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Evaluating the Effects of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences Mentor Program

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Table of Contents

List of Figures

List of Tables

Executive Summary

This report evaluates the impact of the University of Windsor Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences Mentorship Program (FASSMP) on students, mentors and instructors. The FASSMP was established in 2005 in order to address issues of enrolment and retention by enhancing the first-year experience. The program addressed this challenge by integrating peer mentors into first-year foundation courses as a way to help students transition to university.

This report answers four research questions: (1) How has the FASSMP changed first-year student retention rates? (2) How does the FASSMP influence the perceived student experience within the classroom? (3) What is the impact of the FASSMP experience on mentors? and (4) How do instructors perceive the effectiveness and/or implementation of FASSMP?

Methods of analysis include use of the CLASSE survey, focus groups, interviews and institutional data on retention. Participants include first-year students, student mentors, past mentors and course instructors.

Our findings indicate that there is a positive relationship between the FASSMP and retention rates from first to second year. Moreover, we find that mentors positively impacted the first-year student experience, both academically and relationally. Beyond that, the FASSMP has a significant impact on the personal growth of mentors in a variety of ways. Course instructors identified many benefits of the FASSMP, including increased pedagogical connections and a more integrated departmental community network.

We close by offering a series of recommendations that can be used to inform best practices for other mentorship programs:

- Create an environment that encourages communication between all parties and allows for healthy interactions in both the first-year classroom and the FASSMP classroom.
- Ensure that there is a clear understanding of the roles and responsibilities of student mentors in the classroom.
- Create opportunities to develop professional relationships between instructors and mentors by ensuring ongoing dialogue via structured communication mechanisms.
- Develop a plan to promote interest, investment and involvement in the mentorship program within university departments.

Introduction

The University of Windsor created the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences Mentorship Program (FASSMP) in 2005 as a way to address challenges surrounding enrolment and retention at the institution. The program sought to enhance the classroom experience of first-year students by integrating students serving as mentors into foundational first-year courses in a variety of disciplines.

The goal of this paper is to evaluate the impact the FASSMP program has had on a number of target variables, including student retention from first to second year and qualitative measures of student experience. The study is guided by four research questions: (1) How has the FASSMP changed first-year student retention rates? (2) How does the FASSMP influence the perceived student experience within the classroom? (3) What is the impact of the FASSMP experience on mentors? and (4) How do instructors perceive the effectiveness and/or implementation of FASSMP?

The FASSMP

Since 2005, upper-year undergraduate students acting as peer mentors have facilitated active learning in first-year Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (FASS) classrooms at the University of Windsor. At the time of the program's creation, 50 peer mentors were trained to work in one interdisciplinary transitional course, which enrolled 200 first-year students. Since then, the program has expanded in scope to include 50 to 60 mentors facilitating the learning of close to 1,500 students in history, psychology, drama, sociology and political science.

FASSMP is designed to enhance first-year student learning and engagement, while also enabling upper-year mentors to acquire and refine their leadership, facilitation, pedagogical and learning skills. FASSMP mentors are not volunteers or employees but are rather drawn from the students enrolled in a course called 'Mentorship and Learning', which requires a service-learning internship in a first-year class. Driven by the course's intended learning outcomes, the mentors co-facilitate large courses, providing individual support and small-group animation in order to connect first-year students to course content, faculty and the university community. Through the mentors' efforts, first-year students explore and apply the courses' key concepts in critically reflective and collaborative settings, with a focus on developing self-confidence and success strategies, learning autonomy and building a strong sense of connection to their peers and the institution at large. The FASSMP also aims to enhance the circulation among students of 'insider knowledge' about how to succeed both generally at the university level and specifically in first-year courses.

The cornerstone of the FASSMP is the Mentorship and Learning course, which introduces student mentors to learning theory, learning styles, group facilitation, effective leadership, critical thinking/reading skills and information literacy. Student mentors apply their training immediately, interning in introductory courses in their own discipline. Mentorship and Learning course instructors supervise mentor internships, while the instructors of the course in which the mentor is interning offer ongoing feedback and support. Mentorship

and Learning is an interdisciplinary course that explicitly encourages students to share discipline-specific approaches and techniques that often translate differently across disciplines. Senior mentors, selected from among applicants who were highly successful in the Mentorship and Learning course in previous years, work as part of the course teaching team to 'mentor the mentors' and facilitate debriefing and peer learning sessions for interning mentors.

The FASSMP is distinct from many other university peer mentoring programs in that it is anchored in academic units rather than in student services. This allows the FASSMP to integrate trained facilitators directly into courses as part of the teaching team. FASS mentors do not work as mentors in the traditional sense, nor do they serve as teaching assistants. Instead, mentors act as peer learning facilitators, with the dual responsibility of offering support and guidance and of actively engaging students with course content through small-group sessions that we call 'breakout sessions'. This approach enables instructors to employ active learning strategies more frequently and to offer types of learning support that would not otherwise be possible in a large class. It also improves both the quality and quantity of feedback instructors receive about student learning in the course. The highly scaffolded 'just-in-time' supervision and training that the mentors receive enhances their responsiveness and increases the consistency and quality of the mentoring first-year students receive.

