

Building Peer Mentors' Capacity to Support New Students' Transitions to University: A Training Collaboration between MATES@UWS and the University Counselling Service

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Abstract

Many higher education institutions implement peer mentor programs to support new students' transitions to a new learning environment. This is because peer programs are known to foster a sense of belonging, boost student retention and create a supportive campus climate. Best practice guidelines recommend program leaders provide training for peer mentors, yet mentoring literature often fails to articulate the specific content of training. This practice report presents a training collaboration between MATES@UWS and the University Counselling Service that aims to build peer mentors' capacity to support new students. Intended outcomes of MATES@UWS induction mentor training are to ensure volunteer peer mentors are confident in their new role, understand the program's aims, develop a set of mentor skills and become familiar with the support resources available to them. Induction mentor training is facilitated by the program coordinator, with a section on self-awareness, managing stress and concerning behaviour delivered by a University counsellor. The induction mentor training program is described in detail. Survey results suggest MATES@UWS mentor induction training ensures mentors are confident about mentoring, well prepared for their role, informed about support services and, interestingly, more inclined to seek help from services themselves. Mentee survey results also demonstrate the impact of mentor induction training on the new students they support. Implication for leaders and other peer programs are discussed, including the need for leaders to release support services staff to facilitate training.

Background

Mentoring And Transition Equals Success at the University of Western Sydney (MATES@UWS) was first piloted in 2011 with a small group of students. Participation rates have grown steadily since that time. In semester one 2015 more than 1000 students participated in the program.

MATES@UWS is centred on supporting first year students' transitions to university by connecting them with a peer mentor and small group of their first year peers. Mentors facilitate "catch up" meetings during the first eight weeks of semester. At these meetings new students can ask questions, share stories and seek advice for starting at university.

By building a sense of community and fostering social connections amongst students, MATES@UWS aims to promote students' sense of belonging and thus boost their retention at university. The value of peer programs in developing a sense of belonging has been established in higher education literature (Heirdsfield, Walker, Walsh & Wilss, 2008; Stenfors-Hayes et. al., 2010). Research shows programs that activate peers as instructional resources can contribute to a campus culture that is supportive and focussed on learning (Colvin & Ashman, 2010).

The importance of developing peer mentors' capacity to support new students cannot be underestimated. This is reinforced by student feedback and mentoring literature (Ensher & Murphy, 2011) which indicates that a mentee's experience of the program is mediated by their relationship with their mentor: a committed, skilled and knowledgeable mentor contributes to a positive new student experience.

According to the Guidelines for Good Practice in Mentor Programs in Higher Education (Australia and New Zealand Student Services Association, 2009) and Australian National Standards for

Involving Volunteers in Not-for-profit Organisations (Volunteering Australia, 2001), volunteers must undergo training prior to undertaking a role. In a review of twenty mentoring studies, Gershenfeld (2014) identified mentor support and training as a key component of mentor programs and criticised many of the studies for failing to describe the training provided.

Induction mentor training

MATES@UWS works in collaboration with other areas of the University to provide a mentor induction training program that builds mentors' capacity and thus ensures new students have the best possible transition experience. Mentors report a strong desire to develop their employability and personal skills; therefore the provision of high quality training is a strong intrinsic motivator for volunteers to join, and remain with, the program (Esplin, Seabold & Pinnegar, 2012).

MATES@UWS requires students to complete mentor induction training prior to mentoring. This takes the form of a six and a half hour training session (or an online equivalent), which provides an overview of the program, the role of a mentor and mentor skills. The MATES@UWS Program Coordinator and a University Counsellor facilitate mentor induction training biannually in the lead up to Orientation.

MATES@UWS mentor induction training is based on Chisholm's (2011) M.E.N.T.O.R. S.K.I.L.L.S. acronym (see Table 1). Training also emphasises that mentors are not tutors or counsellors.

The desired outcomes of induction training are to ensure student volunteers:

- feel confident in undertaking the role of mentor;
- understand the program's aims and boundaries;
- begin to develop a set of mentor skills; and
- are familiar with the resources available to support them in their role, including the program staff, Mentor Handbook and online mentor resources.

During the Counsellor's section of mentor induction training mentors are encouraged to empower new students rather than to rescue them. They are given opportunities to practice empowerment techniques and develop appropriately assertive communication skills through a case study. The case study follows a student through the first four weeks of their commencing semester at university. Mentors develop an action plan by identifying the new student's key issues, providing information and advice, and referring the student to appropriate support services. This section of the training program aims to help mentors practise listening to, empathising with and normalising new students' transition experiences.

