



STUDENT IDENTITIES IN TIMES OF CHANGE

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Student identities undergo enormous change on entry into the university system. Many find the change in expectations from high school or TAFE overwhelming and the alienation of a large institution adds to this. Our work as LAS advisers, whether as lecturers/tutors in discipline specific contexts, generalists in workshop situations or one-to-one teachers of tertiary literacy/numeracy, is limited to some extent because we are part of the institution. With the move toward technologising and globalising university study it is increasingly important that new students have access to a non-threatening, informal learning situation that will provide them with non-institutional, student driven support. Such a program exists at UWS and has been found to provide first year students with sufficient encouragement to continue with their courses, and often to develop their understanding of academic expectations, despite the chaos of the ongoing restructuring situation they find themselves in. Much of the peer mentor program at UWS has been co-ordinated by the Learning Centre, and has been a rewarding experience for those involved.

Keywords: *restructure; identity; peer mentoring*




Background

The University of Western Sydney (UWS) has been undergoing a process of restructure for the past eighteen months, as part of the process of economic rationalism. Concurrently, there has been a steady decrease in staff morale and increase in student grievances, including some media covered incidents, such as students having to wait forty five minutes to sit for exams because papers were not printed on time (Contractor, 2001). In addition to having to acclimatise to this state of confusion, students have to encounter other more expected challenges to their identity, as well as absorb the changes inherent in globalisation and technological advancement.

There are many changes to which students must adapt when entering the university setting, not the least of which is learning how to learn independently. Furthermore, the transfer from high school, or TAFE, can be alienating because of the sheer size of most universities. Many students become “lost” in this new world of “foreign” discourses, higher academic expectations, which are often not clearly defined, and the discomfort of perhaps not knowing anyone (James & Scoufis, 1995). For those from NESB backgrounds, or who are first generation university students, learning the accepted “behaviours” can be quite traumatic. At UWS the numbers of these students is quite high, therefore the availability of a meaningful support system is paramount. While the role of learning advisers is important, they are still part of the institution, the same institution which has been undergoing a restructure and often causing enormous inconvenience and stress to students. Consequently, we can still be seen as integral to the institution and regarded with some caution. From this perspective, a more informal student orientated approach could prove to be more effective in encouraging first year students to adapt to their new tertiary environment. One effective student orientated approach, which has been successful at UWS, is student peer mentoring. This is a strategy that can be useful in enabling the students to cope with their identity changes, eventually enabling them to become independent learners.

A number of universities in Australia, and overseas (Dolan & Castley, 1998), have found that peer student mentoring programs are of benefit to new students




(mentees), as well as to the students who mentor them (Bond, 1999). Student mentoring schemes can be "buddy" programs, for example, the very successful Student Mentor Program at Central Queensland University (see website: <http://www.cqu.edu.au/cch/mentor.htm>), or those more focussed on the learning process, such as the well researched "Supplemental Instruction" (SI) model from the USA. The latter model has been functioning at the University of Missouri-Kansas City and other institutions throughout the world for over 25 years (see University of Missouri - Kansas City website: <http://www.umkc.edu/cad>). "SI" has been found to be effective for improving retention and pass rates for mentees. Mentor programs have been found to be of considerable benefit to mentees with regard to "enhancinglearning strategies and study skills; transforming passive students into questioning and autonomous learners; providing a relaxed and non-threatening environment" (Bond, 1999, p. 11 - 13). Similarly mentors benefit from an increase in confidence, and in developing a greater sense of understanding of the course content and of learning with others (Bond, 1999). Moreover, a number of industries and discipline areas are interested in developing workplace mentoring, for example, education and business, where such skills are highly valued.

Peer Mentoring – a brief history of programs at UWS

In 1995 the then Head of the Learning Centre, Joanne Tiernan, returned from the USA with the interesting Supplemental Instruction package of peer mentoring. This was introduced to UWS, Nepean, in "difficult subjects" to assist students in understanding content and developing learning strategies in their discipline areas, through the guidance of a trained mentor. Mentors were recruited from student records, and were expected to have achieved a credit or better in the subject.

