

The perceptions of peer mentors by freshmen in transition at a large land grant university
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Introduction

More and more today there is a need to establish expectations early on in students' college career for their undergraduate experience. It is believed there is something lacking in this experience and students are either unprepared for college or for the life after college. Everyone involved from parents to employers have emphasized that there is something lacking in undergraduate education, which does not fully prepare students for the real world (Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, & Gabelnick, 2004). One way to deal with these issues is through the use of learning communities. A learning community is a way to blend disciplines and increase interactions between faculty and students.

A large land grant university has sought to establish learning communities designed to address the freshmen year experience. According to this large land grant university the underlying reasons for the use of freshmen learning communities is to simulate the feeling of a smaller college and by doing so increase the experience for freshmen. Not only do the students attend class together, but live together to help with the overall experience of their freshmen year.

At the large land grant university, the Freshmen Leadership Living Learning Community (L3C) is a freshmen-year initiative designed to engage students academically, while producing reflective experiences, and creating intentional, self-aware learners. The L3C accentuates a common connection between the students involved and leadership. One of the main goals of the instructors of the L3C is to make an impact on the students' personal leadership development. This was done through a variety of methods for this course. The methods used to accomplish this by instructors for year one included: a) specific curriculum designed to develop leadership, b) co-curricular activities, and c) a personal leadership development workbook. In year two,

instructors implemented the use of peer mentors. The peer mentors were students from the inaugural year who self selected to serve in this role.

The L3C is in its second year of operation and has had to make changes from observations and data from year one. Some of those changes are: a) choosing a new textbook, b) using the peer mentors, c) working more closely with the Residence Life staff, especially the Residence Hall Assistants (RA), and d) use more experiential learning. The textbook was found to be too “juvenile” by students in the first year, so a new one was chosen to help with the concern by the first year participants. The RA’s were not fully utilized in year one, with a few backing out of participating, so considerations and arrangements were made for year two. The students found the experiential learning activities (trip to state capitol, trip to NASA, ropes course, and three programs presented by graduate students) to be more beneficial than anything else. Instructors used this information in designing year two, in the hopes of increasing the leadership development of the second year participants.

Literature Review

The use of peer mentoring, gives students the opportunity to learn from more experienced students, who are relatively their own age, while expanding their social network. This can tie in to the different perspectives and experience Harrison et al. talks about. Leadership can be learned experientially in learning communities through the use of peer mentors. Experiential learning is not just learning through doing yourself, but also through learning from others and through reflection. Peer mentors bring with them their experiences, and being relatively the same age, with more experience, which is related to the new students, and allows for a passing of knowledge. This passing of knowledge can be done through the use of stories, activities, etc.

much like how information use to be passed from one generation to the next through the use of story telling.

The idea of mentoring has been around for thousands of years. The term mentoring first appeared in Homer's the *Odyessy* around 1200 B.C. In the story Athena, the Greek goddess of wisdom disguises herself, periodically, as Mentor, a trusted friend of Odysseus. At the request of Odysseus, Mentor serves as a model, advisor, and teacher to Telemachus (Odysseus' son) for ten years. Mentor is asked to look after Telemachus because Odysseus is going to fight in the Trojan War and wants his son to be well looked after and continue in his journey in becoming a man.

Like leadership, mentoring has many different definitions depending on the context. Traditional mentoring has "been around for a long time and various definitions of mentoring exist in the literature... The definition is changing" (Le Cornu, 2005). Gibson, Tesone, and Buchalski (2000) say that a mentor is a trusted advisor and coach.

"In an effort to revitalize our nation's competitive vigor, the school reform movement has borrowed a strategy of the ancient Greeks: mentoring... As Odysseus entrusted his son and posterity to a sage elder, moderns have recognized a resource in seasoned educators and seek to exploit their wisdom for future generations" (Healy & Welchert, 1990).

Gibson et al. (2000) along with Healy et al. (1990) have researched the new era in mentoring finding that during the 1970s corporations and government agencies started using mentoring programs. Healy et al (1990) goes on to say that during the 1980s institutions of higher education, school districts, and states started using mentoring programs. These programs were first instrumented to enhance the quality of faculty and administrators through the use of

mentoring. Then during the 1990s mentoring moved to the student level, where students were mentored by faculty and staff, both in high school and at the college level.

Jekielek, Moore, Hair, and Scarupa (2002) define mentoring as “a sustained relationship between a young person and an adult in which the adult provides the young person with support, guidance, and assistance. The very foundation of mentoring is the idea that if caring, concerned adults are available to young people, youth will be more likely to become successful adults themselves.”