Structure of FASSMP in Fall 2011

During the period of the study (September to December 2011), FASSMP operated in five different first-year courses. Each of these courses integrated the mentors in a slightly different way (see Figure 1). For the most part, mentors worked during their respective class times; course instructors allocated between 10 and 45 minutes for mentors to lead breakout sessions either at the beginning or the end of each class. This model was not, however, applied in the psychology and sociology classes. There, mentors worked alongside graduate teaching assistants during lab sessions. This model posed several problems, which will be discussed in greater detail below.[1]

The FASSMP team model includes six different participants: (1) FASSMP instructors, (2) senior mentors, (3) mentors, (4) course instructors, (5) graduate teaching assistants and, of course, (6) first-year students.[2] The *FASSMP instructors* manage the process and are responsible for the smooth operation and organization of both the FASSMP as a whole and the Mentorship and Learning course. Each week, they instruct students in the Mentorship and Learning course and share facilitation strategies that can then be used to lead breakouts during the practicum component of the course. *Senior mentors* are paid teaching assistants, competitively selected from a pool of the previous year's mentors. They are co-instructors of the Mentorship and Learning class and act as liaisons between the FASSMP instructors and course instructors. Senior mentors are also assigned a small group of mentors to oversee during the semester. They model breakout sessions for their

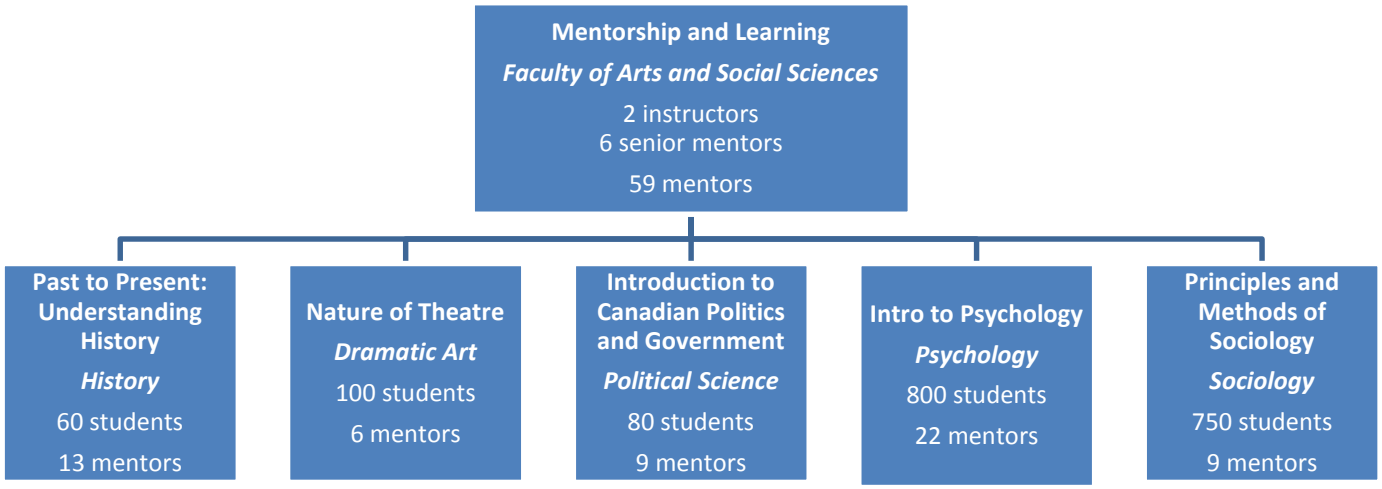
1 For a full description of each class that participated in the study and the way in which it integrated the mentors, see Figure 1 in Appendix A.
2 For a detailed list and explanation of the FASSMP model, see Figure 2 in Appendix A.

group of mentors before every class and offer insight concerning best practices. In this sense, senior mentors mentor mentors.

Mentors are central to the FASSMP. They are learning facilitators and, unlike mentors in most other analogous programs, are discipline-specific, allowing them to provide insider knowledge unique to each department. Their role is twofold: to offer support and guidance for first-year university students and to actively engage them with course content through small-group breakout sessions. Mentors are not to be confused with teaching assistants; they do not teach course content, answer questions regarding content or grade, or receive a stipend. Instead, they receive course credit and are recruited through a competitive selection process.

Finally, *course instructors* represent the FASSMP in each of their respective departments and work with their assigned mentors to make the most of the FASSMP experience. They are to notify mentors of the material that will be covered in class ahead of time so that the mentors can prepare their breakout sessions and manage class time.

