

Creating Classroom Communities: Faculty & Peer Mentor Collaboration in First-Year Only Classes

April Chatham-Carpenter
Interim Associate Provost
University of Northern Iowa
chatham@uni.edu

Deirdre Bucher Heistad
Liberal Arts Core Director
University of Northern Iowa
Deirdre.Heistad@uni.edu

Michael Licari
Interim Provost
University of Northern Iowa
Michael.Licari@uni.edu

Kristin Moser
Senior Research Analyst, Institutional Research
University of Northern Iowa
Kristin.Moser@uni.edu

Kristin Woods
Assistant Dean of Students
University of Northern Iowa
Kristin.Woods@uni.edu

Abstract - Freshmen who enrolled in a first-year only section of a general education course their first semester at the University of Northern Iowa in 2012 were retained at a rate of 85.6% into their second year of college, in comparison to 79.6% of those who did not take a first-year only section. One key aspect of these freshmen-only sections is the mentoring relationship between host instructors, course-embedded peer mentors, and first-year students. The peer mentors in these classes are 2nd, 3rd, or 4th year students who work with the host instructors to effectively address students' first-year transition issues. A faculty/staff leadership team and host instructors guide peer mentors in the use of best practices for engaging students, while the peer mentors then model this similar behavior with first-year students. Our data show the presence of these mentoring relationships creates a learning community for all involved, making a difference in the classroom and students' lives. This paper will present the research we have done illustrating why this classroom-based faculty-peer mentoring program works, using survey and retention data. This model has worked well across disciplines and existing general education courses at the university, and therefore can serve as a model for other campuses.

Introduction

As part of the University of Northern Iowa's reaccreditation efforts with the Higher Learning Commission, the University of Northern Iowa (UNI) was selected in 2008 to participate in a national higher-education project known as "Foundations of Excellence® (FoE) First Year," in partnership with the John Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education, formerly known as the Policy Center on the First Year of College (John N. Gardner Institute, 2014). With over 130 faculty and staff volunteers, UNI partook in a guided, intensive self-study of all aspects of the first year, focusing on nine aspirational dimensions set out by the Gardner Institute. Coming out of this self-study were several university-wide initiatives to improve the first college year, including establishing a First-Year Council to oversee these initiatives, setting up a first-year cornerstone course, establishing a peer mentor program for first-year only general education classes on campus, using an early alert system (MAP-Works) to better help our students progress through their first year, and collaborating with faculty and staff offices to better coordinate what is offered for first-year students.

Prior to UNI's participation in the Foundations of Excellence self-study in 2008, most student success initiatives took place within Student Affairs as co-curricular activities. Once the self-study of the first-year experience of college was complete, with an action plan in place, some of the initiatives began to be jointly shared by both student and academic affairs. The course-embedded peer mentoring program for freshman students is one such initiative. This initiative is different than previous programs in that the

support being provided takes place within the classroom where the host instructor (the instructor for the general education class) and peer mentor work together so that campus resources are available to their students as needed. Whereas these resources have long been available to students, now that these resources are marketed within the classroom, we have a systematic way of wrapping campus resources around each student enrolled in a first-year only class. The purpose of this paper is to explain how the course-embedded peer mentoring program in first-year only general education classes is helping the university address issues related to retention and faculty mentoring of students at various levels.

Literature Review

Vincent Tinto (2000) promoted the concept of classroom as community, suggesting that academic engagement and social involvement should not be viewed as separate processes operating in different settings. Instead, he argued that “involving classrooms” operate as small communities within the larger campus, creating conditions that have the potential to encourage other types of involvement, social connections, quality of effort, and integration (p. 82). By working to create engaging, supportive classroom communities for first-year students within the course-embedded peer mentoring program, characterized by collaboration between student affairs and academic affairs, we move beyond the artificial distinction between students’ academic lives and their out-of-classroom involvement.

