

DEVELOPMENT OF A STUDENT-LED, STUDENT-FOCUSED MENTORSHIP PROGRAM
FOR THE ECU HONORS COLLEGE

by

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by

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Abstract

One of the most important components of a successful undergraduate experience is the sense of belonging with a strong group of peers. While this is an important feeling for young adults, it is also difficult and daunting to find. This is especially true for first-year students who are also simultaneously transitioning to college. The following research analyzes established mentorship programs in higher education to determine what qualities make up a successful program that can lead to strong relationships between upperclassmen and underclassmen. These relationships have the potential to propel students academically and professionally, as well as help students connect and find their community. Connections such as these allow students to expand their networks, form relationships with people from different backgrounds, and get involved with the university and surrounding community. The takeaways of this research will be used as the foundation to create a mentorship program for the East Carolina University Honors College.

DEVELOPMENT OF A STUDENT-LED, STUDENT-FOCUSED MENTORSHIP PROGRAM FOR THE ECU HONORS COLLEGE

During the 2022 fall semester, students in the East Carolina University (ECU) Honors College were given the opportunity to explore university issues in the freshman colloquium classes. As the class progressed and relationships developed, a group of students came together with a similar passion and love for the Honors College. The group held a multitude of positions across the university: one student in the College of Business who was also a leader in club sports, another student in the College of Business who was a lead ambassador for the Honors College, and lastly a senior health administration student who held the position as president of the Honors College Student Council. None of the group members had a background in education, yet as invested honors students, the issues pervading the honors curriculum struck a chord. Specifically, the fields of mentorship and collaboration and how to engrain these concepts into curriculum development were selected as the topic of interest. The project grew from a genuine passion by the group in advancing the resources available to students through the ECU Honors College.

Initially, the project started as a networking approach by interacting with faculty and staff to find barriers preventing the establishment of a mentorship program for the Honors College. During the initial discovery phase, it became apparent that mentoring had been examined and attempted several times, but various programs and events fell short for assorted reasons. Though previous attempts had failed, all faculty supported the need for a mentorship program for the ECU Honors College. Some speculated that previous iterations needed only slight reworkings to their makeup to get the project off the ground, while others pointed to programs utilized by other universities. This led the research team in a wide array of directions when considering what is necessary to establish a well-integrated and high yield program for mentorship. In totality, these conversations with the honors staff, as well as internal discussions

of the group who had all experienced positive mentor relationships, stemmed the same recurring question: “What makes a successful mentorship program?”

Statement of the Problem

Conversations with faculty resulted in the conclusion that one of the most vital components of a successful undergraduate experience is to generate a sense of belonging within a peer group for students. This feeling creates security and confidence, and it also promotes collaborative learning initiatives. However, it can also be an intimidating task for students to cultivate in an era of increased anxiety and stress within an unfamiliar environment. These barriers are especially prevalent in first-year students, who are completing a transition both in peer groups and in their overall lifestyle as they move to a new area to begin college. To assist with this transition and help establish strong connections within the honors community, it was decided that a new mentorship program would be piloted.

Since mentorship in the Honors College has been attempted previously, there had to be a new approach to this program. After conducting interviews about mentorship with both staff and students, it was decided that a program focusing on first-year student support and utilizing upperclassmen as a mentoring resource would be the goal of the program. These relationships have proven to be a stimulant for successful transition into college while bolstering academic and professional success. Although there are clear benefits to these types of relationships, the problems presented were disengagement and a lack of accountability in prior program attempts for the ECU Honors College. Overcoming these issues became the paramount objective of the research, and the goal of the study evolved into analyzing the structures of successful mentorship programs within higher education and integrating applicable aspects into the new program for the ECU Honors College.

Methodology

A meta-analysis was the method chosen to conduct research on the literature of mentorship programs in higher education. By definition, a meta-analysis is a quantitative, formal study design used to systematically assess previous research studies to derive conclusions about that body of research (Haidich, 2010). The goal for this type of analysis is to examine results from many different studies to provide a clearer look into trends and patterns. The meta-analysis performed in this study discovered 20 different higher education programs around the world, along with their successful practices, flaws, and barriers. The only requirement that the mentorship program had to meet to be included in the study was that it was in a higher education setting. There was no restriction as to where the program was, how big or little it was, what kind of college or university setting it was in, etc.

