



Connections, Reflection, and Direction: Implementing a Peer 2 Peer Mentoring Program (P2P)

SPEAKERS

Tierney King, Loreen Smith

Tierney King 00:01

This is the Faculty Focus Live podcast sponsored by the Teaching Professor. I'm your host, Tierney King, and I'm here to bring you inspiration, energy, and creative strategies that you can utilize in your everyday teaching. All right, today we have Loreen Smith with us from Isothermal Community College, and we're going to talk about a peer-to-peer mentoring program that you have at your college. So, first kind of take me through, you know, the program and explain why it was initiated in the first place.

Loreen Smith 00:35

Sure, of course, one of the many goals that we have at Isothermal Community College, and really, in education in general, is a very specific focus to establish how we can retain our student population. Being halfway between Charlotte and Asheville, North Carolina, we are in a distressed county, so many of our students are either first-generation students. So sometimes employment is often listed as a reason for a term withdrawal. And with that, when students come to us, we have students who feel nervous - they're anxious about school, either academically or financially, even socially. So those students and many others, they might not complete their degree pathway. And of course, many colleges experience this. So, I felt that addressing this concern, one of the first steps would really need to take place is to create strong relationships with these students as a key aspect. However, if I could get a part of that relationship to contain a peer, a student mentor who has gone through some of these difficulties, then that would truly help students feel more comfortable, you know, in addressing and overcoming any barriers to give them that confidence and that support that they need to be successful. So really, with that in mind, that helped me to get the ball rolling and creating a peer mentor program at our college.

Tierney King 02:07

That's awesome. I think that's one of, you know, the hardest thing about starting college is just the uncertainty. And you know, the unknowns, and just having someone to look up to is such a big thing that helps students. And we're kind of going to jump ahead a little bit, and I'm going to ask you, you know, what are the benefits that you've seen from implementing this program? Because I know you've collected feedback from the program. So what have you seen from that aspect of it?

Loreen Smith 02:36

Absolutely. I'd say the strongest benefit from the program is when, you know, first year experience students engage in the relationship with their mentor, and then they realize that they can be successful and overcome any obstacles they might have. Because how it works quickly is that the peer-to-peer mentors usually have one or two semesters already completed, and maybe have one, you know, two or three semesters to finish to complete. So they're matched in with the first year experience students in the students ACA 122 College Transfer Success course. And if I have a peer mentor who's a criminal justice student, I will try to match that student with a first year experience student who's also in the criminal justice pathway. And what's amazing is that we have already established kind of like a common ground for the students to be able to work together. So they start to engage in this relationship and they're like, "Oh, you've, you've taken these classes." And, and even though, you know, we have advising, of course, which is fantastic, those peer mentors are working alongside those first year experience students in a way that we, as faculty, and staff, really cannot. And that makes all the difference. So really, the biggest benefit is establishing those relationships, you know, to help them really along the way, and it's interesting, because, you know, a peer mentor and say, "Well, you know, we have a writing center, and you know, we have a math tutoring center. And, you know, if you're nervous about it, let me walk you down there. And we'll go together." And I have a lot of peer mentors who were mentored when they came in. And they are now also mentors because they wanted to give back what they had gotten from their peer mentor. So it becomes cyclical in many ways.

Tierney King 04:37

And how do you choose, you know, does everyone have to take this peer mentor course? How do they become a peer mentor? How does that kind of work?

Loreen Smith 04:44

So everyone in our in our college has to take the ACA 122 College Transfer Success course, and many colleges have a class that's like that, where we try to help students to make sure that they understand what their pathway is, and they're making those correct decisions along with their advisor. But the peer mentors, they are basically, it's a two semester position. So when they come in, they work in the fall and the spring and sometimes in the summer, and they really just help those students out within that ACA course, and work alongside them together. And so for recruiting, I basically send out an email to the faculty and staff, and at this point, our faculty and staff, because we've been doing it for eight years, they're very well versed in what I'm going to be asking. And a lot of the times, I'll get faculty and staff who will say, "I think this student would really make a great peer mentor." And what we try to do is we try to address our diverse population by recruiting student peer mentors who can represent that diverse population, and not only diverse in regards to personality, culture, but also within their major pathway. And I will get emails from, you know, business sciences, from welding, from cosmetology, from associate of arts, you know, arts and science - everything across the gamut. And then what we do is I just meet with them, and once I meet with them, and I tell them about it, and how they will grow as leaders, that not only did those faculty and staff members recognize the talent in them, but we train them on how to recognize the talent and others as well, too. So, recruiting just becomes kind of word of mouth, email, we have marketing departments, so we have posters, a lot of the times I'll even get my current peer mentors to make a video on why they should become a peer mentor. And they do a lot of the presenting themselves as well, too.

