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Academic Mentorship in Honors

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EASTERN KENTUCKY UNIVERSITY

Academic Mentorship in Honors

Honors Thesis
Submitted
in Partial Fulfillment
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by
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Honors Program Coordinator

Academic Mentorship in Honors

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A recently developed program at Eastern Kentucky University (EKU) uses course-embedded tutors called Writing Fellows to provide first-year students with an academic peer mentor. Writing Fellows are assigned to an English 101 class which they attend, and outside of the class, they meet individually with students in consultations concerning their academic projects or papers. Since the Honors Program at ECU currently lacks a sustainable peer mentorship program, the author Tori Abbott attempted to combine elements of the Writing Fellow program with the needs of Honors students. The mentor for this Honors thesis, Katie Patton, taught two sections of the Honors student success seminar and offered to let the author use these courses to test her theory. The two student mentors for these courses volunteered to participate in a pilot version of this peer mentorship model. Their added responsibilities primarily included meeting with the students one-on-one outside of the classroom. This study, “Academic Mentorship in Honors,” used surveys and feedback from the mentors to evaluate whether or not such a model would benefit the Honors Program and what changes would be needed to be made in the future. The results of the studies suggested that students who met with their mentors outside of the classroom as a part of their course felt more socially integrated than students in a control class who were not required to meet with their mentors.

Keywords and phrases: honors students, first year seminar, peer mentors, course-embedded

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Introduction

Many freshman seminars and first-year courses implement a student mentor or peer to guide students through their first impression of college. At Eastern Kentucky University, some students may have a tutor embedded into their course in their English 101 classes, or they may have a mentor called a first-year leader in their first-year seminar courses. Many organizations and clubs use a peer mentor program to promote the inclusion of new students. Integration into the community is an important element to college life.

In the Honors Program at ECU, however, no official system exists for students to connect with an upperclassman in a mentor relationship. In the past, such programs have been student-driven and have come and gone when students graduated and failed to prepare the following class to properly mentor the new students. While not all high-achieving students are Honors students, all Honors students are high-achieving. They would not need as much academic guidance in a mentorship as much as they might need a social connection. Studies have found that high-achieving students, like Honors students, feel less socially connected than their peers (Milem & Berger, 1997). Honors students, then, may need help being more involved in their Honors community. Since the Honors Program at ECU has a recent lack of a peer mentor program, this study sought to establish a suitable model that would benefit students and last after the current class has graduated.

Success and Retention in the First Year

In order to tailor a peer mentoring program successfully, the needs and challenges of first-year students must be considered first. Over the past few decades, universities have targeted first-year programs for improvement based on data indicating a link between a student's first year and their overall success (Upcraft, Gardner, & Barefoot, 2005). Since the first year is a determining factor of future success, attempts to improve the student experience often begin there.

Pickett and Ferguson surveyed a student population of over 400 students in their first semester to determine which skills affect GPA and retention. The survey results suggested six skills of student success: “academic achievement, educational commitment, levels of involvement with student life, social comfort, self-efficacy, and resiliency” (Pickett & Ferguson, 2013). Students' grades correlated to the majority of these categories except social comfort and resiliency. Actually, resiliency had a negative correlation, and the authors suggested that students who are anxious about their studies may just try harder. Overall, the definition of success broken into these separate components was effective in determining GPA and retention.

Challenging and Supporting the First-Year Student, a handbook for the first-year experience, defines first-year success narrowly as “(1) successful completion of courses taken in the first year and (2) continuing enrollment into the second year” (Upcraft, Gardner, & Barefoot, 2005). Retention, then, is defined as first-year students continuing at the same institution for their second year. The focus here in this study is on the student's academic success as a way to assess their place in an educational setting. Indeed, Pickett and Ferguson's study assessed their six

elements by the student's GPA and re-enrollment as this definition suggests. Retention, therefore, is an important factor in measuring student success.

Principles of retention, attributed to Vincent Tinto, are listed as “[commitment] to the students,” “education for all... students,” and “supportive social and educational communities” with integration for all students into those communities as “competent members” (Upcraft, Gardner, & Barefoot, 2005). In connection to the third principle listed, that students be competent members, Jacobs and Archie also found a “strong” positive connection between the first-year student's sense of community and the intent to return (Jacobs & Archie, 2008). Community, then, is a key contributor in retention.

Another study also found social integration to be a greater influence in a student's “persistence” than their academic integration (Milem & Berger, 1997). The same study saw a negative correlation between academic success and social involvement, in that high-achieving students did not feel supported by their social environment or institution. With sense of community so linked to retention, the social involvement of students is a priority in any first-year program.

Peer Mentorship

Academics and relationships need not be exclusive. In *Teaching Tips*, McKeachie writes, “Fortunately, interactions that facilitate learning need not be limited to those with teachers. Often those with peers are more productive” (1999). He speculates that students will talk more in smaller groups and find it easier to express any difficulties with a topic to a peer, rather than an instructor. The use of peers has a double use of aiding learning and being socially connected.

Peer tutoring is not a new a concept, or even a newly promoted one. Topping tracks peer tutoring to ancient Grecian culture all the way to hundreds of educational institutions today. The relationship of peer-to-peer is “qualitatively different from that between a teacher and a student, and [involves] different advantages and disadvantages” (322). Both the tutor and the tutee benefit from the exchange. While very few disadvantages to peer tutoring are listed, educators do have to adjust their curriculum often in order to fit the peer tutor into their classroom. In conclusion, Topping suggests that future research should “achieve adequate quality in design and execution” and use control groups (1996).

