

Keeping them keen without treating them mean: Strategies for successfully retaining quality student volunteers.

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Abstract

Student volunteers make or break the best of university transition programs, even those based on the most rigorous of research and the most detailed planning. Most universities develop programs aimed at supporting the transition of first year students that rely upon the use of later year student volunteers. This nuts and bolts session will draw on our experience of working with hundreds of student volunteer peer mentors and explore what it is about the way in which we recruit and retain these students that sets our program apart from many like it around the country. We will discuss what works, what doesn't and how to tell the difference!

Introduction

Successful first year student transition is important to the University of Western Australia, as it is for all Universities. Evidence of that focus can be seen within Student Services, where there are a number of programs specifically targeted at supporting the transition of first year students. This 'nuts and bolts' session will explore the inner workings of one program, *UniMentor* to see why it is so successful and what can be borrowed to enhance other programs at other institutions.

Background and context

The University of Western Australia is a medium size research intensive university and is a member of the Group of Eight. It is Western Australia's oldest university, established in 1911. The university has one primary campus, situated in Perth and all students study in 'on-campus' mode. UWA has the highest proportion of school leavers of any university in Australia (around 86% each year).

UniMentor is a centrally funded, centrally controlled, university wide mentoring program for first year students. The program began in 2000 with a small number of mentors and 200 mentees and has grown rapidly since then, levelling off at around 500 mentors supporting around 1500 mentees each year across the university. Early on the program was recognised nationally when it was selected as a finalist for the 2000 Australian Awards for University Teaching and received a high commendation for its excellence in the provision of student support services that assist the learning of students.

Participation in UniMentor is voluntary for both commencing students and later year students. Each year around a third of all commencing undergraduate students sign up for the program.

Key focus of session

This session is squarely focused on providing practical solutions and strategies for retaining quality student volunteers. Our mentor program will be examined as an example of how it can be achieved. It is hoped that participants will take away with them some useful ideas and strategies that can be considered within diverse contexts where student volunteers deliver service and support transitioning students.

Figure 1 illustrates the elements of typical transition programs where student volunteers deliver service and support. The program is grounded in research; has clear design and planning; is *primarily* focused on transitioning students; utilises volunteers for service delivery; and evolves (hopefully!). The overlaps indicate points of influence so, research influences design and planning; planning influences the service deliver to transitioning students by volunteers (and secondarily by staff). The greatest influence is created by the volunteers in their service delivery on the transitioning students.

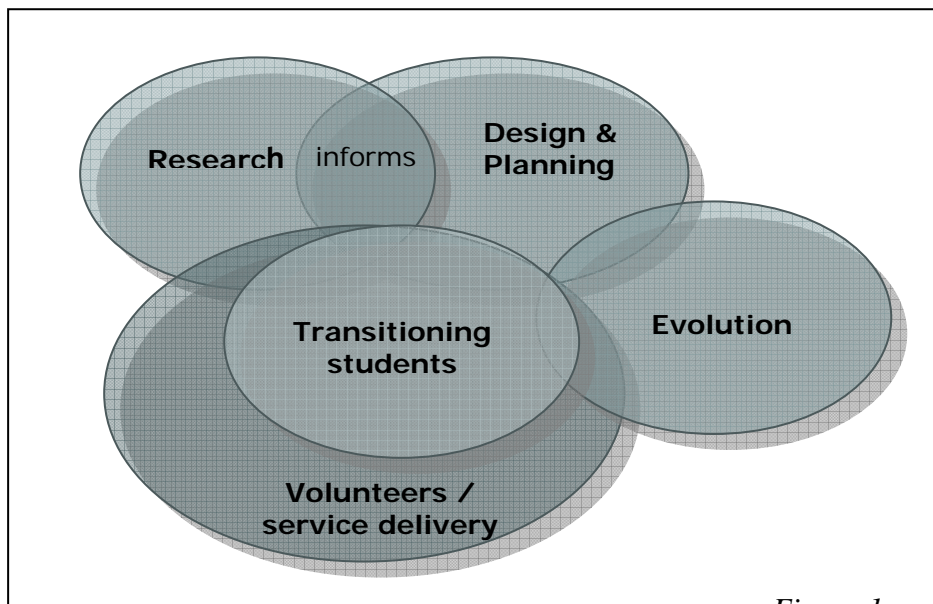


Figure 1

Figure 2 offers an alternative model which we believe underpins our success.

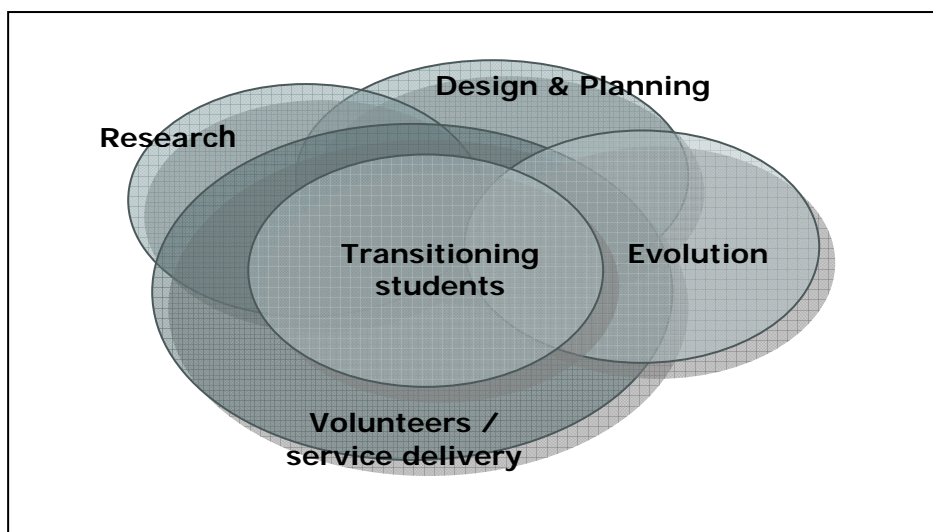


Figure 2

The two central elements in our model are the transitioning students and our volunteers. Both groups inform *every* aspect of the program.

UniMentor began based on a model similar to *figure 1*. As the program has matured we have changed our philosophy, processes and influences to give our students greater impact over the program's evolution, planning and services delivery. Perhaps the greatest change that came out of this shift is our *point of focus*. No longer do we see our mentees (transitioning students) as the centre of our program. We recognise that our mentors (volunteers) are equally central. It is these ideas that we will focus on in this session.

Session structure

This session will incorporate the following aspects:

- short introduction: who we are and where we are from
- a group activity and feedback,
- student voice (video),
- presentation and discussion

Group activity

Participants will be given scenarios based on a volunteer's perspective of participation in a university transition program. They will consider the merits of the program from the volunteer's perspective and give feedback to facilitators. This activity is designed to generate thought and discussion about the motivations and expectations of student volunteers.

Student voice

Students from our program will talk about their motivations, expectations and experiences with UniMentor. It will be interesting to see whether their views are consistent with the findings from the group activity.

Presentation and discussion

Building on the information discussed above, we will dissect the elements that have worked in our program and discuss why we believe we have been successful. We will also explore what hasn't worked.

Conclusion

In this 'nuts and bolts' session we will utilise our program, UniMentor at the University of Western Australia as an example to generate discussion and sharing of ideas about how to retain quality student volunteers. We have designed a session that will be thought provoking and hopefully challenge popular beliefs about managing volunteering in university contexts. In this era where mentoring programs exist at almost all universities, retaining quality mentors is integral to program success and requires a deliberate focus.