Models of Peer Mentoring

Multiple models of peer mentoring are being used in first-year classes at institutions of higher learning. In a comprehensive review of undergraduate curricular peer mentoring, Smith (2013a & b) highlighted several types of programs that have evolved on college campuses since the 1970’s, including using undergraduate peer teaching assistants within large lecture classes, supplemental instruction for difficult gateway courses, peer-led team study groups for math and science courses, common courses featuring peer leaders within living-learning communities, writing fellows who serve as undergraduate writing tutors across the curriculum, peer mentors within first-year success seminars, and various institution-specific peer mentoring programs. Smith (2013b) goes on to identify the key features of curricular peer-mentoring:

...the undergraduate peer mentor’s placement or attachment to a *credit course* and its instructor(s), his or her identity as a *near-peer* to students enrolled in that course, the wide variety of *peer mentoring* roles that may be instructional yet differ from authoritative instruction and grading, and the existence of a *program* that coordinates and supports the learning of peer mentors and their host instructors. (p. 27)

Embedding peer mentors in general education courses for the purpose of increasing first-year student engagement is less common, unless the general education courses are connected to linked first-year success seminars. Two examples of peer mentors working within general education classes for such a purpose are the University of Calgary and Brigham Young University.

The University of Calgary peer mentoring program started as an informal effort on the part of one instructor to connect a former student from an interdisciplinary major course to a section of that same course in a future semester, with the goal of increasing student engagement and strengthening the learning environment. This evolved from a volunteer tutoring position administered on a course level, to a broader experience with institutional support. The program is now administered by a coordinator who places peer mentors with different host instructors across several disciplines (Epstein, 2013). Peer mentors receive academic credit for the experience through a seminar course, and engage with their students through class presentations, in-person and online conversations, and facilitation of in- and out-of class activities.

At Brigham Young University, peer mentors are connected to multiple general education courses at a time, typically working with about 40-60 students per year (Brigham Young University, n.d.). The peer mentors start building relationships with these students when the first-year students come in for orientation, and they work with a cohort of students who have a similar set of first-year classes, or

“mentored courses” (Brigham Young University, n.d.). The peer mentors send out strategic weekly email messages to their students, connect students to resources on campus, and meet with students outside of class when needed for intervention reasons. In addition, they have weekly training meetings with faculty supervisors.

Effects of Peer Mentoring

National research on the positive influence of peers on college student learning and development provides support for continued collaboration between faculty and student affairs professionals in curricular peer mentoring programs. In a longitudinal study of nearly 50,000 undergraduate students using 192 measures of college student experiences, Astin (1993) found that “the student’s peer group is the single most potent source of influence on growth and development during the undergraduate years” (p. 398).

Peer mentoring in particular has been linked to increased post-secondary grades (Rodger & Tremblay, 2003), and social integration and student learning, including writing and critical thinking (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 2010; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Structured, academically-focused peer mentoring has also exerted a significant and positive influence on cognitive gains and decreased psychological distress for first-year student participants (Fantuzzo, Riggio, Connelly, & Dimeff, 1989).

Recent studies have highlighted the importance of peer mentors in strengthening student writing and reading skills. Henry, Brulan, and Sano-Franchini (2011) assessed the outcomes of course-embedded peer mentoring in a first-year composition course and found that mentors helped first-year students acquire academic subject knowledge in composition and provided psychological and emotional support during the transition to college. Peer writing fellows, or writing tutors, have functioned as mentors in courses across the curriculum at many universities, reviewing student writing and providing feedback (Smith, 2013a & b). Subsequently, extensive experiences with reading and writing have been found to serve as significant predictors of first-year satisfaction with academics (Moser, 2013) and academic adjustment (Laanan, Starobin, & Eggleston, 2010; Woods, 2013) for community college transfer students. This suggests the potential for peer mentor contributions to developing student writing and reading skills on academic outcomes for first-year students.

Cuseo (n.d.) reviewed empirical data on outcomes of peer support programs, and found a positive and significant impact on student retention, learning (for both the peer leader and the first-year student), social and emotional development, and leadership. In summary, Cuseo (n.d.) concluded:

... peer leadership programs create a win-win scenario: students benefit from support provided by peer leaders; peer leaders benefit from the support they provide students; and the institution benefits by implementing a student success-promoting intervention that is not cost-prohibitive, yet generates institutional revenue by increasing retention of tuition-paying students. (p. 4)

Research Questions

Based on the above literature, we know that peer mentoring programs do make a difference, but we were unsure of the nature and effects of our specific type of course-embedded peer mentoring program on students, peer mentors, and host instructors, since it seemed unique among the types typically associated with peer mentoring (Smith, 2013a & b), with its connection to a general education course but not a first-year success seminar, and its focus on increasing student engagement in the first year. Therefore, we asked the following research questions.