With the help of Dr. Travis Lewis from the Department of Educational Leadership at ECU, the team designed a custom, effective rubric that was used to score the programs. There were six main themes found throughout the literature that became the pillars of the rubric: program structure, mentor expectations, content, communication, impact, barriers. These themes played a crucial role in shaping and guiding the entire study, as they provided the framework for understanding and analyzing the programs. The data pulled from the literature was analyzed to find successful practices of mentors and the programs they are a part of. Also, it provided a lens into the barriers faced such as lack of funding, university responsibility, program flaws, mentor limitations, or unresponsiveness of mentee. This type of research offered a well-rounded look into the many factors that must work together to create successful mentor programs for all parties involved.

As seen below in *Table 1*, a condensed version of the meta-analysis is displayed. For the rubric, the main themes were color coded and divided to be assessed according to each article that was researched. In the original analysis, each theme was split into 4-8 subcategories for a

more in-depth scoring system. For example, under the theme “Program Structure”, subcategories were created to identify characteristics such as how mentors were identified, how students were paired with mentors, how many mentees were assigned to each mentor, etc. For the “Content” theme, it was divided into six subcategories: academic, professional, relationship and social, university opportunity, emotional support, and orientation. These subcategories served as checkboxes for what area(s) were addressed within the mentorship program being reviewed.

Table 1

Example of Completed Meta-Analysis

Article	Structure	Mentor Expectations	Communication	Impact	Barriers
Implementation and Evaluation of a Formal Academic Peer Mentoring Program in Higher Education	formal STEP Program implemented at Australia Macquarie University, training required, 5 mentees to 1 mentor	mapped out formal agreement for both parties, mentor should be acting as role model, advisor, guide	informal communication on a voluntary basis, preferences established at first meeting, frequency is crucial to a successful partnership, mentors responsible for creating agenda and semester outline	students were better equipped to be successful in the classroom and throughout their college careers, smoother transition to college, increased student-faculty relationships, provided emotional support and friendship	institution responsible for funding of trainings and orientation, research of successful mentor programs is limited
An Examination of the Impact of Peer Mentoring on First-Generation College Student Peer Mentors' Development of the Five Practices of Exemplary Leaders	paired by a simple random sampling, selected from a high level education program at Texas A&M, 1 mentee to 1 mentor	teach 3 to 5 lessons, peer leader and role model, encourage students to be successful and teach life-skill strategies	face to face contact at least once a month	test scores increased, mentors gained valuable leadership experience	mentees not responsive to their assigned mentors, not comfortable opening up
The Effect of Mentorship Program in Enhancing the Academic Performance of First MBBS Students	identified and paired through common perspectives and future career path, 1 mentee to 1 mentor	aim to build trust within the relationship, guide through college experience	communication established by both parties through face to face, texting, phone calls, email, special events throughout the semester for mentee and mentor to attend together	academic and professional development, stronger cohesion as a campus	cost of staffing, programming, activities
Mentoring in Higher Education	selected upon their high level of academic achievement, paired by socio-demographic, 1 mentee to 1 mentor or a small group with 1 mentor	aim to help students be successful in challenging experiences, capstone projects, gain research experience, transition to college, and be successful in courses where high attrition is observed	frequency of communication determined by mentee, can be as frequent as daily if needed, face to face meetings and mediated discussion board with other mentees	build strong community and foundation during the transition to college, improved cognitive and socio-emotional growth, teaching, and communication skills, confidence as a leader and in professional skills	school responsible for compensation of mentors (scholarships, credits or pay)
Roles, Risks, and Benefits of Peer Mentoring Relationships in Higher Education	mentoring class is required for those interested in the program, high performing students	mentors act as connecting link, peer leader, learning coach, student advocate, trusted friend	face to face contact through interviews, weekly reflections by both mentees and mentors	encourage personal growth and offer academic support, reapply classroom concepts in hands on experiences, gained self confidence, help students get involved	some mentees becoming too dependant on the mentor while others felt bothered by how much they were contacted