The application of peer leaders in student development has been increasing. Cuseo notes that peer relationships are defined differently due to the varying uses across programs (2010). The broadest term is “peer leader.” He breaks down the concept by its context and role, specifically by what is being provided to those the peer leader is leading. For “peer mentor,” his definition is that the role is “a more intensive, personalized form of peer leadership that occurs over an extended period of time.” Since peer leadership roles that last over a longer period of time are more successful (Allegretti & Harper, 2013), peer mentor may be the most effective form of peer leadership.

Rieske and Benjamin observed various successful peer mentorship models in different settings and concluded, “Overall, peer mentors are valuable to college students and institutions of higher education because their services contribute to students’ academic and social support, retention, and academic achievement” (69). They define peer mentors as role models with wisdom from experience and having the primary role of aiding others in their transition to college with academic and emotional support (2015).

At the University of Calgary in Canada, a peer mentoring program couples a student with a former instructor to assist in whichever course the student took with that instructor. The peer mentors are not to be assigned to “grade assignments, act as substitute teachers, or proctor exams,” (Smith, 2008) nor are they given freedom to interact with the students without the support or supervision of the instructor. The peer mentors work in conjunction with the instructor. In this way, they are different from graduate assistants within the same program.

One reason peer mentorships have been so helpful relates to the needs of the mentees. Tracey Carver details the profile of Generation Y students (the typical/traditional first-year students today fit in this time frame) and their biggest needs. A primary element is teamwork, defined further as community involvement. Carver says students of this generation “seek a sense of community, to be included, and are more likely to make decisions based on the collective experience of their peers, rather than their teacher’s advice” (208). When surveying students after being in groups facilitated by peer mentors, the students had positive responses, saying the mentors are “able to relate to us,” and they appreciated having “students who had already been through what we were going through” (2011). This connection of understanding to their peer mentor was the primary reason given for success.

Li, when attempting to see if peer mentors helped students have less stress, found that this was not the case. While the relationship had positive effects, the measure of a student’s stress was unaffected by a peer mentor’s presence. Since the peer mentors themselves had to think outside of the box and more expansively, Li considers that this growth for the mentors might be the main benefit (2011). Topping similarly found that tutoring gives the tutor the benefit of a “cognitive challenge” (1996).

Smith and Reid note the disadvantages or obstacles to mentorship. Reid notes that one obstacle is the mentee's resistance. The solution to this is training for the mentor that helps them pay attention to details and problem solve (2008). The problems Smith recognizes are those of integrating peer mentors into classes and curricula that were not designed to "accommodate a peer mentor" (a disadvantage Topping also mentioned) and also emphasizes that training is essential in the success of the mentor's endeavor (2008).

At the University of South Carolina, four students mentored in an orientation course in a study to determine the benefits of the peer mentors themselves. The students had many positive gains, including a better understanding of the instructor's role in a class, more confidence in their leadership abilities, and greater interpersonal skills. They also said they benefited more from the experience when they had an active, meaningful role in the class, either in the classroom or out (Wellman, 2004).

The peer mentors, then, profit as do the students they mentor. While the concept of mentorship is not new, the increase of its presence at the university level has led to a more informed approach and understanding of its effect and implementation.

Peer Mentors in First-Year Seminars

Topping wrote, "Peer tutoring is already widely used in further and higher education, in a variety of different forms. Surveys suggest several hundred institutions deploy this interactive method of teaching and learning" (338). Eight years later, Wellman also said that using peer leaders in first-year seminars is a growing trend (2004). As universities incorporate peer mentors into their programs, many have chosen to place these mentors into first-year seminars. For new students, first-year seminars "facilitate learning: learning about a subject or combination of

topics, learning about the institution, learning about the diversity within campus communities, but most important, learning about oneself and one's abilities" (Upcraft, Gardner, & Barefoot). These seminars are an introduction for the student into these important aspects that determine much about their experience within the first year. Typically, these seminars take place in the first semester to aid student growth and development.

Students at the University of Wollongong "designed, developed, and facilitated" (4) an orientation course for first years, ran by upperclassmen. Orientation courses differ from seminars in that orientation courses helps students prepare for the transition into the first semester (Upcraft, Gardner, & Barefoot) and seminars typically occur during the first semester. Students believed it should be these upperclassmen who introduced new students to life on the campus. This ensured "currency and legitimacy" (6) of the information incoming first-years received. Even though the orientation was only one day instead of a semester long, the responses were so positive that the university expanded the program and other programs on campus adopted the model.

Successful first-year seminars include upperclassmen in a peer mentor role (Upcraft, Gardner, & Barefoot). A program started at Queens University at Charlotte matched first-year students into groups with a peer mentor in the fall. After the fall semester, students could volunteer to still meet in the spring, which four groups did. The discussions in these groups centered on topics chosen by the peer mentor such as "balancing work and social life and examining relationships" (17). Their groups were reportedly successful in their goals of social integration. Students reported enjoyment and appreciation of the meetings. The retention rate for students who only attended the fall groups was 80%, and student who kept with the meetings in the spring semester had a 90% retention rate.

Phinney piloted a peer mentoring program for Latino firstyears at California State University and monitored the psychological effect. The study was conducted over a year and compared students of the same demographic of at-risk Latino first-years with the only difference being whether or not they had a peer mentor. Results showed that mentored students had an advantage. Mentored students maintained academic motivation; non-mentored students declined. Mentored students decreased in depression and stress; non-mentored increased in both. Students, however, did not see mentors as academic resources, since the peers weren't placed in a classroom (2011). So, the first-years benefited from the program, but not academically.

