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Portland State University. University Studies Program

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The Impact of Peer Mentoring at PSU



A Report from University Studies, Spring 2011

What is Peer Mentoring?

Since its inception in 1994, the University Studies (UNST) Program at Portland State University (PSU) has led the nation with a **unique model of peer mentoring** that supports **student success and retention** at Oregon's largest and most diverse, urban university.

The UNST Peer Mentor Program is a **nationally recognized** peer-to-peer mentoring program and approximately 100 students serve annually as Peer Mentors, including advanced undergraduate and graduate students. Peer Mentors support student success by working with instructors to lead small group seminars – also known as *mentor sessions* – where students connect with one another and the campus while also learning the skills to succeed in college. **Peer Mentors work with the majority of the university's first- and second-year student populations**, directly supporting approximately 3,400 students each term.

Although Portland State University is home to several successful peer mentoring initiatives, the University Studies Program has the largest and most established peer-to-peer mentoring program in the nation that is directly embedded within a general education department.

Why is Mentoring Important?

Mentoring directly benefits the academic and social development of students and Peer Mentors. Nearly two decades of research on college student success demonstrates the benefits of student involvement and peer support (e.g., Astin, Bowen, Tinto, Pascarella & Terenzini).

Mentors support students by:

- Engaging students directly with peers and role models who are *like them*
- Creating a learning community on a large campus with commuters and transfers
- Increasing student retention in entry-level courses in their first and second years
- Connecting students to campus resources, such as tutoring and mental health services
- Supporting academic skill development in writing, quantitative, and critical thinking

Mentoring benefits the mentors through:

- Supporting their own retention and success through graduation
- Creating a community of involvement and success from mentor-to-mentor
- Providing intensive leadership training in areas of academic and student life

Mentors Represent Our Campus Community

Undergraduate peer mentors primarily come from Oregon (74%, like our students), representing all parts of the state. Other mentors come from all over the US and other countries, such as Nigeria, Kazakhstan, Japan, Vietnam, and Pakistan. Mentors also mirror our student population in their ethnic/racial makeup and sexual orientation, with 68% identified as White and the next largest group identified as Asian and also including African American, Latino/a, and Native American. Mentors are male, female (60%), or transgender identified.

When mentors share their academic experience with their students, that experience comes from across the array of majors offered at PSU. The largest group of majors is in the social sciences including education, writing, political science, urban studies, and foreign languages. Other prevalent majors include art, architecture, international studies, science, and business.

Mentoring Supports Student Success

Research on peer mentoring in University Studies shows that mentors provide academic, social, and personal support to their students.

- Student evaluations of mentor sessions collected via end-of-term learning surveys show that students find mentors and mentor sessions to be beneficial to increasing their understanding of their classes and campus resources.

		2008-2009	2009-2010
Mentors establish personal connections with students and help students connect with each other and PSU.			
	Displayed a personal interest in students and their learning.	88.4%	92.3%
	Encouraged interaction outside of class (phone calls; e-mail; etc.)	77.2%	83.4%
	Help students feel more comfortable at PSU.	86.0%	88.9%
	Asked students to share ideas and experiences with others whose backgrounds and viewpoints differ from their own.	85.7%	90.8%
Mentors challenge and support students to succeed academically			
	Inspired students to set and achieve goals which really challenged them.	78.6%	81.8%
	Provided opportunities to help students complete assignments successfully.	86.7%	89.9%
	Helped students improve their academic skills (e.g.; writing; time management; study skills).	81.8%	86.1%

Percent of students who agreed or strongly agreed with these statements about mentoring

- Mentors model the academic behaviors they expect of their students. They also embrace the University Studies goals for Social Responsibility and Diversity. When compared with similar, high-achieving seniors on responses to the National Survey of Student Engagement (2007, 2009), mentors report being more engaged overall.

		Mentor	Other Senior
Mentors model the good academic practice they expect from students			
Asked questions in class or contributed to class discussions	% often, very often	84.2%	67.2%
Come to class without completing readings or assignments	% often, very often	5.30%	23.10%
Mentors contribute to the wellbeing of their peers and their community.			
Tutored or taught other students (paid or voluntary)	% often, very often	78.90%	17.60%
Community service or volunteer work	% plan to do or don	100.00%	81.00%
Institutional contribution: Voting in local, state (provincial), or national (federal) elections	% 'quite a bit' and "very much"	58.80%	41.60%
Mentors are more connected to faculty and campus			
Worked with faculty members on activities other than coursework (committees, orientation, student life activities, etc.)	% often, very often	36.90%	13.70%
Practicum, internship, field experience, co-op experience, or clinical assignment	% plan to do or don	88.90%	72.30%
Hours per 7-day week spent working for pay ON CAMPUS	% <10 hrs	83.30%	20.20%
Hours per 7-day week spent working for pay OFF CAMPUS	% <10 hrs	16.70%	45.50%
Mentors work successfully with people from diverse backgrounds and work to understand themselves and others.			
Had serious conversations with students who are very different from you in terms of their religious beliefs, political opinions, or personal values	% often, very often	63.20%	52.90%
Tried to better understand someone else's views by imagining how an issue looks from his or her perspective	% often, very often	94.40%	69.10%
Institutional emphasis: Encouraging contact among students from different economic, social, and racial or ethnic backgrounds	% 'quite a bit' and "very much"	82.40%	43.80%
Institutional contribution: Understanding yourself	% 'quite a bit' and "very much"	76.50%	49.60%
Institutional contribution: Understanding people of other racial and ethnic backgrounds	% 'quite a bit' or "very much"	76.50%	51.50%

