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Chapter 19- The Connections Program: Integrating Mentoring Into the First-Year Experience

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THE CONNECTIONS PROGRAM: INTEGRATING MENTORING INTO THE FIRST-YEAR EXPERIENCE

Jennifer Grewe and Harrison Kleiner

Abstract

In this chapter, we will offer a model of successful integration of evidence-based mentorship practices within a robust first-year experience program at Utah State University. The mentoring aspect of the program was built to address the problem of attrition rates of first-year students transitioning to the second year. This approach provides faculty mentoring for *every student* in the program and addresses how it can be scaled to a large student population. We will discuss how the most at-risk students receive extra focus within this model to help students who lack the educational and social capital to gain mentorship experiences on their own with faculty. We will discuss the use of assessment data to maintain the rigor of the program and triage our most vulnerable students' needs so that they receive the most high-touch mentoring experiences. This chapter will provide an evidence-based model that could be easily adapted for successful use at other universities.

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Mentoring Context and Program Development

Purpose and Objectives of the Program

One of the most important indicators of student success in higher education is the retention rate since it is both an indicator of progress to degree completion and an important driver of tuition and revenue. First-year experience courses have been found to be impactful in retaining students within higher education by providing a sense of belonging to the students and may lead to better academic performance and retention from year one to year two (Kilgo et al., 2014; Soria et al., 2013).

Connections is a first-year experience course that plays a critical role in retention efforts at Utah State University (USU). While USU's retention rates have been improving, retention from year one to year two remained a growth area for our institution. A full year-long mentoring component was added to Connections in fall 2020 to address that issue. A formal mentoring experience within the first year can help to provide the social support and guidance that many students need to be successful within higher education (Wilcox et al., 2005; Nora & Crisp, 2007).

Organizational Setting and Population Served

Connections serves approximately 2,800 incoming undergraduate students every year, including those at higher risk for retention issues such as first-generation and other minoritized students. In 2021, the program was introduced to two statewide residential campuses (Blanding and USU Eastern), which provided evidence that the model could be replicated successfully at other locations with nontraditional, diverse, and sometimes less academically prepared populations.

Organizational Support for Mentoring Program and Infrastructure

A faculty director and staff administrator's time have been necessary to complete tasks and provide oversight and direction for the program. A faculty committee is the main governing body for the program and owns the curriculum. The Connections program reports to the Provost's Office and is supported by staff within that office as well as staff in New Student Orientation and Retention and Completion. They assist with data collection, analyzing data, technological and online support, logistics, and student wellness and behavioral support.

Theoretical Framework

We define mentoring in the context of our Connections program as a relationship that creates a sense of belonging, allows for meaningful guidance, and enhances the efficacy of other student support resources on campus. One critique of previous mentoring models has been the lack of a clearly defined concept of mentoring rooted in a theoretical background (Law et al., 2020). The Connections mentoring program worked to address shortcomings from previous models by reviewing literature to identify best practices.

Previous literature has indicated that faculty-to-student mentoring can be impactful for students

(McKinsey, 2016; Shanahan et al., 2015). We condensed the themes identified from previous literature into three core values that Connections mentors are expected to utilize in all their interactions with the students. The first is to build and maintain a relationship so the students have a sense of belonging and that someone at USU cares about them. A sense of belonging is an important part of developing a sense of student identity within higher education (Tinto, 2017). This first core value is critical and must be established before the next two values can be successful. The second core value is to guide students identified as “at-risk” for persistence (semester to semester) or retention (year to year) by having meaningful conversations with them about their challenges and providing support and guidance to assist them in successfully completing their academic goals. This can include a variety of behaviors, including having conversations about short- and long-term goals or providing best-practices information regarding overcoming challenges. The third core value is that instructor-mentors should serve as brokers between students and their learning community to connect them with the resources they need to be successful. Due to both the feasibility and positive outcomes noted in the literature, a group mentoring approach (see Chapter 3 on mentoring types) is taken within this program. This group mentoring, one-to-many typology (see Chapter 3), does also involve a hierarchical structure as the instructor-mentor is obviously more experienced and knowledgeable about the higher education landscape.

