sessions.

Program Materials

All mentors should receive a variety of handouts and resource sheets during their training sessions, which can also be made available on-line via a classroom management system such as Blackboard or Desire 2 Learn. The most useful of these sheets that we provide at UWSP include the “peer mentoring program contract” that mentees and mentors discuss and complete at the start of the semester match-up meetings (contact the author for a sample contract), as well as an “unwritten rules of the psychology department” sheet which contains information put together by mentors listing topics they wished they had known about early in the program but had not discovered until later. Finally, we include information about campus resources, volunteering opportunities, research with faculty, and internships in the mentor training manuals.

Challenges We Still Face

Despite the largely favorable outcomes of the UWSP peer mentoring program, there are several challenges we still face. The first is how to increase participation in the program. To date, we have averaged about 25 mentors and 23 mentees per semester. Although the students who participate seem to be satisfied with the program, we believe our numbers could be much higher, given that we have approximately 400 majors and 200 minors in our department. We are particularly interested in finding a way to involve those students who are struggling and most need extra assistance.

Another challenge we face is how to ensure repeated contacts between mentor-mentee dyads. Students have resisted set meeting times, noting that they prefer to get together on their own or to conduct their mentoring sessions via telephone or e-mail. Most students report having contact with their mentors/mentees an average of four times per semester, however, several mentees have expressed dissatisfaction with mentors who were not available to them consistently throughout the term.

Program Outcomes

Evaluations of the UWSP peer mentoring program over the past two years have shown that both mentors and mentees are satisfied with the program. Mentors reported that benefits of participating in the program include the development of leadership skills, a sense of generativity and fulfillment, and a greater connection to their peers and to members of the faculty. Mentees have reported the following benefits: greater sense of belonging in the department, better understanding of what can be done with an undergraduate psychology degree, feeling more informed and prepared for the process of applying to graduate school, feeling less intimidated to talk with professors, and feeling more confident going into advising sessions. Faculty members have anecdotally reported favorable outcomes of the program as well.

Suggestions

In closing, I offer several key recommendations to those who may be planning to implement a peer mentoring program on their own campus. I highly recommend having two faculty advisors to oversee the program, especially in its early, most time-consuming phases. In addition, having a clinical psychologist serve as either an advisor or consultant is useful when training mentors about their roles and for serving as a resource person if mentors identify that their mentees need counseling in addition to mentoring. Having multiple student leaders to take on the various duties required to make the program run smoothly is also recommended. An ideal number of officers for such a program is three or four.

The use of an on-line classroom management system (i.e., Blackboard, Desire 2 Learn) where students can access program resource materials, post questions, and engage in on-line discussions and forums 24 hours a day is a useful supplement to in-person meetings and training sessions. In addition, advertising and communication about the program are essential to the success of the program. Based on student feedback, the UWSP peer mentoring program will be supplementing traditional means of advertising the program (i.e., e-mail, flyers) with the use of Facebook, a social networking website that is very popular among college students. Many students have reported that they are more likely to notice and respond to an event advertised on Facebook than a flyer hung up among a mass of other posters in the hallway. Finally,

sending student officers to freshman and sophomore classes early in the semester to briefly present information about the program during class time is recommended.

To avoid making the mentoring program feel like another class, meetings can be held in locations other than standard classrooms. Student lounges within the department or university center, or even private meeting rooms at off-campus restaurants or other establishments seem to increase student interest and enjoyment in the program. In addition to the initial group match-up meeting, holding an end-of-the-semester group social also is a highlight of the experience for participants. Inviting faculty members to participate in these meetings to demonstrate the support of the entire department and to show mentees that they do not have to feel intimidated by their professors is also recommended.

Finally, obtaining official recognition of the peer mentoring program as a student group by your campus student government is encouraged. Such recognition helps legitimize the program and more importantly, provides a budget with which to purchase supplies and expenses associated with running the program.

References

- Bigger, J. J. (2005). *Improving the odds for freshman success*. Retrieved November 18, 2006, from NACADA Clearinghouse of Academic Advising Resources Web site: <http://www.nacada.ksu.edu/Clearinghouse/AdvisingIssues/First-Year.htm>
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