

Creating a Cross-Campus Peer Mentor Network

Kayla Lisenby

This article provides specific best practices for creating a cross-campus peer mentor network. Peer mentoring programs are proliferating on college campuses, especially those that are focused on helping first-year students as they transition into a higher education institution. At an institution where several peer mentoring organizations may already exist, the creation of a cross-campus network can have many advantages to the institution, first-year students, upper-division students, and faculty. This article presents the advantages of establishing a peer-mentoring network and provides strategies for overcoming potential roadblocks to establishing such a program. In addition, seven steps for creating an effective and sustainable cross-campus peer network are shared.

In recent years, peer-to-peer mentoring programs have rapidly developed due to the positive impact they appear to have on the transition and retention of first-year students. Peer-based mentoring on college campuses is “increasingly looked to today as a retention and enrichment strategy for undergraduate education” (Jacobi, 1991, p. 505). In listing methods to increase student success, Kuh (2007) cites the early introduction to campus resources, support networks that can identify early warning signs, and a positive connection to a role model as important aspects of the first-year experience. Peer mentoring programs can support each aspect of this model of first-year student success as well as provide benefits for upper-division mentors, including leadership experience, greater self-confidence, and enhanced communication skills (Hall, 2006).

Peer mentoring programs are being launched in a variety of academic and student affairs offices on campuses, including career services, academic advising and support, cultural centers, and student government. As these mentoring programs proliferate, some institutions are seeking to launch cross-campus mentoring initiatives to coordinate their mentoring programs. Kuh (2007) suggests that institutions strive to “remove obstacles to student engagement and success” (para. 24) as a method to increase student success; however, a confusing web of overlapping mentoring organizations could certainly be considered an obstacle that may prevent first-year students from accessing upper-division mentors. This article discusses the benefits, potential barriers, and best practices for creating a cross-campus peer-to-peer mentoring network that can serve as a streamlined and accessible resource for students.

Kayla Lisenby (kslisenby@gmail.com) is a graduate student in the Higher Education and Student Affairs Master’s of Education program at the University of South Carolina.

The Benefits of Creating a Cross-Campus Mentoring Network

Before investing time and resources into creating a cross-campus mentoring network, institutions need to consider the advantages of doing so. One advantage is that a mentoring network allows the institution to audit which student populations are being served by peer mentorship programs. In turn, the campus can identify gaps in the populations being served, allowing the institution to intentionally create programs to reach those populations. Creating a network will also establish accreditation standards for mentoring organizations, making assessment of these organizations easier.

A peer mentor network can serve as a clearinghouse for first-year students, making it easier for them to access appropriate mentors. A simple, streamlined process allowing students to connect with peer mentors is more likely to be accessed and utilized. Additionally, a network can serve current organizations through providing opportunities to share ideas and gain additional publicity. Finally, a network can serve current students by creating a centralized portal through which larger numbers of upperclassmen can seek opportunities to serve as mentors.

Potential Barriers to Creating a Cross-Campus Mentoring Network

When considering building a cross-campus mentoring network, it is also important to identify potential barriers. One potential barrier is peer mentoring organizations that already exist may be wary of developing and adopting a shared structure and set of standards. Strong and unbiased leadership, a clear mission, buy-in for the establishment of the network by administrative leaders, and willingness to compromise are all strategies that can be used to overcome this potential barrier.

Another potential barrier to establishing a peer mentoring network is that mentoring can be broadly defined, and not all potential member organizations may use this terminology when describing their program. Defining who peer mentors are will help clarify which organizations should participate in the network. Some items to take into consideration when defining peer mentors include the purpose of the mentor/mentee relationships, how consistently mentors work with students, and how the organization's mission impacts the retention of students. Definitions of who should participate in the mentoring network will be specific to each institution and based on the individual missions and goals defined by that institution's network.

