An apple a day:
Supporting 1st year learning and teaching through academic mentoring & peer-tutoring

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This presentation will outline the development process for a series of academic mentoring and peer-tutoring programs, which are 1st year higher education learning & teaching initiatives within the SET Portfolio at RMIT University in Melbourne. The presentation will propose a 3-meeting model for designing and building an academic mentor or peer-tutor program and embedding it into course structure. Presenters will address the following points of interest: identifying 1st year student needs within an academic program; designing a mentor program model to meet these needs; dealing with practicalities and limitations within the organisational culture; structuring the mentor program; building training for the mentors. The unique benefits of peer interaction in learning and teaching settings will be highlighted. Attention will also be paid to the opportunities for collaborative work between academic and student services divisions in developing these programs.

This presentation will address the following core topics as set out on the FYHE Conference website:

- Innovative and effective approaches to teaching and learning
- Schemes for monitoring and improving retention rates for first-year students
- The importance of bridging and foundation programs for first-year students
- Experimenting with new ways of involving students in their first-year learning

Objectives of 'Nuts & Bolts' presentation

- Participants will be presented a 3-meeting model for designing and developing academic mentor / peer-tutor programs;
- Collaborative opportunities between university divisions will be explored;
- Outcomes & benefits to mentors and mentees will be discussed;
- Mentor training development and delivery experiences will be shared.

Discussion arising from 'Nuts & Bolts' presentation

- Opportunities for discussion will arise through workshopping the 3-meeting model presented.

The apple in 3 steps: How to design an academic mentor program

Meeting 1 – Pick the apple

Identify the need

At the initial stages of the development process it is important to identify the specific needs that the mentor program will seek to address in 1st year cohorts. Academics are invited to clearly articulate the desired outcomes of their mentor program and to consider such diverse issues as: attrition / retention; failure rates; social and academic transition to university; building community within their course.

Understand the client

It is important to understand the academic program into which the mentor program will be embedded. Information about the academic program should be sought, including: structure (lectures, tutorials, laboratories); courses; student profile; and local culture. Potential limitations to developing a successful mentor program should also be addressed (e.g. timetable barriers; academic workload; strong industry regulation around course content).

Provide options

In the final part of this first meeting, suggestions are made as to the model of mentor program that might be adopted (e.g. one-to-one mentoring; small group peer-tutoring; drop-in centre peer-tutors). Experiences and examples of best practice models are provided. Academics are invited to share any ideas or concerns they might have. 'Homework' is set prior to the next meeting (i.e. time to absorb the information presented and talk to colleagues; resources with pertinent questions that allow academics to think through the mentor program and how it will fit into their course).

Meeting 2 – Polish the apple

Structure the program

It is expected that the 'homework' from meeting 1 will result in a range of ideas, reservations, and obstacles. Each issue is examined and as solutions emerge the program design foundations become clear. The inclusion of mentoring may be written into the official course guide and activities linked to stated learning objectives. Once there is evidence of ownership and understanding of the basic principles, local knowledge begins to guide program design. Emphasising that the program is a pilot, start by implementing a 'basic' program and expect obstacles and successes, all of which inform future delivery.

Clarify roles and responsibilities

Each participant's role and responsibility should be clear, (i.e. consultant, program 'Champion', mentor/ peer-tutor & 'mentee'). With support from the consultant, the 'Champion' (usually the Academic/ Course coordinator) will shoulder responsibility for recruiting, program design, implementation, communication and evaluation. The 'Champion's' efforts to gather collegial support for the program fosters ownership, which is crucial for sustainability. It is particularly important that the distinction between the role of the student volunteer peer-tutor and the paid (staff) tutor is clear with practical aspects of the distinction discussed in training.

Benefits for all
Understanding the multitude of tangible and intrinsic benefits of academic mentoring / peer-tutoring fosters confidence and provides the 'Champion' with 'selling points' to use in promoting the program to colleagues, management and students. Make links to teaching and learning principles, university policy or strategy, validates the program when assessed against a school or university work plan. Underpinning the concept with theory links the program to the literature of learning and embeds the program as a core teaching and learning activity, as opposed to an ancillary student activity.

Once again, the 'Champion' is given 'homework' that reflects the outcomes of this meeting including preparations of the final program plan from which training is designed.

Meeting 3 – Perfect the apple

Identify the skill set
The next step is to determine the specific set of skills mentors will require within their volunteer role. The program structure is reviewed and the desired experiences and outcomes for the 'mentees' and mentors articulated. These outcomes are then translated into a series of learning objectives for training the mentors.

Define the learning objectives
Learning objectives will vary according to the type of mentoring adopted and the academic programs mentors and 'mentees' are completing. Factors influencing learning objectives and training are discussed. These may include:

- skills & knowledge already covered in the mentors' academic program (e.g. psychology students may have already learnt communication theory);
- whether mentors already have work integrated learning experience;
- whether mentors regularly use online Blackboard facilities such as Wikis or blogs for communication.

Specific learning objectives are then set, such as: define the role of a mentor; utilise group facilitation skills; apply active listening strategies to help a speaker articulate an issue; set realistic goals. These objectives are reviewed through a continuous feedback cycle. 'Champions' are also introduced to the possibility of mentors keeping reflective e-journals on their experiences.

Compile the training content
The training itself is usually five hours. The 'Champion' often chooses to delivers one hour outlining the commitment, expectations, the course-specific content and accreditation requirements of the program. The rest of the training is drawn from an evolving resource bank of mini-modules that can be interlocked together to cover most training sessions.

The training is as activity-based as possible, encouraging students to discuss ideas and use each other as resources. Laughter is a must. Areas commonly covered are: basic concepts of mentoring; managing boundaries; team building; cross-cultural communication; active listening; mentor/tutor role distinction; reflective practice; building rapport; goal setting and time-management; learning styles.

More specific areas may be developed according to the needs of the mentors. Trainers can also source activities that mentors can use to help with exploring major concepts in a particular program.

More information

For more information on current academic mentor and peer-tutor programs at RMIT University, and for information on the services available to support these programs, please go to:

Science Engineering & Technology – Academic Development
www.rmit.edu.au/set/ad/sled

RMIT LEAD – Student Leadership & Volunteering – Student Services Group
www.rmit.edu.au/lead

Study & Learning Centre – Student Services Group
www.rmit.edu.au/studyandlearningcentre