Peer mentoring: A tool for serving the diverse needs of 21ˢᵗ century college students

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Higher education is changing even as it stays the same. What has stayed the same is the immense value of a completed college degree on both societal and personal levels. For society, increasing the percentage of the population with advanced educational credentials is associated with increased work skills, a stable economy, stable national, state, and local tax revenue streams, decreased needs for a range of social services, increased citizen participation, and perhaps most importantly, an informed citizenry capable of understanding and synthesizing complex information and critically thinking about important social issues. On a personal level, increasing the percentage of individuals with completed college degrees should be associated with higher standards of living, better health, and higher levels of feelings of self-efficacy and self-worth for a greater number/ percentage of Americans.

Yet several aspects of the context of higher education are changing rapidly. Unfortunately there are characteristics of 21ˢᵗ century higher education that actually make it harder for students to realize their educational goals and for colleges and universities to facilitate students' efforts, including:

1. The college student population has become increasingly diverse over the past 25 years. As college degrees become more and more essential for obtaining desirable career/occupational paths, the percentage of high school graduates seeking these credentials also increases. Non-traditional student groups increasing their share of the total college population in this period include:

   - student veterans, (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2013)
   - first generation students, (i.e. those whose parents did not complete US college degrees) (Collier, 2015)
   - immigrants and the children of immigrants, (Baum & Flores, 2011)
   - students with disabilities, (Lee, 2009) and
   - students from minority racial-ethnic groups. (Fry, 2011)

   Issues associated with serving an increasingly diverse student body are particularly critical for urban/metropolitan colleges and universities due to both their missions and local populations.

2. There has been a continuing trend of decreased state-level funding of higher education. A 2016 Center on Budget and Policy Priorities report, "Funding Down, Tuition Up," noted that, even after adjusting for inflation, funding for public two and four-year colleges is nearly $10 billion below what it was just prior to the 2008 recession (Mitchell, Leachmen & Masterson, 2016). These changes in state-level funding have resulted in a combination of cuts in academic offerings and the number of professional student support workers

(e.g. advisers and counselors), along with increases in tuition. Non-traditional students are disproportionately impacted by cuts in the number of available counselors and advisers due to their unfamiliarity with the culture of higher education.

As state-level support decreased, colleges and universities were forced to rely on tuition for a larger and larger percentage of their operating budgets. In 1988, public colleges and universities received 3.2 times as much revenue from state and local governments as they did from students; in 2016 they only received 1.2 times as much support (Mitchell, et al. 2016). Unfortunately, wages did not increase at the same rate as tuition. Between the 2007-9 and 2014-15 school years, tuition jumped nearly 30 percent while, in the same period real median income fell roughly 6.5 percent (Mitchell, et al. 2016). The sharp tuition increases of the past ten years have only exacerbated a longer-term trend of a shifting a greater percentage of college costs to students and their families. There is also an equity issue that needs to be addressed as the increasing prices of tuition have disproportionately negative effects on access and degree-completion rates for low-income students and students of color (Allen & Wolniak, 2015).

3. There are costs to schools when students do not finish their degree programs. Alumni are much more likely than degree non-completers to donate to their respective institution/Alma Mater once they are established in the work world. This means that students who leave school without completing their degrees represent a present loss of tuition and a future loss of donation-based revenue, chiefly in two ways:

   - Students who do not complete their degrees cost colleges money by keeping them from recouping all their initial investments in orientation and support services. A sizable amount of colleges' student processing and support costs are actually accrued during the first year. However, all the cost is not recovered until later in a student's undergraduate career (Collier, 2014).
   - While the potential revenue loss associated with any student dropping out is fiscally important for colleges and universities, the loss of students from specific subgroups is particularly critical from a revenue perspective. For example, student veterans are a fiscally important subgroup. They make up an increasing percentage of the U.S. college student population and bring with them federal educational benefits under the Post-9/11 GI Bill. Colleges and universities have a vested financial interest in promoting veterans' college success as Congress is paying increased attention to the degree completion rates student veterans'.

So colleges and universities are faced with a conundrum that is difficult to address, at least initially: how to support students—who share some common issues but also bring with them group-specific issues—and help them succeed academically and feel connected socially to their school, while lacking sufficient external resources to support all students through staff/faculty-based programs.

Peer mentoring is a resource that college and university administrators and student affairs professionals can use to help address this issue. All of the articles in this issue share the

perspective that peer-mentoring works best as a compliment to university-based student support services.

The first article in this issue, my own contribution *Why peer mentoring is an effective approach for promoting college student success*, is an effort to provide some context for the remaining articles in this issue. This article examines three characteristics of a peer mentoring approach that contribute to promoting student success. The first two characteristics, cost and availability of a larger number of potential mentors, relate to the efficient allocation of resources. The third characteristic, the development between mentor and mentee of a common perspective on the college student role, subsequently affects perceived mentor credibility and the likelihood that mentees will actually follow their mentors' advice.

There are two related themes that connect the rest of the articles in this special issue. The first theme is that peer mentoring is a valuable approach that colleges and universities can use to help support the increasingly diverse 21st Century student population. The second theme is that when colleges and universities implement peer-mentoring programs they must be prepared to address new coordination and infrastructure-related issues.