1. What tasks are typically done by peer mentors in first-year only general education classes in this course-embedded peer mentoring program?
2. What are the reactions of students, peer mentors, and host instructors to the course-embedded peer mentoring program?
3. What are the effects of the course-embedded peer mentoring program on student retention and academic development at UNI?

Methods

Background

UNI's first-year retention rate, while good by comparison with our peers, was beginning to trend slightly downward starting with the entering class of 2007. Furthermore, the retention and graduation rates of non-white students have always lagged behind the rest of the student body. In 2007, the first-year retention rate was 83.7%, but by 2010, it had fallen to 82%. To address these concerns, UNI is using a collaborative approach, mobilizing resources from the divisions of Academic Affairs and Student Affairs. This collaboration is important, because we know from reports of students' academic self-efficacy (via MAP-Works, an early intervention system that allows the university to identify at-risk students early in the semester; EBI MAP-Works, 2014) that their academic performance is dependent upon both academic and social factors. One significant initiative to come from these joint efforts is the course-embedded peer mentor program.

Structure of the Course-Embedded Peer Mentor Program

Several faculty and staff members coordinate the course-embedded peer mentor program. The leadership team is made up of the Director of the Liberal Arts Core, the Assistant Dean of Students, and an Administrative Fellow faculty member in the Provost's office. The Director of the Liberal Arts Core works with the Director of the Office of Academic Advising to recruit faculty members to teach first-year only courses. The Assistant Dean of Students handles the recruitment of peer mentors each year. The Director of the Liberal Arts Core and a faculty Administrative Fellow in the Provost's office both teach in the first-year program, and along with the Assistant Dean of Students, team-teach the "Studies in Peer Mentoring Seminar," for which the peer mentors receive course credit. The leadership team also provides information on first-year issues for the host instructors involved in the program, working with them to best integrate peer mentors into their classes. In addition, they work together in assessing the peer mentor program.

Over the last four years, our First-Year Only (FYO) and Peer Mentor programs have grown extensively. The program was first created to enhance the experience of another new initiative called First-Year Cornerstone, a year-long general education course designed to satisfy both the writing and oral communication requirement within UNI's Liberal Arts Core. Both First-Year Cornerstone and the course-embedded peer mentor program were piloted in fall 2010 with 9 First-Year Cornerstone courses and 11 peer mentors. The following year we introduced peer mentors into additional courses within our Liberal Arts Core, ranging from Math in Decision Making to Religions of the World. In 2014-2015, we anticipate having over 28 peer mentors for 26 FYO general education course sections. This rapid expansion is due to initial observations that indicate our efforts are making a difference. Whereas the retention rate at UNI for non-FYO supported courses is 79.6%, the retention rate for our FYO course-embedded peer mentor program supported courses is 85.6%.

The peer mentoring experience involves a complex collaboration among peer mentors, first-year students, host instructors, student affairs staff members, and the seminar leadership team. To this end, we acknowledge that peer mentors can only achieve their goals with the guidance and mentoring of the host faculty. The host instructors are expected to meet regularly with the peer mentor for planning/check in purposes, provide feedback as requested on peer mentor performance to seminar instructors, and provide clear expectations on how the peer mentor might contribute to the class.

The peer mentors help build community within the required general education classroom and mentor first-year students, the goal being that first-year students feel that they have ready access to a helpful peer role model, develop a connection to the UNI community, and identify appropriate campus resources and opportunities that contribute to their educational experience. To achieve these outcomes, the peer mentors complete 10 hours per week of work in support of students in their assigned first-year course, which they have also taken as a first-year student, including (a) maintaining regular office hours, (b) participating in the Studies in First-Year Peer Mentoring seminar, (c) attending every class session of

their assigned first-year course, (d) assisting the faculty member in the classroom, and (e) mentoring individual students in and outside of class.