***Source: PSU Office of Research and UNST Research Office Data Sources*

Why Mentoring Matters

According to PSU students surveyed in winter 2011, Mentors provide the element of *relatability* and a sense of connection to campus. Here are some student comments about Peer Mentors:

- She was just very understanding of everyone's individual situations, and she's very easy to talk to about homework assignments, projects, and whatever else might be on your mind.
- There were many things that our mentor taught us, but one that helped me the most was to take us around campus and show us all our resources and encouraged us to use them to our advantage.
- He showed us through his example as a student that we are all going through the same stuff and all have to get through the hard times, but it's possible and beneficial in the end.
- She was very relatable and easy to talk to. It helped the atmosphere of Portland State by making it feel more intimate.
- She kept me from falling through the cracks by checking in with me constantly.
- [The mentor] set a good example for the class. His attitude reminded me that I need to just be professional and focused if I want to get through school, and not whine and slow down.
- We talked a lot about the writing process, and I found that very helpful. My mentor showed us different tools we can use to edit and revise some of our papers in classes that we take.
- There are always different types of people in a team, and learning to deal with all the individuals improves teamwork and the quality of the work that would be done.
- I felt confident in confiding my academic troubles (academic probation, in this case) with the mentor. She gave me contact options for further assistance in avoiding more serious academic problems.

While Peer Mentors play a vital role in the success of freshman and sophomore students, it is also significant that Peer Mentors are students as well. In fact, many Peer Mentors share that becoming a mentor is a transformative experience that helps them become more successful and connected to campus, and it positively shapes their leadership skills and academic goals.

Tochi Nwaoduh, GR mentor (and former UG mentor) from Nigeria who is an electrical and computer engineering major and PSU President's Service Award recipient for 2010, says:

"Mentoring provides palpable benefits for both the mentor and mentee. By providing guidance, support, strategic advice and feedback, mentors advance their leadership skills while helping mentees navigate the rewarding realm of academia. Mentors are not only academically successful students, but are also knowledgeable about campus life, student organizations, and university resources; and mentees benefit by having trusting relationships with supportive mentors that are eager to share their knowledge and experiences. There is nothing more

magical, within the bounds of a university, than watching older students demonstrate their sincere interest in the success of younger students, and younger students getting better for it. This is why, in my humble view, mentoring matters.”

Zhanar Ospanova, undergraduate mentor from the Kazakh Republic of the Soviet Union who majors in international development, says:

“As an older sister reminiscing about my sunny childhood days with my four younger siblings, I recall spending valuable time helping them with their homework, answering their ‘millions’ of questions, and supporting their beliefs Now, every time I see them, it astonishes me greatly to see in them the fruits of my mentoring that changed not only their lives, but my life as well.... All that they needed back then was a little belief in their dreams, a hand to support them, and sharing of their joy! Listen, mentoring is power that can change life’s direction toward a better future...for you as a mentor and for your mentee!”

Transforming Students into Engaged Citizens

Mentors share stories about their experiences that are as transformative as their students feel about the role of their own Peer Mentors in their work at PSU. Our research continues to study how the roles of Peer Mentors at Portland State create the state’s future leaders and increase student success and engagement in their college classes. Peer Mentors also go on to achieve leadership positions and opportunities when they graduate, such as Fulbright Scholarships, Fellowships for graduate school, career-related opportunities, and much more.

Supporting Peer Mentoring

To position peer mentoring at PSU as a strong leader in the region and nation, it can be supported through a variety of measures institutionally and statewide, including:

- the establishment of a permanent funding source for peer mentors,
- the creation of an endowment, awards series, or scholarships dedicated to supporting the achievements of peer mentors,
- increased support, infrastructure, and capacity for PSU and OUS to increase future impact of peer mentoring activities on student success, such as a regional conference designed and co-led by students, mentors, and program administrators,
- the ongoing support of research opportunities for undergraduates related to mentoring,
- and expanding and/or co-locating peer mentoring programs at PSU and OUS to increase training, technology, outreach, support, and education capacities at the regional, campus and national levels.