The program remained fairly small, due to limited funds and support, but was quite successful nonetheless. Evaluation and review of the program revealed that mentees (first year participants) in some subjects had increased grades compared to those who did not receive mentoring, furthermore, retention rates were improved (Shores & Tiernan, 1996).



Other mentoring programs existed within the university and included international student and local student orientation programs, a mentoring subject in education and a compulsory program, adapted from Supplemental Instruction (SI), in Engineering. All were found to be successful, particularly the latter (Shrestha, 1999).

In 1999 a steering committee was formed to amalgamate the various mentoring programs within UWS Nepean, and from this a new program was established for first semester called “Acculturation mentoring”. This was largely based on the Engineering model from previous years, with an emphasis on SI techniques for training.

From 2000 to 2001 the program has been streamlined and expanded, mostly on two campuses, and thus has enabled more first year students to take advantage of the opportunity to develop academic understanding and independent learning skills, become more familiar with expectations, and form networks for friendship and study.

How peer mentoring has functioned at UWS

Various mentoring schemes existing at UWS, Nepean, prior to the year 2000, have been amalgamated successfully and each program is conducted independently, with co-ordination of the whole scheme being undertaken by the Learning Centre, Office of the Dean of Students. First year students arriving at the university have been able to participate in one of three orientation mentoring programs. These include Orientation week leaders (OWLs), International orientation mentors and mentors for accelerated high school entrants under the Compacts program. Each set of mentors has been trained by different sections of the university (Student Union, International Centre and, in the latter case, via an accredited subject). The orientation mentoring process is predominantly one to one, with new students able to approach mentors either in person, by phone or by email. In addition to this, in first semester 2000 a group program (Acculturation) was offered in certain discipline areas, and in second semester an SI program, Developmental Learning, was offered in difficult subjects.



Orientation Programs


For Orientation week, the OWLs were trained over a two-day period, by the Students' Union, and by other staff from within the university. Mentors helped extensively at enrolments, handing out Students' Union show bags and answering a variety of questions from new students. The mentors were rewarded with t-shirts, movie vouchers and similar non-monetary rewards. First year students and University staff reported satisfaction with the program, and because of the well established ties with staff in the Division of Student Services and the International Centre the OWLs were able to integrate themselves into university based activities and maximise their interactions with new students.

The aim of the International Student program is to help international students settle into the university and into Sydney generally. The training takes place in November, from a Friday night to Sunday afternoon. The program, which includes cross-cultural issues has a focus on the diversity of mentor backgrounds and team-building, as a foundation for mentoring.

There are three types of mentoring within the International Orientation Mentoring (IOM) program:

- (I.) airport mentoring
- (II.) transit mentoring (for students in temporary accommodation)
- (III.) 'regular' mentoring (carried out on campus re accommodation and settling in).

IOMs were required to attend the International Orientation Program in first semester, where 293 new students registered, and approximately 70 new students attended mentor-led city tours. Mentors were paid \$50 per student mentored, \$10 per student transit mentored and \$50 per airport shift. The program was very successful with over 110 new international students receiving mentoring from 13 mentors. Mentors assisted international students at Orientation, as did OWLS. Eight mentors attended a debriefing focus group in July 2000 where suggestions for streamlining were made and an overwhelmingly positive response to the program was expressed. The




evaluation of this aspect of the program was undertaken by the International Student Adviser.

Another orientation mentoring program is part of the university's Compacts Scheme (CUSP). This scheme allows Year 12 students to accelerate their studies by enrolling in a subject at tertiary level. If they pass the subject it will be accredited to their degree at this university. To assist these students in their adaptation to the requirements at university, trained mentors are provided. In 2000 there were 35 CUSP students enrolled at UWS, Nepean (57 from across UWS) and eight mentors available to them. Most of the mentors were trained in an accredited subject in the Education school of Teaching and Educational Studies, "Student and Workplace Mentoring", and two were trained in the Supplemental Instruction (SI) approach. In 2000, some of the mentors elected to study the postgraduate mentoring subject "Readings in Education." According to the CUSP coordinator, the new students were remarkably independent and competent, and thus required a different form of mentoring. The mentors needed further training in understanding "gifted and talented" students to accommodate the difference between CUSP students and other students they had mentored. They contacted the first year students throughout the entire first semester.

