

Developing Undergraduate Student Leadership Skills through Community-Based Mentoring Courses

Tracy M. Parish D.M.A., Emily Malamud B.M.E. Candidate

Office of Public Engagement/School of Music, College of Fine and Applied Arts, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Introduction

The purpose of this course is to support the academic performance and social acclimation of first year undergraduate students in the School of Music by providing greater access to academic and advising resources through mentoring experiences with upper-level undergraduate students enrolled in the James Scholar program. Service and honors credit is provided for James Scholar students participating as mentors. The successful development and implementation of a small pilot course was completed during fall semester 2011. This highly successful course enrolled twelve students who served as mentors. These mentors actively supported the development of a well-structured and effective academic and social support network for first-year music students. Extensive qualitative and quantitative data was collected in order to demonstrate the positive effects of this program. The School of Music Mentoring program is now in its second year, and enrollment has increased by 60%.

Course content includes bi-weekly mentor-mentee meetings focused on diverse topics including communication, network development, health and wellness, time management, exam preparation, and study skill development among others. Mentors also provide mentees with experience-based information on study methods, academic support services, and curriculum requirements as well as general advice. In addition to bi-weekly meetings, mentors and mentees attend three cultural events over the course of the semester. Program participants also participate as volunteers for community events such as the Urbana Sweetcorn Festival and Prosperity Gardens Inc. HalloweenFest in order to become familiar with the local community and to learn about the value of teamwork and community engagement.

Subjects participating in the research study associated with this mentoring program represented 14% of the fall 2011 School of Music freshman class.

Mentor-Mentee Meeting Topics

- Instructors as a Resource
- Communication
- Time Management
- Library Resources
- Tutoring Services
- Health and Wellness
- Students Affairs
- Exam Preparation

Subject Selection and Demographics

A random sampling of subjects representing 14% of the fall semester 2011 School of Music freshman class was recruited through poster, email, and in-person solicitation. Of participating subjects, four were male and seven were female. Seven subjects were participants in the School of Music Mentoring program and four were not. Of the subjects participating in the mentoring program, two were also participants in the Campus Honors program and two participated in the James Scholar program. All non-mentee subjects participated in the Campus Honors program. Subjects were freshman music majors enrolled in one of the following music degree programs: Composition-Theory, Music Education, Music History, Performance – Instrumental, or Performance – Vocal.

All subjects were between 18 and 19 years of age and identified as White (non-Hispanic) or Asian. Given a set of options for hometown community type, subjects categorized the community in which they were raised as urban, suburban, micro-urban, or rural.

Figure 1: Degree Program Distribution

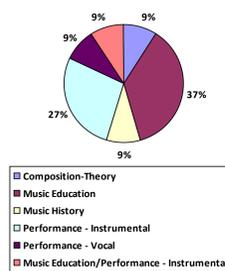


Figure 2: Subject Age Distribution

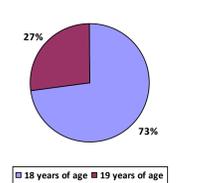


Figure 3: Subject Distribution by Hometown Type

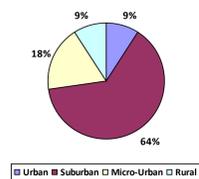
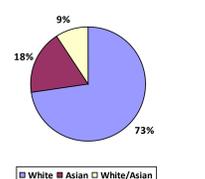


Figure 4: Subjects by Self-Identified Race



Methodology

Experimental Group

Each mentoring program participant was assigned a peer mentor through an in-depth screening and matching process that considered age, gender, hometown community type (urban, micro-urban, rural, etc.), degree program, and personal interests as well as comments provided through a series of open-ended questions. Mentors and mentees were matched by similarity in each of these areas with the intention of pairing individuals who had a common background and similar academic and social interests. Experimental group subjects participated in guided small group and one-on-one activities aimed at providing information about university academic resources, clubs, and registered student organizations as well as other academic, cultural, and co-curricular activities and services in order to more fully acclimate them to the university and local community.

Control Group

Subjects in the control group were not involved with the mentoring program and did not participate in guided small group and one-on-one activities aimed at providing information about university academic resources, clubs, and registered student organizations or other academic, cultural, and co-curricular activities and services.

Data Collection

In order to present a triangulated assessment, qualitative and quantitative data was collected from 11 subjects through two one-on-one interviews, completion of a questionnaire, and collection of grade information for fall semester 2011. Open-ended interview questions were aimed at determining subjects' perception of their academic performance in high school, readiness for matriculation to university, quality of experience, and self-perceived level of academic achievement and professional development as well as social and cultural acclimation of subjects during their first semester of enrollment at the University. Interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Data Analysis

After data collection was completed, researchers created coding schemes separately to be applied to all interview transcriptions. After agreeing on a standard scheme, investigators independently wrote case studies to be compared and consolidated. These case studies were then used to collaboratively formulate conclusions based on interviews, questionnaires, and grades.

Results

Compared to subjects not enrolled in the School of Music mentoring program, first-year undergraduate music students enrolled in the School of Music mentoring program demonstrated:

- superior academic performance,
- greater awareness of campus academic resources,
- broader campus support network development,
- greater focus on positive lifestyle choices,
- improved time-management skills; and
- lower participation rates in extra-curricular activities resulting in additional study time

The overall academic performance of non-mentee subjects, who had an average GPA of 3.8, exceeded that of mentees, for whom the average GPA was 3.32. However, all non-mentee subjects were enrolled in an honors program, suggesting that they were exceptional students to begin with and indicating that they received supplemental academic support. Seven subjects were enrolled in the James Scholar program, which requires students to maintain at minimum 3.50 cumulative grade point average and complete an honors experience each semester while in residence. Four subjects were also enrolled in the Campus Honors program, which provides additional resources including small intensive classes, additional advising support and participation in seminars and lectures that complement the core curriculum.

It is important to note that the average GPA for all freshman music students during fall semester 2011 was 3.1, which is significantly lower than the 3.32 average of subjects participating in the mentoring program.

Data indicates that the supplemental academic support offered by the School of Music Mentoring program, as well as the James Scholar and Campus Honors programs, resulted in higher academic achievement for subjects participating in these programs.

Conclusion

Students participating as mentees in the program identified numerous benefits including greater awareness of campus academic resources, development and utilization of more diverse support networks, changes in lifestyle to improve health and wellness, and more effective use of time-management methods when compared to first-year students not participating in the mentoring program.

In addition, students enrolled as mentees in the program demonstrated superior academic performance during fall semester 2011 when compared to their peers not enrolled in the program with the former earning an average GPA of 3.32 and the latter earning an average GPA of 3.1.

Acknowledgements

Special thanks go to the following campus units for supporting the research outlined in this poster:

- Teaching Advancement Board, Office of the Provost
- Provost's Initiative for Teaching Advancement Award
- College of Fine and Applied Arts
- School of Music
- Krannert Center for the Performing Arts

Contact Information

Tracy M. Parish, D.M.A.
tparish@illinois.edu

Emily Malamud
malamud1@illinois.edu