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Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this action research study is to explore and understand the perceived impacts of a three year peer support initiative on graduate students' academic and professional experience and how this initiative can potentially contribute to the development of a community of practice among graduate students. The peer connect program, also referred to as "Connect ALL" was started in the fall semester of 2009 in Adult Learning and Leadership (ALL), a non-cohort program at Teachers College, Columbia University. Under this initiative, each newly admitted student joining the master's or doctoral program is matched with a current student or an alumnus, referred to as the "connector," who assists the newer student, or "connectee," with negotiating the program and other academic needs. Participation in the program is voluntary. The intent of the program is to expand the peer network and aid students' successful integration into the field of Adult Learning and Leadership.

It is well documented that pursuing graduate study can be an isolating and lonely experience. This is especially the case when the curriculum is designed so that students can choose their courses in varying sequences and can pace themselves to adjust for life demands. While many adult education program designers and administrators recognize this dilemma, the realities of the academy is such that building in institutionally provided organizational support graduate students is not only time consuming but also costly. As a result, adult students are often left to navigate systems and programs on their own. This paper documents one urban private institution's student-institutional collaborative initiative to redress this challenge.

Perspective or theoretical framework including relevant literature

In educational environments, peer mentoring is broadly defined as a relational process where more experienced students provide support and guidance to less experienced students, helping them succeed in their educational goals, advance their careers, or build networks (Kram, 1983; Kram & Isabella, 1985; Parker, Hall, & Kram, 2008; Sanchez & Bauer, 2006). Formal mentoring programs are often implemented as a way to help new students acclimate to new educational environments and further support academic success (Daloz, 1999; Sanchez & Bauer, 2006).

Prior research on peer mentoring focuses on undergraduate students and therefore less is known about implementing such programs for graduate student populations (Budge, 2006; Terrion & Leonard, 2007). Frequently the literature describes formal mentoring programs where incoming students are assigned a mentor and regular time is arranged for them to meet (Miller & Packham, 1999). Much of the focus is on helping students develop appropriate study habits and to adjust to college life (Colvin, 2007). These programs often occur in traditional undergraduate university settings where students attend full-time and reside on campus or nearby.

Research on mentoring of graduate students focuses more on the relationship between faculty and students, where students are paired with a faculty mentor who can guide them in research or navigate their program plan (Daloz, 1999; Sambrook, Stewart, & Roberts, 2008; Webb, Wangmo, Ewen, Teaster, & Hatch, 2009). In addition, research on graduate student mentoring focuses on more tightly knit cohort programs (Bowman & Bowman, 1990; Bowman & McCormick, 2000; Hadjioannou, Shelton, Fu, & Dhanarattigannon, 2007). Often, the studies are about programs where all students begin during the same semester, take many of the same classes together, and move through the program at approximately the same pace.

The research in this study is unique because it focuses on graduate students who are in a non-cohort program and who pursue very individualized learning journeys. Students in ALL represent a wide age range (mid-twenties to early sixties) and a wide range of backgrounds, interests, experience, and practice areas. In this context, it would be difficult to implement a more formalized mentoring program given the diversity of the population. Compounding this problem is the fact that institutional resources are severely limited due to fiscal constraints and cutbacks. The ALL Peer Connect project provides a somewhat unique context in which to study the impacts of an informal peer support initiative for graduate students. Currently, there is little research on peer support programs of this kind or in similar settings.

Research Design, Participants, and Methods

This study sought to address the following overarching question:

> *In light of financial limitations and growing enrollments, how can an adult education program provide opportunities for informal learning, mentoring, and community building among a diverse group of adult learners?*

Five specific questions were asked to better understand the impacts of the program. These included the following:

1. *Why do students volunteer and/or participate in the program?*
2. *How can students best work together to sustain the program?*
3. *How well can diverse students' needs be met?*
4. *How can planners garner involvement and best match participants?*
5. *What are the potential areas for concern or conflict?*

These questions were used to elucidate several dimensions thought to be central to the success of the program including: a) criteria considered in seeking to optimize pairings between students; b) the interactions and reported impacts of the student pairings; c) factors that appeared to enable or hinder participation in the program; and d) recommendations or suggestions for future program improvement.

An action research methodology was used to explore these research questions and to inform the continued development and evolution of the program from year to year. This approach was chosen because it provided an interactive, cooperative, and iterative method for understanding, assessing, and improving problem-solving interventions within an organization or in this case the institution's academic program (Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Richards & Morse, 2007). Students and alumni participated in the different phases of the study each year as researchers, recipients, and volunteers of the peer support initiative. Over the course of three years several cycles of data

collection, analysis, and change were conducted to improve the program based on feedback from participants as well as from insight and experience gained by the program administrators. Data gathering tools and techniques included e-surveys, emails, and face-to-face or phone (VOIP) interviews, all of which were utilized to elicit information from subjects for further analysis, and identification of program enhancement opportunities as the project evolved over the three year period.

