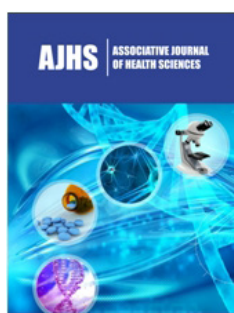


Peer Mentors and the Undergrad Healthcare Student: A Integral Part of the Academic and Personal Learning Experience

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Abstract

First year university students may encounter a variety of emotions and transitions during their initial year at an institution of higher education. The 2020-2021 year, however, intensified those experiences by switching to all or mostly virtual learning and conducting classes overall during the COVID-19 pandemic. One method that has been previously shown to connect students with more experienced students is the concept of peer mentorship. Peer Mentors may be helpful for student retention and more importantly, student emotional health and interconnectedness. This article looks at the peer mentor experience in an orientation seminar course at an urban healthcare and science university during the pandemic.

Keywords: Peer mentors; University; First-year students; Retention

Abbreviations: Doctor of Physical Therapy (DPT); Doctor of Occupational Therapy (DrOT)

Introduction

It has been suggested having peer mentors in a university classroom can improve academic grades and retention [1-5]. Several functions of peer mentors are identified in the literature: acceptance, guidance, resources, opportunity, goal identification, training, socialization, advocacy, and more [2,3,6]. Yet many of these concepts are primarily focused on a one-to-one relationship rather than a peer mentor assigned to a specific discipline or academic class. Peer mentors may be assimilated into a course to provide individualized student tutoring in a specific subject area; serve as teaching assistants, or a combination of these roles, plus offering overall emotional support [2-6]. Additionally, young adults have indicated their mental health and overall wellness has been negatively impacted during the year of the pandemic and their first year of university [7].

Thus, in an accelerated academic program at a rigorous science and healthcare university, a peer mentor may be of considerable value to the first-year student, particularly during a pandemic and the transition to virtual learning. This article assessed the aggregate course evaluations and retention of first-year undergraduate students majoring in Doctor of Physical Therapy (DPT), Doctor of Occupational Therapy (DrOT), Exercise Physiology, and Health Science.

Discussion

The first-year students were enrolled in Orientation I (n=64) and Orientation II (n=60), one-credit seminar courses, during the fall 2020 and spring 2021 semesters, respectively. These classes met virtually and synchronously once per week with a faculty instructor and a student peer mentor who had previously taken the orientation classes. The courses enrolled the same students and took place over a 15-week, two-semester period spanning an entire academic year. While the peer mentors' demographic characteristics and prior experience

were not considered during the recruitment and selection process, the academic major of each peer mentor was required to be one of the four academic disciplines represented in the class. Three female peer mentors comprised of one undergraduate DPT student, one graduate DPT student, and one graduate DrOT student attended a section of the weekly 50-minute class. First-year students enrolled in the course were randomly selected into a particular section with a randomly placed peer mentor. Peer mentor-to-student ratios fluctuated from 1:16; 1:17; 1:15 in the fall term and 1:14, 1:21; and 1:25 during the spring semester. Peer mentors were compensated with federal work-study, elective course credit hours or a stipend (\$8.57 per hour; five hours per week).

The peer mentors primarily supported the course instructor and students during class lectures and activities as a course facilitator with limited interactions occurring on a one-to-one basis, primarily through email and on a rare occasion, a Zoom conference. Additionally, peer mentors were given full access to course materials and grades through the Learning Management System (LMS), Brightspace D2L. Each peer mentor signed a confidentiality agreement including disclosure consequences to assure understanding of the protected information and discourage unlawful use of faculty and private student records. As the peer mentor experience served as an initial pilot, specific responsibilities and expectations were not fully outlined for the peer mentors, thus providing an abundance of initiative opportunities supplemented by weekly faculty-mentor meetings. The primary activities of the peer mentors consisted of in-class verbal contributions related to lecture and discussion, instructor, and mentor meetings, out of class prep, and one-to-one mentoring. Weekly meetings among the peer mentors proved unnecessary, but a weekly discussion among the three instructors and peer mentors was welcomed; established camaraderie among all attendees and allowed for planning and open feedback.

Feedback from the Peer Mentors was obtained verbally through an informal focus group. Peer Mentors indicated they enjoyed assisting in the virtual classroom yet preferred to be enrolled in the class as a facilitator rather than a student, the later implied limited interaction to Discussion Boards and email outreach. The Peer Mentors did not request further training, but a unanimous

request was made to continue weekly post-class meetings with all course instructors. Additionally, all three Peer Mentors have asked to serve again in the coming year in an (pandemic pending), in-person class. Student feedback was obtained through the end-of-course anonymous course evaluations, which rated the course positively, but unfortunately, there were no specific questions regarding the inclusion of the Peer Mentors. While the initial year of integrating Peer Mentors into the class was virtual and during a pandemic, student retention was 94% from the fall to spring terms. Future research should include pre-and post-assessments of the first-year student and peer mentor perceived and actualized benefits as cumulative GPA; college and university retention; interconnectedness; leadership, public speaking, autonomy; and service.

Conclusion

Peer Mentors can be essential to student retention and, more importantly, student emotional health and interconnectedness.

Conflict of Interest

The author of this publication declares no financial, personal, or other conflict of interest to this work.

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