Mentoring Inputs and Resources: Funding

Since the Connections program serves students across all colleges within the university, it is funded through the Provost’s Office. Instructor-mentors receive a lump sum after the initial component of the class and then receive smaller payments distributed throughout the year. A stipend helps to support the work of the program director both by compensating their time and by providing funds to their department so that the director has the time to focus on the program.

Mentoring Activities

Recruitment Activities

All instructor-mentors reapply every year to teach Connections and go through a competitive selection process. The instructor-mentors are recruited by various methods, including word of mouth, targeted emails, communication from central administration, teaching-focused events/presentations, and question-and-answer sessions. Feedback from the student evaluation survey is utilized to inform the selection process and to identify instructor-mentors who need to be reinterviewed.

Instructor-mentors are selected to teach a 3-day, full-day course (90% of the courses are offered this way) or a 7-week, twice-a-week course (10%) and continue to mentor students throughout the remainder of the academic year. Most instructor-mentors are faculty members and represent a wide range of disciplines from across the university.

Selection Activities

All candidate applications are reviewed, but candidates who have taught within the last year and received above-average student evaluations automatically qualify for rehire. A hiring committee

consisting of faculty from the different colleges reviews candidates using a rubric. Potential candidates are interviewed by the hiring committee, which then makes hiring recommendations to the Connections program director.

Matching Activities

Although most instructor-mentors are not selectively placed with specific students, there are some exceptions, including a few specific populations like students with specific intellectual disabilities, athletes, and honors students. In the application process, candidates are asked about their interest in teaching these particular groups of students. Those names are shared with stakeholders of each of the programs that assist these students within their education to gain their feedback, after which the Connections program director makes placement decisions.

Training Activities

There are several required trainings held for instructor-mentors. In addition to these trainings, mentoring training for instructors includes online resources, videos, and a Canvas course. Within the Canvas course are descriptions of curriculum and assignments, including objectives, how that specific curriculum ties to the bigger ideas of the course, supplemental curriculum content (videos, podcasts, articles), and delivery of content ideas. The entire training process starts 4 to 5 months from when the instructors begin teaching. Although many topics are introduced and framed for instructors every year, the focus of some of the training often differs based on feedback received via the mentoring assessment survey.

Strategies to Monitor and Support Relationships

Connections instructor-mentors are supported by related Connections staff throughout the year of mentoring. The program has developed a library of “nudges” via email that provide just-in-time reminders for students to engage in transactional activities (registering) as well as reminding them of the big values of the Connections experience and connecting those to timely events on campus. The expectation is that students will be more responsive to a nudge from a trusted faculty mentor rather than from an anonymous office on campus. Language for an email is provided to instructor-mentors, although they are encouraged to modify and personalize the template before sending it to their students. In addition, we support instructor-mentors in their student-specific outreach. Analytics and engagement data are used by the Office of Retention and Completion to identify students who may be at risk of not persisting or retaining. The reason for the student being higher risk is not shared, but the need to engage with the student along with some template language is provided to the instructor-mentor. The goal is to get the student to engage with the instructor-mentor so they can resolve their issue or be brokered to the best resource to help them.

Monitoring these relationships has proved challenging. We can track engagement and communication to/from faculty and students so long as that engagement is occurring within our learning management software (Canvas). However, we know that a lot of meaningful mentoring discussions are happening off of Canvas—in-person, over email, and in other ways. Rather than trying to track all of those communications, we are instead relying on two campus forms—Student of Concern

and Student Academic Achievement Alert. When an instructor-mentor has a discussion with a mentee where they have some concerns, we ask that they submit one of these forms so these issues can be tracked. On the other hand, when we have reports submitted for students—but not from their Connections instructor-mentor—we can not only leverage the instructor-mentor but also inquire as to whether they were engaging with that student.

Formative and Summative Evaluation

Custom-built course and mentoring evaluations done by students allow the program to engage in data-driven evaluation of program impact and success. Our assessment focus is formative—using what we learn from the data and feedback to improve the structure of the curriculum as well as the hiring and training of mentors. But we also use this information, along with evidence of a level of faculty engagement, as part of a summative assessment of instructor-mentors to inform future hiring decisions.

