

When good mentoring programs seem bad: Managing expectations for ever-increasing numbers of first years

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Abstract

When asked what most excites them about starting university, one of our students' most frequent responses is 'making new friends and meeting new people'. Many students report that they join our mentoring program with precisely this goal in mind. However, as the number of participants in our program has grown, so has the number of students who report that their expectations in this regard have not been met. In this session we will describe the challenges we face in our context, and invite session participants to contribute their ideas on how we might handle this mismatch between expectations and reality. We will also ask participants to share the challenges that they face in their own contexts in managing the expectations of new first year students, and create opportunities for those who face similar challenges to make connections that can lead to ongoing support.

Background

Social integration and a sense of belonging are widely recognised to be a crucial element in ensuring a smooth transition to tertiary learning (Beasley & Pearson, 1999; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Peat, Dalziel, & Grant, 2001; Scott 2008). However, helping students to integrate socially and fostering a sense of community has proven a considerable challenge in a faculty as large and diverse as the Faculty of Arts at the University of Sydney.

Ours is one of the biggest humanities faculties in Australia, with over 7000 undergraduate students. We currently offer a total of fifteen different undergraduate degree and combined degree programs to commencing students, and over fifty-five different subject areas of study. Students in most degree programs can take at least one major outside of the Faculty, expanding the range of choice even further.

The Faculty prides itself on the breadth of choice offered to students and the many opportunities for interdisciplinary learning. These are features that are also highly valued by students.¹ However, along with the benefits of studying in this context come some serious challenges. Not surprisingly, many Arts students have little natural sense of belonging to a cohort, nor a strong sense of identity with their degree program or with the Faculty.

Students' expectations

When it comes to students' expectations about starting university, the social aspects of the experience are high on the list. In a survey of commencing students across the University, conducted during the enrolment period in 2009, 'making new friends and meeting new people' was the most common response to the open-ended question 'What excites you most

¹ Woolcott Research. (2009). Arts Undergraduate Enrolment Study.

about starting Uni?'. For Arts students, this response came in a very close second to 'learning new things/gaining new knowledge', and was well ahead of the next most common response.

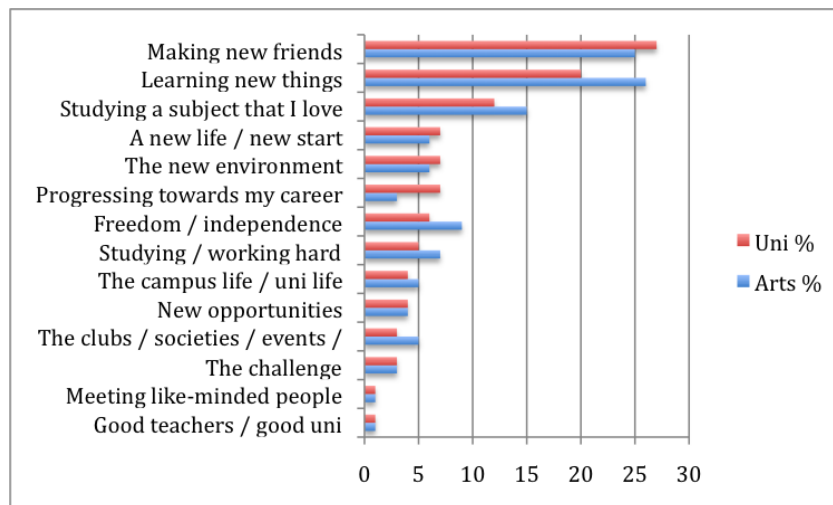


Figure 1

Survey of Commencing Students 2009: What excites you most about starting Uni?²

A major challenge for our Faculty, then, is to facilitate students' interactions and opportunities to establish social networks, in a context in which it is clearly not easy to do so.

Fostering a sense of community through the Arts Network Mentoring Program

Transition and mentoring programs are widely recognised as a way to foster a sense of community (McInnis, et al., 2000, pp. 51-53). Since 2002, the Arts Network Program has invited senior student volunteers to help welcome first years to the Faculty at enrolment, to participate in organising a welcome day for initial orientation and social networking, and to provide ongoing mentoring support, especially over the first crucial weeks of the semester.

In addition to helping students learn about the institution and increase their awareness of support services, which have been traditional goals of orientation activities, we aim to foster a sense of community by assisting in the creation of networks within the Faculty, centred around common academic interests. First years who participate in the program are matched with a group of others who are commencing in the same degree program and, ideally, are studying in at least one of the same subject areas. Although it is not possible to make a 'perfect match' every time, whenever we can we make sure that the group's mentor is also studying in the same degree program and subject area(s).

Since the program commenced, we have worked hard to ensure that students can participate not only in orientation and academic activities together, but that they also have opportunities to socialise. Over the years, groups have participated as teams in photographic 'scavenger hunts' around campus, as well as other social activities like theatre sports and trivia nights.

² Woolcott Research. (2009). Arts Undergraduate Enrolment Study. Total n=2815; Arts n=460.

Feedback suggests these activities really have helped many students to build supportive networks and to make friends. When asked to reflect on the aspect of the program they have found most valuable, around two thirds of first years and an even higher proportion of mentors generally identify making friends with others in their course and supporting one another as key aspects for them.³ The following is typical of the comments we often receive:

[The most valuable part of the program was] meeting people who are doing the same course as me. We are all still really good friends and we see each other all the time. It was a good chance (and one of the few opportunities) to spend a prolonged period of time getting to know people in your course.⁴

Not only does the program provide these opportunities for first years, but, as a wonderful bonus, it has also proven extremely beneficial for mentors. They often report finding that it helps them expand their own circle of friends:

I find that I have made numerous friends not only amongst the mentors but also with the first years. The experience was invaluable⁵

The challenge we are facing

Over the years since the program began we have experienced a significant increase in the number of participants in our program. While less than 350 first years and mentors joined the program in 2004, this year (2010) our participant numbers have reached nearly 1,000.

