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THE CHRONICLE OF MENTORING & COACHING

MENTORING INSTITUTE

Influence of Peer Mentors on the College Transition Experience through Program Partnerships

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to describe how the student mentoring program at California State University, San Bernardino (CSUSB) increased peer-to-peer services by collaborating with campus constituents to develop first-year experience program partnerships. This paper showcases CSUSB's student mentoring program partnerships with Coyote First STEP, a summer transition program, and the Library Ambassador program initiative, and how these partnerships have evolved to engage virtually with students during the COVID-19 pandemic. During a pilot year, student participants completed survey data showing that program partnerships for student leaders enhances the professional and leadership identity development of the mentors. By partnering with programs, student participants interact with peer mentors and benefit, academically, by engaging with students who have successfully transitioned to college. Research on higher education consistently divulges the benefits of mentorship, including enhanced psycho-social, cognitive, and career development. Embedding peer mentors into first-year experience programming produces platforms for students to gain a sense of belonging, connect with peers who are transitioning to college, gain access to and an understanding of campus resources, and receive affirmation of past educational experiences.

Literature Review

Receiving a college education produces many significant personal benefits such as improved mental and physical health, increased life span, reduction in crime and imprisonment, increased lifetime earnings, and overall happiness (Trostel, 2015). In addition to benefits individuals experience, society as a whole benefits from a college-educated citizenry. College graduates are more likely to make charitable donations, engage in philanthropic giving, volunteer time and service to community organizations, pay higher amounts in taxes over the course of a lifetime, and are more likely to vote and participate in local politics (Trostel, 2015). Understanding the benefits to self and society for producing college graduates provides a frame to focus on the development of programming that promotes the advancement of college goers - from student to graduate.

The paths and experiences beginning with the decision to attend college, select an institution and major, and approach how to "do" college vary based on college knowledge prior to campus arrival. Some students arrive to college as a rite of passage that occurs immediately after completion of secondary school. Attendance is an expectation established and reinforced by families who have college degrees. Conversely, first-generation students (FGS) are first in their families to attend college, and while they may experience family encouragement to pursue higher education, they must learn how to navigate the institution and acquire strategies for academic success. Students navigating college for the first time are less likely to seek out academic support resources compared to students who have a history of utilizing services such as tutoring, supplemental instruction, and meetings with course instructors. The social psychological model referred to in discussions around mental health can also be applied in a higher educational context. The model describes shared stigmas around mental health within a general population (Corrigan et al., 2001). Stigmas associated with help-seeking are present when it comes to accessing academic support services such as tutoring, especially for student populations who have been historically and currently experienced stereotyping around ability based on race or identity group membership. For example, Winograd and Rust (2014) found that Black students are less likely to access services for fear of validating the idea that they are not capable of academic success and that seeking help confirms intellectual inferiority. Whether students attach stigmas around seeking academic help and support or students like FGS simply are not aware with resources and how to access them, there is a clear need for ways to connect students to services on college campuses.

This paper aims to explore the role of peer education in academic success, specifically during the critical first year of college. To that end, a partnership framework is employed to discuss the ways that the student mentoring program at CSUSB developed program partnerships with a math readiness summer bridge program and the campus library information literacy program.

Peer Education and College Transition

Peer education programs have become commonplace on college campuses. Connecting students with peers who have shared experiences support the first-year transition from secondary to post-secondary school and beyond and has demonstrated positive outcomes for both students who participate as leaders or service providers and service recipients. Peer mentoring, a model of peer education, is an impactful intervention that facilitates college transition and academic success (Roszkowski & Badmus, 2014; Sanchez et al., 2006). Engaging in mentoring, as a mentor or a mentee, produce opportunities to forge natural, personal, and enduring relationships. Furthermore, inherent in the relationship is an expectation that mentors and mentees maintain continuous and ongoing interaction (Roszkowski & Badmus, 2014). In doing so, psychological and emotional needs are met, and overall mental health is improved. Mentors serve as role models by sharing their college experience with mentees with the goal of teaching from past and current experiences (Jacobi, 1991). Rodger and Tremblay (2003) share the positive impact peer mentoring has on the reduction of test anxiety thereby contributing to academic success. Specifically, academic achievement (as measured by grades) improves when mentors and mentees met at least once per month (Rodger & Tremblay, 2003). Public institutions of higher education have fiduciary responsibilities to support the success of the students they serve. As so, colleges implement strategic plans that layout expectations or goals related to graduation rates, student retention rates, academic integrity and rigorous curriculum, and faculty expectations (Rodger & Tremblay, 2003). Students naturally connect and relate to other students, and peer mentors are well positioned to encourage their mentees to attend academic support

services such as tutoring by sharing their personal experiences utilizing the services. Testimonials familiarize mentees with academic and co-curricular opportunities and normalize accessing academic support services (Rodger & Tremblay, 2003). The remainder of this paper focuses on college readiness and positions program partnerships with a bridge program and the university library as they relate to math and information literacy support for student success.