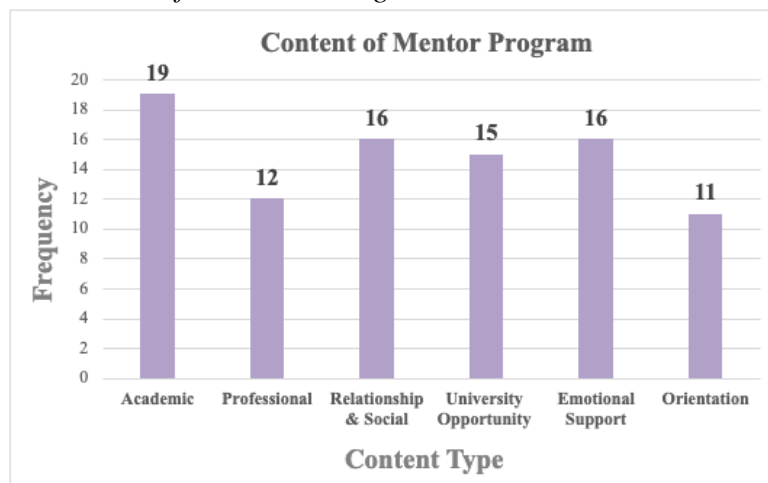
Results

Many reoccurring themes appeared within each of the categories as the meta-analysis was performed. One of the biggest themes to note is that the most successful mentoring programs were a mix of formal and informal in structure. Formal components ensured that academic and

professional work was being completed through the mentorship relationships, while the informal components provided more emotional support and a sense of comfort for the mentee. Nearly half (40%) of the programs in this study were a mix of formal and informal structures. Additionally, it was noted that methods for how mentors were identified varied between the 20 different programs. Some programs had a more volunteer or interest-based approach to selecting mentors while other programs had a more formal process, requiring an application, interview, training, and sometimes even a class on mentorship before potential mentors were assigned students. For program content, there was a wide variety of information covered between the different programs. Again, the main areas of content were academic, professional, relationship and social, university opportunity, emotional support, and orientation. Of those six categories, academic content was the most frequent, which was expected since all the mentorship programs in the study came from higher education settings. However, 19 of the 20 programs in the study had at least one additional area of content within their mentorship program. By incorporating different types of content into mentoring, it made these programs more versatile and better equipped to address students' needs.

Table 2

Frequency of Content Material for Mentor Programs



Further details were assessed from the meta-analysis by looking at some of the more specific components of the mentorship programs. Routine expectations of the mentor included hosting regular check-ins with their mentees, attending the same events encouraged to mentees, and providing educational and emotional support. The mentor was also expected to serve as a role model to mentees. Oftentimes, this was the mentor showing their mentees how to set themselves up for success, whether it was related to the transition to college, networking, research, etc. Between the 20 different programs in this study, the most frequent type of communication between the mentor and the mentee was recurring face-to-face meetings. The frequency of these meetings was often determined by the mentor and mentee based on their needs, but it was important for the mentor to regularly check in with their mentee(s) regardless of if they actually met or not. Events were also an important component of communication in mentor relationships. It was important for the mentor to connect students to different types of events that would benefit them and to attend those events along with their mentees. Additionally, it was important for mentors and mentees to all get together to reflect on the progress and growth being made by both parties.

As far as the impact seen by mentorship programs in higher education, numerous benefits are noted. Positive impacts were reported in a variety of areas including improvements to academics, professional development, self-confidence, building community, and university engagement. While students improved their grades and skillsets, they also found a sense of empowerment and community through the mentorship program they were a part of. It is also important to note that no negative impacts were reported by these mentorship programs, reflecting that oftentimes they can only do good for a university or student body. While these programs had many benefits, there were barriers that prevented the program's optimal success.

Some of these included costs, training, mentorship pairing, and setting boundaries between the mentor and mentee.