Acculturation Program

While most of the orientation programs were available on an individual basis, it was considered important to offer students an opportunity to make friends, network and form study groups through the mentoring process. The Acculturation mentoring program was a pilot program based on one which had been developed two years previously in the school of Civic Engineering and the Environment, which was very successful, especially in terms of improved retention and pass rates (Shrestha, 1999). The first year students were expected to attend a mentor group, which was allocated space on the weekly timetable. This approach was based on the success of a similar program in previous years. Most of the other schools involved in 2000 preferred a voluntary approach, and for several schools this was their first experience with a mentoring scheme.



Since this was a pilot scheme, it was considered important that the Acculturation Program be evaluated in terms of meeting the main aim, of assisting students entering university study to achieve their personal academic goals with the support of more experienced, trained students (mentors). Questionnaires were used for evaluation of the impact of mentor sessions on the mentee experience, while focus groups and surveys evaluated the mentors' experience.

The schools involved in the pilot program in 2000 were Civic Engineering (CEE), Teaching and Educational Studies (TES), Employment Relations (ER), Law and Nursing & Health. Each of these schools had a contact lecturer, who assisted the student mentors with promotion of the program, helped them find a room, if necessary, and were available for consultation. Mentors were expected to facilitate weekly sessions of one hour each over five weeks, early in the semester. The following were features of the scheme:


Training was conducted over one day, by Learning Centre and Counselling and Health staff, most of whom have attended Supplemental Instruction Train the Trainer workshops, with a debriefing session in week 3 of the program.

The total number of students trained to be mentors was 45. Each mentor was trained in an model adapted from Supplemental Instruction. Certificates for attending training were distributed and book vouchers of \$50 for participation in the program were distributed at the conclusion of the five weeks.

Debriefing for the training revealed positive experiences, though indications were that perhaps there was too much emphasis on some aspects, such as "ice breakers", while more time could be spent on useful activities for sessions.

Program:

Most schools, with the exception of CEE, ran voluntary programs. The mentors were available for five weeks early in first semester, with CEE extending its program for the entire semester with the additional expectation that mentors would submit a short weekly report by email.




Debriefing with mentors revealed some problems with attendance of first year students. Questionnaires were distributed to first year students in core subjects in those schools involved in an effort to determine reasons for non attendance and, more importantly, to evaluate the mentoring sessions.

Results:

Reasons for not attending mentoring sessions were based on results from the questionnaires from only three schools: TES (N=51), Law (N=101) and Nursing & Health (N=37), as only one reply was received from ER (a mentee) and CEE had very few who did not attend. The main reasons given for not attending included: not aware of the program (51% in Nursing/Health); lack of time (38% in Law); didn't need help (especially TES- 32%). Responses from those who did attend mentoring sessions were positive, based on a total of 75 questionnaires received from the three programs which ran regular sessions: Engineering (41.3%), Education (28%) and Law (20%).

The majority of mentees found the sessions to be useful (62%), while 65% of the Engineering students and 43% of Law students agreed that the sessions encouraged them to continue with their course. 54% of the Engineering students agreed that the sessions helped them to understand their course, and 76% of the Engineering students felt that the mentor had answered most of their questions relating to adjustment to university. Half the total mentee responses indicated that the sessions provided them with an opportunity to network with peers. Those who had attended five or more sessions appeared to have gained the most benefit. While the overall responses indicate that more students agreed that the sessions were beneficial than disagreed (see appendix), there were some students who were undecided. It would possibly be worthwhile to research those students' responses at a further stage in their studies, to gain the benefit of hindsight. Perhaps they would have different perceptions at the end of second year, than they had at the end of semester one, first year. It would also have been interesting to research the performance of the participating students (GPA) and their attrition rate, compared to the first year cohort for that school. However, as it was a pilot program and mentors were not fully aware of the importance of keeping accurate records of mentee



attendances, this was not possible. The evaluation of the 2001 program will include these aspects.