A final potential barrier is that, in some organizations, mentoring may represent only one aspect of an organization's larger mission. For example, a business honor fraternity may have a one-to-one mentoring program, but its overall mission may be more focused on professional development and philanthropy. These organizations may or may not have a place in the cross-

campus network, depending on the mission and goals as set forth by the institution's network. If they are included, decisions concerning the extent to which they must follow the protocols set forth by the network, especially in regards to training, must be considered.

Best Practices to Consider in Creating a Cross-Campus Network

This section will highlight specific best practices that institutions can use to create an effective cross-campus peer mentor network. These practices were developed based on reflection of the process of creating the UA Mentoring Connection at the University of Alabama in fall 2010.

Centralize

The first step is to select an appropriate office or department to create and oversee the cross-campus network. Offices that focus on student transition and retention, the first-year experience, and/or student organizations, and are not affiliated with any network member organizations are good options to consider. Resources necessary to run the network will vary based on the size of the network and its detailed mission.

Examine

The office charged with creating the network should conduct an audit of the student populations currently being served by peer mentoring organizations, including areas where peer-mentoring programs are being considered or are being developed. Identify student populations that are currently not being reached by mentors and consider what services might be most helpful for these students.

Define

Determine the mission and focus for the network. One overarching mission could be to create an effective and efficient means of connecting first-year students with mentors in order to ease their transition to college and positively impact retention. After defining a mission, further clarify the goals of the network. For example, at the University of Alabama, the cross-campus network was constructed as a resource and support for existing mentoring organizations and as a clearinghouse that could connect students with mentors.

After network goals have been defined, establish a framework that allows the institution to create a network that will meet these goals. This form will vary and be unique to the institution's needs and resources. Keep in mind that the plan of action should be straightforward with clear goals, but flexible and easily adjusted as the network continues to expand.

Represent

Contact each existing organization and invite members, especially advisors and student leaders, to an organizational summit. Also invite representatives of any areas where peer-mentoring programs are currently being developed. At the summit, identify a leadership team that will include liaisons from each organization represented in the network.

Train

Examine what types of training current organizations are already using to prepare mentors to work with students. Identify areas of overlap, as well as gaps, and then determine key areas in which all mentors should receive training, regardless of their backgrounds. Examples include basic health and stress management, the transition model for first-year students, an overview of campus resources, crisis management and referral, and communication skills. After developing a training curriculum, establish the simplest, yet most impactful, means of having mentors complete the standardized training. An online course is a viable option for many institutions, given that it is cost effective, flexible with scheduling, and can be tailored to meet specific organizations' needs.

Legitimize

Have the network accredit organizations based on their ability to meet a common set of expectations and standards. The accrediting process legitimizes the network as the central place on campus for peer mentoring programs. Faculty, staff, and students will be more comfortable working with mentors who work for an accredited organization. Accreditation can be accomplished through charging the network's leadership team with determining appropriate standards. The following sample criteria may be included for accreditation:

- all members should successfully complete the standardized training program;
- the organization should have at least one active representative on the leadership board; and
- each organization's mission and impact must be evaluated regularly by network leaders.

In addition to developing accreditation criteria, the network should publicize the benefits that accreditation offers to organizations, such as access to mentoring summits and resources compiled for mentors and organizations, as well as increased support for the individual organizations and additional campus visibility.

Promote

Develop a Web presence for the network to attract mentees and mentors, disseminate information, advertise for member organizations, and spread the word about the network to current and future students, parents, faculty, staff, and other institutions. Social media can be used to attract current and incoming students in a cost-effective manner. Increasing the visibility of the mission and function of the network among this population will attract more student interest and, therefore, allow the network and each of its member organizations to grow.

Conclusion

A cross-campus mentoring network offers multiple benefits, including removing obstacles to first-year students finding a mentor, increasing the pool of potential mentor candidates, and increasing student success and retention. By following the seven steps (centralize, examine, define, represent, train, legitimize, and promote) provided in this article, an institution can create a cohesive and effective cross-campus peer mentoring network focused on helping first-year students successfully transition into the university.

References

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