

First Year School Contact Officer: Partnering with academics to meet the needs of commencing students

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Background

Widening student participation in higher education has resulted in an increase in student diversity. Although web-based technology is a common mode of information delivery to students, it does not always meet the needs of commencing students. This is especially applicable in the first month of course commencement when students are transitioning into academic life. Since 2009, all five schools within the college appointed First Year School Contact Officers (FYSCOs) to provide face-to-face, first-tier point of contact during normal business hours, weeks 0 to 3 to assist with commencing student inquiries. All FYSCOs are experienced administrative staff with corporate knowledge of university processes, undertook special training to understand first year student needs and introduced at orientation sessions, making them a known face to commencing students. This approach provided a one stop shop solution as students navigated through their first crucial weeks of university.

Aim

To evaluate the utility and the benefits of the FYSCOs initiative.

Findings

The utilisation of the FYSCOs initiative benefits a range of stakeholders. Not only were students receiving immediate support, academics perceived it as an additional resource to support them and their activities. Although utilisation of this service support peaked in Week 1, commencing students were still seeking the assistance of FYSCOs in Week 3. Reasons for seeking help included: a) tutorial changes; b) advanced standing; and c) access to learning platform, and d) location of teaching facilities. Of these inquiries, 41% were resolved immediately without referral. Two major themes emerged from the interview data collected to evaluate the FYSCO program. The first was a sense of relief from students who sought assistance. The second was a perception of optimal partnership between academics and administrative staff in the management of inquiries from commencing students.

Conclusion

In addition to providing 'just-in-time' assistance to commencing students, this 'one-stop shop' first-tier point of support provided by the FYSCOs enabled effective management of student inquiries across the schools. FYSCO's corporate knowledge and assessment skills enabled the use of a triage approach to student inquiries whereby immediate assistance were provided in most cases, or referred to the most appropriate person or department to manage more complicated issues. In providing this central point of contact, a partnership was established between FYSCOs and academics to effectively meet the needs of commencing students to promote a positive first year experience.