Academic success and retention, however, as previously concluded, can be predicted by a student's academic performance. While a peer mentor in the first year may help students, an ideal situation would allow the mentors to aid in a student's academic life as well. Placing the peer mentors in an academic setting, like a classroom, keeps the effect of a mentor but adds an academic element to the relationship.

Honors Programs

While these programs were largely successful in their settings, would the same concept benefit an honors program? The selective nature and different curriculum of an honors program sets its students apart from non-honors students on the same campus. Hundreds of honors programs exist around the country, and as tuition increases, so do the requirements to enter these programs (Lord 62). Each program is different, but "the best are found at large state-supported universities" (Lord 62). They all focus on an expanded and improved education. The result is a rigorously uplifting experience to compares to that of Harvard and Yale.

Academic self-efficacy is connected as a positive predictor to academic success (Trigwell; Pickett and Ferguson). So, when a student's self-assessment of their academic abilities is higher, they tend to also be performing well, and honors students have higher "academic achievement and academic self-concept than equally gifted non-honors students" (Rinn 242). In other words, honors students are more confident in their academic abilities than their peers of average ability. Whether that self-concept existed before entry into an honors program or as a result of it has not be determined.

In addition to student's self-perception of their academic abilities, another difference between honors students and others is prior accomplishments. *Challenging and Supporting the First-Year Student* lists prior academic achievement as "the most powerful predictor" of retention (Upcraft 33). As most honors programs (and Eastern Kentucky University) list above-average academic criteria for entry, honors students are already more likely to finish their degree for this reason.

Another major factor for a good first year, however, for all students is the interpersonal interactions of students with others (Upcraft 38). Therefore, one of the principles of retention is integration into the educational and social community (Upcraft 45). More than just academic community, students need the social element of community, even Honors students.

Since a negative relationship exists between high-achieving students and their sense of involvement in the community (Milem and Berger) and a student's sense of community influences their desire to return (Jacobs and Archie), the question arises about the honors student's involvement and how affects their experiences. While the focus of honors programs is that of academic excellence, a balance between challenging students and supporting them is for

successful first-year experiences (Upcraft). An honors program that seeks retention and success for their students must consider both aspects of the student's well-being.

McDonald sees a need in for more social involvement among honors students and argues for peer mentoring (or "fellowship" as he calls it). He sees the education system as having been depersonalized, but he believes, "The relational is at the very core of students' learning" (91). He supports the promotion of more peer mentoring as an integral part of the honors programs as it creates an elevated conversation within the program about what's been being taught in the classrooms.

While honors students have academic advantages over non-honors students, they may have the same social needs if not greater, due to the discrepancy between student achievement and sense of community.

Peer Mentorship in Honors

The University of Florida already used peer mentors in a non-mandatory first-year seminar offered to honors students, but very few honors students chose to enroll in the seminar. The feedback they gave the school was that they felt they had already "mastered the basic concepts" and "desired more advanced skills and activities in a first-year seminar" (Johnson 2009). The university responded by designing a program that focused on preparing them for upper level tasks, like study abroad, job skills, interpersonal skills, to name a few. Additionally, students in these courses met individually both with their instructor and with a peer leader who was active in the honors program.

The results were positive with students who took the course saying they felt more closely connected to the Honors Program compared to students who did not. What remains unknown is

if the peer mentors can be directly attached to the success or not. While it may not indicate the effectiveness of peer mentors, it does show a desire for Honors students to be connected to their programs.

Context

At Eastern Kentucky University (EKU), a student's first year is treated as an important opportunity to engage the student and promote their success. The Office of First Year Courses utilizes first-year seminars to "foster student success and help students transition to University life" (First Year Courses). The seminar provides community, involvement, academic aid, and connections to the university.

Another service EKU provides is free consultations to all undergraduate and graduate students at the Noel Studio for Academic Creativity. The consultants in the Noel Studio are also students who receive weekly and yearly training to be equipped to help other students with a plethora of projects and issues. Many first year courses require or recommend students to visit the Noel Studio. While the majority of the consultations concern writing and essays, students may bring any academic project into the studio for a consultation.

In Fall 2013, the Noel Studio added a Writing Fellows program to extend their reach directly into the classroom (Writing Fellows). Writing Fellows are also paid students, but they work with a specific English 101 course each semester. They attend the class to which they are assigned, and they aid the instructor however the instructor requests. Outside of class, they meet with students in the Noel Studio for as many a times a semester as the instructor requires of the

students, although the normal suggestion is to have students meet with their Writing Fellow with a rough draft for each major paper assignment.

Each semester the results were positive, and the provost continued to support the funding of the Writing Fellows program. In the first semester, only ten classes had a Writing Fellow. In surveys, students reported learning from their Writing Fellow and appreciating the extra help. The students' grades indicated the positive outcome of the program. After prolonged success, the program is now a yearly budgeted item and no longer conditional semester to semester. By Fall 2015, 17 classes had Writing Fellows.

The Honors Program at Eastern Kentucky University currently has no official peer program. Honors students take an Honors Rhetoric course that satisfies the requirement for an English 101 course, so they would not have access to a Writing Fellow either. Previously, a student had organized a Big-Little peer program such as fraternities and sororities use. Due to a lack of accountability or clear communication, the plan ceased to work once the student in charge graduated.

