

Creating a Successful Peer-Mentoring Program

Every college or university's peer-mentoring program is unique so that it can best meet the needs of the particular mix of students on campus. However, there are some commonalities—skills, knowledge, and mindset—that successful mentors need to acquire in order to effectively guide other students. When creating a peer-mentoring program, you will need to consider both the needs and personality of your particular institution and the skills and habits that all peer mentors require in order to succeed. Some tips to consider at the outset of developing a program:

- **Clarify your program's primary goals.** Do you want students to receive academic as well as personal help? Who will your peer mentors serve, and how will they be identified?
- **Gain support from others by involving them in building the program.** Consider involving students, administrators, faculty, staff, parents, and community members. Think big, but start small. If the program is to last, it will need the support and energy of many people, especially the academic side.
- **Create opportunities to foster connections between the mentors.** Friendships will develop more naturally in a comfortable and social environment. In addition to the obvious academic connections, investing energy and resources into creating meaningful social opportunities to bring the mentors together will pay lasting dividends.
- **Create successful training for the program.** Express your expectations clearly to the mentors, and be sure to provide these expectations in written form as well.
- **Focus on overall success for students, not remediation.** Rather than specifically targeting just “at-risk” students, focus on the benefits that peer mentoring can contribute to all students. Remember, every successful person had a mentor at some point.
- **Engage peer mentors in recruitment.** The best leaders and recruiters of a peer-mentoring program are the mentors themselves. Over 90% of the peer mentors we polled said that other peer mentors had recruited them into the program.

If you are looking at these materials, you have probably given a lot of thought to the question “Why create a peer mentoring program?” As a first step to successfully building and/or improving a peer-mentoring program, you should be able to answer the following questions:

1. **Why does your institution want/need a mentoring program?**
3. **Who will the program serve?**
4. **What responsibilities will participants in your program have?**
5. **How will you select and train your mentors?**
6. **How will the program be administered?**

We will look at each of these questions individually and then provide background information on the history of our own peer-mentoring program at Utah Valley State College (UVSC).

1. Why does your institution want/need a mentoring program?

Poor retention rates of college students for over the last few decades have demonstrated the need for successful mentoring of new college students. Student retention is one of the biggest reasons for creating a peer-mentoring program. Peer mentors can assist your new students with connecting to campus, developing good study skills, and transitioning to college—all of which are key retention issues. Students are also more likely to adopt effective study strategies from a peer.

Not only can a peer-mentoring program can help with student retention, it can also be used as a great marketing tool to recruit new students and gain additional support from alumni. Having a peer-mentoring program in place for incoming students can also help an institution demonstrate its commitment to parents and to its community.

The financial cost for beginning a peer-mentoring program tends to be relatively low when compared to funding other student programs. Funding is needed to train and compensate mentors as well as to finance the day-to-day costs of running the program. However, the benefits of the peer-mentoring program well outweigh the expenses.

2. Who will the program serve?

A peer-mentoring program serves several populations: most obviously, new students and peer mentors. However, a program also serves academic departments, student-services departments, and the institution as a whole. The extent to which your program serves each particular population on campus will depend on the program's goals.

Both incoming and existing students benefit from a mentoring program. New students benefit by having support and guidance not only as they enter their educational experience, but throughout their entire course of study. Existing students who serve as peer mentors have the opportunity to share their knowledge as well as to offer their expertise to their fellow students. Part of the eight-stage psychosocial development theory promoted by pioneering psychologist Erik Erikson is that in order to avoid feelings of stunted growth, an experienced individual may develop a strong need to share knowledge and skills. Mentoring provides an opportunity for students to feel this sense of involvement and personal growth. Both parties—the mentors and the students they help—enjoy positive relationships based on mutual respect and understanding.

Your institution and departments will also be served by strengthened connections with new students. For example, the mentoring program can provide a forum for departments to deliver information about their offerings, to promote themselves and to recruit students. By having department representatives present pertinent information to the peer mentors, departments can form partnerships with students who will then in turn share that information with other students.

3. What responsibilities will program participants have?

Everyone involved with your peer-mentoring program—the students being mentored, the program and its administrators, the institution, and of course the peer mentors themselves—will have a unique set of responsibilities. Clearly defining these responsibilities for all participants will help you to make your program as efficient and successful as possible. Following are some ideas for defining the responsibilities of each of the key groups identified above.

