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Peer mentoring at the university level: the importance of organization

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Abstract

Peer Mentoring Programs implemented in University of Zaragoza faculties during the 2012-2013 academic year have been received favorably by university management teams and have achieved outstanding student mentor involvement in support of new students. This was achieved through the application of a convenient organizational model and an objective and transparent assessment activity method developed by mentors based on online records.

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1. Introduction and objectives

The Peer Mentoring Program was introduced during the 2012-2013 academic year following a 2010-2011 trial period. The pilot program was initiated by the Vice-Chancellor of Students and Employment in collaboration with the Institute of Education Sciences (ICE, in Spanish), who worked closely with management teams of all university faculties. However, the key players were student mentors who voluntarily applied their college experience to assist freshman students.

The objective of the project was to instigate university senior student involvement in the academic support of new students and to sustain ongoing academic advising from professors involved in various tutoring programs at the university.

While similar mentoring programs exist at other Spanish universities (Sánchez et al., 2008; Ferré et al., 2009; Casado and Ruiz, 2009; Manzano et al., 2012), those of the University of Zaragoza are unique in their fast and successful implementation at all of the institution's faculties. This was achieved due to the highly structured nature of the program, through processes of objective and transparent assessment, and through strong institutional support.

However, in this first year of program implementation, weaknesses concerning student mentor engagement with student mentees have been identified (Cepero, Yusta and Prieto, 2013) as observed in similar programs at other universities (Crisp and Cruz, 2009; Allueva, 2013).

This paper describes program results achieved to date.

2. Program description

The Peer Mentoring Program is structured as follows. A team of three university professors with partial dedication to the project have managed program design, timeline, monitoring and evaluation duties in collaboration with the ICE. However, the Office of the Vice-Chancellor of Students and Employment plays paramount role in program implementation, as the Vice-Chancellor personally extends invitations to all University of Zaragoza schools and colleges, encouraging faculties to participate in the program and providing precise procedural guidelines.

Faculty heads select student mentors under Office of the Vice-Chancellor of Students and Employment guidance. Student mentors must have passed at least 50% of degree credits and must exhibit strong social skills and self-motivation. The program allows each school to select instruments considered most appropriate to ensure an adequate profile of student mentors. Some schools conduct personal interviews with candidates, while others request personal statements from each student. In personal statements, applicants must describe their motivations for participating as mentors and must attest to their personal involvement in university activities that would support their mentoring duties, particularly those that exhibit knowledge of their program of study and of the university's organizational structure, rules and service offerings.

Faculties also assign students to mentoring groups depending on the availability of student mentors in each program. In most cases, assignments are made automatically for all incoming freshmen. However, on occasion, some schools assign mentors to only those students who voluntarily request them during orientations at the start of the school year and after the presentation of program objectives.

An online Peer Mentoring Program activity registration system is available through the ICE website at www.unizar.es/ice. The system lists mentorship meetings between student mentors and mentees. The system also allows for further evaluations of mentor activities, providing these students with benefits specified through program guidelines.

Other organizational elements include an annual calendar of activities for program participants, a student mentor guide provided at the start of the school year and an online database where mentors must report on mentoring activities under a personal username and password.

Additionally, student mentors can contact program coordinators via email at mentor@unizar.es for additional information and advice or to discuss any issues of concern.

Mentors, key actors in the support process, voluntarily advise student mentees in academic and administrative matters.

- Mentors must attend initial presentation and training meetings of the Peer Mentoring program organized by the Office of the Vice-Chancellor at the start of the academic year. Complementary communication and counseling training workshops for mentors are also available.
- Each mentor must meet with student mentees at least twice each semester to help mentees plan their course requirements and evaluation methods and to answer mentee questions regarding organizational or administrative matters.
- Mentors must also provide a brief summary of engagements with their mentees via standardized online records located at <http://www.unizar.es/ice/index.php/integracion-en-la-universidad>.
- Mentors also collaborate with the Tutoring Program and Peer Mentoring Program coordinator in their respective schools, for instance, in freshman students welcome day.

A total of 127 student mentors (46% male and 54% female) have participated in the program in the first year of its execution. The majority of mentoring activities have been held through the Engineering and Architecture (29%) school, followed by Social Sciences and Law (28%) and Health Sciences (27%). The Science (4%) and Arts and Humanities (12 %) faculties exhibited lower levels of participation.

ECTS recognition for program participation falls between 0 and 2 ECTS, and 50% of the mentors have earned maximum credits for their continuing activities throughout the academic year. The ICE coordination team determines criteria for mentor final performance evaluations and communicates these criteria to school administrators with each student mentor proposal for credit recognition of activities performed. Additionally, faculty heads are asked to confirm their recognition of each proposal or to otherwise submit additional evidence to that listed at www.unizar.es/ice in support of credit assignment reconsideration.

The program was positively assessed through a satisfaction survey of student mentors, both from a personal standpoint and as an institutional initiative. Mentors reported that they would recommend program participation to their peers. Additionally, assistance from school heads, faculty tutors, degree coordinators and associate deans has been greatly appreciated.

Main areas for improvement are generally related to lacking mentee participation. This was highlighted in spite of actions taken to promote mentee participation, including the establishment of informal meeting spaces for mentoring sessions and the encouragement of new technological and social networking applications as alternative and/or supplemental resources to face-to-face meetings. This underscores the need for stronger program promotion efforts.

3. Conclusions

Other observations to consider for continuous Peer Mentoring Program improvement at the University of Zaragoza include the following:

- Mentors experienced personal satisfaction through the performance of mentoring activities, though some expressed frustration with limited mentee participation.
- There is a need for program dissemination and implementation from freshmen and the university community.
- Mentors have requested other informal meetings to be taken into account as part of their mentoring activities.
- Mentors request additional communication channels that allow for the discussion of experiences and concerns over the course of the academic year.
- Mentors also call for additional personal skills training.

In view of the programs results for the 2012-2013 school year, it can be concluded that the organizational design of the program has bolstered its rapid implementation in all University of Zaragoza faculties. The program's acceptance among school management teams and high mentor involvement have undoubtedly formed positive perceptions of the program throughout the university community, generating a 36% increase in the number of mentor participants in the following 2013-2014 academic year.

We therefore present a model of Peer Mentoring program organization and implementation. The program's success lies largely in institutional support from the Office of the Vice-Chancellor and in school autonomy to tailor program content.

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