Participants

In Fall 2012-13, there were 8 sections of first-year only Liberal Arts Core classes with 8 course-embedded peer mentors and 8 host instructors, serving 381 distinct students. In Fall 2013-14, the number of sections increased to 15 sections of first-year only Liberal Arts Core classes with peer mentors, with 662 distinct students, 16 peer mentors, and 10 host instructors. Courses represented the disciplines of biology, earth sciences, family services, geography, math, music, political science, religion, and theatre. Average class sizes were 55 and 50 (fall 2012 & fall 2013 respectively), with a range of 24 – 77 in 2012 and 14 – 89 in 2013.

Dataset for RQ1 & RQ2

The data reported for RQ1 and RQ2 is based on surveys of students, peer mentors, and host instructors with questions about tasks done, relationships built, and satisfaction with the program from data collected during the 2013-14 academic year. See Table 1 for information on number of participants and years for these data sets.

Dataset for RQ3

The instruments used for RQ3 were administered to the fall 2012 cohort of entering freshmen (n=1,791). Students were asked to respond to a series of surveys over the course of their freshman and sophomore years at the university. We combined information obtained from these surveys into a large data set, which was merged with existing institutional data related to student background characteristics (e.g., high school GPA, race/ethnicity) and student outcome measures (e.g., retention, university GPA).

Students in the present study completed the MAP-Works transition survey during the fall 2012 and spring 2013 semesters of their first year at the university. In addition, these students also participated in the MAP-Works sophomore survey during the spring 2014 semester of their sophomore year. See Table 1 for respondent totals for each of the surveys used in this study.

Table 1: *Survey Data Information*

Type of Survey	Date of Survey	Type of Participant	# of Participants	Population
MAP-Works	Fall 2012	First-year student	1,569	1,700
MAP-Works	Spring 2013	First-year student	1,183	1,709
MAP-Works	Spring 2014	Sophomore students	630	1,329
Student survey about peer mentors	Fall 2013	First-year student	197	662
Peer mentor survey	Fall 2013	Peer mentors	15	16
Host instructor survey	Spring 2014	Instructor	8	10

Analyses

For RQ3, a variety of student academic factors were used to determine the impact of FYO participation and student development at the university. The dependent variables for RQ3 included semester GPA, student retention, and student academic development. The student academic development construct addressed students' reading comprehension and writing skills during spring 2013 (the second semester of their freshman year), and was measured on a 7-point scale (1=not at all to 7=extremely). Several independent variables were also analyzed in the present study, including gender, race/ethnicity, ACT composite score, high school GPA, first generation status, student socio-economic status, and full-time vs. part-time student enrollment. A regression analysis was run with retention, GPA, and academic development as dependent variables, and predictor variables including student background characteristics and whether the student took a FYO class or not with a peer mentor.

Results

Research Question 1

The first research question we asked was “What tasks are typically done by peer mentors in first-year only general education classes.” According to surveys of both host instructors and peer mentors, there is evidence the peer mentors are regularly participating in activities such as grading assignments, answering student emails, meeting with students during office hours, helping prepare and present class materials, and leading class discussions.

In a survey of eight host instructors in Spring 2014, the instructors indicated that the top five activities done by peer mentors in their first-year only classes were updating students about class information (100%), tutoring individual students or meeting one-on-one with students (100%), holding study sessions (100%), grading or providing feedback on student assignments (75%), and taking attendance (63%). Half of the instructors indicated their peer mentors teach lessons (on student success topics or class-related topics) (50%) and facilitate group discussions (50%). Some host instructors allow their peer mentors to plan outings or out-of-class get-togethers or take students to out-of-class events (38%).

It is evident that the peer mentors are involved in both in-class and out-of-class activities in their first-year only classes; although on the surface, it appears the peer mentors are doing similar tasks to what a traditional peer teaching assistant might do in a regular general education classroom. What makes their role unique for first-year students becomes more evident, when looking at the data for the next research question.

Research Question 2

The second research question we asked was “What are the reactions of students, peer mentors, and host instructors to the course-embedded peer mentoring program.” To determine reactions to the peer mentoring experience, we collected survey data on the success of the program from students, peer mentors, and the host instructors in the first-year only classes.

First-Year Students

First-year students enrolled in first-year classes reported positive experiences with peer teaching assistants. In a mid-term survey of 197 first-year students in Fall 2013, 37.2% said they had already met once with their peer mentors, and 18.9% had met 2 or more times with a peer mentor. Almost 60% of the students said their peer mentors had helped them “often” or “a lot” with study skills (59.6%) and meeting academic challenges (53.6%), which is consistent with the findings from RQ1.