Individual Peer Mentor Responsibilities:

- Offer relevant experience and learning skills
- Employ good interpersonal/communication skills
- Desire to help and develop new students
- Display an open-mind and flexible positive attitude
- Dedicate adequate time and willingness to develop relationships
- Respect the confidentiality of the new students
- Follow through on important tasks
- Seek feedback on effectiveness of their mentoring

New Student Responsibilities:

- Participate actively in their own learning/development
- Be willing to seek out resources and take initiative
- Have trust and confidence in the peer relationship
- Recognize that learning can involve taking risks
- See learning as a continuing process
- Share goals and expectations
- Seek out additional professional development opportunities
- Provide feedback on effectiveness of the mentoring program

Program & Administrator Responsibilities:

- Understand the peer-mentoring program (appraisal, rewards, time required, etc.)
- Support and encourage peer mentoring efforts
- Communicate positive feedback regarding mentoring program
- Successfully model the mentoring roles: learning coach, student advocate, trusted friend, peer leader, and connecting link
- Provide reasonable time for mentors to connect with new students, peer group, class of students, etc.
- Identify potential mentoring events and or connections
- Assist with coordinating invitational meetings.
- Select new peer mentors
- Provide relevant training, resources, and support
- Develop website for information and skills/learning exchange database
- Identify contact information for all mentors
- Identify roles, responsibilities, and processes within the program

- Establish ground rules, accountability, and responsibilities for mentors
- Initiate events for contact with new students (welcome, overview of program, etc.)
- Serve as an information resource (on contacts, resources, operations, guidelines, etc.) for new and mentors
- Maintain membership (accountability, eligibility, rotation, recruitment, promotion, etc.) of the program

Institutional Responsibilities:

- Establish and maintain an organizational structure that supports, rewards, and values the peer mentoring program
- Assign an administrator to oversee the program
- Provide sufficient resources to foster program development
- Allow time for the program to show value
- Promote mentoring as a cultural norm of the institution
- Establish oversight committee for evaluation, feedback, guidance, resources, etc.
- Provide resources for ongoing evaluation of the program to ensure continuing success

4. How will you select and train your mentors?

As you prepare to select and train peer mentors, there are certain personal qualities you should look for in the students you interview. At Utah Valley State College, our current peer mentors and instructors are continually searching for students to recruit into the program. They watch for students in their Student Success courses who, among other characteristics, demonstrate interest in serving others, unofficially mentor their classmates, lead by example, practice what they are learning, have high academic standards, and exhibit strong personal integrity and charisma. Students who exhibit these types of characteristics usually enjoy success in their own academic pursuits, which they can then use to influence other students for good. Design your program to help you seek out effective students who can become great peer mentors.

Selection:

Students interested in becoming peer mentors should meet the basic requirements for selection and continuance that you outline for your program. These may include the following:

- Completion of at least one or more semesters at your institution
- Minimum GPA requirements for participation in your program
- Submission of a written application
- Completion of prerequisite and training courses provided for the program
- Participation in interviews with program administrators and mentor leaders

You want to make sure that your students recognize that being selected for your program is a privilege and opportunity to serve. If students are trying to get in just to pad a resume, they may be in for a difficult experience. Effectively mentoring requires a tremendous amount of sincere

effort. (To view specifics about our selection/training processes and other details of our program at Utah Valley State College, please visit www.uvsc.edu/studentssuccess/uvmentor/info.html.)

Training:

There are a variety of ways to organize peer mentor training. Which is best depends on the needs of your institution. The most important thing about training is that you actually *do* it: leaving peer mentors to figure things out on their own will only reduce your program's effectiveness. Program training could be as simple as taking a couple of days before school starts or as extensive as requiring mentors to take credit-bearing training courses before and after selection. Train your potential mentors about the roles and responsibilities of a mentor in your program. Training should include role plays of what their students might expect, how to communicate with their students, how to keep the relationships going, and how to set boundaries. *Peer Mentor Companion* covers these and many other valuable concepts for training peer mentors.

At Utah Valley State, our students must meet certain course requirements to complete their training. Students are required to earn at least a B grade in all of the following courses in order to be selected as mentors and stay in the program. The courses are taken in the following order:

- CLSS 1000 (College Student Success)
- CLSS 2200 (Leadership Mentoring I)
- CLSS 2300 (Leadership Mentoring II)
- CLSS 240R (Leadership Mentoring Practicum)

Because our mentors are assigned to a CLSS 1000 course, they are required to successfully complete that course prior to applying to the mentoring program. Students interested in becoming peer mentors then take CLSS 2200 during the spring semester in order to be eligible for the program. *Peer Mentor Companion* is the training manual for this course. If the students are selected, they participate in two summer activities designed to have them work in teams and develop friendships. During the fall semester, newly selected mentors continue their training by enrolling in CLSS 2300, which also uses *Peer Mentor Companion*. In this course, students can revisit the text and see how the concepts apply directly to their own current mentoring experiences. After successfully completing both of these courses, our mentors enroll in CLSS 240R each semester. In this course, just as in CLSS 2300, they are required to maintain and submit a weekly reflection journal, bringing accountability to the program. In addition to the courses, our mentors also meet once a week as a group to discuss program business and share best practices. Sometimes they also meet with representatives from various campus resources.

5. How will the program be administered?

Our experience has been that a program is most successful when organized under an academic department (as discussed in the "History of the Mentor Program at Utah Valley State College" section that follows). At a minimum, the program administration should consist of a program coordinator and a support person to keep track of the mentors and the paper trail.

It is also important for the mentors in the program to participate in the leadership of the program. Look for the best mentors you have and utilize them in leadership roles to help “mentor the mentors.” You may also try organizing potential mentors into teams to help facilitate training.

