

 THE RESEARCH AGENDA

Informal Peer Mentorship: Listening to the Everyday Student

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Peer mentorship at colleges and universities is often thought of in the context of formal programs. This paper examines mentorship from an informal lens as the everyday advice students give their peers. This study utilized focus groups to see how students responded to questions their peers asked about their experiences. Four themes emerged that can be used to inform research and practice: academic development, psychological and identity development, interpersonal and social development, and life-skill development.

There's a dollars-and-sense argument to student attrition: The "dollars" side of the argument is that recruiting students is expensive, and losing students to attrition negatively impacts revenue. Research has shown that recruiting a single student is four to five times more costly than simply retaining them (Cuseo 2010, Raisman 2013). Raisman (2013) estimated the cost of attrition for 1,699 U.S. higher education institutions and found the average financial loss to be \$9.8 million per school. The "sense" side of the argument is that when students leave college *not* having achieved their academic goals, they, society, and communities lose—both in terms of the financial cost of education and the loss of talent development.

This study was conducted in Montana, a state where the six-year graduation rate at all public colleges and universities is 45.6 percent (*The Chronicle of Higher Education* 2019). Despite the well-known earnings premium

and improved quality of life for bachelor's degree holders (Mayhew, *et al.* 2016) and the fact that by 2020, it is projected that 25 percent of Montana's jobs will require a bachelor's degree (Carnevale, Smith and Strohl 2013), 25 percent of students in Montana who attended a public four-year university in their home state in 2017 failed to return for their second year (Montana University System n.d.). Based on research conducted by Raisman (2013), the state as a whole is underperforming compared to the national average. If current conditions persist, Montana may lack the educated workforce it needs for the future.

The use of data analytics is becoming a matter of course in strategic enrollment management (*see* Muhammad and McManus 2018, Seigle 2017, Sigler 2017). The authors of the current study acknowledge the value that predictive analytics can provide in bringing in and keeping a class. The research presented in this article,

however, takes a different approach to data and student retention: It investigates the advice “everyday students” give their peers about how to be successful at their institution of higher education. “Everyday students” are defined as common students, disregarding special qualities often taken into consideration when examining the student experience and researching student outcomes, such as students in honors programs, international programs, leadership positions, and/or high achievers. This is the crux of the argument: How and how often do strategic enrollment management professionals use everyday students’ experiences and advice to shape the institution’s enrollment practice, and how do staff and faculty cultivate a campus culture such that everyday students serve as informal mentors, supporting their peers’ persistence and success? This article describes themes developed from the analysis of focus group data from students at four universities and colleges in Montana. Sharing their perspectives on what it takes to be successful and the information they retained from orientation and onboarding practices, everyday students provided a wealth of suggestions and support for those preparing to go to college. Listening carefully to these students, one can discern recommendations for strategic enrollment management practice in promoting student retention.

Literature Review

Peer-to-peer mentorship of students in higher education has been well-studied for several decades (Astin 1993; Campbell, Smith, Dugan and Komives 2012; Crisp and Cruz 2009; Jacobi 1991; Peregrina-Kretz, Seifert, Arnold and Burrow 2018; Snowden and Hardy 2012). Peer mentorship in higher education relies on one student, the mentor, passing experiential, intellectual, and programmatic knowledge on to another student, the mentee. Yet in a review of the literature, few studies expressly examined the advice everyday students would give on how to be successful in college (Wilson 2014). This literature review focuses on how more experienced college peers can support new students’ acquisition of the knowledge necessary to navigate higher education. This study adds to the literature by including advice from everyday students and suggests the potential they

have to create a culture in which peers view one another as informal mentors supporting their success.

College Knowledge

College knowledge is the overarching concept of one’s acquisition and understanding of all of the information regarding the higher education environment (Ardoin 2013), including the college application process, applying for and obtaining financial aid, and programs and services available subsequent to admission to and matriculation at a college or university. Students typically gain information about the latter of these areas during new student orientation, when they must learn how colleges and universities work and the intricacies of their own institution in a little less than a week (Angeles 2014). The transition from high school to college brings multiple challenges as learning and living environments change and adult responsibilities accumulate (Conley 2005; Ramming and Phillips 2014; Roehling, Vander Kooi, Dykema, Quisenberry and Vandlen 2010). The college knowledge students do not acquire prior to the start of their first academic year must be obtained as they complete their coursework; some of this knowledge is acquired from their peers.