College Math Readiness

Need for support in mathematics at the college-level is a costly and widespread problem in the United States. It is estimated that nationally, the cost of developmental education is greater than one billion dollars per year (Pretlow III & Wathington, 2012). Students who require developmental coursework at college entry take longer to complete their degree, are less likely to remain enrolled in college, and less likely to earn a degree than students who do not need developmental courses (Benken et al., 2015). Recent studies have shown that traditional remediation has not been successful in increasing student success and, in some cases, even hinders it (Bailey & Jaggars, 2016; Boatman & Long, 2018; Page & Scott-Clayton, 2016; Witteveen & Attewell, 2017). However, students who remediate successfully can experience academic success and graduate on time (Bahr, 2013). More recently, attention has turned to corequisite courses that have shown to improve success in courses and overall outcomes in coursework and graduation, even when controlling for race, over traditional remediation (Logue et al., 2019). These courses are particularly beneficial for Hispanic students (Crisp et al., 2017; Paschal & Taggart, 2019).

Students who enter college unprepared to complete college-level courses are likely to be underrepresented ethnic minorities, low-income, and first-generation college students (Nunez, 2009). They often have limited knowledge about the college experience, preparation for college coursework, and access to financial aid resources. In addition to receiving academic support, these students benefit from learning environments where they can engage in both formal and informal interactions with faculty members and peers (Meeuwisse et al., 2010; Tovar, 2015). These environments help build a sense of belonging, with activities including one-on-one peer tutoring, residence life, and opportunities for social connections (Johnson et al., 2007; Nunez, 2009; Maestas et al., 2007; Santa Rita & Bacote, 1996). When students feel supported, they are more likely to experience a smoother transition to and remain in college (Santa Rita & Bacote, 1996). Programs that provide these supports to ease the transition from high school to college increase rates of graduation, especially for student populations at higher risk of not completing a degree (Douglas & Attewell, 2014).

Information Literacy and College Success

Studies have also demonstrated the positive impact of information literacy instruction and library/co-curricular partnerships on student success (Brown & Malenfant, 2017; Lowe et al., 2020). More specifically, the incorporation of information literacy into the first-year experience has been shown to improve retention rates, grade point average, and completion of credit hours (Blake et al., 2017). Attention to information literacy in initial coursework also helps students to acquire competencies that support strong performance in undergraduate courses and general education outcome achievement (Brown & Malenfant, 2017).

Libraries have long used peer-to-peer models at service points (circulation and reference desks, for example), but this approach in library teaching contexts is not widely adopted (Maxson et al., 2020). Yet, for those who have experimented with peer instructional models, the benefits (to both those delivering and receiving instruction) are clear – peers are viewed as more approachable, serve to decrease uneven power dynamics between teacher and student, and can relate to fellow students in ways librarians or other faculty cannot (Bodemer, 2014; Maxson et al., 2020; Rinto et al., 2017). As Maxson et al. (2020) explain, "[peer-assisted learning] strategies center the student in the pedagogy and provide agency and empowerment through valuing students' experiences and positioning them as knowledge creators and co-creators. Seen through the lens of critical pedagogy, [peer-assisted learning] has liberatory aims in that it frees both the teacher and student from the traditional classroom … and honors students' identities and agency" (p. 318).

Institutional Context

California State University, San Bernardino (CSUSB) has slightly more than 20,000 students, with approximately 2,800 incoming first-time freshmen. As a proud Hispanic Serving Institution, 64% of students identify as Hispanic or Latino, 81% of students identify as first-generation having parents without a college degree, 62% of undergraduates are Pell grant recipients, and 38% of the incoming first-time freshman were placed as needing additional support in math and/or English upon entry to the university. Due to the large population of first-generation college students, paired with the number of students determined to need additional support in math and English, and the research and information literacy demands of college work, the student mentoring program engaged in discussions about developing peer education programs to address the academic needs of the student population.