However, the majority of those responding said their peer mentor had helped them with connecting with campus resources (70.1%), campus opportunities (65.4%), campus events (62.3%), student organizations (62%), and the university as a whole (77%). In addition, 55% of those responding said that their peer mentor had helped them in their ability to talk to professors (54.9%) and making connections with their first-year only professor (60.2%). Almost 55% of them agreed that their peer mentor also had already helped them connect with their classmates in their first-year only class (54.6%), and 44.9% said their peer mentor had helped them deal with personal challenges. So we see evidence of learning communities being built by the work of the peer mentors, where the work of the peer mentor goes beyond that which is traditionally associated with a peer teaching assistant into the realm of student engagement for first-year students.

Peer Mentors

In a Fall 2013 survey of 15 course-embedded *peer mentors*, they emphasized the importance of the relationships they were building with faculty and students in their role as peer mentors. The peer mentors indicate a high degree of satisfaction with both their classroom participation and with their communication with their instructors, with scores ranging between 4.07-4.60, on a 5 point scale (very dissatisfied – very satisfied) on items such as (a) opportunities for helping in the classroom (M = 4.07),

(b) opportunities to present information in class (M = 4.21), (c) opportunities to help respond to student work (M = 4.40), (d) faculty communication about weekly class planning (M = 4.53), (e) faculty feedback on how well you're doing (M = 4.47), and (f) faculty's general communication with you (M = 4.60).

Some example comments from peer mentors on open-ended questions illustrate the positive nature of the relationship developed with both students and professors, as seen below.

- *There's nothing I would change in my experience at a PTA, I loved getting to know so many students, help them adjust to the college experience, lead class activities and work with such a great and knowledgeable professor!*
- *I feel that my instructor was awesome, and I did not have any issues!! She was truly a great inspiration to me as well as the students I'm sure, and I look up to her not only in the setting at UNI but also outside of class also. I really consider her a role model and I am so grateful to have had the opportunity to work with her this year!*
- *I loved the students!!! I could tell that they really cared about me and that they really valued my presence in the classroom. I also loved the professor that I worked with and was very happy coming to class every day.*

Overall, peer mentors believe they are making a difference in their students' lives and are continuing to build important relationships with faculty members through this course-embedded peer mentoring program.

Host Instructors

Host Instructors also indicated a high degree of satisfaction with the course-embedded peer mentoring program, from a survey conducted in Spring 2014, with 7 different general education courses and 8 host instructors represented. Host instructors were split between "strongly agree" and "agree" (M = 1.50, on a 5 point scale) when asked whether peer mentors were an effective asset for first-year classrooms and were effective in helping first-year students and instructors for first-year only classes. When asked about how much their PTA or peer mentor helped students in specific areas, host instructors believed that peer mentors were helping students frequently or very frequently in areas such as making campus connections, dealing with academic concerns, building connections with professors, and making a successful adjustment to college.

When asked to provide more information on their relationship with the peer mentors and experiences with the program, host instructors overall were very positive, as seen in the comments below.

- *The first-year experience program and the PTAs is the best thing to have happened to my teaching in the past 10 years. I am completely spoiled and have my fingers crossed for two PTAs for the coming year.*
- *It works, I like it, I would welcome it again. It is another layer of work for the instructor, but worth it. I think we get out of the PTAs what we are willing to put in to them and their training.*
- *Students in the classroom benefit. So do the PTAs and the instructor. I hope the PTAs will have grown, expanded their horizons, and have an appreciation for a wider range of student issues. I hope that I am a better instructor because of them. Meeting with them, hearing their opinions, having them be the "voice" of the students, that all helps me learn to do my job more effectively.*
- *If every UNI student could take one class their first semester with a PTA in it, we could broaden their impact and also enhance faculty awareness of the needs of first-year students, enabling faculty to modify some of the ways they approach first-year students.*

In short, first-year students, peer mentors, and host instructors all are seeing the benefits of a course-embedded peer mentoring program, with mentoring happening by the host instructors for the peer mentors, and by the peer mentors for the first-year students. Peer mentors are guided by host instructors and the faculty/staff leadership team in the use of best practices for engaging students, while the peer mentors then model this similar behavior with first-year students. Our data clearly show that the presence

of these mentoring relationships creates a learning community filled with student engagement opportunities for all involved, making a difference in the classroom and students' lives.