Mentorship

The contribution students make to their peers’ learning has been thoroughly studied (Astin 1993; Crisp and Cruz 2009; Campbell, Smith, Dugan and Komives 2012; Jacobi 1991; Peregrina-Kretz, Seifert, Arnold and Burrow 2018; Snowden and Hardy 2012). This includes pre-college interventions using peer mentors (Castleman and Page 2013). Mentorship can be achieved in both informal and formal settings (Jacobi 1991). The Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP) (2011) defines informal mentoring as “naturally occurring, supportive relationships students have with older and more experienced individuals...and involves the provision of general guidance and support and, in some instances, helping a student learn something new” (2). Informal settings are environments where people naturally form a relationship that leads to a mentor-mentee connection (Luna and Cullen 1995). Formal mentoring involves a more struc-

tured and intentional approach (IHEP 2011, 2) and often is seen as established mentorship programs (Luna and Cullen 1995). In cultivating a “mentoring constellation” (Johnson 2014), students can serve as mentors to other students in both formal and informal settings.

Peer mentorship goes beyond learning and obtaining knowledge, having been shown to contribute to the transition of young adults toward independence and their adjustment in their collegiate environment (Crisp and Cruz 2009, Eby, *et al.* 2008, Jacobi 1991). Collings, Swanson, and Watkins (2014) studied a formal peer mentorship program in the United Kingdom and found that “mentoring may buffer the effect of the transition to university” (927). They also found that students without a mentor relationship were four times more likely to consider leaving their institution of higher education (Collings, Swanson and Watkins 2014). Formal peer mentorship between students and faculty members has also been shown to promote student success; specifically, students who identified as having mentors within their higher education institutions had statistically significant increases in grade point average and year-to-year persistence (Pagan and Edwards-Wilson 2002). Formal mentorship has also been shown to have a positive impact on the success of students at four-year and two-year institutions (Crisp 2010). Despite evidence of the positive effect of formal peer mentorship programs on student outcomes, the research on informal peer mentorship of students is sparse.

An exhaustive literature search failed to identify any literature that evaluated informal peer mentorship of college students. Much of the formal peer mentorship literature references and defines informal mentoring; however, none of the studies reviewed findings related to informal mentorship. Jacobi (1991) discusses informal mentorship in a literature review on college student mentorship; unfortunately, all literature discussed in this review evaluates only faculty-student mentorship. Two studies compared the effects of informal and formal peer mentorship in a professional setting (Chao, Walz, and Gardner 1992, Ragins and Cotton 1999). Both found informal mentorship to have a greater positive impact on career-related support and salary than on

formal mentor-mentee pairings (Chao, Walz, and Gardner 1992, Ragins and Cotton 1999). This review of the literature identifies an expressed need for evaluation of informal peer mentorship of students in the higher education setting.

The current study addresses the gap in the literature relative to informal mentorship and college knowledge by promoting understanding of what everyday students believe is important to retain and pass on as keys to success in completing their undergraduate degree. This research opens up paths for professionals to cultivate a campus culture of informal mentorship where the phrase “look left, look right; both of those people can support you” becomes the norm.

Methodology

The challenge of transitioning from high school to college has been well documented, particularly related to students developing the college knowledge needed for success (Conley 2005, The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education 2009). Recognizing the power that peers can play in supporting one another's success, the intent of this qualitative study was to gather advice from current Montana college students related to topics previous research had used to identify high school students' questions and concerns (see Oliveri, *et al.* 2018). Focusing this study on this population of college students was purposeful as second-semester first-year students and those with an even longer tenure at college are well-positioned to give advice to high school students who are thinking about pursuing post-secondary education.

Using a semi-structured protocol informed by categories from a previous study (Oliveri, *et al.* 2018), the research team conducted focus groups on four Montana college campuses. The categories informing the interview protocol included making friends and getting involved, living away from home, finding support and resources/help, succeeding in college classes, practicing wellness and staying healthy, and exploring majors and careers. Focus groups seemed the most effective way to engage college students and generate interaction among participants (Savin-Baden and Major 2013).

Data Sample and Collection

Focus group participants included 42 college students pursuing bachelor's degrees in a broad range of disciplines at four universities of diverse institutional types (research university, regional university, community college, and private liberal arts college). Academic areas of focus included health professions, political science, education, forestry, and engineering. Each university was unique in terms of size, mission, and academic focus, yet all shared an interest in increasing student retention. Members of the research team scheduled meeting dates, times, and locations for focus groups on each campus, extended invitations through a variety of methods (e-mail, verbal, posters), and traveled to each of the four campuses. On one campus, three focus groups were hosted; invitations to participate were sent via student e-mail, outreach to student clubs and organizations, and research team members directly inviting student participation. (See Table 1 for details about focus group composition.)