Student Mentoring Program

The Student Mentoring Program fosters the success of undergraduate students through peer-to-peer support that encourages academic excellence, campus connectedness and engagement, and the personal growth and development of participating students. Scholarly higher educational research divulges the benefits of mentorship including enhanced psycho-social, cognitive, and career development (Ballenger, 2010; Humberd & Rouse, 2016; Komives et al., 2006). As a result, students engaging in mentor/mentee relationships experience a greater sense of belonging with the campus community and positive self-regard (Hoyt & Murphy, 2016). Astin (1993) highlights the importance of peer-to-peer engagement, developmentally, to college students. Incorporating peer mentoring into first-year experience programming creates a platform for students to gain a sense of belonging, connect with peers who have recently transitioned and acclimated to college life, receive affirmation of experiences that are directly related to past performance, gain access to and an understanding of campus resources, discuss study skills and time management, and build relationships with their mentor. Peer men-

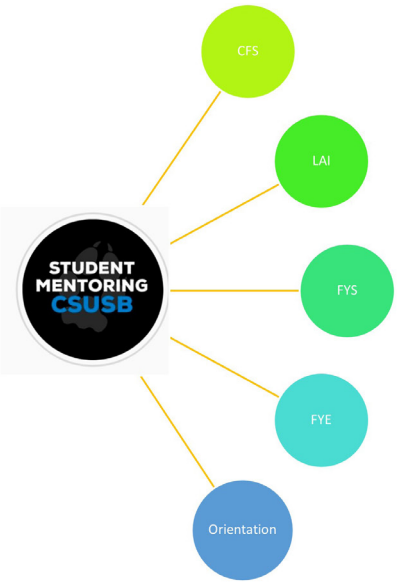
tors work with freshmen during the college transition process their first year at CSUSB. Protégés learn about campus resources, time management, goal setting, co-curricular opportunities and campus clubs and organizations. Center events developed and delivered by the student mentors provide additional first-year student engagement opportunities. The SMP occupies a middle space between the curricular and co-curricular student experience. As a peer-led program, students who serve as mentors experience professional and leadership development opportunities while protégés gain a space to develop skills and capital that supports the first-year transition to college. The program currently employs 45 student mentors and serves 800 protégés.

Problem Statement

Staffed by one program coordinator, the student mentoring program sought ways to provide larger populations of students with access to services outside of the traditional one-on-one programming that takes place in the center. In seeking first-year experience program partnerships, the program discovered that collaborations with other campus constituents facing similar staffing and scalability challenges proved mutually beneficial. For example, the partnership with the CSUSB Pfau Library – the Library Ambassador Initiative (LAI) – has allowed this peer-to-peer program to expand from approximately five to 45 student participants and to support the new CSUSB semester General Education program. Past iterations of the LAI utilized library student employees, who were not only limited in number and availability, which in turn limited the courses the initiative could support, but who also did not necessarily possess the same comfort engaging with their peers as mentors demonstrate. The same holds true for Coyote First STEP, the summer bridge/college readiness program. The program serves approximately 800 students during the summer months and is coordinated by one staff member. In this way, maximizing outreach and impact proves challenging. This is the impetus for developing a series of program partnerships that centers student mentors as peer educators.

Partnership Framework

The partnership framework represents a growing network of collaborations with the student mentoring program and first year experience programs across campus. While the partnerships differ by program and need, the concept centers peer education in the delivery of services geared towards college readiness, transition, and academic success. SMP currently has five active program partnerships: orientation, first-year experience (FYE), CFS, LAI, and Foundation Seminar/GE programs. While peer education for orientation and FYE take the form of workshops and presentations, the CFS and LAI partnerships embed student leaders as peer educators within a classroom environment and educational context. The first-year seminar partnership is the newest of partnerships that will mirror the model in place for CFS and LAI commencing fall 2020.



Program Partnership Framework at CSUSB

The sections that follow provide program information and partnership details and outline the role of student mentors as peer educators.

Coyote First STEP

The Office of Undergraduate Studies at CSUSB began offering Coyote First STEP (Student Transition Enrichment Program) 2014. First-time freshmen who are determined to need additional support in math or English to prepare them for college are required and/or recommended to participate in the California State University (CSU) system-wide Early Start Program. In summer 2018, CSUSB implemented changes to CFS to meet the new requirements of the CSU Executive Order 1110, the elimination of remedial coursework, by providing an opportunity for students to enroll in an enhanced college-level, baccalaureate credit-bearing course. To promote student success during this time of CSU system-wide change, a six-week supported math and college transition program was offered. CFS

partnered with SMP to include a peer education component to the program. CFS provides opportunities for incoming students to fulfill their requirement for the CSU system-wide Early Start Program by providing an enhanced college-level, baccalaureate credit-bearing course, tuition free, in the summer prior to their first term. In addition to the academic coursework, ESPU 1000, an active learning co-curricular course, with embedded student mentors was designed and launched to promote college success. Student mentors in ESPU 1000 played a direct role in the course by serving as co-facilitators and peer educators. Student mentors were divided into teams, assigned a course to support, and attended the course two times per week with incoming first-time freshmen (FTF). Referred to as a resource course, guest speakers from across campus provided important information, resources, and facilitated discussions with the support of student mentors. Following guest speaker workshops, mentors worked directly with students to reinforce familiarity and awareness around campus programs and resources. Additionally, mentors and FTF had the opportunity to develop relationships that continued into the academic year.

