First Year Identities: Complementing peer mentoring in Higher Education

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Motivation

Peer mentoring is a traditional strategy used in Higher Education to enhance the First Year experience. However this strategy, considered in isolation, is not infallible. Hill and Davenport's 1998 study of peer mentors and their first year "mentorees" at the University of South Australia revealed one main issue with the mentoring program – access. Participants experienced difficulty in contacting and meeting with their mentors/mentorees.[1]

In 2007, Craig Cameron, First Year Advisor ("FYA") for Bachelor of Commerce students, and Peter Woods, FYA for Bachelor of Business students, instituted the First Year Identity ("FYI") program. At Griffith University, First Year Advisors are appointed in each undergraduate program to assist students in their transition to university life.

Background

First Year Identities ("FYI") are not mentors in the traditional sense, but first year Bachelor of Commerce and Bachelor of Business students who act as an information resource for first year ("FY") students. As the name suggests, FYI are there for first year students' information and assistance. The primary advantage of employing first year students is visibility and accessibility. The FYI sits in the same lectures and tutorials as FY students and associates with FY students on a social level. Simply put, they are in constant contact with FY students.

The First Year Identity program is designed to utilise leadership skills that students have developed during their schooling, and in the case of mature age students, their employment. Six leadership positions are offered to first year B Com and B Bus students with an ex gratia payment of $500 made to students at the end of Semester on successful completion of a mission plan (see below).

Position Description

- Familiarise yourself with the convenors of the relevant first year courses in Bachelor of Business and Bachelor of Commerce;
- Make announcements during lectures about academic and social events;
- Attend training courses designed for FYI;
- Attend meetings to discuss FY strategy with the FYAs;
- Attend social events involving FY students;
- Assist with co-ordinating FY social and academic events;
- Act as an "ice breaker" between FY convenors/support staff and FY students at social and academic events;

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[1] Hill, M. & Davenport T. (1998) Equity and Student Support: A Peer Mentoring Program at the University of South Australia. *Journal of the Australian and New Zealand Student Services Association*, 11, 58-66.

- Provide general information to students about academic, social and welfare issues in response to student queries;
- Refer students to relevant university resources if the FYI is unable to provide general information to address the students' concerns; and
- Be available for student consultation during lecture breaks and after the lecture.

Recruitment Process

During orientation week, the FYAs made a presentation about relevant activities for the forthcoming Semester and students received a one page flyer which introduced the FYA to the students, provided web links to relevant first year resources and summarised the Semester's activities. During Week 1 of Semester, students were e-mailed about the FYI position and notices were placed on first year course intranet sites. Students were required to send their CV and a statement of 100 words or less on why they wanted to be a FYI to their FYA by the Friday of Week 1.

The FYAs received 25 applications for the 6 positions offered - 17 applications from Bachelor of Business students and 8 applications from Bachelor of Commerce students. A similar ratio applied in respect of female to male applicants. The FYAs considered the applicants purely on the basis of the documentation supplied – no formal interviews were conducted of the applicants because of time constraints. The FYAs considered the following matters relevant in the selection process:
- An appropriate mix of mature age, school leavers and international students which reflected their representation in the Business and Commerce programs;
- Academic results;
- The reasons for wanting to become a FYI – those who were in it "for the money" as opposed to the experience, were largely ignored;
- Evidence of leadership positions at school or in the workplace;
- The number of first year B Com and B Bus courses that the student was enrolled in. This matter was crucial for the purposes of FYI access and visibility. For example, many students were enrolled in double degrees or had already received credit from other teaching institutions, which meant that they may have been enrolled in only one or two of the four core first year courses in B Com / B Bus;
- Evidence of strong communication skills, which was reflected in the 100 word submission and the student's employment history.

Appointment and Training

FYIs received a formal letter of congratulations from the FYAs and a mission plan at the beginning of a ½ day training program which took place in Week 2. The mission plan set out the weekly activities and a dollar value (representing a % of the overall $500 payment) was placed against each weekly activity. For example, $40 of the $500 was allocated to selling tickets for the upcoming first year function. Weekly activities included co-ordinating and attending social and academic events (e.g. an exam preparation workshop), making announcements during FY lectures and contributing items to the online newsletter produced for FY students called the "FY Advisor".

The ½ day training was co-ordinated by a representative from Student Services and was divided up into six sessions:
- An introduction by the FYAs about the FYI role and expectations

- Issues experienced by commencing students
- Communication skills
- Support services at Griffith University
- Privacy and Confidentiality issues
- Frequently asked questions by first year students

Suggested Questions for Discussion

- How can the FYI program complement the traditional peer mentoring program?
- What would be an appropriate means of evaluating the success (or otherwise) of the FYI program?
- What alternative incentive schemes could be implemented for the FYI program?
- What other areas should FYI receive training in?