Figure 1: Structure of FASSMP in Fall 2011



Literature Review

The link between mentorship and academic success has been discussed in much of the academic literature. An analysis of these studies reveals several key themes and gaps. First, the broad and varying definitions of 'mentorship' often lead to a lack of consistency in measuring outcomes (Jacobi, 1991; Crisp & Cruz, 2009). For example, while the presence of specific peer-mentoring programs has been linked to significant improvements in student achievement (Rodger & Tremblay, 2003) and retention (Higgins, 2004; Collings, Swanson & Watkins, 2014), there is still a lack of methodical and rigorously tested research that would allow these findings to be generalized outside their specific contexts (Gershenfeld, 2014, p. 365). Even within higher education literature, it is challenging to find two mentorship programs that operate in exactly the same manner, making similar-systems comparison difficult. What is more, there is currently a lack of information on mentoring program models and minimal progress has been made in the expansion of definitions, theories and methods (Gershenfeld, 2014).

A second theme that emerges from the literature is that students are more likely to succeed in university when they are able to connect with an academic community. Studies illustrate that student success is linked to opportunities to connect with and commit to the institution, interact with faculty members and peers, engage actively in their learning process and take part in high-impact learning situations (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Sidle & McReynolds, 1999; Kuh, 2009; Kinzie, 2010). Peer-led learning initiatives constitute one way of effectively achieving these conditions (Kreie, Headrick & Steiner, 2007; Lewis & Lewis, 2005; Tien, Roth & Kampmeier, 2002). This sentiment is also expressed by Holland, Major and Orvis (2012), who make note of student retention, academic success and future commitment to a student's faculty as outcomes of the use of peer-mentoring initiatives.

Similarly, the literature highlights the importance of "learning communities." Again, this concept suffers from a less than precise common definition. Tinto (1998) explains that learning communities are "a kind of co-registration or block scheduling that enables students to take courses together" (p. 170). This first definition is echoed in the literature by way of linked or clustered courses (Barefoot, Gardner, Cutright, Morris, Schroeder, Schwartz & Swing, 2005; Bunting, Dye, Pinnegar & Robinson, 2012). The second, broader definition comes from Wegner (1998) and focuses on a "privileged locus for the acquisition of knowledge" (p. 214); this "locus" may take the form of building supportive peer groups and allowing for shared learning among group members (Pugliese et al., 2012; Bunting et al., 2012; Crisp & Cruz, 2009; O'Brien, Llamas & Stevens, 2012). More often than not, however, the literature refers to learning communities without any significant definition. While many views exist on what constitutes a learning community, it is noteworthy that no definitions explicitly link this community to departmental faculty, focusing instead on peer interactions.

Another area of significant discussion is the role of the mentor. Support guide, overseer, personal and professional development facilitator, university guide, academic advisor and role model are terms that have all been used in reference to the position of mentor (Bolton, Pugliese & Singleton-Jackson, 2009; Bunting Dye, Pinnegar & Robinson, 2012; Crisp & Cruz, 2009; O'Brien, Llamas & Stevens, 2012; Power, Miles, Peruzzi

& Voerman, 2011). Colvin and Ashman (2010) discuss the role of the mentor primarily as a link, peer leader, learning coach, student advocate and trusted friend (p. 125-126), while Smith (2008) describes mentors as class discussion facilitators and academic coaches.

While there are many mentoring programs and initiatives currently in practice, many focus on informal mentors, often linked to student services. One such example is the Mentor Accountant Project (MAP), developed in 2001-2002 and operating at two Scottish universities (Fox et al., 2010). A second, well documented example is the Telemachus Ancient History Mentor Program, located in New South Wales at Macquarie University; again, this program is based around informal mentors who liaise with the head of the Department of Ancient History and is geared toward creating a "learning community" within the discipline (Power et al., 2011).

The academic mentorship literature points to only a small number of embedded and for-credit mentorship programs. Of note is the for-credit peer-mentoring program at the University of Calgary, which reports a high level of responsibility and commitment among mentors (Smith, 2008). The only other for-credit model (to the best of our knowledge) is located at the University of Windsor, in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences Mentorship Program (FASSMP). While there are a variety of other mentorship programs even on the University of Windsor campus, these programs are not embedded into departmental classes and do not offer mentors class credit.

Finally, many studies on university-based peer mentorship discuss the relationship between mentor and mentee, academic results, and the retention or transition of mentees (Crisp & Cruz, 2009). A survey of 16 such programs within one discipline found that while there was a significant impact on mentees, there was no sign of any significant data on benefits to other stakeholders, such as the mentors themselves or the department (Dorsey & Baker, 2004, p. 263). Emerging research, however, is indicating that mentorship programs may have a positive and profound impact on mentors as well as mentees (Bolton, Pugliese & Singleton-Jackson, 2009; Heirdsfield, Walker, Walsh & Wilss, 2008; Smith, 2008; Terrion & Philion, 2008). Bunting, Dye, Pinnegar and Robinson (2012) focus on the mentor experience rather than that of the mentee, identifying three major themes: learning through observation and self-reflection, community building and personal responsibility. Finally, departmental impact is only briefly mentioned or hinted at in the literature (Fox et al., 2010; Pugliese et al., 2012) and is a topic that requires further research.