The Connect ALL project team consists of two current doctoral students, one recent graduate of the ALL doctoral program, and one faculty member. The project was implemented in three iterative cycles spanning the course of three academic years between 2009 -2010, 2010-2011, and 2011-2012. Data was collected formally and informally over these years and used to inform the further development and modification of the Connect ALL program.

A convenience sampling technique was utilized to recruit subjects for the research project. An email was sent to all connectors and connectees inviting them to share their experience and feedback on the program. Those who volunteered were interviewed either in person or over the phone (VOIP), by one of the Connect ALL project team members. The data collected from the interviews was then compiled and used to inform the development of the program. This process was employed three times as a means to collect in-depth feedback from participants. In addition, several e-surveys and emails were sent out over the course of the program to collect suggestions and ideas from participants. The findings presented in this paper reflect the combined data collected over both research cycles as well as from the e-surveys, and emails.

A total of 94 students and alumni participated in the Connect ALL program, as connectors and connectors, to date (2009-2012). After the first year of the program 19 subjects gave feedback on the program (2009-2010), another 14 subjects gave feedback in the second year (2010-2011), and 11 subjects were interviewed in the third year (2011-2012). Please refer to Table 1 below for number of participants in the program and research study by year.

Table 1.

Connect ALL Program Participants

Years	Total Participants	Connectors	Connectees	Connectors Participating in the study	Connectees Participating in the study	Percentage of Respondents to Participants
2009-2010	33	12	21	7	12	57%
2010-2011	33	12	21	6	8	42%
2011-2012	28	12	16	8	3	39%

Findings

This research contributes to an understanding of what graduate students need and value in a peer mentor program, what kinds of interactions took place, as well as what pitfalls or problems might be experienced by teams looking to support students in similar institutional settings. Through an action research design of three cycles of action, reflection, data gathering and redesign the team explored how pairings were done, what interactions occurred, and how these reportedly impacted the interactions. Findings and modifications in the initial design also addressed the impacts of the process and what changes needed to be made to improve overall program practice and student satisfaction. In addition, recommendations are made for others seeking to design similar programs.

Why do students volunteer and/or participate in the program?

The team found that students tend to volunteer as a way to "give back" often because they had a successful experience with a peer mentor or because they wished they had one. Participants report the role of mentor as "fulfilling". Interestingly when incoming students were initially asked whether they felt a need for a peer "mentor" fewer than 50% responded that they would like one. After a year in the program however, many of these non-participants willingly volunteered to engage this role in the service of others. They indicated a wish "to feel part of a community" and "to network" as reasons why they participated.

Connectors often talked about being motivated to help others and the pleasure they received in giving feedback and giving advice, such as tips on balancing work with school or selecting courses. Connectees reported that they participated to learn more about the professors from other peers' perspectives as well as to hear additional student perspectives regarding the program, conferences, and future employment opportunities. Surprisingly, no one reported that the participation would be value added on their resumes.

How can student best work together to sustain the program?

Participants corroborated the researchers' sentiment that student leadership or coordination of efforts is essential. The peer connect program was primarily a student driven initiative. Although there was faculty oversight and support from the ALL program, student leadership was essential for the success of the program. We found that the coordinator of the program needs to be someone who is engaged, authentic and entrepreneurial at finding additional resources from the community (both internal to the institution as well as from the local business community) to provide recognition and rewards for involvement. In light of budgetary constraints incentivizing with credit, a small stipend, or some other forgiveness of credits was a way to encourage student leadership.

How well were students' needs met?

The relationships that formed between participants varied widely in both the frequency and nature of the interactions. For some participants intermittent email or phone calls were the extent of contact. In some cases the pairs simply emailed on an as needed basis. Others arranged to meet regularly on campus or find time to have a meal together. Time investment varied from an occasional email or phone conversation to some pairs meeting in person a few hours weekly. The

spectrum went from 1-2 emails per semester to meeting or speaking 4 times /week. Participants preferred to work out the relationship between themselves rather than being told how often to meet.

In general the connectors would have liked more in person contact but acknowledge the challenge in doing so given the wide variance in schedule and availability. Both parties reported the organic nature and open flexibility of design as positives. Most pairs talked about the experience as exceeding expectations in both roles.

Those in the connector role did indicate that it would be helpful to have a coordinator(s)/faculty remind connectors to reach out systematically. Connectees indicated it would be nice to receive at least two potential matches from the time they received their notice of admittance. Flexibility in assignment also should allow for opportunities to change or re-assign based on informal interactions through classes and social engagements.