Rosser and Egan (2003) claim that “successful individuals often point to mentors as supporting their success by providing support, guidance, and confidential counsel... mentoring relationships can be a critical component in the success of individuals both personally and professionally.” According to research conducted by Jekielek et al. (2002), Mavrinac (2005), Angelique, Kyle, and Taylor (2002), and Chao (1997) mentoring can increase attendance, improve attitudes towards school, reduce some negative behaviors, and promote positive social attitudes and relationships. The researchers go on to say that the longer the mentoring takes place the better the outcome.

There are many different types of mentoring: traditional, peer, cross, formal and informal. Traditional mentoring is done between someone who is older and more experienced than the younger by passing down information and knowledge. In this relationship experience is passed down from the older to younger person. Peer mentoring is much like traditional mentoring, but is done between people of relatively the same age, with one having more experience than the other (Angelique et al., 2002).

Formal mentoring can be thought of as an established program, where it is not spontaneous and is guided by an organization. Informal mentoring happens more spontaneously

and is not guided by the overall organization. Peer mentoring is usually a formal process with specific goals and defined boundaries, but is more flexible than traditional mentoring (Angelique et al., 2002)

In a study done at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse, they found the peer mentors reduced the number of underclassmen participating in house parties (Santovec, 2004). The university had a problem with underclassmen drinking heavily in a social atmosphere to meet new people, so the university developed a peer mentoring program to reduce these numbers, while still allowing new students to meet new people.

Santovec (2004) said the results from the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse study showed peer mentors gained leadership opportunities, allowing them to hone their skills, while the new students were able to meet people in a social setting that did not revolve around drinking. McLean (2004) found that students found who were mentored were more apt to learn and identified the mentors as role models, while the mentors underwent personal development.

Jekielek et al. (2002) claim that college students are a good source of mentoring, if they have the time. A study done at the Tanfield School in England found that peer mentors helped ease the transition of primary school pupils into the secondary school but have provided the opportunity of the peer tutors and the peer mentors to improve basic skills and become more self confident through active participation (Nelson, 2003).

To support peer mentoring, Gartner and Riessman (1999) claim that there is a peer movement taking place. There is a peer movement abroad that represents a number of different forces, which need to be recognized and harnessed to address the problems that face our youth. The answer to many of the problems youth are facing today is other young people, their peers. When young people are viewed as assets and resources with something to give instead of

problematic vessels to be filled up with adult concern, the chance for growth and academic advancement is tremendous (Gartner and Riessman, 1999).

According to Gartner and Riessman (1999), peer education is not a new concept, but if the smart kids just keep teaching other students, without the other students being allowed to show what they have learned and be allowed to give back it just perpetuates the cycle of the rich getting richer. This is basically the same thing Dopp and Block (2004) said when working with students with disabilities, the students need to be allowed to give back and show what they have learned for the learning to actually ‘stick’.

Treston (1999) did a study at James Cook University Cairns in Australia. The philosophy of the program involves the offer of a friendly helping hand from a continuing student for each new student in his or her first semester. Research from many countries identified that students benefit from a formalized interaction program. In Australia, there are formal mentoring programs at many levels. There are programs set up where college students mentor high school students, new college students are mentored by upperclassmen and faculty, and ready to graduate college students are mentored by people already in the workforce. This program has been in place for eight years and people at James Cook University Cairns say it would be hard to imagine the university without a mentoring program. The program has become a tradition at the university, benefiting not only the students, faculty, and staff involved, but also other stakeholders (Treston, 1999).

According to Angelique et al. (2002) “peer mentoring promotes information sharing, career planning, and job related feedback... By drawing upon their own immediate experiences, peer mentors may more readily offer empathetic emotional support rather than just sympathetic support.” This is supported by McLean (2004) that says peer mentors provide support, but also

adds that the mentors benefit as well from the relationship, and students state they want mentors with similar experiences.

Peer mentoring has many components which encompass it. One part of peer mentoring thought to be important is transformational leadership. Transformational change, transformational leadership, and learning cultures or learning organizations have all become popularized and somewhat utopian in their claims that these practices can address challenges and cure all of what ails an organization (Mavrinac, 2005). For transformational leadership to be applied to mentoring, you need to think about learning cultures, since they revolve around learning. Learning cultures obviously place learning at the center of organizational activities, valuing it as a core asset (Mavrinac, 2005), while a goal of mentoring is learning as well. Peer mentoring preserves most of the benefits of traditional mentoring; while at the same time, it is in greater congruence with values-based transformational leadership and change (Mavrinac, 2005). This allows peer mentoring to serve as learning culture in itself, benefiting the mentee and the mentor alike.