Research Methodology

This is an exploratory case study meant to serve as the first of future studies regarding the University of Windsor's FASSMP. It is our hope that this report will add to the existing academic literature of mentorship learning programs, uncover additional research questions and act as a model for new mentor programs.

In order to address our overarching inquiry, we conducted a case study of the FASSMP between September 2011 and June 2012. This study was guided by the following sub research questions:

1. How has FASSMP changed first-year student retention rates?
2. How does the FASSMP influence the perceived student experience within the classroom?
3. What is the impact of the FASSMP experience on mentors?
4. How do instructors perceive the effectiveness and/or implementation of FASSMP?

To address these questions, we drew on three main sources of data: surveys, focus groups and interviews, and institutional data. All data were collected in the fall and winter semesters of the 2011-2012 academic year.

Measures

Survey

The Classroom Survey of Student Engagement (CLASSE) is an adaptation of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) used to assess student engagement at the classroom level. There are two instruments that make up the CLASSE; of relevance to this study is CLASSE Student. This instrument uses Likert scales to explore the frequency with which students engage in various educational activities associated with a particular course. For this study, the CLASSE was used to assess student classroom engagement for both first-year students and mentors. Mentors completed the CLASSE survey in order to measure engagement in the Mentorship and Learning classroom. Additional questions relating to the mentorship component of the course were added to the original survey and complemented the CLASSE items.[3]

Mentorship and Learning students and first-year students enrolled in a participating course during the Fall 2011 semester were recruited via an invitation from their course website to complete an online survey. The link to the survey was also posted on each course's website. Completion of the survey confirmed informed consent. Participation was not mandatory and those who chose to participate were entered in a draw to win an iPod Touch. At the end of the online survey, students were given the opportunity to provide their information for follow-up to participate in an interview or focus group.

In addition, past mentors who took the Mentorship and Learning course between 2005 and 2010 were also contacted via email and provided with a link to an online survey to provide data on the impact of their mentorship experience.

Focus Group and Interviews

Both focus groups and semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather qualitative data on the impact of the FASSMP. There were three sets of interview protocols, one for each of the participant groups (first-

3 See Appendix B: CLASSE Survey – Mentor-Specific Questions

year students, mentors and course instructors). The protocols for first-year students and mentors each contained six questions aimed at understanding the experience of the individual in relation to their participation in the mentorship program. Both protocols looked at the mentorship experience and the transition of first-year students from high school to university. The protocol used for first-year students looked at the value of the mentor, while the mentor protocol looked at the impact of the program on the mentor. See Appendix B for the protocols for the first-year students, mentors and instructors, respectively. All interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded.

Participants for our focus groups and interviews were recruited via email. Starting in January 2012, both first-year students and current mentors who had previously indicated an interest to participate in our study were contacted via email to schedule a time for a focus group. They were able to sign up for a time through email correspondence. Due to scheduling challenges, individual interviews were only offered to and conducted with those who were interested but unable to make one of the scheduled focus group sessions. Informed consent was obtained prior to the interview.

Similarly, course instructors were sent emails with a request to schedule an interview. Individual interviews were conducted with each of the five course instructors.

Archival Institutional Data

Enrolment and retention data were identified and obtained for the period between fall 2008 and fall 2013 to determine the possible impact of the FASSMP on student retention.

Participants

There were three categories of participants in this study. The number of participants per class was not tracked, although all disciplines were represented by first-year students and mentors, with the exception of dramatic art, for which no students responded to the survey despite a second call for participants from the course instructor. All students were invited to participate in the focus group interviews via the university's learning management system, Collaboration and Learning Environment Windsor, commonly known as CLE*W*.

First-Year Students

All students who were enrolled in a participating first-year course from one of the five arts and social sciences departments were eligible for the study. In total, 225 out of approximately 1,040 eligible students completed the CLASSE survey, for a response rate of about 22%. Thirteen additional 13 first-year students participated in either a focus group or an individual interview.

Student Mentors

We also collected data from current students enrolled in the Mentorship and Learning course. Twenty-four current mentors completed the CLASSE out of a possible 59, for a response rate of 41%. In addition, 14 mentors participated in either a focus group or an interview.

Past Mentors

We recruited past peer mentors to evaluate the impact FASSMP had in their lives after the completion of their undergraduate degree. Sixty-three of them completed the CLASSE.

Course Instructors

The five instructors who oversee the implementation of the FASSMP – representing the departments of drama, history, political science, psychology and sociology – made up the final set of participants for the study. Each of these instructors participated in an interview.

Research Approaches

This study uses both quantitative and qualitative research methods. The first research question requires the use of quantitative data and involves the consultation of retention rates for students in non-mentorship FASS courses compared to students enrolled in FASS courses that contained a mentorship component. Frequency analyses were conducted and enrolment numbers were compared. Similarly, for research questions two and three, we ran frequency analyses with all survey data. From these findings, we were able to identify key items and get a sense of the percentage of students (by department and overall) who were engaged as measured by CLASSE data. Finally, we ran a series of cross-tabulations with items from the CLASSE to identify any significant differences in student engagement between departments.