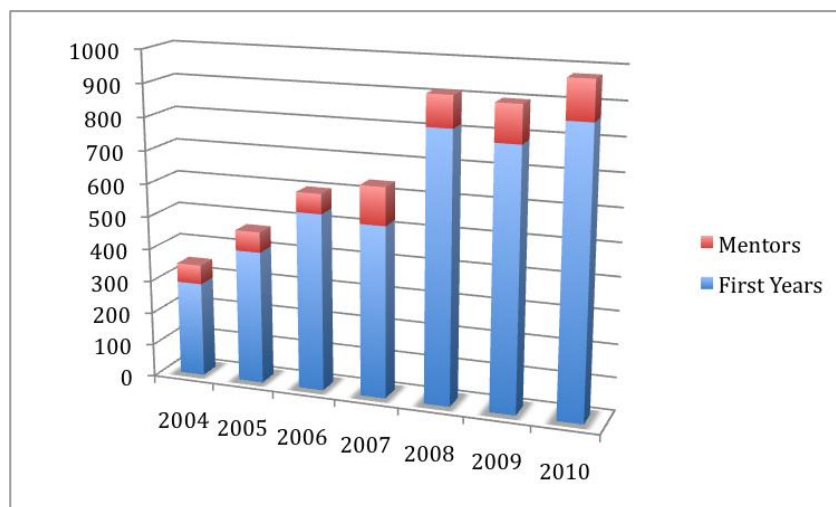


Figure 2
Arts Network Mentoring Program participant numbers 2004-2010

³ Response to the question ‘What was the most valuable aspect of the Program for you?’ in online survey at end of Semester One, 2006: First Year respondents 66%; Mentor respondents 70%.

⁴ Response to the question ‘What was the most valuable aspect of the Program for you?’ in online survey at end of Semester One, 2006.

⁵ Email from mentor to Director of First Year Teaching and Learning, April 2005 (quoted with permission).

Of particular note is the huge increase in mentors in 2007—up 90% on 2006 figures—and of first years in 2008—a jump of 57% from 2007.⁶ Since that time, both mentor and first year participant numbers have held steady or continued to rise slightly.

Around the same time that we experienced this very steep rise in participant numbers, we also began to notice an increase in feedback that suggested that participants' social experiences in the program have not always been entirely positive. While these kinds of comments are definitely in the minority, they are, nevertheless, too frequent to be ignored. The following are from first years at the end of Semester One in 2009:

I didn't really make lasting friends.

We didn't form a tight group, rather we may have smiled to one another in a lecture and that's it.

I can see the potential for the program to be successful but I think my group was too dissimilar to make any lasting connections.

A number of respondents have made suggestions about how they think this challenge might be addressed:

I don't feel that I connected with the other group members, and may as well not have gone. Perhaps in future ask questions that assess compatibility on the application forms? I had nothing in common with my group members (aside from our courses) and although, this obviously doesn't preclude interaction, ... there was no real impetus to engage.

I know you select groups based on subjects ..., which in some ways is a good idea, because it gives you those faces you recognise in your first couple of lectures. However, i think for the purpose of actually making friends, it might work better if it was based on some personality trait, or at least area code, which seem to be the two main factors in who hangs out with who.

A preference for interacting with others who are 'just like me' is only to be expected when one finds oneself in a new or unsettling situation. This may well, in fact, be the basis on which many of the closest friendships are formed. However, in spite of our desire to fulfil students' expectations and to facilitate their quest to make new friends, we are convinced that this is neither a realistic nor an entirely desirable goal of our program.

Rather than striving to match like with like, we take pride in the fact that our mentoring groups are often degree-specific microcosms reflecting the enormous diversity of our Faculty community. In a program as large as ours, we may simply have to accept that not everyone will 'hit it off' with others in their mentoring group.

What we can do, however, is to manage students' expectations so that they do not come in to the program with the assumption that it is guaranteed to help them make friends. This does not mean that we will not work hard to facilitate students' interactions and opportunities for making friends and establishing social networks. It also does not mean

⁶ This increase cannot be attributed to the rise in the number of commencing first year students in the Faculty, which went up by a relatively modest 17% in that year:
Bachelor Pass Commencing Students 2007 = 1,877; 2008 = 2,203.

that friendships won't develop naturally in this context—our feedback from participants continues to assure us that they very often do. However, our challenge now is to modify our program publicity, and our program activities, to ensure that the expectations of our prospective participants match the reality we can provide.

Questions for discussion

- (1) What type of program activities do you suggest would be most appropriate / helpful in meeting the challenge we have described?
- (2) How do you think we should publicise our program to better manage students' expectations?
- (3) Do you face similar or different challenges in the transition experiences of your first year students in relation to the 'expectations – reality mismatch', and how are you addressing these challenges?

Session outline

10 minutes: Summary of key issues in our context and the challenge we face. (As in the discussion above, at this stage we will not share with session participants the strategies that we are currently piloting to address this challenge.)

5 minutes: Participants discuss questions (1) and (2) in small groups.

5 minutes: Participants share the ideas that emerge with all participants. We share the strategies that we have piloted in 2010, and our observations about their 'success' or otherwise.

10 minutes: Participants to talk briefly about question (3). We will encourage colleagues who find that they are facing similar contexts and challenges to continue to share and support one another beyond the session and the conference.

References

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