

# STUDENTS EMPOWERING STUDENTS THROUGH PEER MENTORSHIP: AN UNTAPPED RESOURCE

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*Peer mentoring (PM) builds connections and promotes academic excellence by supporting students transitioning into higher education. PM programs in nursing have also been reported to nurture nursing students' professional identities. Nursing students help their peers understand, critique, and resolve professional identity questions that arise throughout their undergraduate preparation. While a current PM committee within a Faculty of Nursing has successfully engaged the student body, it remains to be an untapped resource. Students with similar experiences can offer support regarding academics and provide valuable insight regarding the demands of the profession. An opportunity exists for peer mentors, mentees, and faculty members to become co-inquirers in exploring the nature of nursing and influence teaching and learning experiences in higher education. With students as drivers, PM has the potential to create a self-sustaining environment where strengthened and genuine student-teacher connections are privileged.*

Who do we send into the world? When asked this question, nurse educators at the University of Calgary typically list the qualities they expect of their nursing graduates, which include competence, confidence and sound ethical comportment. The road to becoming a Registered Nurse can be arduous. Along the way, nursing students find different ways to manage the challenges. Some do this in solitude while others make use of communities such as peer mentors with whom they can share common struggles and successes. Peer mentorship often involves students from the same field of study providing support and guidance to their peers. Peer mentors are often individuals who are further along in their studies in comparison to the mentees. While peer mentorship programs within nursing promote academic success, build social capital, and nurture professional growth (Lombardo, Wong, Sanzone, Filion, & Tsimicalis, 2017), these programs remain underutilized by students and faculty members. Promotion and utilization of peer mentorship programs, particularly in undergraduate nursing programs, ought to be conducted in a strategic and deliberate approach to capitalize on its potentials. In this paper, we will describe the Nursing Peer Mentorship group within the Faculty of Nursing at the University of Calgary from its inception to present state. Successes and challenges, along with future recommendations, will also be discussed to offer insight to those considering peer mentorship as a way to promote a community of practice.

Existing literature shows the benefits of incorporating peer mentorship in higher education. Walters and Kanak (2016) discussed not only the broad contributions of peer mentors from an institutional perspective but also the perceived benefit to first year students' understanding of their program and ease of transition to university. The authors emphasized the peer mentors' role in assisting first-year students' integration into the university community

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through the promotion of extracurricular activities as a way to enhance their college experience. Run by staff and student mentors, this program is an opportunity to grow and develop student mentors as leaders. This particular program highlights the purpose of peer mentorship initiatives as more than just to provide academic assistance and rather more of a holistic approach to supporting students' experience in higher education. Carragher and McGaughey (2016) discussed similar observations specific to peer mentorship and its potential effectiveness in enhancing first year students' transition to higher education. The authors posited that student experience is a critical determining factor in student retention and overall success.

Price (2009) alluded to the notion of socialization and social capital as an important factor that can influence one's desire and motivation to not only choose nursing but also to stay in nursing. Price argues that "family members, friends, educators, role models and specifically peers, were important influences on career decisions and professional behaviours" (p. 17). Price suggested that peers ought to be involved in recruitment and retentions strategies which reflects what Walters and Kanak (2016) and Carragher and McGaughey (2016) proposed.

In nursing, Lombardo, Wong, Sanzone, Filion, and Tsimicalis (2017) found the transition to higher education and academic pressures are reasons that most students joined mentorship programs. Although these factors primarily drove students to join, students voiced other benefits of joining a peer mentorship program such as "becoming part of a nursing community", receiving support to promote "mental health and well being", "reinforcing passion for nursing", and "developing self-awareness and maturity" (p. 228-229). Although Lombardo et al. (2017) described a formal mentorship program where mentees are matched with mentors, the importance of mentors being flexible and having the ability to tailor their approach to each individual is stressed as a requirement for beneficial mentorship.