Discussion

Mentorship in higher education is an extremely beneficial type of program to invest in, particularly to help first-year students with the transition to college. Although mentorship is seen often, there is still no standard as to what a "perfect" program looks like. Instead, universities need to tailor the program to best fit their needs while considering the resources and staff they have that will support the program. One of the most important things to recognize with mentorship is the emotional impact it has on the mentee. While a program can be structured around more formal topics such as academics, oftentimes the biggest benefit for the mentee is just having someone to talk to and ask questions. With this, they can find their confidence and feel empowered to connect with others and be involved in their university community.

Recommendations

Based on the results of the meta-analysis, there are some key takeaways for successful components of mentorship programs in higher education. Some of the most successful programs include group-style meetings and are framed as a continuation of orientation. Two recommendations have been proposed and catered for ways to approach a new mentorship program for the ECU Honors College.

Connections, Resources, Engagement, and Welcome Seminars (CREWS)

CREWS is a potential solution to one of the most common problems facing freshman today: isolation and a disconnect between them and their peers. According to Gitnux Market Report, 73% of college students report feeling isolated during their freshman year, and 47% of students leave college feeling as though the connections they made during their time at university did not prepare them to seek a job (Linder, 2023). Furthermore, 60% of all United States college

students say they were never made aware of the scope and availability of support resources at their university. CREWS can help to directly address these issues. Time spent with peers before they even begin their academic careers can combat isolation and loneliness in their first semester, especially given the guidance of an experienced student who can direct the group toward clubs and opportunities. Hosting guest speakers during meeting times can aid in career readiness and community engagement to help shape overall undergraduate experience for the mentees. Providing an hour every 1-2 weeks for students to talk about their challenges and have them be directly heard by mentors who were at one point in the same situation allows for the mentor to direct the student towards valuable resources and opportunities. This will help to bridge the gap between what the university offers and what the students can access and take advantage of.

Implementation for ECU Honors College

If CREWS were to be implemented in the ECU Honors College, the first step would be to identify potential mentors for the program. These students would be upperclassmen students (at least sophomores or “second year” students) that have an outgoing personality. The main responsibility of the mentors would be to host weekly in-person group meetings with their mentees during the fall semester. These meetings would serve as a check-in for students but also as an opportunity for mentors to share insight into different opportunities and lessons. Ideas for these topics include student engagement (clubs/organizations), professional development, research exploration, service opportunities, etc. Curriculum from the HNRS 2000 course could also be integrated into the weekly meetings. Guest speakers such as professors and prospective employers can join these meetings to promote additional opportunities and important information. Mentee groups would be established at the beginning of the academic year and groups would be randomized so that students from different majors and areas of interest can meet and interact with one another. This model establishes repetitive contact for the students

with a group of peers who are within their living community that are then led by high-achieving mentors who know the university, Honors College, and opportunities available for them. The size of the groups would vary based on the number of mentors that could be recruited and supported by the Honors College. Another proposal with CREWS is to have the mentors assist with summer orientation. By having a leadership role during orientation, this would allow mentors to begin forming connections with the incoming first year students and be a recognizable face once they get to campus.

Since the mentors are taking a more proactive role in the freshmen's well-being and engagement, it is important to make sure they are prepared and equipped with the proper tools. It would be beneficial for the mentors to go through standard training that would provide an overview of ECU and its wide array of resources. Mentors should have a strong understanding of different campus offices frequently used by honors students, such as Career Services, Pirate Academic Success Center (PASC), Intercultural Affairs, Global Affairs, etc. Within this training, it would be crucial for the mentors to receive information on how to address mental health concerns and guide students to the appropriate resources (and when to report if necessary or safety is at risk). Outside of the meetings and orientation, the mentor's only other main responsibility is to report any concerns for students' health: mentally or physically. This guarantees that mentors are not overworked or turned away by workload, while creating valuable connections for students in their first semester, both with their peers and with those already ingrained in campus life.