Tierney King 06:49

That's awesome. And kind of leads into the next question is, you know, when students complete this program, whether they're doing the mentoring or whether they're being mentored, how does it impact their lives? And what do they, you know, retain from this program?

Loreen Smith 07:04

Oh, that's a great question. And I'd really like to answer that from the students who are being mentored as well as what happens to the peer mentors. So the first year experience students, they definitely after they finished their AC 122, because that's when they have their mentor, just within that semester. And at Isothermal Community College, we make sure that any new student who comes in has to complete that ACA 122, within their first or second semester. So that's when they really meet their mentors, within those classes, and many of them continue that relationship afterwards. But the students become more confident in their understanding of their learning, and how they can address any obstacles or barriers to help them achieve their goals. But they also have a stronger understanding of how long it's going to take them to graduate with us, what life will be realistically like after they finish school, and most of the students say in the evaluations that we have of them, that they really just felt like they were supported without bias or judgment. And they feel like they are really part of the college culture and community. I have many students who will come in, and they might be not that traditional student age, and they feel like they're not going to fit in because they had, you know, they worked for all this time, or, you know, they raised their families, and now it's their turn. And I will sometimes match a peer mentor who's had that experience with someone else as well, too. So they just really feel like they're more part of that college community. And and to be honest, there are some students who are like, "No, I don't need a mentor, you know, I know what I'm doing." And that's fine. And we say that's okay, too. But they know that they have that support if they need it. As for the peer mentors, when they complete this two semester program, they come out with leadership skills, with those hands on experience of working with these students side by side in the ACA classes. It is a paid position as well, so they have a job title they can showcase on their resume to show the skills that they have learned and applied. They also take my Humanities 230 Leadership and Development course. And so they job shadow, they network, they can get college credit. They also like to say when they evaluate me that I push them out of their comfort zone. And they look at me sometimes like "No, I'm not going to do this." And of course, I say you don't have to do it, but they do it. And they decide to do that, which is I think the best step. And they present quite a bit. They present at staff development days, this last crew that I had in the spring, they presented in front of the board of trustees and were really engaging, but really what they do is they have a sense of ownership of their growth and they go into whatever career that they go into knowing they really can do so much now because they have completed it and that they've helped.

Tierney King 10:08

That's amazing. I think it's so important to get these real world skills and to, you know, know that they're part of this community and that they have other people to lean on. And so, you know, just the overarching, you know, goal of this is really is really amazing. And then, you know, you did it from the student perspective, from kind of the instructor perspective, what is personally your favorite aspect of this program?

Loreen Smith 10:34

Oh, that's easy. It is the look on the face of students who have shared their personal success because of the support that they had with the mentors. And to be a part of, like I said, before, recognizing the talent and others, it's an infectious joy. As educators, we go into this field, because, you know, we want our students to prosper, you know, we want our students to grow, we want them to succeed. So, you know, working alongside the mentors, who work alongside the students, for lack of a better word, it fills me up, you know, just to be to be part of that, and not to relish in the success of, "Hey, look, what I've done," it's really, "Look what they have done," that really makes all the difference, you know, I just feel like I'm the navigator, you know, and to do that, to see that sense of accomplishment, and how many doors are going to be now open for them in their own way.

Tierney King 11:34

Yeah, that's very powerful. And then, you know, creating this program, it obviously has a lot of moving parts. There's, you know, scheduling, the data, the feedback, the budget, the program itself, kind of take us through, you know, the steps for other people who are listening, other universities and instructors, what they can do to kind of maybe start their own peer-to-peer mentoring program.

