

By Christine Lynn

Student Peer Mentoring in a Hospitality Management Program

IT SEEMS THAT FOR A PEER STUDENT MENTORING PROGRAM TO BE EFFECTIVE, THE PROGRAM WOULD NEED MANDATORY PARTICIPATION ON BOTH ENDS. PERHAPS BOTH MENTORS AND MENTEES COULD VOLUNTARILY ENROLL IN ONE-CREDIT MENTOR/MENTEE COURSES ADMINISTERED BY A FACULTY OR STAFF MEMBER OR AN ADMINISTRATOR.

MENTORING PROGRAMS ARE A WELL RECOGNIZED MEANS to quicken students' assimilation and increase retention, but not all mentoring programs are successful. There have been failed efforts over the past 15 years to establish successful student peer mentoring programs at Northern Arizona University; this article shares the findings in order to perhaps help other programs.

Mentoring Program Model A

In 1994, a few student leaders in the School of Hotel and Restaurant Management (HRM) at Northern Arizona University began a peer mentoring program in which they matched continuing HRM students with new students beginning the four-year university program. The student-run volunteer mentoring program was embraced enthusiastically by students; however, it was less than successful in terms of mentor/mentee interactions, and there was little continuity and much chaos between semesters.

Mentoring Program Model B

In fall 1996, after four semesters of diminishing interest, the program was taken over by a faculty member to assure, at least, that the program survives. In the first week of the next 23 semesters, sign-up sheets were circulated in the Introduction courses for new students desiring mentors, and in the upper division courses for continuing students willing to mentor the Intro students. Between 50 and 100 students signed up to be mentored each semester, and continuing students graciously signed up to mentor them. (Some

faculty gave extra credit for mentoring.) The matches between new and continuing students were made simply by typing, alphabetizing and numbering the names on the sign-up sheets. Student one on the mentor list was matched with student one on the mentee list, and so forth, until all the students were matched. The mentor and mentee names, phone numbers and e-mail addresses were affixed to instruction sheets. Mentors were to contact their mentees (new students) by e-mail or phone and to keep in touch throughout the semester. There was no training and no assessment of the program.

A few students each semester had wonderful mentoring experiences. However, many of the mentors said that when they contacted their mentees, the mentees were not interested in being mentored. The mentees, meanwhile, said they were never contacted by their mentors. The program was only minimally successful. It continued for all those years because the administration wanted the program in place, and it had become fairly easy to get volunteers and make the matches.

Mentoring Program Model C

A change in instructors for the Introduction course resulted in a large reduction of new students requesting to be mentored. In fall 2007, the head of the HRM Advisement Office began automatically signing up all new HRM students for mentoring. To become a mentor was still voluntary, but new students were required to have a continuing student mentor. Because in the past most of the Intro students had requested mentors, the numbers were not that much different; so



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getting volunteer mentors and making the matches were about the same as before the change.

New students, when enrolling, were told they would be contacted by a mentor, but many seemed unaware and unprepared for the experience when contacted by their mentors. The program did not improve.

Mentoring Program Model D

The administration wanted all new students to have continuing student mentors. This sounded good when recruiting new students, and mentoring is widely known to be a good thing. However, it was determined that a volunteer program would never be effective. The faculty member who made the matches conferred with the instructors of the required upper divi-

sion Leadership course and the required Introductory course to match Leadership students with Intro students for mentoring. Participation would be required and given credit for in both courses. The mentor matches were made by matching the Intro and Leadership class rosters—much as it had been done in the past models.

Many of the school activities were poorly attended. The activities such as Club Night, Career Fair, and several information sessions (*i.e.*, Study Abroad, Internships) were good for students, so it was decided to require mentors to invite and meet mentees at these events (for credit). After many meetings and much work, the new improved mandatory mentoring program involving Leadership and Intro students went into effect in the fall of 2008. A combined Club Night (where

students have opportunities to hear about and join hospitality-related clubs) and the Mentors Meet and Greet was scheduled, and about 200 students showed up. The system of name tags and mentors meeting mentees was a disaster and most could not find each other. A well thought out plan was put in place for the next semester's combined Club Night and Mentors Meet and Greet, but none of the Intro students showed up for the required Meet and Greet, and only 15 of the 75 Leadership students showed up. It was a complete failure.

Thirty-one semesters and four models later, the mentoring program went from "less than successful" to a "complete failure." Model D could have been effective. It would have required that faculty work together and require their students to par-

ticipate. To make Model D work would require either total buy-in by the faculty members involved, or the administration would have to require the involved faculty members to make it work. Neither faculty nor administration cared enough about the mentor program, so it was dropped for fall 2009.

Mentoring Program Model E

Freshmen at the university then had the option of being in a “Living Learning Community.” Six HRM juniors and seniors signed up for a one-credit mentor course that was developed to train them to mentor the freshmen in the HRM dorm, and to utilize the forms for keeping track of required interactions and activities. The mentors did a great job and were at all of the activities; but they had difficulty getting their freshmen mentees

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to attend. The mentors were required as part of the class they were in, but no one required the freshmen to participate. This program too was dropped.

Recommendations for Implementing a Successful Mentoring Program

The students who mentored and were mentored enjoyed the experience and found the HRM Mentors Program to be useful, according to anecdotal evidence. A voluntary program was nice and not difficult to administer, but was not very effective at HRM. Everyone in the school agrees that students mentoring students is

a good thing—but perhaps not worth the effort with such limited results.

It seems that for a peer student mentoring program to be effective, the program would need mandatory participation on both ends. Perhaps both mentors and mentees could voluntarily enroll in one-credit mentor/mentee courses administered by a faculty or staff member or an administrator. Mentors would need some training in how to mentor. They would need a mechanism for keeping track of interactions, and their participation would need to be graded by an instructor or administrator. Mentees would also be required to interact with their mentors and to attend specified activities and be graded on their participation. The entire program should be formally assessed to determine just how effective it is—and if it is worth the cost.

In summary, effective mentoring programs are expensive and take time to design and administer. Voluntary mentoring programs can cost next to nothing and take minimal time to design and administer; however, they are not very effective. There does not seem to be a way to improve the effectiveness of voluntary programs without increasing the cost unless faculty and/or administration are committed to their success. ■

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