

Peer Mentoring: Building Strong Learning Communities

Curricular peer mentoring is an effective collaborative learning strategy that enables students to work together to delve deeper and more analytically into course content.

This program focuses on the learning process, improves student engagement, empowers students and builds strong partnerships between students and faculty members.

Developing and implementing a curricular peer mentoring program can strengthen student learning in any academic program or discipline.

What are peer mentors?

Peer mentors are senior students who are registered in a peer mentoring practicum course that educates them while they enrich learning within a course they have previously taken. Peer mentors are NOT teaching assistants and do not have grading authority. Rather, they are learning facilitators uniquely positioned to help guide their peers through the learning process.

What are the instructor's responsibilities?

Invest time outside of scheduled class time for communicating with your peer mentor(s).

Meet with your peer mentor and the mentoring instructor to discuss roles, how the peer mentor will be introduced to the students, and how you will communicate with each other during the term.

Come to a peer mentoring program event to get to know other host instructors and peer mentors and to develop a network of peer support among colleagues.

Introduce your mentor and his/her role very clearly to students in the first week of class.

Provide a document with mentoring information to students (which may be customized to your course) and reinforce the main points about how they differ from teaching assistants and tutors, and how privacy and confidentiality issues will be handled.

Guide the mentor in his/her duties during the term -- a half hour meeting every week is a good practice, so you can hear what the mentor is observing about student reactions to the course, discuss the mentor's concerns, and prevent misunderstandings of mentoring roles and course expectations.

Schedule a check-up meeting or email with the peer mentoring instructor and your peer mentor(s) around mid-term.

Facilitate surveys about the mentoring experience near the end of the course. Find out how students interacted with peer mentors, how they benefitted, and how peer mentoring could be better integrated into your course.

Why host a peer mentor?

- They provide active learning opportunities for any level of student, especially those who learn course concepts more deeply through peer-to-peer social interaction.
- Peer mentors can design and lead occasional creative in-class activities and presentations that communicate course content in ways that suit their generation's interests and learning styles.
- In large class sections, peer mentors can provide ongoing support to students.
- An empathetic, experienced peer is helpful to first-year or transfer students who may be intimidated by the university, as well as busy commuter students who do not have a group of friends to study with.
- Forming a partnership with a peer mentor allows instructors to access student feedback and constructive suggestions for supporting student learning on an immediate and ongoing basis.



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Curricular Peer Mentoring in Action

Planning, developing and maintaining a curricular peer mentoring program can be applied to any academic program. When implementing a curricular peer mentoring program, consider the following:

Plan

- Engage faculty members willing to host student peer mentors. In some situations, the peer mentoring practicum course instructor also acts as the host instructor.
- Implement a reward system, through course credits or another method, whereby the efforts of the student peer mentors are gauged and recognized.
- Allow peer mentors to contribute insights into how best to utilize their talents. Peer mentoring roles can be diverse and tailored to suit a specific program, application and individual mentor. It is important that mentoring roles are clearly defined and communicated to all participants.

Implement

- Integrate peer mentors into classroom activities. If they cannot find ways to perform their role during class, they will be unable to form a connection that attracts students to study sessions or appointments.
- Integrate peer mentors into at least part of the teaching team's regular meetings. Peer mentors and instructors need to understand each other's concerns and priorities in order to achieve shared goals.
- Peer mentors require instructor guidance, discussion among other peer mentors, and exposure to pedagogical theory and student engagement issues.
- Approximately every two weeks, peer mentors should send an email log of their activities to both the host instructors and mentoring instructor. These messages develop accountability and keep a record that can prevent misunderstandings.

Evaluate

- Evaluate the peer mentoring process to ensure that the goals are being reached, that the program is operating effectively and the peer mentors are performing the roles agreed upon.

Where Can I Go for More Information?

1. Peer Mentoring Network Website

Detailed resource for students and instructors

www.ucalgary.ca/peermentoring

2. Learning Together: Peer Tutoring in Higher Education

N. Falchikov (2001). Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge Falmer

3. Curricular Peer Mentoring: A Handbook for Undergraduate Peer Mentors Serving in Learning Courses

T. Smith, C. Rabbite, S. Robinson. (2009). Victoria, British Columbia: Trafford Publishing

Available to order online at <http://books.trafford.com/08-1089>

4. Integrating Peer Assistants into Liberal Arts Courses: A Pilot Study. (Fall 2008)

T. Smith, Innovative Higher Education, Volume 33, issue 1 (Fall 2008)

Give Me an Example

Nursing

- Student peer leaders in the Faculty of Nursing worked with their host instructor in simulation labs helping students practice hands-on skills such as assessing blood pressure.
- Peer leaders organized not-for-credit, drop-in study sessions in which first year students were able to collaborate, study, clarify areas of confusion and practice hands-on skills.
- Peer leaders organized presentations within tutorial sessions in which they spoke to first-year students about real-life nursing situations they had encountered in their recently completed practicum.

Liberal Arts

- Peer mentors delivered short presentations on aspects of the course material, using their previous experience in the course itself and also as senior level learners.
- Peer mentors organized drop-in study sessions available and open to all students enrolled in their host class. Many of these sessions took place in informal settings and allowed students to delve deeper into complex course material.
- Peer mentors engaged with students online via Blackboard and other web applications, allowing students unable to attend study sessions to engage in meaningful dialogue pertaining to the course.

Business

- Peer mentors in the Haskayne School of Business worked as a part of a two-person coaching team guiding junior management students through a community learning project.
- Peer mentors gained experience building coaching skills associated with the process of interacting with client organizations and individuals while conducting a technology-based project.
- Peer mentors gained critical thinking experience and decision making capabilities associated with real-world business applications.

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