The next section of this practice report outlines the Autumn 2015 MATES@UWS survey results, which indicate the positive outcomes of the training collaboration between MATES@UWS and the Counselling Service.

Table 1: Overview of MATES@UWS mentor induction training day

Training Content	Facilitator
Overview of MATES <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Program aims, structure and logistics • Characteristics of UWS students • The first year experience: common causes of attrition and behaviours that lead to success • Benefits of being a mentor • Work Health and Safety 	Program Coordinator
M.E.N.T.O.R. S.K.I.L.L.S. (adapted from Chisholm, 2011) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Motivational: supporting new student’s intrinsic motivation • Empathetic and respectful: verbal and non-verbal techniques for building empathy • Non-judgemental attitude: modelling the student Code of Conduct including valuing cultural diversity • Trustworthy: behaviours that build trust • Optimistic: helping students to develop a growth mindset • Realistic Expectations: program boundaries and likely scenarios • Study skills: modelling time management skills and a deep approach to learning • Know your university: services, resources, facilities and systems essential to a successful transition • Initiate communication: how to welcome new students via email and phone; how to use ice breakers • Listening skills: how to actively listen • Language: email and phone etiquette 	Program Coordinator
M.E.N.T.O.R. S.K.I.L.L.S. continued <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-awareness and support: understanding self-care • Managing stress and concerns <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ An overview of the Counselling Service ○ Recognising the signs of stress ○ Concerning behaviours and common situational causes ○ Crisis situations: an action flowchart and script to help mentors respond to a critical incident ○ An overview of the empowerment dynamic and assertive communication skills including a case study ○ Mental Health and Wellbeing resources 	Counsellor

Results

The outcomes of training are measured through online surveys, which all program participants are invited to complete. New students/mentees and mentors are notified about the surveys via direct email to their student email accounts and posts in the MATES@UWS Facebook group.

The semester one 2015 Mentor Induction Training Survey was opened immediately after training and the Mentor and New Student/Mentee Program Evaluation Surveys were opened in Week 8 of semester, when the MATES@UWS program concluded. All surveys remained open for two weeks and reminders were sent to students via email. The program evaluation surveys were incentivised with two \$150 gift vouchers. All three surveys contained a series of likert scale questions and open response items.

Autumn 2015 Mentor Induction Training Survey results:

- Sample size n=40
- 92.5% of respondents strongly agreed or agreed that Mentor Induction Training was helpful.
- 97.5% stated they felt confident about mentoring.
- When asked about the best parts of training,
 - 17.5% stated learning about the university's Student Support Services, particularly the Counselling Service, and
 - 22.5% stated building on skills, particularly communication skills.

Autumn 2015 Mentor Program Evaluation Survey results:

- Sample size n=77
- 83.5% of respondents strongly agreed or agreed that MATES@UWS “helped me to learn more about Student Support Services”.
- 71.2% strongly agreed or agreed “as a result of the program, I am more likely to access Student Support Services myself”.

Autumn 2015 New Student/Mentee Program Evaluation Survey results:

- Sample size n=178
- 72.5% agreed or strongly agreed “being involved in the program helped me find out about services at the university”.
- 75.8% agreed or strongly agreed, “my mentor informed me of the student services and resources available at the university”.

Discussion

The survey results demonstrate that the mentor induction training program developed and facilitated by MATES@UWS in collaboration with the Counselling Service¹ ensures students are: well equipped to undertake their responsibilities as peer mentors; better informed about the services on offer; and more inclined to seek help.

Furthermore, the survey results highlight a flow-on effect for new students. The provision of training to mentors helps ensure new students/mentees are informed about the university's support services during the early weeks of their commencing semester so they can access assistance during this critical transition period and throughout their degree.

This training collaboration resulted in other university staff facilitating on-going professional development for student leaders, which is offered under the banner of the LEAD Conference (Lead, Engage, Aspire, Develop). Through the LEAD Conference a wider range of student leaders—such as Peer Assisted Study Session facilitators, Student Representatives and Ambassadors—are learning more about the services on offer at university and passing that knowledge on to the students they serve.

Leaders of student support services can play an important role in facilitating these positive student outcomes by releasing staff for the time needed to plan, deliver, evaluate and improve peer training programs. This is supported by Rodrigo and colleagues (2014) who advocate for “incorporating a central support component” (p.111) into training for targeted programs.

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