For the final round of interviews conducted Winter 2012 the mean score for relative satisfaction on a Likert scale of 1 to 5 (5 being "most positive") was just over 4.3. Regardless of degree of initial contact most students chose to volunteer in their second year of the program. General satisfaction in the experience yielded frequently reported formation of long lasting relationships or friendships. Participants also suggested that efforts be made to partner with other student organizations, thereby increasing visibility, including word of mouth recruitment and assistance in sharing resources for social events.

How to garner involvement and match participants?
The team learned that while the notion of an electronic data bank is positive, e-surveys didn't work in soliciting participants. Students in the first year of the cycle reported an unwillingness to go the extra step to click and be redirected to a survey. This was especially true as initial contact was done in email. When the process involved in matching had a coordinator review volunteers' interests against incoming resumes matches were more successful. Careful attention needed to be made to cultural nuances – most times students preferred being matched with some similarity – e.g., international students of same country of origin or language, individuals working in same sectors, age, etc. While it is not always possible to get the right chemistry in the first match, offering multiple assignments allowed for some choice and spontaneity in process. With respect to international students it was suggested that there be one match made of similar language or country of origin and another with respect to dominant culture and career path.

What are potential areas for concern or conflict?
Without some oversight there is lack of standardization hence some students may be given misinformation or "unapproved" information. Connectors, although meaning well and acting on best intent, may advise students into courses not suitable for the enrollee. Similarly connectors may direct students away from a particular faculty or course because of their personal experience. As well, connectors may have insider awareness of how to take advantage of opportunities not open to all students, thereby establishing discontent. Finally, there is potential in either role to push boundaries – either in being too demanding or aggressive or in being non-

responsive. In order to counteract this, participants talked about the potential benefits of being provided additional resources, training or supervision.

Recommendations

There are a number of additional recommendations from participants in the study, and endorsed by the research team that were identified as being beneficial for implementing peer support programs:

- Provide structure through template letters of introductions, schedule of activities, resources for advisement, what to expect, optional trainings, and toolkit resources for the connector role
- Assign multiple connectors to each new student, giving both parties the option to continue working with their preferred pairings, and allowing the relationships to evolve organically
- Establish a small website or Facebook page for all incoming students with pictures and small bios
- Have a student maintained voluntary listserv to avert constant need for institutional/program approval for events and information dissemination
- Have more structured social events where students could get to know each other more naturally for matching (perhaps equivalent of a "speed dating" type activity)
- Provide an orientation for connectors on giving feedback and averting miscommunication
- Establish a student maintained Online forum for student concerns – create an evolving FAQ list
- Provide incentives for participation –recognition letters and awards –employ entrepreneurial skills (raffle dinners, celebratory acknowledgement with certificates worked well)
- Consider offering training and "connector role" as for-credit bearing course
- Compensation for student coordinator can be made through credit or independent study
- Have a mandated minimum of in person meetings per semester for involvement
- Have past pairs present at orientations or in classes to discuss process/relationship to better gauge and/or manage expectations
- Have representatives or connectors attend a few minutes at the beginning of introductory courses to answer questions and create visibility
- Gain increased faculty involvement
- Encourage connectees to keep a list of questions for having productive conversations and ensuring needs are met

Conclusions

The researchers conclude that peer support programs are a cost effective way to meet some of academic, professional and personal needs of new graduate students. Such initiatives benefit from structure and guidelines, establishing realistic expectations, and helping participants in understanding respective roles and creating boundaries. Further, the provision of training and resources for the peer connectors is invaluable in increasing relative satisfaction for both sides of the relationship. While meeting in person was not a requisite, those that did meet in person reported greater satisfaction. Improvements in matching also suggested giving both connector

and connectees multiple possibilities such that both parties were able to exercise some choice in establishing productive relationships. In addition, utilizing the word "mentor" in describing the relationships set up unrealistic expectations and decreased satisfaction. Finally, the planners learned that in addition to sector representation, professional practice, academic background and age, cultural sensitivity needed to be factored into recommending matching of connectors and connectees. Interestingly in this research, country of origin did not seem to be of greatest importance in establishing a trustful climate.

The hope is that the results of this research can help other program initiators looking to design similar programs. In particular, we sought to provide insight into: a) understanding what enables or hinders the motivation of students to participate; b) how such programs might optimize the matching of students for positive results and c) what might be expected as realistic outcomes from such efforts. The findings not only inform the particular peer support program but also inform the theory of peer support in general, particularly peer mentoring for graduate students attending a non-cohort graduate program. The outcomes of this program show that peer initiatives contribute greatly to community building in academic programs. Program improvements can result from student recommendations and dialogue. Additionally, the professional identity of students is fostered by such initiatives. Peer support serves as a foundation for future networking and for positively profiling the academic program within the institution and the field in general.

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