Library Ambassador Initiative

The LAI connects students in first-year courses with peers knowledgeable about library resources and services. The LAI was piloted in 2016 using student library employees and, given the challenges previously mentioned, in 2018 the librarian coordinating the effort reached out to the SMP coordinator. Together, they explored how they might collaborate to support a single first-year course known to have an information literacy outcome, meaning all students would be able to apply what they learned from the Library Ambassadors to their coursework. They agreed that a classroom visit model was the best approach and, in 2019 and 2020, steadily increased the number of first-year courses to which they offered Library Ambassador visits. The identification of particular courses was strategic, as the Pfau Library faculty do not have the capacity to provide in-class instruction for first-year courses; yet, with a new General Education program beginning fall 2020 that houses a number of first-year courses containing information literacy outcomes, the librarian also understood it was important to engage these students and faculty by providing some level of face-to-face support.

As Library Ambassadors, mentors are trained in the basics of the Pfau Library, including services available to new students, finding resources for common assignments, and getting research help. The librarian-led training typically includes an overview of an in-class presentation, practice addressing frequently asked questions, and discussion of presentation best practices. Ambassadors then connect with first-year students by pairing up to visit classrooms where they deliver the presentation, answer questions, administer a brief survey, and promote the SMP. In calling upon a peer-education approach, the LAI strives to combat library anxiety by providing early exposure to the library that centers student research experiences, concerns, and needs (Blecher-Cohen, 2019; Carlile, 2007; Parks, 2019). Students in courses that receive LAI classroom visits not only report learning about library services and resources, but also identify the Student Mentoring Program as a safe place and valuable resource to receive assistance as they learn how to navigate the university.

Conclusion

As of this writing, CFS and LAI collectively have reached approximately 3000 unique first-year students. The value of peer education when it comes to student retention from freshman to sophomore year and academic performance is well documented in the literature (Jacobi, 1991). The SMP program partnerships serve as impactful and effective ways to engage students and facilitate the college transition, fostering a sense of belonging and academic success. Additionally, important mentor/mentee relationships are established early on and continue for the duration of the first year and beyond. This is evident by the increase in number of mentee requests and membership. The CFS experience demonstrates effectiveness by the high percentage of students who pass the math portion of the program. The pass rate during the last two years is well over 90 percent. The number of students who continue to mentoring program membership paired with the high pass rates highlights the success of the partnership.

For the LAI, 93 percent of surveyed students indicated that they learned how to conduct basic college-level research as a result of the program, and 95 percent reported they learned how to get research help. The initiative has received positive feedback from not only students, but also faculty – one instructor shared that “the program . . . is extremely beneficial for students who are learning the tricks of the trade for research. Many of my former students have told me how instrumental this program was to them” (L. Esparza, personal communication, October 16, 2019). At the same time, some student mentors have also encountered challenges related to faculty expectations, some of whom press Library Ambassadors to cover advanced research methods or other content beyond the scope of what they are trained to present during their 45-minute timeslot. While the ambassadors are advised to refer anyone with advanced questions to a librarian, at times faculty have put the ambassadors on the spot. In the future, the librarian plans on reiterating the “basic” nature of the presentation, underscoring that the LAI is meant to supplement, not replace, faculty-led information literacy instruction.

Looking forward to Fall 2020, the SMP faces challenges related to program partnerships and teleservice delivery, though COVID-19 has provided a learning opportunity and ultimately served to reveal issues related to the accessibility of in-person only resources, services, and programming. While in-person modality is recommended and hybrid preferred, the program is now looking at ways to provide the same level of programming in this new environment. The student impact of CFS is linked to in-person programming, specifically the on-campus residential component. While the current model of CFS will shift as a result of virtual programming, the goal to focus on positive student experiences and academic outcomes remains. The LAI will continue to support first-year courses in the new General Education program by offering online classroom “visits.” The central peer face-to-face component, though virtual, will remain a key piece of these partnerships, and the authors hope that this model provides a framework to further cross-campus collaborations to develop effective and comprehensive virtual programming for current and future students.

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