Research Question 3

The third research question asked “What are the effects of the course-embedded peer mentoring program on student retention and academic development at UNI?” Initial data runs showed a statistically significant difference in retention between students who took a FYO course and those who did not ($X^2(1) = 6.224, p = .013$, 2-sided test), with 79.6% of students who did not take a FYO course being retained into their second year, in contrast to 85.6% of students who did take a FYO course being retained into their second year.

A regression analysis, while controlling for high school GPA, examined the impact of FYO course involvement on the MAP-Works factor of student communication skills, as measured by students' perceptions of writing and reading comprehension skills. This factor was chosen as a dependent variable in this model, since the literature on peer mentors has shown that peer mentoring can lead to improvements in writing and critical thinking (Kuh et al., 2010; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Additionally, as mentioned above, some models of peer mentors see peer mentors deployed in writing courses, where they are shown to be effective (Henry et al., 2011). Indeed, despite the fact that our FYO courses are not specifically writing courses, we found that students who participated in a FYO course had significantly higher self-ratings of communication skills ($M = 5.45, sd = .897$) when compared to students who did not take a FYO course ($M = 5.25, sd = .971$), $t(1153) = -2.852, p < .005$. This indicates that students who participate in a FYO course perceive themselves to have significantly higher writing and reading comprehension skills compared to their non-FYO peers.

This is an important finding, since, as seen in Figure 1, student communication skills are an intermediate variable between student FYO participation and student retention. Simply put, FYO participation leads to better perceived communication skills, which in turn leads to higher rates of student retention. Students from the Fall 2012 cohort who took at least one FYO course were retained at a rate of 85.6% into the Fall 2013 semester, compared to 79.6% retention of students who did not take a FYO course. This finding shows particular promise as the university strives to reach an 85.0% retention rate goal set by the governing body in the state.

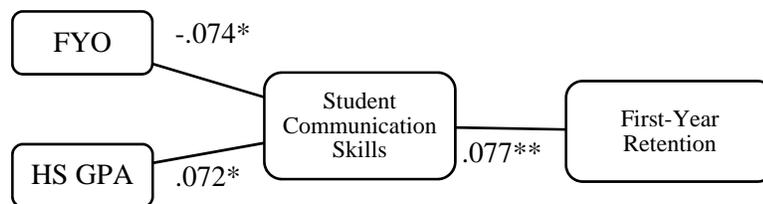


Figure 1: FYO participation and first-year student retention

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

In addition to the effect on first-year student retention, an effect can also be seen between FYO participation and student GPA at the end of their sophomore year of college (see Figure 2).

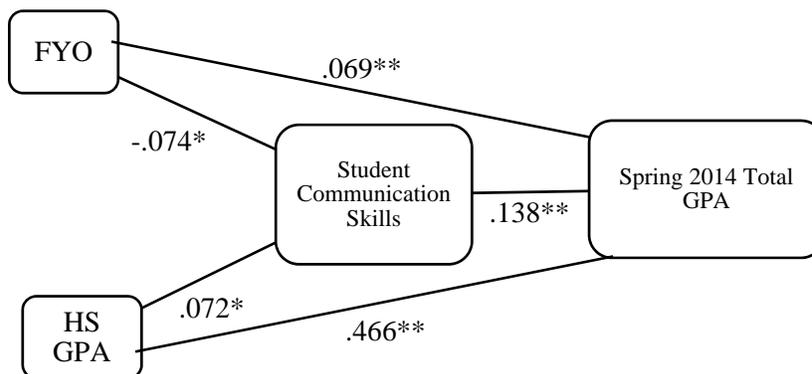


Figure 2: FYO participation and first-year student retention

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

Again, students who participate in FYO courses have improved perceived communication skills, which then lead to improvements in second-year GPA of those students.

Discussion

UNI's course-embedded peer mentoring program is innovative in that it integrates student success materials, developed by student affairs professionals, within existing Liberal Arts Core (general education) courses. Rather than working through a student success course/seminar, which had not been supported or approved by our university's Faculty Senate over the years at this institution, this program found a way to build this material into required general education classes. Through extensive collaboration between the Office of Academic Advising, the Liberal Arts Core Director, the Office of the Provost, and the Dean of Students Office, we were able to designate classes across all categories of the Liberal Arts Core as "first-year only" (FYO).