A few of the Writing Fellows who were also in Honors, including the author, noticed this gap in the freshmen experience for Honors students and suggested a version of the course-embedded tutorship of the Writing Fellows program implemented into the Honors Program.

Methods

At Eastern Kentucky University, the Honors Program has three required courses for first-year students in their first semester. The first is the university's required Student Success Seminar specifically for Honors first-year students (HON 100), worth one credit hour, which meets once a week. Each HON 100 instructor has the option of using an upperclassmen student

from the Honors Program as an assistant in their class. These students have the title “Student Mentor” and function as teaching assistants by aiding the instructor and possibly attending each class meeting. Each faculty may use their student mentor differently, and each student is rewarded with one credit hour of HON 390: Directed Topics in Honors, which is used to award students credit for independent academic work. The second and third courses are Honors Rhetoric and Communication (HON 102/103). These linked courses meet Monday through Friday throughout the first semester. This course is typically an interdisciplinary, rigorous challenge that gives students credit for their general education written and oral communication requirements.

In order to have a course-embedded peer mentor, the mentor must attend most of the classes, if not all of them. The logistics of asking a volunteer peer mentor to attend five classes each week for HON 102/103 without pay seemed unlikely compared to the one class a week for HON 100. Furthermore, the nature of HON 100 already includes the option for a student mentor within its curriculum. Peer mentors could still ask students about any difficulties with HON 102/103, but logistically, HON 100 as a first-year seminar was a more ideal option for a study on the effects of peer mentorship in Honors.

In order to know if Honors students really would benefit from peer mentorship in the first year, the effect of the peer mentors themselves needed to be monitored. In order to track changes from the beginning of a classroom experience with a peer mentor to afterwards, surveys were administered at the start and conclusion of the course. Additionally, a control class without peer mentors also took the surveys.

Two surveys were drafted for this purpose. The first survey asked basic questions to rate the student’s comfortability in general areas and knowledge concerning campus resources to

establish a baseline for where these students already perceived themselves. (Appendix A). The second survey repeated the same questions as the first survey to measure change over the course of the semester and added questions concerning the mentors' effect on the students' experience (Appendix B). Since the goal of the program was to provide social and academic support to students as well as serve as a resource, these factors were the focus of the surveys. All surveys included a disclaimer that responses would not affect their grades, and answers were guaranteed to be anonymous. The university's institutional review board read and approved of each survey before the study administered them to students.

Aside from attending the classes themselves, peer mentors would also be required to meet with students outside of the classroom. Their presence in the class would provide an academic role and perspective to their position, and the meetings outside of the classroom would allow the mentors to invest individually in each student.

The Study

The Honors Program Coordinator, Katie Patton, instructed two HON 100 courses in the fall of 2015 and agreed to use her classrooms as pilot classes. As the program coordinator, Patton also oversees all six sections of HON 100. Any HON 100 instructor who wishes to use a student mentor in their classroom reports this desire to Patton, who then sends an email to all Honors students with the appropriate information.

In the spring of 2015, the email calling for volunteer Honors leadership listed HON 100 instructors and class times for students to apply. Under her own course, Patton added that any student mentors who applied would also be participating in "trial sections" of a "proposed method to combine the previous... mentoring program with the HON 100 student mentor"

(personal communication, April 16, 2015). Additional responsibilities included meeting times with the students outside of the course and informing students of resources and activities on campus. Two female students volunteered to work as her mentors.

To compensate for the extra work and to reward the volunteers, the Honors Program agreed to offer the student mentors an extra credit hour of HON 390. The students then were receiving a total of two credit hours for their help in mentoring an HON 100 course. This was also mentioned in the email attachment. They agreed to participate in the additional tasks and extra time required.

After calculating the number of students and the mentors' own class schedules, it made most logistical sense to have the mentors meet with each student two times, once before midterms and once afterwards. Each meeting would be thirty minutes in a location decided upon by the mentor. The mentor would report who attended the meetings to Patton. Attendance in these meetings did affect the students' grade by twenty-five points each (roughly five percent of their total grade), as indicated by the syllabus for each class.

Before the semester began and once communication with the mentors was established, both mentors met with the author and coordinator of this study to discuss expectations and goals. Furthermore, they were sent an email documenting the goals for their involvement with the students. The email emphasized that the main two priorities were: "A) Being present and available to your students" and "B) Meet with your students" (Appendix C).

To fulfill the first priority, the study simply asked for friendliness and the mentors' attendance in the classes. They were to emphasize to students that they were available for them and how to get in touch "inasmuch as personal boundaries permit" (personal communication, August 21, 2015). For the second priority, the email mentioned that the first meeting may be just

building rapport, but “the goal is that they would see you as an Honors resource and seek you out as a peer leader” (Appendix C).

A few times throughout the semester, the study’s author met with the peer mentors and read a few notes from their meetings to monitor progress and the way in which these goals were executed. The author also stayed in contact with Katie Patton, and the mentors reported to her as well.

Results

The pre-semester surveys offered a profile of the Honors students in the courses and of the incoming class. The control group consisted of an HON 100 class that took place in the same semester as this study. Patton’s class took the pre-semester survey the first day of class, and the control group filled out the surveys one week later. Patton’s classes provided 42 responses, and the control class provided 20. Since the total of 62 responses is over half the incoming class of 114 Honors students, the collected data suggests an accurate picture of first-year Honors students at Eastern Kentucky University.