Since mentoring is connected to learning cultures through the context of learning, applying them to an academic context proves useful. McLean (2004) says that when mentoring programs are applied to an academic context, the mentors assist students 'socialization' into the academic culture; therefore optimizing their learning experience by providing emotional and moral support. The author goes on to say that their relationship must be characterized by mutual respect, understanding, empathy, and trust. These concepts are the very foundation of mentoring, so peer mentoring in an academic context helps the mentee adjust to college.

From the review of literature it appears that mentoring and more importantly peer mentoring helps not only the mentee, but also the mentor. Mentoring can increase recruitment

and retention rates, while at the same time helping the protégé improve their educational and social performance (McLean, 2004; Mavrinac, 2005). Also, the mentor is given the satisfaction of helping someone, which can in turn help them with their own personal development. In general mentoring seems to help with the passing of experience, even when participants are of relatively the same age.

Methodology

The purpose of this research was to see if peer mentors made an impact on freshmen students in transition at a large land grant university, their feelings about the peer mentors, and their acclamation to the university. The investigation ascertained whether the peer mentors influenced freshmen student's transition to the university. The following methodology was used to accomplish this purpose.

The purpose of the study guided the development of the following objective, which was to determine:

- 1) the perceptions of year two L3C participants about the role of peer mentors.

This is accomplished through a causal-comparative study. Causal-comparative research can test hypotheses concerning the relationship between an independent variable, X, and a dependent variable, Y.

Description of population

There were N=57 participants for year two with an almost even split between male and female. The target population for this study was freshmen students who applied to be a part of the Leadership Living Learning Community and who chose to live in on-campus housing.

From year one's population (N=61) participants could choose to participate in year two as peer

mentors (n=11) and were required to fill out an application before being allowed to mentor year two participants.

With the size of the total population (N=57) being relatively small, it was decided to do a census of the entire population. A census is a survey which covers the entire population of interest for a study. For year two 48.14% (N=26) were surveyed during the end of the first semester banquet. The remainder of the population for year two (N=31) chose not to attend the banquet and therefore chose not to participate in the study. To account for the census error, the participants who did not attend the end of semester banquet at the end of the first semester were counted as choosing not to participate in the study.

Survey Instrument

This survey used a self-perceived leadership skills inventory and demographic questions. The Leadership Skills Inventory (LSI) was revised for this study to be conducted in the fall of 2006 to include questions specifically about peer mentors which coincided with the original LSI scales. Twenty questions were added to ask participants about the peer mentors. These questions were asked to see if the freshmen felt the peer mentors were doing what they were intended to do and see what needed to be changed for following years. Questions related to the five categories of the LSI about their self-perceptions of leadership and general questions about the peer mentors were used to see what the perceptions were of the peer mentors by the freshmen in transition.

Treatment Procedure

Students attended class one day a week throughout the semester which was developed by two instructors, one from the Agricultural Leadership, Education, and Communications Department and the other from the Department of Residence Life. They also lived in the same

residence hall, attended various programs administered by the course instructors, graduate students, and the Department of Residence Life, and attended fieldtrips. Lecture topics were given in a manner to promote the understanding of various leadership theories and built upon the various programs. These opportunities allowed the students to expand their understanding of leadership theories and skills through the programs, lectures, discussions, and fieldtrips. The instructors were skilled in leadership theories and facilitation.

Data Analysis

After the data was entered into Excel it was exported into SPSS^R. Once in SPSS^R the data was run using statistical analysis tools present in the program. The data generate was descriptive in nature. SPSS^R procedures are referenced in capital letters.

Descriptive statistics generated by SPSS^R procedure FREQUENCIES were used to report the results of the research questions. The frequencies, percentages, and means were calculated for all of the variables for years one and two. Procedure ONE SAMPLE T-TEST was used to determine what year two participants perceptions were about the peer mentors and the differences between years one and two LSI scales. To determine statistical significance, an alpha level of $p < .05$ was established a priori for all analyses.

Results

Participants indicated that the peer mentors were supportive ($M=4.27$, $SD=0.60$), gave positive feedback ($M=4.00$, $SD=0.69$), were good role models ($M=4.23$, $SD=0.71$), were knowledgeable about the large land grant university ($M=4.19$, $SD=0.75$), were easy to communicate with ($M=4.23$, $SD=0.77$), and did not use peer pressure to get them to do anything negative ($M=4.16$, $SD=0.75$) according to the means and standard deviations for the questions.