The results of our analyses on our three research questions support the findings of previous literature on peer mentoring. Prior work has shown that peer mentoring can be expected to lead to better post-secondary grades, improved student learning, and more successful transitions to college. Our findings here confirm that FYO courses with peer mentors can lead to all of these outcomes.

We found that (a) faculty, peer mentors, and first-year students in FYO courses are all working together in a learning community in which students are engaged in learning inside and outside the classroom; (b) faculty, mentors, and students perceive benefits from the FYO courses in building a learning community around student engagement; and (c) students who take a FYO course are retained at a higher rate than those who do not, with higher college GPAs in their sophomore year. This last result is particularly encouraging, as it demonstrates that FYO courses have an enduring impact on students who take them. We believe that as a result of our innovative approach, we are able to show positive results across all three research questions. Although our findings show that FYO courses primarily have an indirect effect on college GPA and retention rates, those courses work via a critical skill that all students must learn: effective communication.

Furthermore, UNI's approach is self-sustaining and is one that can provide additional benefits to more advanced students. The university has created a system whereby students enrolled in first-year only sections (and benefiting from the work of a peer mentor) are targeted as preferred candidates in our recruitment of peer mentors for the following year. This has created a unique sophomore leadership experience, where peer mentors collaborate with one of their first-year professors as a sophomore, and share personal transition experiences with our next group of first-year students.

Connecting peer mentoring to the Liberal Arts Core has also raised awareness among faculty members about the importance of early intervention efforts. As such, faculty participation in the MAP-Works retention/early intervention system has increased substantially with the growth of our peer mentoring program. Overall, the peer mentoring program has created an opportunity for us to integrate student affairs expertise in student development, leadership programs, and mentoring with faculty expertise in content knowledge, classroom pedagogy, and academic integration.

Because of the course-embedded peer mentoring program, first-year only course faculty work in partnership with a larger support team. The larger support team includes representatives from the Dean of Students Office, Admissions, Financial Aid, Residence Life, Center for Multicultural Education, the Student Involvement Center, Wellness, Advising and Career Services, and the Rod Library. Thanks to this on-going collaboration, first-year students have been able to take advantage of the plethora of co-curricular activities and learning experiences UNI has to offer at higher level than in non-FYO classes.

Our experiences throughout the development of the course-embedded peer mentoring program have taught us a great deal about the importance of collaboration across divisions. In particular, we learned that personal relationships developed within the Foundations of Excellence (FoE) collaborative model created the energy and mutual respect required for the next phases of our work together on this and other initiatives. On our mid-sized campus, we found that many faculty members knew few student affairs professionals on a personal level, and as such knew little about their work. Beginning with our co-chairing experiences during the self-study phase of the FoE project, our new connections with each other grew into ongoing, personal/professional relationships that have been vital to our continued success.

We have learned that by creating structured opportunities for student affairs professionals and faculty members to bring their expertise to joint projects, we create stronger programs. For example, student affairs professionals focus on teaching peer mentors about student development, outreach, and mentoring, while host faculty members create openings within their existing classrooms for co-curricular integration with academic topics and community building.

Conclusion & Recommendations

The course-embedded peer mentoring initiative to create FYO general education courses with embedded peer mentors can be replicated in other institutions. The additional infrastructure is minimal, and involves some modest faculty development and teaching an extra course that the peer mentors take. Requirements for financial investment are thus low. The faculty development needs to be centered on how to incorporate a peer mentor into their courses, as well as what material needs to be present in a FYO section. The course for the peer mentors involves material on peer leadership. The return on investment, as shown by the results of our three research questions, is substantial. All involved (students, mentors, faculty, and the broader institution) receive direct benefits from the program.

One condition that is required for this initiative to work, however, is a collaborative environment across the institution, especially between the divisions of Academic Affairs and Student Affairs. The University of Northern Iowa achieved this as a result of the FoE project, although presumably there are less resource-intensive ways to foster collaboration and cooperation. We do feel, though, that the FoE project created enduring and strong links between the two divisions that make initiatives such as the FYO courses more seamless.