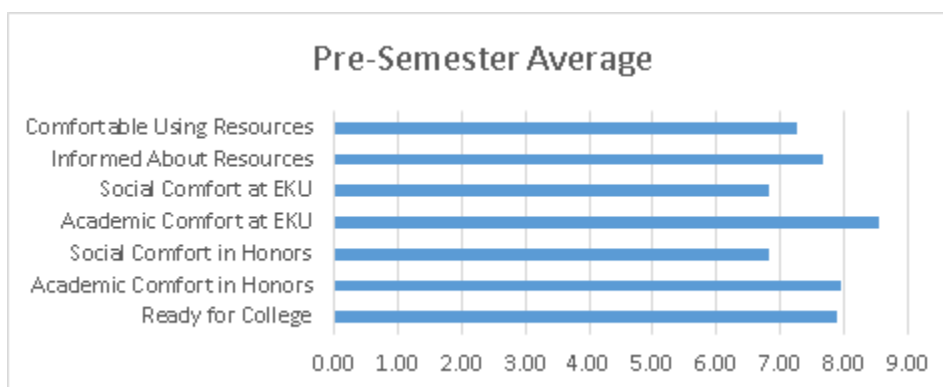


Table 1. The average responses from the pre-semester survey of both courses.

Both at ECU and within the Honors programs, students show a discrepancy in their social and academic comfort (Table 1). The question specifically asks about comfort “with your place” in each setting. On average, students felt ready for college, but less so socially. That high-achieving students would be less likely to feel integrated into the community is consistent with earlier studies (Milem & Berger, 1997).

It should be noted also that no average drops below a 6.5 on a scale from 1-10. Without surveying non-Honors students to compare, we cannot determine if these scores are above average, but at least, they do not immediately indicate a lack in the student’s preparedness, as Honors students self-asserted in Johnson’s study (2009). Overall, these ECU Honors students felt prepared and informed about resources.

Separated responses, however, show that the control class already had higher scores than Patton’s classes (Table 2) in five out of the seven categories. In comfortability using resources and academic comfort at ECU, they were behind, but in every other category, the control class rated their scores higher than Patton’s students did. So, before the semester began or even the peer mentorship program which we designed had started, the control class self-disclosed greater preparedness than the classes in the study.

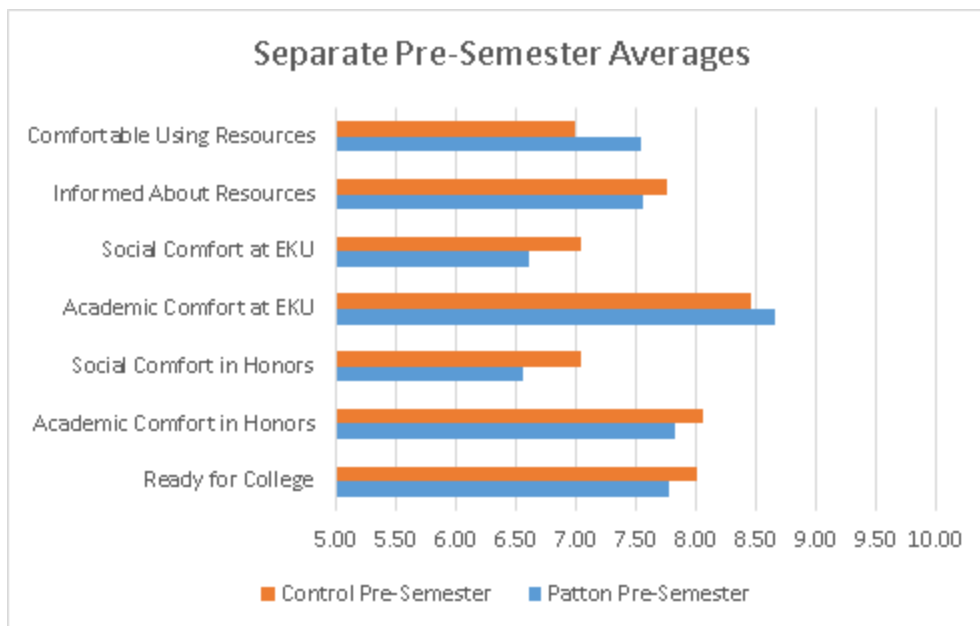


Table 2. The average of responses to the pre-semester survey, separated by control and Patton's class.

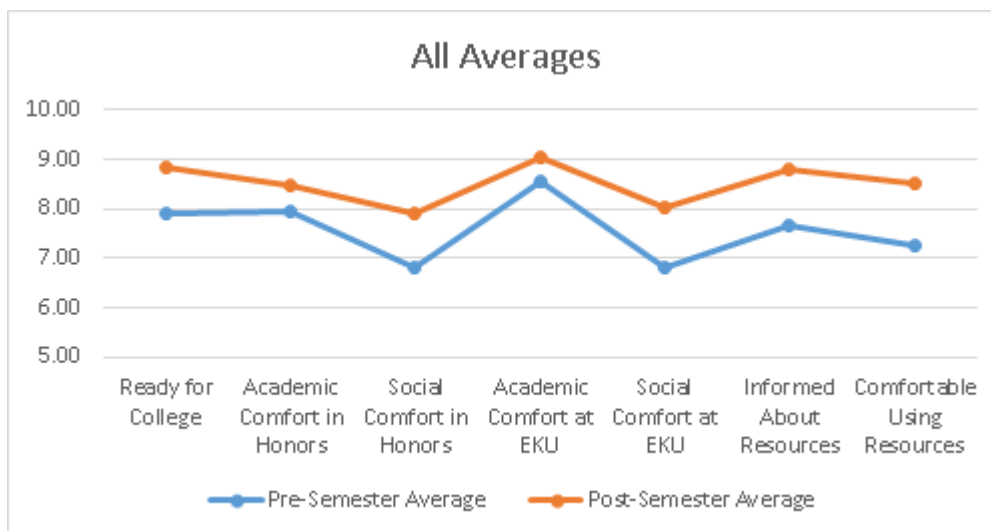


Table 3. The average results from questions present in both pre-semester and post-semester surveys of both HON 100 courses.