Perhaps the single defining characteristic of the current college-level student population is how many students from previously under-represented groups are now attending universities in their efforts to complete degrees. By tailoring their support efforts to the specific needs of distinct groups of students, peer-mentoring programs facilitate student academic and social success, and increase the likelihood of students' connecting with the larger university communities.

Many of the articles in this special issue were selected as examples of best practices regarding targeted support for specific, previously under-served subgroups of college students (e.g. student veterans, students with disabilities, first generation, low-income, and immigrant students).

Catherine Lewis (University of Rochester), in her article *Creating Inclusive Campus Communities: The Vital Role of Peer Mentorship in Inclusive Higher Education*, details the "Transition Opportunities at University of Rochester" (TOUR) program that supports students with intellectual and developmental disabilities. She explains how the TOUR program focuses on helping these students thrive academically and socially during their college educations. An interesting aspect of this paper is a discussion of the reciprocal benefits of using peer mentoring to support inclusive higher education.

Student veterans are another group whose proportional representation is increasing on college and university campuses. Michelle Kees, Brittany Rsik, Chrysta Meadowbrooke, Timothy Nellen and Jane Spinner (University of Michigan), in their article *Peer Advisors for Veteran Education (PAVE): Implementing a Sustainable Peer Support Program for Student Veterans on College Campuses*, describe the iterative development of a nationwide peer support program for student veterans, Peer Advisors for Education (PAVE). PAVE uses trained peers to provide outreach, support, and linkage to resources to assist student veterans.

Mathew Kring (Metropolitan State University of Denver) details how peer mentoring is used to support immigrant students in his article, *Supporting College Students through Peer Mentoring:*

Serving Immigrant Students. The Immigrant Services Program at Metropolitan State University of Denver provides support to a specific population of students at Metropolitan State University of Denver that includes immigrants, refugees, undocumented and Deferred Action Childhood Arrival (DACA) students, and English Language Learners (ELL).

Two of the articles in this issue describe programs that target first generation, low-income, racial-ethnic minority group students:

Jennifer L. Smith (University of Texas-Austin), in her article *Innovating for student success: The University Leadership Network and tiered undergraduate peer mentor model*,explains how peer mentoring is utilized in the University of Texas's large-scale University Leadership Network program. This article also examines the tiered undergraduate peer mentor model, utilized to support the success of first-year students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds, including a majority of underrepresented minority students.

Thomas E. Keller, Kay Logan, Jennifer Lindwall and Caitlyn Beals (Portland State University), in their article *Peer mentoring for undergraduates in a research-focused diversity initiative*, describe the Building University Infrastructure Leading to Diversity (BUILD) EXITO program. The BUILD EXITO project is part of an NIH-sponsored diversity initiative, intended to promote innovative approaches to research training for undergraduates from backgrounds traditionally underrepresented in the biomedical and behavioral sciences. Using a "convoy" model of mentoring, this program matches student scholars with three mentors: (a) a peer mentor (i.e. advanced student); (b) a career mentor (i.e. faculty adviser); and (c) a research mentor (i.e. research project supervisor) in a coordinated effort to support students from their beginnings at community colleges through transfer to a four year university and associated research laboratory experiences in preparation for graduate-level biomedical training.

The second theme of this journal issue is what are some best practices for coordinating multiple peer mentoring programs, both on the same campus and across multiple schools? Selected articles share best practices and insights into the organization and coordination of multiple peer mentoring programs, serving different constituencies but still sharing some common organizational needs.

Allison McWilliams (Wake Forest University), in her article *Wake Forest University: Building a Campus-Wide Mentoring Culture*, describes how the Wake Forest's Mentoring Resource Center (MRC) uses a decentralized, consulting model to support a variety of peer mentoring programs. These serve diverse groups from first generation students to student leaders and honor society members. MRC facilitates mentor and mentee skill development by providing peer-mentoring programs with trainings, resource toolkits and evaluation tools.

Coordination of multiple programs is discussed in several other articles. Matthew Kring describes how the Student Academic Success Center at Metropolitan University of Denver coordinates multiple programs including Immigrant Services. Other MU-D programs that use peer mentors to provide direct services to students include Brother to Brother that supports male students of color, Fostering Success that serves emancipated foster youth, and Transfer Services.

Keller, Logan, Lindwall and Beals introduce the Build EXITO program, and describe how peer mentoring contributes to coordinated activities between community colleges, four-year universities and research settings. Here, peer mentoring provides undergraduate research experiences to STEM majors which are designed to increase students' likelihood of graduate school acceptance and success. Finally, Kees, Risk, Meadowebrooke, Nellet, and Spinner offer an article on PAVE veteran-support program with a unique perspective on the coordination and infrastructure challenges this program experienced. Itprogressed from a relatively local program (i.e. 3 Michigan universities) to a national program represented on 48 campuses in only a three-year time period.

I want to sincerely thank all of the authors of the articles in this special issue for the time and effort they put into crafting the manuscripts for this special issue. I also would like to thank all of the other peer mentoring advocates, i.e. faculty members, student affairs professionals, alumni, and student mentors, who are doing the not-so-glamorous, day-to-day work of developing and maintaining college and university student support programs. Keep up your good work.

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