A unique opportunity where peer mentorship has surfaced is in the area of simulation. Badowski and Oosterhouse (2017) suggested the use of peer mentors to provide peer coaching opportunities through the use of simulation. The authors found that the presence of peers and their ability to coach their colleagues during a simulated clinical day positively influenced their attitudes towards cooperation and teamwork (Badowski & Oosterhouse, 2017).

## **A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE NURSING PEER MENTORSHIP INITIATIVE**

The Nursing Peer Mentorship (NPM) Committee in the Faculty of Nursing at the University of Calgary originated in 2013. NPM is a student-led committee which formed as a response to students feeling segregated from the Faculty during their years of study. Initially, the NPM committee aimed to create ways for students to build community and engage with each other. Currently, the student body drives the NPM committee's purpose. By being flexible and supportive, the committee aims to engage students in learning and growing during their nursing program in collaboration with faculty members.

During the 2014-2015 academic year, the NPM committee made its official debut, hosting approximately 50 undergraduate students from various years in the program through a social event. Through an informal approach, the NPM committee purposefully planned for informal mentorship to form between junior students with more experienced senior students. Students met in groups on their own rather than being assigned an exclusive one-on-one relationship in a mentee-mentor role. Following this kickoff event, participants proceeded to extend their informal mentor-mentee relationship through social media platforms. Junior peers sought out advice or support help on academics and other nursing related questions from their more experienced nursing peers. Due to the nature of the junior peers' needs, which primarily

addressed support and guidance on specific assignments in a given semester, the groups slowly and naturally dissolved. Supported by the experiences of participants in the study conducted by Lombardo et al. (2017), it was during these opportunities that the NPM's goal of providing social connection and opportunities for professional growth and development as students were met.

## **NURSING PEER MENTORSHIP COMMITTEE - ITS CURRENT STATE, CHALLENGES, AND OPPORTUNITIES**

Since its inception, the NPM committee continues to face challenges including difficulty with active participation from members, lack of opportunities for formal mentorship, and a shortage of leadership development initiatives within the faculty and nursing community. For the NPM committee to have a sustained presence in the Faculty of Nursing, there is a need for engagement from its participants, that is, the committee members as well as the general student body. To support the presence of this resource, the NPM committee focused on building capacity by having co-chair positions held by senior students in either third or fourth year, and a couple of students representatives from first and second years. Having representation from all levels allowed the committee to stay in tune with the needs expressed by the current cohort of nursing students. While a formal commitment to the committee is not required, bi-weekly meetings are scheduled where student representatives discuss the needs coming from their peers from the same year of study. These meetings allow members of the committee to plan events to meet the students' expressed needs where mentors often have the opportunity to develop leadership abilities.

Presently, the NPM committee consists of 15 to 20 core executive members who attend regular meetings and plan events. In the last four years, 57 undergraduate students have been involved in the core organization and facilitation of events. Each semester (fall and winter semesters only), there are approximately 700 students enrolled in the undergraduate nursing program at the University of Calgary. About 150 to 200 students attend the various social and academic events hosted by the NPM committee. Social events aimed at connecting undergraduate students from various years in the program often engage 20 to 30 students at a time while academic events often attract larger crowds of 50 to 60 students per event. Academic events typically involve senior peers providing assistance in writing scholarly papers, hands-on practice, and other assignments relevant to their semester of study. Second and third year students often take advantage of these academic events, with higher attendance often seen during peak times of stress related to their academic workload during the school year.

Currently, the NPM committee is continuing their work to engage all undergraduate nursing students with a focus on inviting first year nursing students through social events to support their transition into secondary education from high school. Another area of focus for the NPM committee is to create opportunities for students in their third and fourth year of study to take on vital leadership positions to ensure sustainability of the committee which can also promote the development of leadership skills necessary in today's workplace.