If you plan to use peer mentors as leaders, connect the leader and their teams by the end of the academic term preceding the initial term of their mentoring work so there is sufficient time to train and make connections. You might provide additional opportunities for new mentors to bond with returning peer mentors during the summer by doing an adventure activity or a service-related project. By doing so, they can form personal relationships before the fall term begins. We also strongly recommend holding regularly scheduled meetings (weekly or monthly, depending on the needs of your program) with your mentors throughout the semester.

If your program pairs a mentor with a course and instructor, announce the pairs by the end of the preceding academic term and introduce the instructors and mentors before classes start. This could be in the context of a meeting, a lunch, or another social event for mentors and instructors.

History of the Mentor Program at Utah Valley State College

Mentoring initiatives at Utah Valley State College began taking form in 1998, when college administrators recognized serious problems with many students’ persistence to graduation. Student Life, Student Services, and Academic Affairs united and held a number of focus groups to discuss possible solutions to the retention problem. As an outcome of those meetings, participants expressed an interest in developing a peer-mentoring program that would allow new students to learn from experienced students who were trained as generalist advisors. The College Success Studies Department already housed a first-year-experience course—College Student Success—and expressed interest in utilizing peer mentors in it. The Vice Presidents of Academic Affairs and Student Affairs asked College Success Studies to pilot a peer-mentoring model in connection with the new course, which began in 1999. The administrators also created a steering group called the Partnership for Student Success, which included numerous representatives from Student Life, Student Services, and College Success Studies. The Partnership invited First-Year pioneer Dr. John Gardner to UVSC to consult and encourage support for the effort. Initially, the Partnership decided to call the participants in the mentoring program “UV Leaders.”

The program was initially housed in Student Services with additional support from Student Life and College Success Studies. Having a partnership between the three entities provided wonderful support to the new program. The director of the program and all support staff were funded from both Student Life and Student Services. One of the difficulties of this organization, however, was that since the UV Leaders worked with the Student Success course but were not directly overseen by an academic department, there was a disconnect between the goals of the mentoring program and the academic needs being served. After much evaluation and discussion, in 2005 it was decided that College Success Studies should solely administer the program, with Student Life and Student Services continuing to provide moral and financial support. The program went on to achieve even greater effectiveness and success after this change was implemented.

During the initial years of the program, the UV Leaders were primarily charged with finding ways to connect their students to campus. They also presented on different study strategies in

their assigned classes. Prospective mentors were trained in a pre-service course called CLSS 2300 (Leadership Mentoring) prior to selection to the program. The main goal of the course was to provide the mentors with presentation skills. As the program evolved, the administrators realized that mentoring encompassed much more than the typical leadership and presentation model. This realization inspired several changes to the program. Mentor training took a big step forward with the creation of two new training courses. In 2004, curricula for an in-service course and a repeatable practicum course were created to accompany the pre-service course. The pre-service course, now called CLSS 2200 (Leadership Mentoring I), shifted its focus to the soft skills necessary for the mentors to effectively connect with the students. (This course led to the development of our text *Peer Mentor Companion*.) The course also includes some presentation training. CLSS 2300 became Leadership Mentoring II and is now taken by mentors during their first semester in the program after selection. In this course, mentors continue to hone their mentoring skills as well as their presentation skills. It also provides them with a forum for discussing their experiences with other mentors while they are still learning their roles. All returning mentors enroll in CLSS 240R (Leadership Mentoring Practicum) each semester after completing CLSS 2300. This course provides opportunities for reflection through weekly goal setting and reports. Students in this course also attend a weekly meeting together.

These changes in training also coincided with a change in the name of the program. In 2005, the program began to be called “UV Mentors” instead of the original “UV Leaders.” The UV Mentors focus mainly on the individual students. They still help students learn how to better connect to campus; however, they now concentrate more on the individual needs of the students they are assigned to mentor. They help them to feel comfortable with their transition to our institution, teach them success skills, and direct them to the campus resources they need. They spend one-on-one and small-group time with their students in addition to working with the class as a whole. Returning mentors serve as “senior mentors” to the newly selected mentors. In this role, they check up on the new mentors to see if they need any help or advice regarding the mentor role. Four student team leaders are chosen to oversee activities, service, mentoring, and research for both the mentors in the program and the students being served by the program.

At the same time the program was being redesigned, the UV Mentor program moved to a larger space on campus that has office space for administrators, team leads, and mentors. The space also includes several tables for group study and a lounge area where mentors and students alike can hang out and relax. In 2006, the entire College Success Studies Department moved to be near the UV Mentor program. This move has created an additional support system for the mentors and their program, as mentors have ready access to all Department faculty and support staff.

The UV Mentor program at UVSC is constantly under evaluation. Each semester, the mentors evaluate themselves, conduct research on their program, and make adjustments based on their findings. As the mentors have grown into their roles within the program, they have received more and more support and accolades from our institution. They are highly sought-after by various UVSC departments. Perhaps the best praise for our program is the fact that it’s common to hear on campus, “If you want something to succeed, get the UV Mentors involved!”