Another condition that is required is careful class scheduling, based on faculty resources and incoming student needs. This means that the institution needs to have a good grasp of the nature of its incoming freshman class, including new-student enrollment and what types of classes they typically have already completed. In an era of increased ability for high school students to earn college credit, properly scheduling FYO courses is becoming a larger challenge.

A final condition that is required is a solid system to support the peer mentors. This does involve the course they enroll in, but other resources need to be available to the mentors. UNI uses MAP-Works, so mentors can refer students to campus resources when first-year students are experiencing challenges. Some sort of "student need" calendar might also be established to help peer mentors focus each week on a

particular topic. Simply requiring peer mentors to have unstructured office hours each week is unlikely to be successful, so many FYO faculty have found it helpful to require students to meet with their peer mentors in small groups or individually during the semester.

In conclusion, we have learned many lessons from this initiative. The most important is that high levels of student success can best be achieved through cross-campus collaboration. At UNI, the FYO and peer mentoring programs exemplify not only this type of collaboration, but more importantly puts forth a model for student success that positively impacts students, faculty, and staff.

References

- Astin, A. (1993). *What matters in college? Four critical years revisited*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Brigham Young University. (n.d.). *Freshman mentoring*. Retrieved from <http://freshmanmentoring.byu.edu/> and <http://freshmanmentoring.byu.edu/understanding>
- Cuseo, J. (n.d.) *Peer power: Developing & deploying peer leaders to promote student success*. Unpublished white paper.
- EBI MAP-Works. (2014). *MAP-Works: Making achievement possible*. Retrieved from <http://www.webebi.com/mapworks>
- Epstein, M. J. (2013). Hosting peer mentors in a senior interdisciplinary course: Notes from a pre-history of peer mentoring at the University of Calgary. In T. S. Smith (Ed.), *Undergraduate curricular peer mentoring programs: Perspectives on innovation by faculty, staff, and students* (pp.127-141). Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.
- Fantuzzo, J. W., Riggio, R. E., Connelly, S., & Dimeff, L. A. (1989). Effects of reciprocal peer tutoring on academic achievement and psychological adjustment: A component analysis. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 81 (2), 173-177.
- John N. Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education. (2014). *Foundations of Excellence First Year*. Retrieved from <http://www.jngi.org/foe-program/first-year-focus/>
- Henry, J., Bruland, H. H., & Sano-Franchini, J. (2011). Course embedded mentoring for first-year students: Melding academic subject support with role modeling, psycho-social support, and goal setting. *International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 55 (2), 2-22.
- Kuh, G. D., Kinzie, J., Schuh, J. H., Whitt, E. J., & Associates (2010). *Student success in college: Creating conditions that matter*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Laanan, F. S., Starobin, S. S., & Eggleston, L. E. (2010). Adjustment of community college students at a four-year university: Role and relevance of transfer student capital for student retention. *Journal of College Student Retention*, 12 (2), 175-209.
- Moser, K. M. (2013). Exploring the impact of transfer capital on community college transfer students. *Journal of the First-Year Experience & Students in Transition*, 25 (2), 53-75.
- Pascarella, E. T. & Terenzini, P. T. (2005). *How college affects students: A third decade of research* (2nd ed). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Rodger, S. & Tremblay, P. F. (2003). The effects of a peer mentoring program on academic success among first year university students. *The Canadian Journal of Higher Education*, 33 (3), 1-18.
- Smith, T. S. (2013a). Introduction: The history and scope of curricular peer mentoring programs. In T. S. Smith (Ed.), *Undergraduate curricular peer mentoring programs: Perspectives on innovation by faculty, staff, and students* (pp.1-22). Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.
- Smith, T. S. (2013b). Defining features of curricular peer mentoring programs. In T. S. Smith (Ed.), *Undergraduate curricular peer mentoring programs: Perspectives on innovation by faculty, staff, and students* (pp. 23-50). Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.
- Tinto, V. (2000). Linking learning and leaving: Exploring the role of the college classroom in student departure. In J. M. Braxton (Ed.), *Reworking the student departure puzzle* (pp. 81-94). Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press.
- Woods, K. L. (2013). *Predicting community college transfer student success: The role of community college academic experiences on post-transfer adjustment* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Ames, IA: Iowa State University.