Loreen Smith 11:58

Yes, of course. I've presented about this program several times, and I kind of come with like a guide that the audience can leave with because there are a lot of parts to it. But it's really not a difficult task, to put the program together and adapt what I've put together in the guide, you know, into someone's institution, but I will say that I will talk just really about four very important steps, you know, four very quick steps that I think everybody needs really to get started. And the first is to really establish a team. And in that team, that team needs to be diverse kind of across campus, because it takes a village really to make sure this program works. So you know, someone from advising or you know, academic coaching, or whatever it's called, we have on our campus at an academic development division, for those students who, let's say, need to take developmental math or English, you know, anyone who can teach an ACA course, or something that's comparable to that someone from like registrar or student services, you know, a dean. And so these people, they're not on an actual physical team, it's usually just myself. And I have an assistant that helps me, but everybody else helps me as well to from that buy in, because you have to look at all the mechanics, you know, like, when we target certain students, we target students who are students who register right before classes start, you know. There's many different components that we like to target and assess. So those folks really helped quite a bit because they think of things that I don't think of. So establishing a team is very important. The second is recruitment. We touched on that briefly on what that is, but you really can't have a program without peer mentors. So you know, really putting the word out there asking faculty and staff. I will bribe a lot of my faculty and staff with this amazing banana bread that I make. I make connections on campus, I know everyone, and I always say, you know, just think of one name, you know, or I'll send an email out to everyone. And I'll say, here's what happened today in the ACA class, this was what was so amazing, send me just one name, and then I'll do all the rest to see if they qualify. You know, and we use marketing quite a bit. The third step really is training and working with the mentors. One of the reasons why I wanted to have a leadership class is because then I see those mentors weekly. And not only do we use that class that humanities 230, but you know, meeting with them and talking with them and making sure I'm constantly with them is very, very important. So we train them in August, you know,

and that's where HR comes in where we'll talk about FERPA or we'll talk about certain mechanics of it, you know, what are they going to be doing in the ACA classrooms? You know, filling out timesheets. One thing that's great for everyone really to know is the biggest question that I get is, well, how do you pay them? And really most of the peer mentors are federal work studies. So that is a key component that I talk about. And then if a student does not qualify to be in federal work study, my administration is so generous, and I have a budget that I work with. And so with establishing a team, you know, recruiting properly, training and working with the mentors all the way throughout, I train myself as well. I'm always reading about books about leadership and mentoring. And that helps and reaching out with, you know, podcasts, webinars, conferences. And the last one, though, which is so important is really the promotion and the sharing of the program. You know, whenever I do present at a conference or professional development, I either always bring a mentor with me, or a video of it. I'm very honest with the data, you know, for those students who really reap the benefits of having the mentor and for those students who said, "No, I don't want one," you know, so we talk about that. And then the students, the mentors themselves, give presentations, so having those four is a really great way to then fill in all the rest, you know, kind of what you need. And also guest speakers, you know, I'll invite our president, and you know, our administration team, or any faculty and staff that they can glean insights from them as well, too. So we become a really wonderful school, where we just really embrace all the students and just really try to make sure that they're supported the best way we can. This peer mentoring, you know, peer mentoring is, you know, everywhere, but we really lead from within with this program. So hopefully those four steps will help get someone started.

Tierney King 14:59

And then kind of lastly, you know, why do you think a program like this is so important for instructors, students and universities, kind of what, you know, what is the overarching goal of implementing a program? And why should people do it?

Loreen Smith 16:49

You know, I think, as educators, we're so trained to do, you know, research, we evaluate, you know, we use the data to try and understand why sometimes in this specific case, students do not finish or complete a degree pathway. And really, the answer is so simple, you know, life gets in the way. And so I have a quote on my bulletin board at home and at work, and it's by John C. Maxwell. And you know, he says, "Leadership is not about titles, positions, or flowcharts. It's about one life influencing another." And this program, you know, when a peer-to-peer mentor who can work alongside a student sharing how that mentor overcame barriers for, you know, their own success and sharing, you know, how they were able to take what, I always tell my students, whatever pains we have, if we can turn them into a purpose, then we have really given the students the most important gift. You know, we've given these students the most important tools that they need to succeed and that support connections direction, and really a reflection for a stronger and more meaningful education.

Tierney King 18:10

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