Questionnaires were also distributed to the mentors by mail. Furthermore, they were invited to attend focus group discussions to evaluate the program. Final analysis of the focus groups and questionnaires has given a clear indication that the process was beneficial for mentors. Of the 45 mentors trained, 16 attended focus groups for discussion and debriefing, and mentor survey responses revealed that mentors enjoyed interacting with new students (50%). Most felt they had benefited (63%) from the experience. For example, they included comments such as “helped me to feel part of the university”. Several mentors felt they gained in self confidence, leadership and interpersonal skills. Both the focus groups and questionnaires brought forth a number of suggestions for improving the program, such as “more advertising to first years”, more possibility of “being able to help with subject related questions”. These suggestions have been incorporated into the program for 2001.

Developmental Learning

The second semester Developmental Learning program in 2000 was small. Difficult subjects, such as Introductory Financial Accounting, were targetted in this Supplemental Instruction based program, and twelve quality mentors were trained, though not all managed to establish groups. One Bioscience group decided to continue to meet without their mentor, after the five weeks were completed, and this was considered to be the mark of a successful group. While this particular semester's program was unable to be evaluated, several other similar programs conducted at this university have shown positive improvements in student results (Shores & Tiernan, 1996). Research into SI programs in other countries has provided evidence of benefits to first year students' retention rates and grades (see University of Missouri - Kansas City website: <http://www.umkc.edu/cad>).

Current Program

This year, 2001, has seen a growth in the number of mentors training to participate in the university's scheme aimed at supporting first year students. For example, the number of mentors trained for the Acculturation program doubled to 80, as did the



number for the Developmental Learning program, which doubled to 40. All of the above mentioned orientation programs have been conducted, followed by the Acculturation and then the Developmental Learning programs. None have been evaluated yet, though this is seen to be essential to ensure that mentoring continues after the restructure is completed. The co-ordination of mentoring at UWS will no doubt continue to involve those discipline lecturers, learning development staff and administration staff who participate in the programs, in a most satisfying aspect of supporting students in their first year of tertiary learning.

Some of the comments from past mentors provide convincing indicators of the satisfaction they have gained from being involved in the program, and the benefits they perceive for first years adapting to their new learning environment:

"...peer mentoring sessions were fun, meeting first years and helping them out in the best possible way..."

"The mentees and I got on well, more like friends than anything else. I felt it was good for them to have a familiar face around the campus who had experienced what they were going through."

"The peer mentoring sessions were a worthwhile experience for the first year students as well as of benefit to the senior students."


(regarding mentees) .."Most of them are still here in second semester, whereas when we were in first year a lot of people dropped off..."

"Some first years were a lot less worried about a subject than they were before."

(Armstrong & Carmichael, 2000)

Conclusion

At a crucial period of time in the history of the University of Western Sydney, where students are coping with the effects of a restructure, rapid loss of staff, increased use of technology and globalisation of tertiary education, it is important that there is an emphasis on providing a "human face" for new students. Student peer mentoring is



not a new approach to providing that human face, however, it is a successful complement to the human faces provided by the institution. The student mentors offer an opportunity for newer students to learn about the expectations at university, without intimidation and in a relaxed situation.


While the sample of first year students participating in the pilot Acculturation mentoring program at UWS in the year 2000 was small, the evaluation of student perceptions indicates that more students agreed that the program was beneficial than disagreed. A smaller group were undecided, but may have different perceptions if surveyed at a later time in their degree studies. Academic performance and attrition rates were unable to be examined, but will be an important aspect of evaluation of the 2001 program. Furthermore, the feedback from mentors was generally positive and it would seem that the programs offered an opportunity for these students to gain increased confidence in group situations, something which will be of benefit in their future professional lives.

Finally, the continuation of a student peer mentoring program at UWS is dependent upon the financial support of the university management, particularly in terms of the provision of book vouchers or some form of reward for the mentors. However, considering the uncertainty surrounding the restructure, perhaps the ultimate aim of the program, whatever shape it takes in the future, should be to involve the students more in the overall organisation of the program, such that it becomes increasingly student driven. There is certainly a willingness on the part of some mentors to become involved as “mentors to the mentors”, perhaps a first step toward co-ordinating the program themselves?

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