Our qualitative research methods involved interviews and focus groups. Once all interviews and focus groups had been conducted, transcripts were separated by participant group and transcribed. Beginning with first-year student data, the transcripts were read in their entirety by research assistants working independently. This was followed by a meeting to discuss emergent themes. A preliminary set of themes and their definitions was set, and the first five first-year interviews were coded independently. Following this initial coding, our research team met again to discuss and resolve any differences. This process was repeated four times, with a coding meeting held for the remaining six first-year interviews, the mentor interviews, the focus group interviews and finally the instructor interviews.

After all interviews had been coded, three theme charts were created (first-year chart, mentor chart and instructor chart). Quotes selected during the coding phase were placed under the appropriate theme category in the chart. The main theme categories of each chart were then analyzed and re-organized into sub-themes (see Appendix B). Following the initial analysis, each theme chart was circulated electronically

within the research team for review, comments and discussion. Final adjustments to the theme categories were then made.

Findings

This section will answer each of the aforementioned research questions, with answers for questions 2, 3 and 4 being derived from the qualitative data. The interview and focus group data were synthesized into six tables in Appendix B, with the research team identifying both general themes and subtopics to support each of these questions. A selection of quotes is included to support the themes and is referenced frequently throughout the report of the findings.

Overall, the data show that most first-year students were generally positive about having a mentor and benefitted in some way from the experience. Additionally, the mentors themselves received many positive benefits from the self-reflective process in which they participated. Instructors observed the mentors' evolution and commented on the overall impact of the FASSMP on pedagogy, relational connections and departmental cohesion. Whether it helped with academic success, transition into university, or created friendships and connections among students and mentors, the majority of participants indicated that mentors positively impacted their student experience.

Research Question 1

How has FASSMP changed first-year retention rates?

For a student to be considered retained, they must be enrolled at the University of Windsor for two consecutive fall semesters. To address our first research question, we looked at all first-year students, whether full- or part-time, who were enrolled in a mentored FASS course at any time between fall 2008 and fall 2012. We compared these numbers to the general enrolment numbers of first-year students in other, non-participating FASS courses.

We found that the retention rates for the mentored courses were consistently higher across the years when compared to the overall FASS rates (Table 1). It is important to note that this difference may be due in part to the fact that the number of students included in mentored courses was smaller than the number of students in the non-participating classes, so each retained student accounts for a higher proportion of the total. However, the large and consistent difference in rates suggests that students in courses with a mentor integrated are more likely to persist in their studies. The results from this study match the results from preliminary studies that indicated that including a mentorship component in first-year classes through the University of Windsor FASSMP is associated with significantly higher student retention rates in first and subsequent years (Pugliese et al., 2012).

Table 1: FASS Retention Rates for First-Year Students, both Part-Time and Full-Time

Semester	Non-mentor class	Mentored class
Fall 2008	76.3%	87.8%
Fall 2009	73.3%	86.4%
Fall 2010	71.8%	83.2%
Fall 2011	72.0%	80.6%
Fall 2012	72.1%	82.8%

Research Question 2

How does the FASSMP influence the perceived student experience within the classroom?

Quantitative Data

The intention with the CLASSE survey was to see whether students who had mentors with them in the classroom would respond to general CLASSE questions differently from students who had no connection with a mentor. The goal was not to prove the effectiveness of the FASSMP using CLASSE but instead to provide evidence to suggest that students connected with the FASSMP would have higher overall classroom engagement scores than the average CLASSE respondent in the faculty.

A series of t-tests were performed to determine the effect of the mentor experience on student engagement as measured by the CLASSE survey.[4] Many of the questions on which students in mentored classes scored higher were closely linked with activities led by the mentors. CLASSE items were higher for first-year students who:

- reported greater participation in the mentor-led breakout sessions and activities (Q39)
- were more comfortable interacting with their mentor (Q40)
- found their mentor to be very helpful in aiding their transition to the university (Q41)
- found mentor-led activities to be very helpful to their ability to understand course material (Q42)
- consulted with their mentors multiple times on academic issues (Q43)
- felt that their experiences with their mentors was very helpful to being a good student (Q45)
- were more motivated by the mentor experience (Q46)

4 See Appendix B: CLASSE Survey – Mentor-Specific Questions.

Students who credited the activities and strategies of their mentors for providing them with a better understanding of course material and those who frequently took part in mentor-led breakout sessions were significantly more likely ($p<.001$) to have higher scores on the CLASSE engagement activities than those who did not. A similar positive result was found for students who reported that having a mentor was motivating and helped them to be a good student. These students were significantly ($p<.001$) more engaged than those who did not view the mentor experience so positively. Finally, students in the mentored classes who felt that their mentor had been very helpful in their transition to university were significantly more likely ($p<.001$) to score higher on the CLASSE engagement measures. These findings suggest that the actions and behaviours of the mentors are key to student engagement.