The program also has reporting obligations to the institution requiring summative evaluations of program impact on broader institutional goals. That summative retention data also becomes formative for us. If, despite success on internal markers described above, we were not making an impact on institutional retention rates, that would be cause for reevaluation.

Mentoring Outputs: Number of Mentors, Number of Mentees, Mentor/Mentee Ratio

Approximately 110 instructor-mentors are hired for the academic year. Each section consists of about 28 students with whom the instructor-mentor is charged with building a mentor relationship that will then lead to successful guiding and brokering students to the appropriate resources. We predicted, and experience has shown, that most students only need the beginning of the semester mentorship along with regular email check-ins throughout the year, as they do not face challenges that require utilizing student supports. In most cases, faculty-mentors will have around three students over the course of the year who require higher-touch mentoring in the form of guiding and brokering work.

Mentoring Outcomes and Lessons Learned

Outcomes of Program

In the year prior to adding mentoring, students who engaged in Connections were retained at 75.85%, which was fairly consistent from years prior. The fall 2020 cohort was the first to have mentoring, and the students in that cohort who engaged in Connections were retained at 78.10%. The Connections students were retained much higher than the overall cohort (78.10% vs. 72.61%). It is worth noting that our underrepresented students who engaged in Connections were retained at an even higher rate (80.47%) than the overall retention rate for engaged Connections students. And for the fall 2021 cohort, already 79.72% of those who engaged in Connections are registered for fall 2022, so we are trending to have a Connections-mentoring retention rate of over 80%. Given national enrollment challenges due to the pandemic and economy, these increases are even more remarkable.

Sustaining the Program

The positive impact that the Connections mentoring program has had on student retention and completion has led to ongoing funding by the Office of the President. Stakeholders are being communicated with at various points in the process, including the president of the university to state legislature in yearly addresses, communication to faculty during training events, and the program director's communication to various members of central administration.

Lessons Learned

Our feedback loop is informed by the various ways in which we gather feedback from students, instructor-mentors, campus data analytics partners, and other stakeholders. This feedback loop facilitates a continual improvement process: We receive feedback, make decisions based on our available information and feedback, implement these changes, and then assess outcomes again. A few of the more critical lessons learned will be outlined below.

Clearly defined roles can help with the implementation of the program by identifying those responsible for different tasks and helping to eliminate redundancy. It became helpful to create a role responsibility diagram or tree, which helps to identify each person's responsibilities and contributions. Along with this diagram, it is helpful to have subcommittee working groups that are active contributors on tasks. Various working groups help to create and revise online content and course curriculum and are involved in the hiring process. A program director has been an important component in keeping all working groups on task and accomplishing responsibilities by deadlines.

One interesting effect of trying to improve flexibility for our instructor-mentors is that we had some issues with fidelity in training and implementation. We moved many of our training materials to videos that could be watched at one's leisure. However, some instructor-mentors were not fully engaging with that online content. This year the program will return to having face-to-face training along with asynchronous training.

We also learned the importance of engaging with student-facing employees, from advisors to financial aid officers, to ensure they are knowledgeable about the program and supportive, as many will be in direct contact with the students.

Recommendations for Future Designers and Stakeholders of Academic Mentoring Programs

Successfully launching a new initiative of any kind on a campus requires a team of people dedicated to the task and willing to work. Ensuring you have the right team with the right connections to important decision-makers from around the institution is the first step. A relatively small core team is sufficient, no more than a half dozen or so, which then does outreach with a much broader group of stakeholders. For a mentoring program focusing on first-year students, that broader group of stakeholders will need to include both decision-makers and "in the trenches" staff across the student experience: student affairs, residential life, mental and physical wellness centers, recruitment and orientation services, as well as the academic side of the university. In our experience, it was not necessary to have representatives from every one of these groups on the core team, but certainly the

academic side should be well represented along with your retention office and then the logistics staff from new-student orientation offices.

Aligning your mentoring program goals with broader institutional goals is all but necessary for success. Using other campus models and experience, including USU's, as evidence of the kinds of impacts a mentoring program can have, but then translating that to your institution and what it might mean for your retention figures is likely the best step. Moving the needle on retention is the most measurable and tangible—in the form of increased tuition dollars—impact you can offer upper administration. Setting significant but achievable goals is the best approach.

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