




## Building a Connected Community of Learners: the Postgraduate Peer Mentor Program




Dr Rodney Carr & Rachael Baron  
Faculty of Business and Law  
Deakin University, Australia


"Mentoring is a brain to pick, an ear to listen, and a push in the right direction."

- John Crosby




## The Context


- Faculty of Business and Law
- Postgraduate (coursework) students
- MBA, MComm, MPA etc and combined courses
- Most students study for 1.5-2 years
- Over 3000 enrolled students
- Large proportion of on campus international students
  - Many come directly from overseas
  - A small proportion come from DUELI
- Based on one campus

## Background

- Relationship between culture issues and student learning outcomes
- Differences in learning styles
- Observed differences between students are most likely the result from
  - cross cultural language and communication problems (Tran 2008, Xiao and Petraki 2007, Holmes 2006), or
  - stress from social issues such as social connectedness, homesickness or making friends (Brown and Holloway 2008, Rosenthal, Russell et al. 2007), or
  - 'academic' shock (Sovic 2008).


Friday 5 December



## Our research question

- How do peer Mentoring programs help students improve their intercultural competence?
  - Overcoming cross cultural language and communication barriers
  - Overcoming culture shock
  - Overcoming academic shock
- Focus is on the direct help provided by peer mentoring programs that relate to cultural issues
- Links to other benefits is the subject of on going research

Friday 5 December



## Two-level classification of help

Developed by Kram 1985.

Table 1. Direct help provided by student peer mentoring schemes

Category	Help type
1. Psychosocial	1.1. Creating social connections, friendships, etc. (Fox and Stevenson 2006).
	1.2. Helping new students adjust to aspects of university life, understanding timetables, development of IT skills, enrolment issues, etc. (Glaser, Hall et al. 2006, Treston 1999)
	1.3. Improving social skills (Glaser, Hall et al. 2006)
2. Instrumental	2.1. Academic support, including development of academic skills (Tenerbaum, Crosby et al. 2001, Chlow 2000, Weisz and Kenlo 2004). There is an overlap with peer tutoring and peer-assisted-learning programs (Smith 2008)
	2.2. Development of professional skills, leadership (Gilles and Wilson 2004, Glaser, Hall et al. 2006)
	2.3. Improving communication skills (Glaser, Hall et al. 2006, Terrion and Leonard 2007)

Friday 5 December

7

## Links to longer term benefits of peer mentoring programs

- Many studies link help provided in Peer mentoring programs to longer term benefits for staff, students and University
- Links to student learning outcomes can be made on theoretical grounds (Watkins and Biggs 1996)
- Student satisfaction (Sanchez, Bauer et al. 2006)
- Progression rates (Fox and Stevenson 2006 and Glaser, Hall et al. 2006, Reberger 2007)
- Mentors reported increased satisfaction and self worth (Leung Mee-Lee and Bush 2003, Gilles and Wilson 2004, Heirdsfield, Walker et al. 2008).

Friday 5 December

8

## The PG Mentor program

- Developed with student society
- Available to all PG coursework students
- Student co-ordinator position
- Supports academic and social transition
- Mentor selection and training
- Matching of mentors and mentees
- No's in the program
- PG Drop in Station
- Program philosophy




Friday 5 December

9

## Data & initial findings

- Narratives of events or situations described to either the Program Manager or Mentor Co-ordinator
- Mentor groups or Drop In Station
- Focus groups
- Program events
- Program evaluations



Friday 5 December

10

Help type	Examples of activities or incidents
1. Psychosocial	
1.1. Creating social connections, friendships, etc.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Cooking and sharing food from their own countries</li> <li>● Mentors introduce mentees to own personal networks</li> <li>● Friendships have been maintained since the pilot of the program</li> <li>● Food and clothes shopping</li> <li>● Mentors help explain local culture and individual rights and responsibilities, eg getting a refund for items past the expiry date.</li> </ul>
1.2. Helping new students adjust to aspects of university life, understanding timetables, development of IT skills, enrolment issues, etc.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Mentors are familiar with University practices and expectations including how to post and write messages appropriately on the University learning management system</li> <li>● Connections with the rest of the university are developing.</li> <li>● Helping new students to manage homesickness and refer to University community as appropriate</li> <li>● Mentors often facilitate connections with course advisors for their mentees, to get advice on transferring courses, credit transfer.</li> </ul>
1.3. Improving social skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Mentors model social interaction skills and language</li> <li>● One example: a new student was unsure about how to approach an organisation about a missing membership card. Their mentor coached the new student about the importance of sounding confident and assertive. With the mentor's help, the new student contacted a representative in the organisation by telephone and the situation resolved satisfactorily.</li> </ul>

Friday 5 December

11

Help type	Examples of activities or incidents
2. Instrumental	
2.1. Academic support, including development of academic skills and meeting academic requirements and expectations.	<p>Mentors assist students to develop appropriate learning strategies such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Learning to appreciate that different people learn in different ways, and that teachers teach in different ways, too.</li> <li>● Accessing pod-casts on-line</li> <li>● Utilising lecturers' consultation times</li> <li>● Utilising services provided by the library</li> </ul>
2.2. Development of professional skills, leadership	<p>It is not uncommon for students who were mentees in a prior semester becoming Mentors the next, reporting a desire to help others, make new friends, become more familiar with the new environment, and develop leadership skills and other interpersonal skills.</p>
2.3. Improving communication skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Mentors often advise mentees of the importance of attending lectures to practice listening skills.</li> <li>● Advice from mentors of the importance of responding to emails with a simple 'okay', to help build rapport.</li> </ul> <p>Building awareness of cross-cultural communication issues:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Mentors and mentees experience the phenomena of students from some cultures being reticent to talk or ask questions during meetings. The students learn appropriate strategies to help others with language problems and to build rapport in spite of these barriers.</li> <li>● We have had instances where mentors have been able to connect with university staff to improve cross-cultural communication between staff and students.</li> <li>● The mentor program has had a positive impact on the academic skills workshops run for students, with an increase in the number of students attending. Mentors recommend these services to mentees.</li> </ul>

Friday 5 December

12

## Example for discussion

- "In lectures there is not enough time...we need someone outside of class...some intelligence...someone we trust, someone with experience...for example how to approach an open book exam"

Friday 5 December



## Example 2 for discussion

- What happens when an international student mentors a local student?
- What happens when a local student mentors a new student?



## Summary of outcomes

- Examples are not new, we have simply highlighted how they relate to cultural issues
- These examples help inform the development of future programs
  - Training program
  - Role plays



## More questions...

- What are the impacts or outcomes that might be able to be measured?
  - student satisfaction
  - Student progression
  - Retention
  - Grades
  - Other learning outcomes



## Further research

- What are the long term benefits for
  - for students?
  - for the University?
- Small focus groups of mentors and mentees
- Using the 'iceberg of culture' as a tool to assist in reflection
- Asking students to reflect on how '*The Mentor Program*' has helped them better understand culture



Questions?

## THANKS FOR LISTENING