Following the protocol established for the focus groups, a member of the research team facilitated each conversation. Using the categories from a previous study in which high school students shared their questions and concerns about transitioning to college, participants were asked to share their advice with current high school students. All research team members took detailed notes, and, with participants' permission, recorded the conversations in order to ensure accu-

racy and authenticity of the data. Following each focus group, the team created a working document to share observations and reflections until the sessions could be debriefed.

Data Analysis and Trustworthiness

Analysis included transcribing and organizing interview data and field notes into spreadsheets. One workbook was created for each campus. Each workbook contained a separate page for data from each focus group and the coding method for analyzing participant data. An additional workbook was used to describe participants from each campus and focus group; Microsoft Word documents provided rich descriptions of participants, their location, and group summaries.

The researchers organized the data and analyzed each participant statement related to the protocol questions as well as interviewer notes related to the members of each group. Codes were established as researchers read each statement and identified a term that broadly described the data point. The codes were defined and used to develop themes and sub-themes, which then were used to describe the data gathered from focus group participants. Coders achieved a 67.4 percent agreement in their coding of the statements generated by the focus groups.

Computing technologies allowed for the analysis to be shared among team members and for the principal investigator to provide feedback as codes, themes, and

TABLE 1 ► Focus Group Data by Institution

Institution	Number of Students	Focus Group Size	Gender (F/M)	Majors Represented
1	16	4–7	13/3	Healthcare, History, Native American Studies, Organizational Communication, Biology (Pre-med), Elementary Education, Special Education, Psychology, Art Education, Human Services
2	9	2–7	2/7	Political Science, Women's and Gender Studies, Psychology, Biology (Pre-Med), Undeclared, Forestry, Business
3	7	3–4	4/3	Biology, Political Science, Economics, Chemistry, Environmental Science, Accounting, Undeclared
4	10	2–4	5/5	Environmental Science, Land and Environmental Design, Mechanical Engineering, Computer Science, Sustainability, Engineering

sub-themes were established. In addition, the team met often and engaged in consensual meaning making as its members analyzed the data and came to agreement as to how to most accurately represent the data (Creswell 2013, Savin-Baden and Major 2013). During these meetings, the themes were modified until the team achieved consensus on the naming of each and the codes of which they were comprised. To further ensure trustworthiness, rich description was used to detail findings. A new researcher joined the team for this project, and this allowed for the use of peer debriefing to enhance the accuracy of the analysis (Creswell 2013).

Positionality

This research team included the principal investigator, who is a faculty member and higher education graduate program professor at a large university in a rural state, and three graduate students from the same university. Each team member had a personal or professional interest in the topic. For example, two graduate researchers hold positions dedicated to student retention at STEM colleges. The team worked together to manage bias and reach consensus in representing nuances in the data to ensure their trustworthiness (Savin-Baden and Major 2013).

Results

Following analysis of the focus group data by the research team, twelve codes were constructed and further developed into four themes: academic development, psychological and identity development, interpersonal/social development, and life skill development. This section discusses each of these themes and provides evidence for their existence within the data; in addition, each of the 12 codes is discussed.

Academic Development

Academic development is the learning and development that occurs when students enter college and learn how it differs from high school in terms of workload, expectations, and types of people. This includes the behaviors and choices students make in studying, attending class, and working in groups. Focus group participants of-

fered advice within two related areas: academic success and the differences between high school and college.

Students regularly offered advice on how to be academically successful. Academic success included thoughts and advice related to achievement in class and academic coursework and related work. Statements in this code included “Don’t let [academics] sneak up on you,” “Show up,” and discussion of the results of missing or skipping coursework. One student said:

For my major, I do a lot of history classes, we read a lot of documents, and my teacher required documents read before class so that we can discuss them. When I was a freshman, I was like, “We don’t really have to read that, it’s not a big deal.” There are 80 kids in class, and I got to class and didn’t know what they were talking about. So I learned real quick that it’s important to read what you’re assigned, or you won’t know what is going on.

Students also pointed out the differences they identified between high school and college, often suggesting that students needed to know them in order to be successful. Many discussed the difference in schedule: “The best part of college is [that] no one tells you to go, and the worst part of college is [that] no one tells you to go.” Another student discussed the difference between professors and teachers: “Professors won’t baby you. Sometimes [there are] perceptions that professors don’t care. Not true.”