All the results of the initial survey together indicate clear progress in the student's first semester (Table 3). Each item has a visible increase from the first survey to the second. The smallest increase is 0.49 in academic comfort, although that category already had the highest

score in the averages of both groups together and separately. The highest increase of 1.24 is in the student's comfort in using campus resources.

In the post-semester survey administered during the final week, 58 students responded. Both classes showed improved responses in every category (Table 3). While these responses do not speak to the nature of the different kinds of mentors in each class, it does show that students tend to improve in these categories within their first semester in EKU's Honors Program.

When separated by classes, however, Patton's classes rated themselves higher in almost every category, except in social comfort in which both classes had the same average (Table 4). Not only were their scores higher, but their rate of improvement is higher than the other students

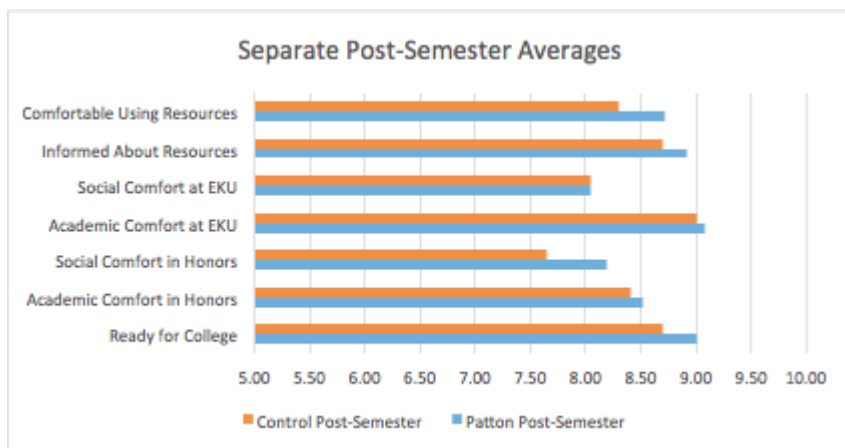


Table 4. The average of responses to the pre-semester survey, separated by control and Patton's class. All responses were rated on a scale of 1-10.

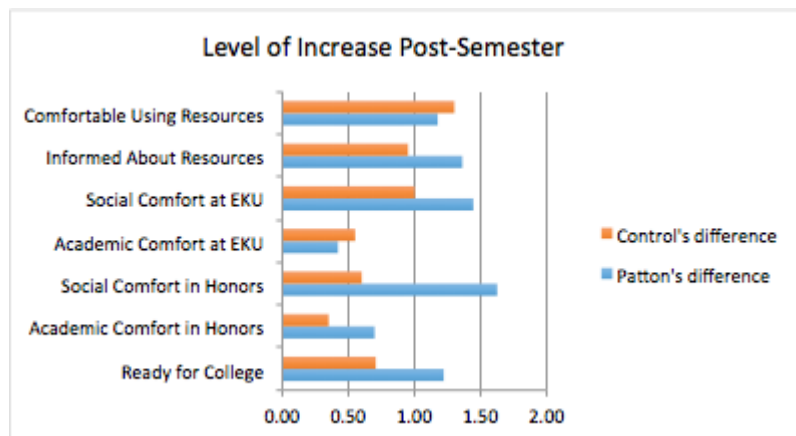


Table 5. The differences from the average responses of the pre-semester surveys and the post-semester surveys.

without the study's model of peer mentors (Table 5). Only in academic comfort at EKU and student comfortability using resources did the other class improve more, although Patton's classes still had higher averages in those categories.

Each post-semester survey had four additional questions not on the pre-semester survey. The additional questions focused on the mentors' effects. While Patton's peer mentors had added responsibilities, the other class did have a peer mentor who attended the class and aided the instructor.

The students in the control class gave their mentor a higher rating than Patton's students did their mentors (Table 6). Scores for Overall Mentorship Success only varied by a .09 difference, and as a whole, all averages are above 8 for each mentor in each category. The students in the control class rated their mentor higher, even though the peer mentors in Patton's class were connected to a higher rate of improvement.

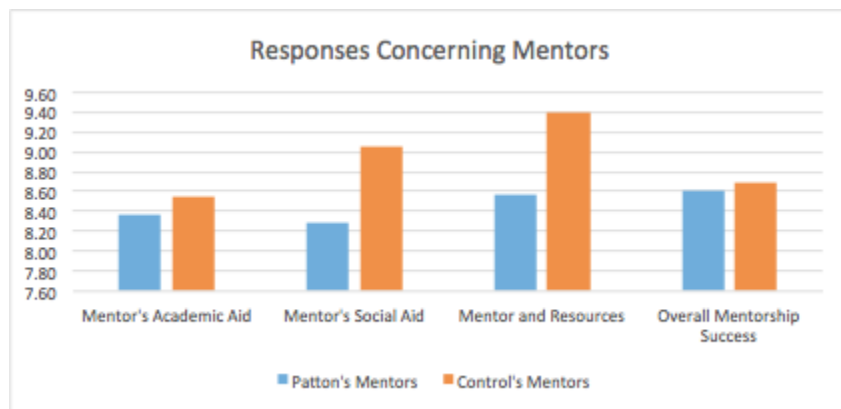


Table 6. The average student responses to the additional questions about mentors in the post-semester survey.