At the end of the fall semester, the official responsibilities of the mentors are over, however, they are encouraged to maintain relationships with students if they request one on-one meetings or have continued questions. Mentors will then be re-evaluated to return the following year.

Challenge with Engagement

The main concern with using the CREWS model would be engagement. How would freshmen involvement be encouraged and assessed? One possible option is to link the mentorship program to HNRS 2000, the fall freshmen colloquium course. By linking this program to the course, there can be a wider exchange of information and more of an opportunity to discuss topics from class. Additionally, if the meetings become required, that could minimize some of the lecture time and provide a slight relief to professors. Even if the program is not directly related to the course, there still could be a possibility to use a CREWS mentorship program as extra credit in HNRS 2000 to promote freshmen engagement.

Academic Resources and Guidance for Honors (ARGH)

ARGH is another possible approach to mentorship that is more academic based. Students would be given the opportunity to really dive into their intended major and begin thinking about ways to get involved and prepare themselves for success over the next three to four years. One benefit of ARGH is that it would be a more intimate approach to mentorship as it would not be group based and only a few students would be assigned to each mentee. ARGH offers one-on-one attention for students who may feel that they need to talk through things with their mentor. It can feel overwhelming or scary to bring up problems in a group format, so allowing students time one-on-one with a mentor can lead to a more transparent reading of the students' needs and how they feel about any potential solutions. On top of this, ARGH takes a more academic approach, addressing the students' needs in the classroom by allowing them time to ask for specific advice from someone in their field of study. This can lead to more effective stress management and more fine-tuned knowledge of the resources a student might need to combat their stated problems.

Implementation for ECU Honors College

In order to implement ARGH into the Honors College, high-achieving students would need to be identified across different areas of study. This includes STEM, healthcare, humanities, performing arts, business, etc. From there, mentors would reach out to freshmen students who are intending the same major or career path and connect with them. The mentor would then coordinate one-on-one meetings about once a month with their mentees throughout the mentee's freshmen year. This is a perfect time for the student to ask questions inside of their field of study, ask about introductory classes which the mentor would have already completed and can offer strategies or aid, or ask about the resources available on campus, which the mentor will also be trained to offer as much knowledge as possible.

These meetings would be scheduled for as long as the student feels they need, up to one hour. Outside of this time, mentors should report any concerns about a student's physical or mental wellbeing they become aware of, as well as send out a singular outreach email per month to confirm the date and time of the meeting. The mentor can also include information about on-campus opportunities or events in this email. This ensures a manageable workload for the mentors while also protecting against an overwhelming feeling towards the mentee by managing the relationship level. This method focuses more on one-on-one academic aid and does not provide the connections or social foundation offered by CREWS.

Challenge with Engagement

Engagement would still be a concern with ARGH. One thing to consider is the outreach approach to incoming freshmen. Would each student be required to participate in the program, or is it an optional resource that would promote high engagement if it was used only by students

who were interested? Leading by example would be huge for this approach, as many incoming freshmen do not know what to expect with their classes or major so giving them examples of how this kind of relationship would benefit them may increase interest. Occasional group meetings may also be beneficial to get students familiarized with who else is in their major within the honors community. It is also important to consider what incentive could be offered to the mentors with this approach. ARGH would likely require more mentors than CREWS so if funds are not available for a stipend, other ways to increase buy-in for the mentors would need to be considered.

Conclusion

Throughout the last two years, this team conducted extensive research in higher education. By interviewing faculty within the Honors College, working alongside esteemed professionals, and creating a meta-analysis, data has been analyzed to design a mentorship pilot program for the college. Through the analysis of 20 programs, it was found that mentorship in higher education can be beneficial for all parties. Specifically for incoming freshmen, the community and emotional support aspect was found to be the most significant impact. Mentees participating in mentorship programs saw an increase in their community involvement, confidence, academic achievements, university impact, and overall engagement. The mentors also saw improvements in their own cognitive and socio-emotional growth, communication and professional skills, and confidence in leadership. As the ECU Honors College moves forward, it is recommended that an investment be made in a mentorship program that pushes students academically, professionally, and socially in both a formal and informal manner.

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