

From foundations to outcomes: Evaluating the effectiveness of central mentor training in a peer mentoring program in the Griffith School of Environment.

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This session will examine the effectiveness of a centrally designed and facilitated mentor training program provided to student mentors participating in a peer mentoring program in the Griffith School of Environment. The outcomes of research undertaken to ascertain training effectiveness will be presented and discussed against a backdrop of centralised program support for School-based mentoring initiatives. The training program for peer mentors in The Griffith School of Environment is one example of collaborative work taking place between academic and central elements as a result of broader institution-wide initiatives aimed at enhancing the student experience.

Introduction

This session will focus on the perceived effectiveness of central mentor training in meeting the needs of student mentors in a peer mentoring program conducted in the Griffith School of Environment. Presenters will outline the results of various evaluations of the program, including evaluations conducted immediately after the training session, and also at the conclusion of the mentoring program. The goal of research undertaken jointly by staff in the Griffith School of Environment and Student Services was to identify opportunities for improving future central mentor training and to investigate how centralised and School-based programs can successfully interact to enhance mentoring practice across an institution.

Background

The development of mainstreamed peer mentoring at Griffith University has been advanced over recent years by the implementation of two separate institutional strategic initiatives – the First Year Advisor initiative and the Mainstreaming Griffith Mentoring project.

In 2006, in response to recommendations by the *Griffith Retention Project* (Lizzio and Peters, 2004), the role of the First Year Advisor was established for all undergraduate programs to address first year student issues at the local level and to initiate and oversee activities to support transition (Burnett & Lamar, 2008; Griffith Institute for Higher Education, 2008). First Year Advisors are members of academic staff and are supported by the First Year Advisor Coordinator, an academic position located in the Griffith Institute for Higher Education (Griffith Institute of Higher Education, 2008).

The Mainstreaming Griffith Mentoring project was an institution-wide project commenced in 2006 which aimed at increasing sustained and effective Griffith mentoring initiatives (Mainstreaming Griffith Mentoring, 2008). One of the outcomes of Mainstreaming Griffith Mentoring was the establishment of central mentor training developed and facilitated by professional staff in Student Services.

As a result of the Mainstreaming Griffith Mentoring project, the Student Mentoring and Development program was established. Student Mentoring and Development is a centralised program located in Student Services with the ongoing aim to support and advance mentoring practice at Griffith. This is achieved through activities such as the gathering and sharing of resources, management of an on-line program management system through the Mentoring@Griffith website and provision of central mentor training. The professional position of Coordinator, Student Mentoring and Development was established to support these activities and located in Student Services.

The Griffith School of Environment peer mentor training program is conducted on a collaborative basis between First Year Advisors and the Student Mentoring and Development program.

The Griffith School of Environment Mentoring Program

The Griffith School of Environment has offered a peer mentoring program to first year students under the management of the First Year Advisor since 2006. The First Year Advisor at that time developed a mentor training workshop, based upon the Uni-Key Peer Mentor Program at Griffith (Griffith University Student Equity Services, 2008). A series of manuals were developed to support peer mentoring in the Griffith School of Environment, including *A Guide to Mentoring*, a *Mentor Handbook* and a *Mentee Handbook*. In 2007, a new First Year Advisor assumed the role and at this time the institution established continuing academic centralised support for the First Year Advisor role. In 2008 central mentor training was provided for the first time to peer mentors in this program. The mentor/mentee manuals were revised and updated and the First Year Advisor worked collaboratively with Student Services to ensure that the approach to mentor development and training was consistent with the general framework of the central mentor training program. In 2009, central mentor training was again provided to mentors within the Griffith School of Environment and the decision was taken to undertake collaborative research to ascertain the effectiveness of this training.

To support the development of peer mentoring activities, central funding was allocated to the Griffith School of Environment to enable First Year Advisors to conduct programs and to Student Mentoring and Development to provide central mentor training. This session explores the concrete outcomes for a group of student mentors, resulting from a foundation of two separate yet complementary strategic initiatives - First Year Advisors and Student Mentoring and Development.

Training Structure

As previously stated, central mentor training has formed part of the Griffith School of Environment peer mentor training program for two years. The sessions are four hours in length and are followed by an organisational meeting led by the First Year Advisor in which specific mentor duties and responsibilities are allocated and discussed. Central mentor

training incorporates content, activities and skill development common to many peer mentor training programs, such as: understanding the role of a peer mentor including expectations, boundaries and the development of the mentoring relationship; communication skills; group facilitation; referral techniques; awareness of diversity and cultural difference; and reflection on the first year experience to inform contact and activities with mentees. Sessions use a collaborative learning approach and activities are designed to encourage group discussion and sharing of knowledge with peers. The knowledge and experience student mentors bring to the session is valued and used as a learning resource during the program.

Evaluation

Evaluations conducted at the conclusion of the training program indicate that participants were very satisfied with the training received and believed that it prepared them to undertake their duties as a student mentor. Focus group interviews and surveys of student mentors were conducted at the conclusion of the mentoring program to ascertain the perceived relevance and usefulness of the training once mentors were actively engaged in their duties. Overall, data collection indicated that mentors continued to feel that the training program had provided them with the information and skills required to undertake their mentoring tasks, however, the mentors indicated some areas of training which require further consideration and development.

Aspects of central training considered most effective and useful at the conclusion of the program included:

- Definition of the boundaries of the role of the Mentor
- Communication skills
- Cross-cultural awareness and strategies to assist international students
- Referral techniques and information on support services available to students
- Group facilitation, including conducting the first meeting and managing challenging behaviour, for example, dominant group members

Mentors indicated that they continued to feel that all aspects of the training program were useful, however some areas were identified in which further guidance was required:

- Strategies to maintain engagement and participation of mentees in the program
- Intergenerational interaction, particularly between a younger mentor and older mentee
- Promoting positive behaviours amongst students in the face of potential bullying or harassing behaviour

Mentors suggested the addition of ongoing support in the form of a Mentors' network where practice could be shared and concerns considered collectively. Mentors highlighted the importance of *A Guide to Mentoring* and the *Mentor Handbook* which they used as an ongoing reference and source of reassurance in their role. All of the Mentors indicated that they would be interested in attending advanced training which would further develop their mentoring and leadership skills. The outcomes of this research into training effectiveness will inform the development of central mentor training undertaken in the Griffith School of Environment.

Session Plan

Following a short presentation, participants will be given the opportunity to share information about their practice and engage in group discussions around issues raised in the research findings.

Participants will discuss mentoring programs they are involved with and the models of mentor training which exist in their institutions (for example, university-wide or School-based training programs). Following this discussion, participants will be given the opportunity to consider an aspect of the research findings in greater depth through small group discussion.

The Griffith School of Environment Mentoring Program will be used as a case study to stimulate discussion and participants will have the opportunity to share practice and discuss ideas with others.

References

Burnett, L. & Lamar, S. (2008) *Improving the first year: The role of First Year Advisors (FYAs.)* Refereed Conference Paper. 21st International Conference on the First Year Experience, Dublin, June 23-26, 2008.

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Lizzio, A., & Peters, J. (2004) *The retention project*. Brisbane, Australia: Griffith University.

Mainstreaming Griffith Mentoring. (2008) Unpublished Report. Brisbane, Australia: Griffith University.

Further Information

Mentoring@Griffith
www.griffith.edu.au/mentoring

First Year Advisors
<http://www.griffith.edu.au/fya>