It is worth repeating that the control class did take the pre-semester survey a week after the other class. The rate of increase (Table 6) may therefore may not be perfectly reflective of the different influences of the mentors, but the post-semester comparison (Table 5) is still accurate since they were both taken during finals week.

The Mentorship

While the peer mentors themselves may not have scored higher on the surveys, they reported successful interactions with the students in their out-of-class meetings. One mentor never had a student miss, and the other mentor only had two students fail to meet. The author met with both of them in the middle and at the end of the semester once they had finished with all their student meetings for the semester.

The topics discussed with students varied greatly in each meeting. Most questions and discussions were academic in nature in that they related to class or concerns related to on-campus living. Mentors got to know students' majors, classes, and which Honors courses they wanted to take in the future. Sometimes the mentors prompted the students with questions, but often, the students came to the meeting with questions/concerns of their own. The questions that

were not as academic still concerned campus life, such as dorm life and conflict resolution with those in the dorm. The first meetings established a rapport and connection, and by the second, the students were familiar with their mentors enough to ask questions and open up.

In the second meetings of the semester, one mentor asked her students, “Do these meetings help?” Most told her yes. She summarized their reasoning: “because it’s just a way to relax, throw everything out there, and have someone who’s been through that before” (personal communication, December 7, 2015). Since the meetings had no goal other than connecting with each other, the students were able to talk about whatever they wanted to most share. The first semester in the Honors program is different enough from the first-year experience of non-Honors students that the Honors student appreciated the upperclassman who had already passed through it.

Although the students’ only required contact with mentors outside of class were the two meetings, many students still reached out to the mentors by text message or email. While offering their phone numbers to students was not suggested or recommended, the mentors decided to allow students to contact them in that way. One mentor waited until they had been in class two weeks and felt comfortable with students. The other gave her number during finals weeks to better “be there for them as a resource for questions, conversations, and even rides to the grocery” (personal communication, December 7, 2015).

The mentors continually exhibited a desire to be helpful and available to their mentees. When asked about a specific instance in which they felt they were most helpful to students, the mentors both shared stories of a time they got to meet a mentee’s needs directly. One student had financial difficulty, and the mentor helped resolve the issue by finding the numbers for the right financial aid people to call. A few other students texted their mentor with questions about who to

take for science courses, since the mentor's major was in a scientific field. Being a resource and directing students to other resources were the two ways the mentors felt most helpful.

The location of the meetings changed according to the schedule, needs, and comfortability of both the mentors and mentees. Only one mentor used the Honors lounge for the meetings, and the majority for both of them took place in the library, either the Noel Studio or the main computer lobby. Occasionally, they met in the mentors' apartment, but students reportedly opened up more in the library, perhaps because of its neutral setting. Unfortunately, one student made the mentor uncomfortable, and she asked him to meet her in an open, outdoor location in their first meeting for safety.

As the study requested of the mentors, they made sure to acknowledge mentees when passing them on campus or at Honors events. At a minimum, the mentors said they would wave. Two of the mentees interacted with their mentor when they went to the same church, and other mentees would casually "hang out" with the mentors at off times.

For improving the program, the mentors had two suggestions. First, they wanted an "intra-mentor get-together." Since the mentors themselves were already friends and roommates, they wanted to have thrown a dinner party for the students of both sections. One mentor explained it could also be, "a game night. It would also be helpful for them to see other mentors in case they have questions about things I don't know, like biology. Make a network, a team, for them to access all the mentors" (personal communication, December 7, 2015). The students would not have been required to attend, but it would have been an extra opportunity to meet the goals of the program.

Their second suggestion was about their role in the classroom. The mentors were in charge of the out-of-class meetings, but they felt useless in the classroom itself. One of the

mentors would have liked the opportunity to teach or lecture at least once, although the other mentor simply wanted to be involved in classroom discussions. Either way, they both desired a more active role in the classroom and thought it would help students to view them, not as a teacher, but more as a mentor.

A factor that may have influenced both the surveys and the meetings is that one of the mentors was also a Writing Fellow. She went through training in order to be a Writing Fellow. She understood the nature of the study's goals, and naturally, she would have used her resources and background as a Writing Fellow in her meetings with students. Since she was also a friend and roommate of the other mentor, she could have shared the skills or advised the other mentor. Future mentors may not have this advantage.

Discussion

The Honors Program is currently attempting to adopt this peer mentorship program for the Fall 2016 semester. After the semester, the mentors reported on the meetings and general success. No data had yet been analyzed, but the experiment was viewed as beneficial to students. While no professor is required to use a student mentor, the Honors Program is strongly suggesting to those who do that they have their students meet with the mentors outside of the class at least once in the semester.

The study's mentors saw a difference from the first meeting to the second. The first meetings built a foundation for the mentorship that allowed the second meetings to be more productive. They did not need as much time establishing a connection in the second meeting.