Future research could allow more rigorous conclusions to be drawn about the effect of mentors on student engagement in the classroom by administering the CLASSE instrument to two sections of the same course, with one section being mentored and the other not. Ideally, the two sections would be taught by the same instructor.

Qualitative Data

Data collected from all three participants groups reveal the way in which the FASSMP has a positive impact on both the academic and interpersonal experiences of first-year students in the classroom.

Theme 1: Academic Impact

Academic impact can be categorized into the following sub-topics:

- Practical academic advice
- Constructive feedback
- Content-specific learning
- Critical thinking skills
- Increased engagement and participation
- Accessibility and approachability for assistance

The range and scope of the mentors' effect on the first-year student academic experience is very significant. Mentors have the task of helping students navigate the first-year experience. They assist in bridging gaps that the professor is sometimes unable to address, such as studying for midterm exams, essay writing support and keeping up with class content. Many first-year students reported feeling that mentors were accessible and made them feel comfortable, often breaking down the barriers that may exist within the professor-student relationship.[5] This allowed mentors to provide practical advice, give constructive feedback

5 Appendix C, Table 1.

on how to improve on course assignments, as well as address any content-specific questions. Additionally, first-year students reported increased engagement within the classroom, noting an increase in understanding of the course material.[6]

The interviews with mentors corroborated these findings. An increase in pedagogical connections and critical thinking capacity emerged as a prominent finding, as both mentors and first-year students confirmed that the FASSMP provided a rich learning experience that allowed for innovative teaching approaches. The interviews with the course instructors further elaborated on this point, with one professor summarizing it this way:

> They [the mentors] are hitting it [course content] in different ways pedagogically and I know this just intuitively, the more different ways you hit something, the better it is retained. … that's just in any class, having somebody else teach a similar thing in a different way is going to make your retention just much higher.[7]

This sentiment was expressed by all three participant groups. Mentors had the unique ability to employ different learning techniques through their specialized breakout sessions that were able to increase and stimulate the first-year students' content knowledge. They also had a lasting impact beyond the classroom by helping students refine their academic skills.

Theme 2: Interpersonal Skills and Social Connections

The interviews from all three participant groups reported an increase in both interpersonal skills and social connections. They can be categorized as follows:

1) Positive work environment
2) Increase in social connections

The FASSMP provides first-year students with a mechanism to meet and interact with other students through the structured breakout sessions, an opportunity that students typically do not have within a university classroom. It is clear that this experience allowed first-year students to develop relationships, translating into a more positive and open work environment. Professors observed this finding, noting that these connections seemingly reduced the isolation that often puts students at risk of achieving poor academic results or even dropping the course entirely. In addition to the academic impact, this sense of connection provides students with the opportunity to collaborate and learn from each other, an experience that would not typically occur naturally in a lecture-style class.

6 Appendix C, Table 1.
7 Appendix C, Table 3.

It is clear that having an undergraduate mentor who is available to provide assistance and instruct first-year students in fundamentally different ways than the professor contributes to a greater connection to both the course and to one another in the classroom. Overall, the data show that most first-year students were generally positive about having a mentor and described benefiting in some way from the experience. Whether the mentor helped with academic success, the transition into university, or the creation of friendships and connections among students in first-year classes, many students indicated that mentors positively impacted their student experience.

Research Question 3

How does the FASSMP experience impact mentors?

To answer this research question, data from both the mentor and instructor focus groups are utilized. In addition to this, a survey was conducted with past mentors who participated in the FASSMP between 2005 and 2010 to understand if there was any significant impact after they left the academic setting. Here, the lasting impact of the FASSMP is the most prominent finding. All three participants groups reported being aware of an increase in personal growth, as well as an increase in interpersonal skills and social connections as a result of their participation in the mentorship program. This is significant as it suggests that the FASSMP is leaving a lasting mark on mentors. However, the data reveal that the impact is more important than anticipated.

Theme 1: Personal Growth

Mentors reported personal growth in several areas as well as the development of new skills. The major sub-themes are categorized as follows:

1) Leadership skills
2) Presentation skills
3) Organizational skills
4) Study and learning skills
5) Critical thinking skills
6) Facilitation of learning
7) Self-esteem and self-confidence
8) Transferrable skills
9) Community contribution

These topics emerged through mentor and instructor interviews. Both groups observed that the practicum component of the mentorship program and the self-reflective process that accompanies it led to personal growth in mentors. As mentors were required to create, lead and report on breakout sessions, they noticed a substantial increase in their abilities surrounding these tasks. Instructors corroborated these findings, observing a noticeable transformation of many mentors throughout the semester. Past mentors also

corroborated these findings: nearly 75% indicated that the FASSMP experience helped them become a better student and 44% indicated significantly higher academic motivation.[8] Both perceived and actual changes occurred, with both mentors and instructors reporting that the experience augmented their self-confidence, translating into greater effectiveness within the first-year classroom. For example, one mentor noted:

> I've gained a lot of more confidence in my own abilities. … I find it very difficult to trust myself and my own abilities. I did while in school, but I had this idea that it was just a fluke and I was just lucky I was good at writing essays and it had nothing to do with my own abilities. Through mentorship [FASSMP] I started seeing myself as a successful person, as a good student, as somebody is capable, somebody who had skills and talents. That really boosted my confidence in my own abilities.[9]

Even though mentors were working in different settings across various disciplines, the common responsibility to instruct students impacted their development. Mentors did not begin the course as 'experts', but grew their skills and developed existing ones throughout the course of the program.