Psychological and Identity Development

The theme of psychological and identity development included the learning and development that occurs within the self/identity, affective realms through college experiences related to caring for self and others, managing time in order to stay well, and learning from failure. Four codes were included in this theme: self-care, major and career, psychological abilities, and identity development.

Self-care included advice from students about how to take care of oneself mentally, psychologically, and physically and how to be a balanced and happy person. One student discussed setting boundaries as being a very important element of self-care, especially during

high stress times. Another student suggested being balanced yet flexible with one's schedule:

Mine is about being flexible, so being involved in so many different things, you do have to have that structure, and that schedule, but also be flexible. So I always make sure that I have my evenings, and I have nothing, so I don't do anything else, that is family time, and I hang out with my dogs and my boyfriend and that's it. So structuring that certain little time, maybe it is just your meal, and that is all you do.

Other advice students mentioned regularly pertained to major and career choice; this included thoughts about choosing a major, changing a major, choosing a career, and the personal reflection required to make thoughtful choices. One student said that peers should not feel “unwanted shame in being undeclared.” Another student said, “It is okay to change” and suggested taking advantage of the first two years of college to explore career options. In terms of career selection, one student discussed the importance of internships and shadowing opportunities: “I did a lot of coaching and summer volunteering, working with kids, and then realized, wait, why am I doing a communications degree?”

Students also discussed changes in their psychological abilities, defined as the development of higher-level psychological resources or skills and abilities necessary for well-being and success in college. One student pointed out how learning experiences in college could be applied to one's own growth, “so if you got an F on an assignment, what are you going to learn from that F that will make you a better person?” Another student offered advice for managing awkward social situations:

Realize you're not the only one feeling awkward. I am constantly feeling awkward...it is ok, whether you are introverted or extroverted, in whatever order, but taking a step back and realizing someone else may be feeling the same, and in a sense taking it a step further and being extroverted so that other people can get over their introversion.

Last, students discussed the development of their identity while attending college. This statement stood out: “Be a good person.” Students also talked about the

influence their parents had on their identity development and how they had changed since becoming students. Another student advised, “Take advantage of it being a fresh start,” and “If you are in a group of people that doesn't make you feel good, you can start fresh, literally, any day.”

Interpersonal and Social Development

Interpersonal and social development are the learning and development that make it possible to reach out to and connect with people in college; professors, roommates, classmates, and friends serve as a support system and guide to growth and success in college. The types of advice in this theme pertained to involvement and social connection, social support network, connection to professors, and learning from diversity.

Students offered advice on getting involved and building social connections. This included statements about the importance of getting involved as well as how to get involved and connect with others in college—formally or informally. Students said, “Talk to your classmates.” Multiple students proposed finding groups and organizations with which to get involved. One student spoke about the importance of early semester programs to build relationships:

In college, [for] the first six weeks, there is going to be something every single night that you can do. As a freshman, everyone around you is in the same boat. Some are more in the boat than others: I came here fully aware that I am from two states away, and I knew no one, and that was kind of the reason I came—to make friends, different friends. So everyone is open freshman year to making new friends and to that process.

Students also discussed the importance of having people to turn to when they needed support. These are the essential people students need in order to be successful. The following quote describes the extensive support and information network students can build:

My freshman year, my RA was really, really helpful with any questions I had. They go through week-long trainings to answer questions, so my RA pointed me to student

health and let me know the hours of it when I was very new here. Then I got involved with a few clubs on campus, and being a part of them, I learned what professors will do to help, and what offices do—like the writing center. And we have tutors on campus who are students and teachers, so if you don't feel comfortable working one on one with a teacher, you can work with a peer who took the class earlier. A lot of those types of resources are available. The student health center works with both mental and physical health. If they feel they are not best suited to your needs, then they will refer you to a local doctor, so it's really nice.

Other students suggested building a strong relationship with academic advisors. One pointed out the importance of a peer mentorship program for helping get oriented to the environment.

Students gave advice about building and maintaining relationships with professors, instructors, advisors, and mentors and their connection to college success. One student advised to communicate with professors proactively in order to indicate investment in the course. Other advice included “Don’t be scared of your professors” and “They are human, and just talk to them.” Several students also suggested the importance of building relationships with professors by going to office hours and attending class regularly.

Students also gave advice on the importance of learning and interacting with people different from oneself:

Being a traditional student right out of high school, and you are hearing experiences, it's like, yeah, that's 'cause we were in school last year. Then you get those people who are going back to school for their career, and their kids are all in school.... It really lends itself to—helps with—different points of view.

