MENTORING THE FIRST-YEAR STUDENT: LEARNING OUTCOMES OF UNDERGRADUATE PEER MENTORS

Jason Bentley, Nathan Cradit & Christine Jackson
Central Michigan University
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ABSTRACT
The peer mentor program is an experience for students who already have practical working knowledge of the university environment, an appreciation for the value of a liberal arts education, understanding of career guidance resources and the shared learning expectations between students and faculty. To provide a context for the experience, undergraduate peer mentors explore theoretical student development issues. The objectives of the experience are meant to facilitate learning for students to the extent that they are able to: (1) develop and lead activities that contribute to a positive classroom community in FYE 101; (2) articulate a theory of college student development and apply it to first-year students; (3) implement appropriate responses to first-year students who are engaging in problem behaviors that interfere with a successful transition to college (e.g. alcohol, drug use, depression, eating disorders and loneliness); (4) introduce and model positive decision-making strategies to first-year students; (5) demonstrate effective mentoring techniques such as active listening, coaching, advising, and providing feedback to first-year students; (6) identify different mentors in their life and the role these individuals play in personal, academic and professional development; (7) collaborate with university faculty members; (8) define personal learning goals for their experience as a FYE mentor and develop an action plan for achieving these goals; and (9) demonstrate how the experience as a FYE mentor has supported their own personal and professional development.

Undergraduate peer mentors were asked a series of questions prior to and directly following their participation in the program as part of the required FYE 301 course. The assessment data is used to identify the value added as personally reported. Results confirm that Central Michigan University’s top priority of creating an environment that supports teaching and learning through heightened expectations and preparing students for lifelong learning is being aided by the experiences of undergraduate peer mentors. Additionally, the university’s strategy for promoting student engagement through focus on connections with faculty, and the student’s knowledge and utilization of campus resources is being facilitated by the undergraduate peer mentor experience. Detailed results of this assessment are presented as well as consideration on how other institutions may incorporate an undergraduate peer mentor experience.

UNDERGRADUATE PEER MENTOR EXPERIENCE

An experience theoretically founded where practical knowledge and skill development for the role of assisting first-year (FYE 101) students is supported by introduction of
first-year student development issues and theoretical frameworks, programming design and delivery strategies, active learning techniques, experiential learning, interpersonal communication models and group facilitation opportunities.

- Mentors are engaged in critical analytical reasoning of case examples related to first-year students and transitional issues with focus on student development theory, decision-making frameworks, institutional priorities, FYE program strategies, and course specific initiatives.
- Learning involves interaction between mentors, faculty members and FYE 101 students through lectures, panels, group and whole class discussions as well as independent and group experiential activity.
- The experience engages the student in a close relationship with a member of the faculty in the design and delivery of instruction and teaching related duties associated with assisting first-year students as well as in a close relationship with other mentors.
- Didactic engagement underscores the nature of learning and education with mentors, faculty and first-year students asked to challenge personal beliefs, consider the nature of their virtues as they relate to learning and human development, and life choices that may assist in understanding of self as well as awareness of themselves relative to the larger community.

**RESEARCH QUESTIONS**
- What do patterns of learning outcomes suggest about the value added to first-year experience undergraduate peer mentors?
- What do the relationships between learning outcomes suggest about male and female undergraduate peer mentors?

**FYE 101 AT CENTRAL MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY**
- 1 credit academic elective
- Meets 100 minutes weekly for 8 weeks

**FYE 301 AT CENTRAL MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY**
- 3 credit academic elective for peer mentors
- Meets for 14 hours prior to semester
- Engages students in academic planning discussions and course content reviews during 24 week summer session
- Partners select undergraduate students with FYE 101 faculty/staff instructors
- Meets 100 minutes weekly during first 10 weeks

**STUDY METHODS**

**Peer Mentor Sample**
- 32 students (34.4% male, 65.6% female)
- Hometown (13% city, 59% suburban, 28% rural)
- Age range 19-23
- GPA (Mean = 3.27, SD = 0.71)
- Residence (25% on-campus housing,
75% off-campus housing)
❖ Primarily Caucasian

Measures
❖ Pre-post surveys
❖ End-of-class (FYE 301) surveys
❖ Quantitative ratings of:
  o Programming
  o Interpersonal communication
  o Self-awareness
  o Facilitation skills
  o Knowledge of institutional resources
❖ Qualitative comments:
  o What, if anything, did you learn through your experience?
  o What was the most valuable aspect(s) of the mentor experience?
  o How has the mentor role shaped your college experience?
  o How has the mentor role shaped your goals or future plans?
  o What was the most useful concept learned through your role as a FYE mentor?