Theme 2: Interpersonal Skills and Social Connections

There was also an observable increase in mentors' interpersonal skills and social connections. This was similar to the first-year students' experience. Mentors and instructors perceived that the program cultivated healthy relationships between mentors, who were required to work collaboratively both in the FASSMP class and the first-year breakout sessions. Trust and friendship developed, as mentors learned to relate and engage with others who were different from them. One mentor commented:

> I remember one activity was list your hope, fear and expectation. You had to do that on the first day of class, you're sitting with a bunch of strangers and you're sitting there saying a hope, a fear, an expectation. You've already let these people know more about you in one hour than you may have with anybody else that you meet in university. And then throughout the semester we are constantly doing these activities where we have to say how we feel, or express how something went, so I think that's why the bond is so different between mentors.

In addition, past mentor survey data also indicated an increase in engagement with fellow classmates.[10] Professors also observed this heightened interaction between mentors. Both groups noted that through interacting with other students outside their disciplines, mentors developed positive social connections. Past mentors were in agreement, with more than 80% responding that the FASSMP had helped them develop social relationships.[11]

8 See Appendix D, questions 4 and 5.
9 See Appendix C, Table 2.
10 See Appendix D, Question 1.
11 See Appendix D, Question 3.

Both the quantity and intensity of the interview responses relating to the mentors' personal growth and increase in positive social interactions point to a significant change in both areas. It is clear that the impact of the FASSMP extends beyond the first-year classroom to affect the undergraduate mentors themselves.

Research Question 4

How do instructors perceive the effectiveness and/or implementation of FASSMP?

The data collected from the instructors' interviews provide another perspective on the FASSMP's overall impact in the classroom, on students and on the greater university community. These interview questions were designed to shed light on both the benefits and challenges instructors faced, as well as the impact on their own pedagogical styles. Findings were generally positive and consistent with both the first-year student and mentors' interviews.

Theme 1: Academic Impact

Four topics emerged to describe the academic impact of the FASSMP:

1) Student engagement
2) Approachability of mentors
3) Increased connection to students
4) Increased pedagogical connections
5) Assessment

The implementation of the FASSMP into the instructors' classroom time increased the level of student participation. The professors suggested that the open atmosphere created by mentorship breakout sessions encouraged this participation, something they would not have been able to achieve on their own accord. The approachability of mentors contributed to this phenomenon, as first-year students were typically more open with the mentors, who were neither an authority figure nor responsible for assessment. One instructor articulated it as follows:

> I just feel the tension and atmosphere of the breakout group change when I am within earshot. They are conscious that I may hear what they will say and I may judge them. … I think it is just an important moment that they have talking to each other each other and talk about what is going on in class in this very different kind of discourse.[12]

Instructors also noted that giving mentors the time and space to work with the first-year students in smaller groups allowed them to observe their students engaging with the course content in innovative ways.

12 See Appendix C, Table 3.

Observing the way in which mentors operates sometimes affected the instructor's own teaching style, assessment practices or curriculum development. The instructors noted that the presence of mentors provided an effective feedback mechanism, as mentors were able to report to the professors their observations of student learning, shaping the development of the class to better suit the students' learning needs. For example, one instructor reported having a better sense of the "pulse of the room" through the mentors, helping them to make better pedagogical decisions based on the breakout sessions.[13]

Theme 2: Institutional Impact

The addition of mentors allowed instructors to observe departmental changes that extended beyond the classroom:

1. Increased engagement between professors and mentors
2. Mentors as resource for first-year students
3. Increased mentor visibility and involvement

Instructors noted that many mentors became more connected with peers and professors in their respective departments. This led to increased involvement in various events, such as open house recruitment, fall orientation, high school days and other department specific events. The mentors created a non-threatening space outside of the classroom that encouraged other students to become more active in the university community. For example, one group of mentors was motivated by their course instructor to create a departmental student group.

Generally, the incorporation of mentors was seen by instructors as having a positive impacts on departmental cohesion.

Challenges

Although the findings generally reported a positive impact of FASSMP on the various participants, it is important to account for the program's challenges, especially when making recommendations for growth and development. These findings largely pertain to various elements of the FASSMP's structure and the mentors' role. Notably, two particular disciplines experienced substantial challenges due to structure and size of breakout sessions.