If the Honors Program officially uses this model for future HON 100 courses, they should keep the meetings at twice a semester at the least. The meetings were the primary difference

between the control class and Katie Patton's classes, and according to the data, Patton's students definitely had the most improvement by the end of the semester. Therefore, the Honors Program should consider the logistics of adding two meetings a semester to the curriculum for HON 100 courses.

While this study's mentors chose to vary their locations, future mentors may encounter problems with boundaries and risk inappropriate claims about the nature of the meetings. An official meeting location would help maintain accountability and visibility. The current Honors lounge is in a building set to be demolished. If the future Honors lounge is not a suitable environment for the meetings, then the Noel Studio or the library in general could be the official location for meetings.

Too much regimentation may hinder an organic mentorship, but a lack of boundaries may do the same. Future peer mentors may choose not to give out their phone number or to give it on the first day. Either way, they should consider boundaries as well and how much access they want the students to have to them. Late night phone calls are a risk if every first-year in a mentor's HON 100 course has his/her phone number.

In order to cover these topics, a small orientation or informational session for future mentors would help at the beginning of the fall semester or at the end of the spring semester before the assigned course. The orientation would need to cover the needs of first-year students, the professional boundaries, personal skills, and options for locations. Hopefully, any student applying to be a student mentor would already have a desire to mentor peers, but additional information will help them be more effective. This study's peer mentors had some training and knowledge of the Writing Fellow's training, but future peer mentors may not have this advantage.

The goal of this study was to provide a viable peer mentorship program that would benefit Honors student. The student mentors system already in place for HON 100 fit the proposed model well, and the extra meetings with mentors throughout the semester helped student's sense of social placement within the Honors Program and the university in general.

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Appendix A

Pre-Semester Survey

In an attempt to improve your first semester at Eastern Kentucky University, the Honors Program is evaluating a new approach to peer mentorship. Please take a moment to rate your responses to the follow questions on a scale of 1-10. Your answers will be anonymous not affect your grade.

Please circle the correct number under each question, assuming that 1 is very negative and 10 is very positive.

How ready do you feel to begin college?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

How comfortable are you with your place in the Honors program?

Academically: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Socially: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

With your place at ECU?

Academically: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Socially: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Do you believe you've been informed sufficiently about resources available to you on campus?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

How comfortable are you with the idea of using those resources?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Appendix B

Post-Semester Survey

In an attempt to improve your first semester at Eastern Kentucky University, the Honors Program is evaluating a new approach to peer mentorship. Please take a moment to rate your responses to the follow questions on a scale of 1-10. Your answers will be anonymous not affect your grade.

Please circle the correct number under each question, assuming that 1 is very negative and 10 is very positive.

How ready do you feel to begin college?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

How comfortable are you with your place in the Honors program?

Academically: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Socially: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

With your place at ECU?

Academically: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Socially: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Do you believe you've been informed sufficiently about resources available to you on campus?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

How comfortable are you with the idea of using those resources?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

This semester, did your Big Nerd promote or aid your academic growth?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Did your Big Nerd help introduce you to Honors opportunities and social activities?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Did your Big Nerd inform you about resources available on campus?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Overall, please rate your experience with your HON100 mentor.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Please write any additional thoughts about your HON100 mentor below:

Appendix C

Hello!

I'm Tori Abbott, the Honor student whose thesis you are immensely helping this semester in Katie Patton's HON100 class.

I know it's the Friday night before classes start, but what a good time to start thinking about next week, right? I'm looking forward to working with you all this semester. Before we get started, I wanted to share my vision and plan for your positions. I also want to thank you for your willingness to help with this somewhat experimental study.

Currently, the Honors Program lacks an accountable, successful mentorship program. I want to improve on the previous attempts at a Big Nerd/Little Nerd system by placing the peer mentors (you two!) directly into the classroom. As a Writing Fellow in the Noel Studio, I've been a part of academic peer mentorship relationships for the past two years. Their model is focused specifically on students in English classes and is too demanding and time-consuming to ask of non-paid volunteer mentors, but I am drawing from their approach to the relationships between the mentors and the students.

We'll go over more later, but I wanted to shoot you a message now with the two main responsibilities in your role:

A) **Being present and available to your students.** I don't mean giving them your room number in Burnam, but inasmuch as personal boundaries permit, be available to your freshman during this transitory semester. At the beginning of the semester, this means introducing yourself, being friendly, getting to know them, and coming to the classes. Let them know how to contact you and make frequent contact with them. You are their guide across the river of Honors. You've been through Rhetoric and give them tips, advice, and help. When you see them outside of class, don't be a stranger! We're all part of a wonderful Honors Program together.

The primary way you can be available to them will be holding "office hours" in the the Honors lounge, which brings me to the next point!

B) **Meet with your students.** Twice a semester, each student needs to meet with you for a consultation. We can go over what that will look in person, but for now, think of that time as a check-up. If you know they've had problems with HON100 or mentioned difficulties in Rhetoric, bring it up and offer to help how you can in that hour. The first meeting especially may just be building a rapport with the student, but the goal is that they would see you as an Honor's resource and seek you out as a peer leader.

Just remember what it was like your first semester in Honors and how you wish a mentor would've helped you!

I would like to meet next week for us all at the same time to discuss this more. I know I'll be free this Monday night, Wednesday 5pm-6pm, Thursday after 4pm, and Friday 10am-2pm. Please reply with when works best for you and include everyone in this email so we can all coordinate.

Tori Abbott