## **A VISION OF SUSTAINED GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT - A WORLD OF POSSIBILITIES**

While the benefits of having a peer mentorship program for students is well documented in the literature, we would like to propose ways to strengthen and sustain the NPM committee as an ally for faculty members. The table below briefly outlines potential challenges as well as

recommendations from the participants during the conversation café hosted by members of the NPM committee during the 2018 University of Calgary Postsecondary Learning and Teaching conference. The NPM committee believes that there is a need to better support first year students in the transition and incorporation into higher education. Introducing Nursing Peer Mentorship sooner helps junior students potentially establish earlier connections with their more senior peers. With first-year nursing students enrolled in non-nursing courses, feelings of being segregated from the Faculty is a commonly reported experience amongst Year One (YO) students. YOs found it hard to connect with faculty members or other nursing students and therefore report missing out on nursing-related opportunities and connections within the Faculty during their first year in the program. In response to this concern, there is also an anticipated need to reintroduce the NPM committee later on during the first two semesters of nursing school. The use of social media can also be promoted as a component to peer mentorship so that students have an alternative way to connect other than meeting face-to-face.

Table 1

*Conference Discussion*

Challenges Discussed by Students	Challenges Discussed By Faculty
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Balancing committee involvement with academic course work</li> <li>- Poor understanding of the benefits of Peer Mentorship</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Encouraging student involvement in Peer Mentorship</li> <li>- Accessibility of a Peer Mentorship program for students</li> </ul>
Recommendations Proposed by Students	Recommendations Proposed by Faculty
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Incorporating informal peer mentorship programs across Faculties</li> <li>- Earlier involvement for students in Peer Mentorship</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Using motives to get more students to join</li> <li>- Using social media to further connect students with each other</li> </ul>

Members of the NPM committee found that earlier introduction of the NPM program and its accessibility to both students and faculty members can be beneficial in supporting student retention and success. While the NPM committee attends student orientation days, it would be beneficial for representatives from the NPM committee to attend faculty orientation to promote its mission and offer faculty members a resource for student academic and social support.

Another recommendation from the NPM committee is to broaden the aims of peer mentorship with the addition of experiential learning. Simulation is a growing learning and teaching strategy within the Faculty of Nursing. Learning opportunities where members of the NPM committee and faculty members can partner to create experiential learning using simulation for nursing students to encourage the development of nursing knowledge, skills, and attitudes have tremendous potential for success. With the Faculty of Nursing strategic plan involving a focus on advancing nursing education, there is potential to use simulation to encourage junior students to work alongside senior students to develop professionalism, critical thinking, problem solving, and encourage experiential learning.

While there are already faculty members who have been open to meeting with peer mentors to discuss student assessments in their classes, a more purposeful and deliberate partnership with NPM mentors would be beneficial. A student-as-partner approach may be a way to create authentic opportunities to gain insight into the learning and teaching processes involved in what it means to become a Registered Nurse. In this partnership, NPM mentors and faculty members work together to support each other by understanding, sharing, and responding to each other's experience of the teaching and learning process unique to the profession and discipline of nursing.

## CONCLUSION

NPM aims to continue to be a system that connects students across various years to offer support throughout their journey in the Faculty of Nursing. While the committee aims to continue to utilize informal mentorship to allow natural relationships to form, possibilities of formal mentorship can also be explored. At this time, the primary motivation by the NPM committee is to provide means of helping students connect and utilize peer mentorship in accordance with their own needs and requirements while enrolled in the program. In regards to sustainability, the committee will continue to encourage junior students to become mentors as they move through the program. Continued evaluation of the committee in meeting current students' academic and social needs is a must to promote sustainability and to build capacity.

Advocacy and leadership are two important concepts taught in the undergraduate nursing program at the University of Calgary. It is important to the authors to continue to listen and advocate for students' health, well-being, and overall success. By supporting the mission and promoting the value of the Nursing Peer Mentorship committee, we hope to continue to provide a resource that is flexible and responsive to assist to students' in their academic, social, and professional endeavors, while promoting leadership development opportunities.

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