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Peer Mentoring and the First Year Experience

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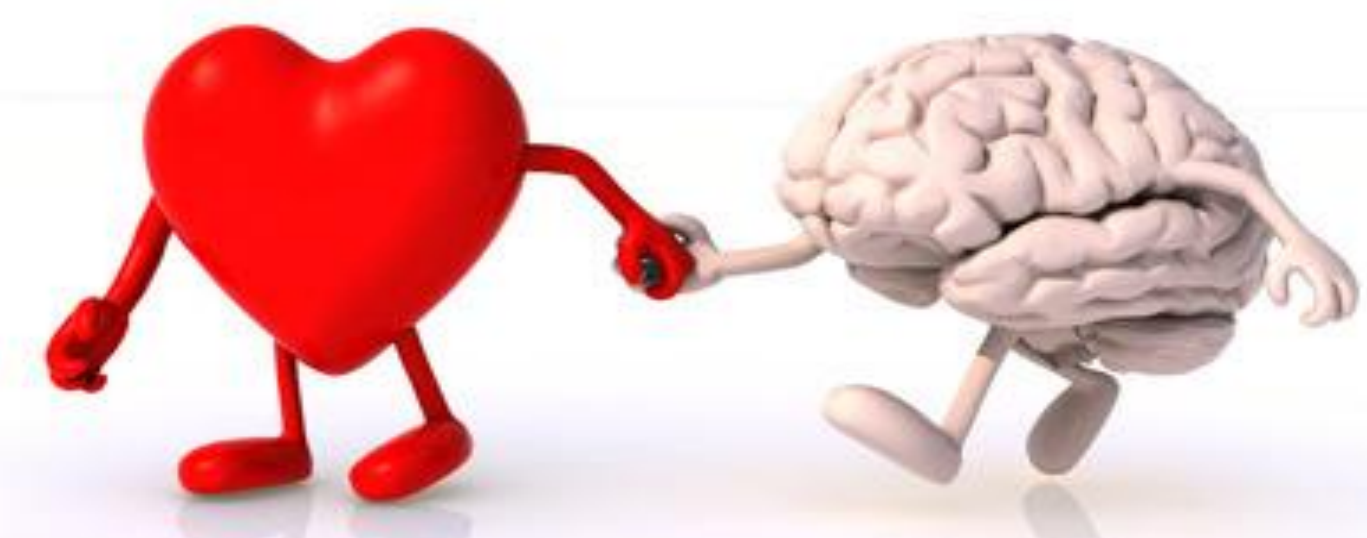
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Peer Mentoring and the First Year Experience

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ABSTRACT

The transition from secondary level learning to independent study can be difficult to negotiate and many students also experience emotional pressures as they adjust to a busy social environment at college (McAleavy, Collins and Adamson 2004 ; O'Reilly 2008). Many third level institutions are exploring ways to improve the first year experience and one such approach that has gained increasing interest in recent years is the provision of peer mentoring. This paper outlines and evaluates a pilot peer mentoring programme that was conducted with first year business students (n = 112) from three separate courses at a third level institution in Dublin, Ireland. Three first year groups were chosen for participation in this study due to on-going low levels of engagement and high levels of attrition. A novel 360° approach was formulated, whereby students were provided support by mentors, lecturers and support staff. In order to measure the efficacy of the programme, feedback was elicited from participants and key academic variables (GPA and attrition rate) for participants and a matched sample that did not receive coaching were also compared. Results revealed that GPA increased significantly for one of the three student groups involved and that the attrition rate decreased significantly for one of the three groups.

BACKGROUND

Many students face significant issues as they transition to third level learning:

- Non-standard entrants may face specific difficulties such as having to resolve financial pressures and deal with childcare issues (McAleavy, Collins and Adamson 2004).
- Students who are non-native speakers may struggle with studying in a foreign tongue (Andrade 2006).
- Integrating into the third level learning environment is often particularly challenging for students from lower socio-economic groups, as they may lack the cultural capital to enable a quick transition (O'Reilly 2008).
- This poses financial and pedagogical issues for colleges:
- Disruption within the classroom.
- Higher levels of attrition (drop-out).
- Decreased levels of academic achievement.
- Peer mentoring programmes can improve the first year experience for students and help them to engage successfully with the third level learning environment. For example:
- Fox, Stevenson, Connelly, Duff and Dunlop (2010) found that GPA improved significantly for first year accountancy students at the University of St Andrew's in Scotland that were provided peer mentoring by third year students in the same programme of study compared to a control group who did not receive mentoring.
- Andrews and Clark (2011) found that there were benefits for mentors as well as mentees. Mentors in their study reported perceived advantages including the ability to develop leadership and self-management skills.

OUR PEER MENTORING PROGRAMME

Students had contact with their mentors and were also invited to weekly group lunches.
 •Group lunches - guest speakers, meet with lecturers, free lunch, fun and games!

The programme was delivered across the first six weeks for semester one of first year.

A 360° approach was taken. Mentors, lecturers and support staff were all involved!

Each week a specific theme was covered:

- Week one – getting to know you and clubs and socs.
- Week two – getting organised.
- Week three – who can help me?
- Week four – my business career.
- Week five – stress management.
- Week six - time management and wrap-up.
- Week six – time management and wrap up.

RESULTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

No previous studies in Ireland, or elsewhere have quantitatively measured the impact of peer mentoring on key academic variables.

A statistically significant increase in average GPA was found for one of the three groups involved in the peer mentoring programme.

The total cost of running the programme was €15k. The bulk of the costs pertained to purchasing the advice and expertise of a peer mentoring expert and paying for student lunches for the weekly group sessions.

It is anticipated that overall the programme will lead to cost savings as a consequence of lowering the attrition rate for the programmes involved, which results in a net saving for the college.

Feedback from students indicated that they would like the programme to be continued into the second semester of first year. Specifically, they felt that sessions in semester two to coincide with the release of first semester exam results would be helpful. Therefore, this coming year, instead of having six sessions in semester one, there will be four sessions in semester one and two in semester two.

Feedback from both mentors and mentees was positive! However, attendance at some lunches was poor.

A statistically significant decrease in the attrition rate was found for one of the three groups involved in the peer mentoring programme.

As attendance was poor at some group lunches, it is recommended that they be included on students' official timetables to encourage participation.

Mentoring lunches should be fun and include background music and games!

Although the programme was a huge success, it took a great deal of time and effort to coordinate!

Directions for further study:

The programme will be expanded this year to include just over 400 incoming first year business, engineering and computing students. Further research will be conducted to measure the efficacy of the programme across this larger cohort. Further research is also planned to measure the on-going impact, if any, of the mentoring programme. For example, it is possible that the positive gains made as a consequence of the programme will be lost, or that there may be a delayed reaction whereby improvements are not seen until the end of first year.

Bibliography: Andrade, M. (2006) International students in English-speaking universities adjustment factors *Journal of Research in International Education* Volume 5(2): 131-154; Andrews, A. and Clark, R. (2011) *Peer Mentoring Works! How peer mentoring enhances success in higher education* Aston University; Fox, A., Stevenson, L., Connelly, P., Duff, A. and Dunlop, A. (2010) Peer-mentoring undergraduate accounting students: The influence on approaches to learning and academic performance *Active learning in higher education* Volume 11(2): 145-156; McAleavy, G., Collins, K. and Adamson, G. (2004) Adult learning in Northern Ireland: Investigating further education policies for widening participation *Research in Post-Compulsory Education* Volume 9(1), 83-104; O'Reilly, P. (2008) *The Evolution of University Access Programmes in Ireland* Geary Institute, University College Dublin.