Another student discussed the importance of experience brought to learning: “It shows you that so much knowledge happens outside of the classroom—so when they bring their experience into the experience, it's like, wow, that happens?”

Life-Skill Development

The last theme that emerged from the focus groups was life-skill development. Life-skill development includes

the more transactional, fact-based skills and abilities that make it possible to succeed in college and, eventually, in the world as a functioning adult. Two types of advice were expressed within this theme: life-skill advice and financial education.

Life-skill advice centered on the learning of skills necessary for adulthood and college life, from the practical (such as doing laundry) to the communication skills necessary to manage life with roommates. One student described how learning occurs both in and out of the classroom:

I had a mentor, and I asked, “So what did you take from college?” And [she said], “Your degree—what you learned in the classroom—is not going to help you in your job. It's the tools you learned, like how to communicate, how to be on time, how to work with people you don't like—those things result in success.”

Another student discussed the importance of building a foundation, including “waking up on time, getting ready, and getting your coffee.” Students also pointed out the importance of chores such as laundry and preparing meals.

Advice about financial education included understanding the finances of college and of adulthood, including living on one's own and managing money, and how to finance college and understand student loans. Students' advice about financial education centered on being careful with financial aid they received: “You want grants and scholarships first, then loans, and you have to be careful, because you have to pay more interest [on some] than [on] others, and private loans are terrible.”

Discussion

Students are faced with many challenges as they transition to higher education; a primary goal of strategic enrollment management professionals is to ease that transition (Crisp and Cruz 2009; Eby, et al. 2008; Jacobi 1991). The results of this study pose many implications for strategic enrollment management professionals. One of the most significant implications derives from the overwhelming positive and meaningful advice each

of the students offered during the focus groups; this suggests that any student can be an informal mentor. Literature regarding student peer mentorship is largely focused on formal programs; yet according to Luna and Cullen (1995), mentorship can also be found in informal settings. Strategic enrollment management professionals should create spaces where formal and informal mentorship can be explored and developed. During orientation, staff members should identify the knowledge that peers can provide informally to help new students navigate college. Each class of new students possesses a wealth of knowledge and strengths; invite students to invest in one another's success. Everyday students working collectively to support one another through informal mentorship cultivates a peer culture of persistence.

The results of this study demonstrate the value of advice from everyday students in helping new students transition to college. Their advice may be directed to improving practice in areas such as recruitment, admissions, and financial aid.

For recruitment professionals, two implications are evident in the students' statements: First is the importance of assessing the knowledge of students who have attended the institution and facilitating the transfer of this knowledge to prospective students via recruitment materials such as viewbooks, websites, and social media. Second is the opportunity to have current students share their advice; this can create a narrative that paints a vivid picture of the campus and provides college knowledge to incoming students. Hire students who can communicate in accessible language and use image-based media to provide an insider view of how 'to do' college.

Students' statements indicate that they may not fully understand the college knowledge provided at the moments of application and matriculation. Asking students questions similar to those posed in this study may

provide insight into how orientation sessions could be improved. Students should be empowered during their initial weeks on campus to see one another and themselves as informal mentors; administrative statements should affirm the importance of a cooperative and supportive environment in which all students rise together.

It is important for financial aid professionals to assess students' understanding of financial processes such as paying tuition and fees, scholarship disbursement, and loan initiation and repayment. Financial aid discussions are often unique, so checking in with students by asking them questions about the process will help staff gauge their understanding. It is also important to be as transparent as possible so students are aware of the impact their financial aid can have. Drawing on student understanding to modify the language in financial aid communications (*e.g.*, the initial aid award letter) is a powerful example of student-centered SEM practice (see Burd, *et al.* 2018 for a detailed summary of the need for transparency in financial aid award letters).

Given the overwhelming amount of literature that supports peer mentorship interventions (Astin 1993; Campbell, Smith, Dugan and Komives 2012; Castleman and Page 2013; Crisp and Cruz 2009; Jacobi 1991; Peregina-Kretz, Seifert, Arnold and Burrow 2018; Snowden and Hardy 2012), it is important for higher education institutions to empower students by creating opportunities for increased informal and formal mentorship opportunities. By connecting newer students with students who have experience at the institution, every student is provided the opportunity to connect with a mentor and thereby maximize the likelihood of success for all students. The everyday student has significant knowledge to share and can greatly inform our professional practice. We need to regularly ask for their advice and listen to what they have to tell us.

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