Analysis
❖ Statistical analysis of student ratings pre and post experience
❖ Content analysis of comments
  o Two teams of coders to construct categories
  o Two independent coders to tally codes

RESULTS
What do patterns of learning outcomes suggest about the value added to first-year experience undergraduate peer mentors?

On quantitative paired sample tests, ALL pairs showed a positive change in mean score with at least marginally statistical significance in 5 of 7 items.
❖ program construction and supervision
❖ communicating with others
❖ understanding of self (who I am and who I may become)
❖ facilitating learning experiences (experiential learning)
❖ institutional resource knowledge

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In coded open-ended responses, mentors similarly reported more positive statements about:

- knowledge of the value of faculty and other students in the learning environment
- sense of empowerment concerning future orientation
- general sense of personal growth
- increased openness to new activities
- communicating with others

What do the relationships between learning outcomes suggest about male and female undergraduate peer mentors?

Female peer mentors reported significant or marginally significant increases in 5 of 7 areas:

- program construction and supervision
- communicating with others
- understanding of self (who I am and who I may become)
- facilitating learning experiences (experiential learning)
- institutional resource knowledge

On quantitative pre-post paired sample tests, male mentors showed no statistically significant increases and generally have very small or no increases in scores from pre to post assessments.

When asked about the perceived value of the mentor experience in coded open-ended responses, ALL mentors reported positively.

Female mentors more frequently reported (n=18 of 21 females) a value in the development of interpersonal connections.
whereas male mentors reported (n=10 of 11 males) a value in the experience as it related to their personal networking and use for a future career.

When asked to what extent the experience may have shaped their personal goals or plans, female mentors cited:

- reinforced career plans related to education (n=9)
- enhanced future plans and preparations (n=6)
- increased personal confidence (n=3)

When asked to what extent the experience may have shaped their college experience, female mentors cited:

- feelings of confidence/empowerment (n=6)
- non-specific development of self (n=3)

When asked to what extent the experience may have shaped their college experience, male mentors cited an appreciation for the role of faculty and other students in the learning process (n=4).

The only qualitative items where male mentors indicated a more frequent response than females were in ratings of “no benefit” and neutral non-codeable responses.

Male responses were more variable in the post assessment revealing that while a few males increased, some had no increase and others decreased.

In closer examination of the coded open-ended responses, male peer mentors reported more positive statements about how the experience enhanced their personal educational pursuits. When asked to articulate how the experience may have shaped their goals or plans, male mentors indicated positively in terms of:

- motivation to achieve personal goals
- personal confidence
- career plans related to education or graduate study
- more involvement in campus activities
CONCLUSIONS
This exploration of the learning outcomes associated with undergraduate peer mentors programs began with the goal of understanding how such an experience shapes the undergraduate experience and what findings, if any, would suggest with respect to the creation of future program models or program redesign efforts. The data analysis reveals that:

- Female mentors do have a significant learning outcome with respect to the construction and supervision of educational programming, their inter-personal communication skills, understanding of who they are and who they may become, facilitation of experiential opportunities, and knowledge of institutional resources.
- The data suggests positive learning outcomes for female peer mentors and that, as a group, the experience may help codify valued positions.
- Though no pre-post comparisons for males were significant, the positive mean changes in 5 of 7 areas at least suggests that males may enter the experience with different learning expectations and do experience some positive learning growth.
- While there are no statistical significant items for male peer mentors, the positive change in mean scores and differences in standard deviation suggests, important learning by at least some of the males. The greater variability for males does, however, suggest that the experience has different meaning for males as a group compared to females.
- For institutions in the process of developing or redesigning undergraduate peer mentor programs, the data suggests that consideration must be made in how learning outcomes are designed and instructional strategies employed to facilitate optimal learning among males and females. This consideration likely permeates how a program is represented in various mediums—online, written brochures, course learning objectives and faculty-mentor partnering considerations.
- When undergraduate peer mentoring programs may be designed to support or even reflect institutional priorities, there is a compelling need to foster significant learning outcomes for all students. While the small sample size in this study should not be overly applied, the findings do suggest that males and females may enter the peer mentor experience with different motivations for learning. While the motivational differences may not adversely impact institutional priorities such incongruity may inhibit intended value-added elements.
TO LEARN MORE CONTACT:

Jason M. Bentley  
AD for EHS/FYE/HON/ResLife  
113 Larzelere Hall  
Mt. Pleasant, MI. 48859

Telephone:  (989) 774-2434  
Facsimile:  (989) 774-6410  
Email: bentl1jm@cmich.edu  
Web Address: www.fye.cmich.edu

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