

Involvement in extra-curricular activities facilitated by former students encourages intercultural communication, sustains student engagement and promotes positive academic outcomes.

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There has been significant interest in Australia and around the world about the importance of the first year university experience as a critical factor influencing first year attrition rates and the performance of students throughout their university studies. This experience includes in-class engagement as well as out of class engagement of students with university life and extra-curricular activities. Several studies (Kift, 2009; Wilson, 2009; Skene, Hogan & Brown, 2006; Arkoudis, Yu, Baik, Borland, Chang, Lang, Lang, Pearce, Watty, 2010) have already indicated the importance of extra-curricular engagement. These outside class engagements of students are particularly important for international students, who, unlike domestic students, do not have the benefit of familiarity with the local culture and language.

This paper reports on an ongoing approach at Wollongong College Australia (WCA), where a group of ex-WCA students has been employed to facilitate a number of lunchtime activities for current WCA students such as sports, cooking classes and information workshops. These ex-students, who reflect the major nationality groups studying at the College, are referred to as Student Relations Coordinators (SRCs). They engage with new and existing students, both domestic and international, effectively due to their familiarity with their home cultures, languages, and confidence gained through university and life experience in Australia.

This initiative has brought many benefits for WCA students: new students are settling into their new surrounds better and are better informed, students from different countries and cultures are interacting more with domestic students, their pastoral care needs are being met more comprehensively and overall there is greater engagement with the College. Qualitative feedback and students' performance data continue to demonstrate the effectiveness of this program. The practical guidelines and results of this initiative covered in the paper will have broad application for most institutions supporting first year university (particularly international) students.

Key Words

Engagement, Well-being, First Year Experience, Intercultural, Extra-curricular, Social, Co-curricular

References

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