A Likert-type scale of one to five (5-strongly agree, 4-agree, 3-neither agree nor disagree, 2-disagree, 1-strongly disagree) was used and any means above four were considered to be significant. All questions had a mean above three, except question 52 (“The peer mentors helped me to realize my prejudices”), which had a mean of 2.96. Summaries of these results are found in Table 1.

Table 1. one sample *t*-test: Questions on peer mentors

Peer Mentors Questions	L3C Peer Mentoring Questions (N=26)			
	N	Mean	SD	2-Tail Prob.
Not supportive	26	4.27	0.60	0.00
Helped me	26	3.46	0.91	0.00
Positive feedback	26	4.00	0.69	0.00
Good role models	26	4.23	0.71	0.00
Personal relationship	26	3.54	0.95	0.00
Developed leadership	26	3.31	0.93	0.00
Knowledgeable	26	4.19	0.75	0.00
Helped me adjust	26	3.77	0.86	0.00
Did not help me	26	3.89	0.86	0.00
<i>Realize prejudices</i>	25	2.96	0.46	0.00
Communication skills	24	3.25	0.79	0.00
Time management	26	3.15	0.83	0.00
Understand situations	26	3.39	0.98	0.00
Learn from experiences	26	3.69	0.79	0.00
Felt uncomfortable	25	3.92	1.38	0.00
Easy to communicate	26	4.23	0.77	0.00
Help me set goals	26	3.39	0.85	0.00
Helped me get involved	26	3.50	0.86	0.00
No peer pressure	25	4.16	0.75	0.00
Strengths & Weaknesses	26	3.42	0.86	0.00

Conclusion and Recommendations

Participants indicated that the peer mentors helped them become acquainted with the large land grant university, were supportive, gave positive feedback, were good role models, were easy to communicate with, and did not use peer pressure to get them to do anything

negative. From these responses it can conclude that the peer mentors did in fact help them with their transition from high school to college and had other positive effects on them. The peer mentors did help year two L3C participants adjust to college in some way, learn about the large land grant university, improve their communication skills, help them to better work in groups, were supportive, offered positive feedback, and did not try to use peer pressure to get them to do anything negative.

This is supported by findings from Jekielek et al. (2002), Mavrincac (2005), Angelique, Kyle, and Taylor (2002), and Chao (1997) who said that mentoring can increase attendance, improve attitudes towards school, reduce some negative behaviors, promotes positive social attitudes, and relationships.

Jekielek, Moore, Hair, and Scarupa (2002) define mentoring as “a sustained relationship between a young person and an adult in which the adult provides the young person with support, guidance, and assistance. The very foundation of mentoring is the idea that if caring, concerned adults are available to young people, youth will be more likely to become successful adults themselves.” By looking at this definition of mentoring it can be concluded that year two L3C participants were mentored and it had positive effects.

The peer mentors should continue to be from the previous years L3C participants and should self-select to continue as peer mentors in the program. By allowing them to self-select, the previous year’s participants are showing that they not only care about the program, but received something from participating. These concepts go back to experiential learning where participants use skills and experiences gained to help others. This too shows that the program is working and the peer mentors are doing a good job.

The number of peer mentors should continue to remain small, so they are mentoring the students in small groups, which will continue to foster the skills of the LSI, which the program is based on. The role of the peer mentors might be increased somewhat to use their experiences with the program to help instructors make improvements to better help the next year's participants.

The use of peer mentors will allow the course to grow and better help participants, as long as instructors listen to what the participants think are the most helpful and continue to change. Money needs to continue to be available to the program and the budget changed on a yearly basis to account for the changes which might need to be made to ensure the continued improvement for participants, which will help ensure the longevity of the program. These improvements could be more experiential learning opportunities and other ways for participants to relate what they are learning in the class to both leadership and the real world.

Future Research

There are too many variables at this time to account for the effects the peer mentors had on L3C participants. If the variables can be determined and accounted for, then the effects of the peer mentors can be determined to make sure the improvements are solely based on them and they are worth the additional resources of the program. The data from this research needs to be collected the same time each semester to avoid the loss of the population participating in the study. Research should be collected the first and last day of class the first semester, as well as the last day of class the second semester, administered by an outside party.

A continued longitudinal study needs to be conducted on the peer mentors themselves, to see if they perceive they are helping the participants. This data should then be compared to what participants perceive about the peer mentors. It is also suggested that data be collected at the end

of each year L3C participants are in college and compared to a control group who also live in the same residence hall, but are not part of the program. This additional data, although overwhelming, might prove useful in determining just how much L3C participants gain from participating in the program.

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