13 See Appendix C, Table 3.

Challenge 1: Structural Challenges

The challenges originating from the FASSMP's structure are categorized as follows:

1) Time constraints
2) Need for structured connection between instructors and mentors
3) Succession and sustainability of FASSMP with first-year classes

Time constraints were a universally acknowledged challenge within the FASSMP. At all levels, first-year students, mentors and instructors alike noted the difficulties that arose when breakout sessions were either too short or too long. Mentors are given a portion of classroom time in which to complete a planned lesson that complements the course and achieves an identified learning goal. However, it was often noted that issues such as the length of lectures (whether too long or too short) would leave mentors unable to complete their planned activity. Although this finding was known to the FASSMP course instructors, who helped mentors to overcome these challenges, the consistent data regarding this topic confirm how critical timing is when it comes to breakout activities. Instructors were the ones in charge of the classroom and therefore had a different perspective on the time constraints. For instance, they noted that finding a balance between lecture time and the time allocated to breakout sessions required them to rethink the structure of their classes.[14]

Another challenge is centered on the lack of structured time for instructors to discuss issues with mentors regarding the form and function of class *outside* of class time. Both mentors and instructors articulated this need, noting that without a formal mechanism to discuss classroom issues, some things would fall through the cracks. One instructor described it like this:

> I think if this was to continue, the challenge would be that extra time the instructors need to allocate for discuss[ing] the issues with mentors. … The instructor needs to spend time with mentors at least once a week or every other week, discussing the key terms and concepts so they know and share those with the students consistently and accurately. Although perhaps after a couple of times of meetings, if time arises, not necessarily all the time, but to see if there is a problem that the mentors themselves perceive that need to be addressed.[15]

Both educational and relational issues are raised in this statement, pointing to the need for continuity between instructors and mentors, who were at times encouraged to see themselves as co-instructors, as they were partially responsible for content delivery as part of their academic support.

14 See Appendix C, Table 3.
15 See Appendix C, Table 3.

Professors raised concerns about the continuation of the program: what would happen to the FASSMP within their specific department if they were unable to teach the first-year course? The continuation of the FASSMP was seen as a challenge to the future of the program, as interviewed instructors inherently understood its value to the student experience but were unsure if other instructors in their departments had the same buy-in.

> I worry that outside of [FASSMP instructor] and myself [and sessional colleague who teaches first-year students in other courses], faculty members without direct contact with mentors and mentorship do not fully understand this program.[16]

This finding is significant, as instructors observe first-hand the benefits of the FASSMP while at the same time sharing a concern for its continuation if they were not the primary instructor. Instructors also noted the importance of recruiting sufficient numbers of strong mentors to the FASSMP, an additional challenge to the programs' sustainability. These issues need to be addressed within the greater department, which is outside of the FASSMP's purview.

Challenge 2: Role of the Mentor

The other thematic challenge identified by all three participant groups related to mentors' role and responsibilities. They are classified into four topics:

1) Lack of preparation, leadership and organization from mentors
2) Confusion about mentors' role
3) Confusion about degree of help needed
4) Potential for lack of participation from first-year students

Unfortunately, some mentors were ill-prepared for their breakouts sessions, negatively impacting the first-year student experience. The challenge of mentors learning and practicing at the same time affected a minority of students. Instructors noted that some mentors were more prepared than others to facilitate their breakouts.[17]

A larger, systemic challenge was the confusion of the mentors' role in relation to both the GAs and TAs present in courses.[18] All three participant groups noted this difficulty, with some questioning whether the role could have been incorporated under the GAs/TAs' responsibilities. This finding is linked to both the uniqueness and novelty of the FASSMP (as indicated in the review of the academic literature), as it is fairly uncommon to have an unpaid, academic mentorship model embedded within university classrooms. The

16 See Appendix C, Table 3.
17 See Appendix C, Table 3.
18 See Appendix A, Figure 2 for differences in mentor and GA/TA roles.

misinterpretation of the mentors' role led to confusion regarding the level and type of support the mentors were expected to provide. While not responsible for assessment, certain situations would arise that would challenge the mentors' level of authority. An example noted by one of the instructors illustrates this dilemma:

> That's the main difficulty, is just participation and then how that happens when the [breakout] group is working their butts off and one person is not doing anything. And he is going to get the same mark as everybody else. The mentor knows he is not doing anything. Everyone knows he's not doing anything. What does the mentor do? What is the role of the mentor in that situation? Because the students want the mentor to be "tough guy." I think they want the mentor to be tough with this person. And you know what is the role of the mentor in that situation?[19]

This situation is related to the lack of participation on the part of the first-year students. Although mentors were trained in engagement techniques and underwent a self-reflective process to help students think critically about course material, there were still students who were uninterested in participating. This was noted across all three participants groups and posed problems to the both the flow and effectiveness of the breakout sessions. It is important to note that even with this challenge, most FASSMP participants still felt overwhelmingly that the impact on engagement was substantial and that this issue was not the fault of the mentorship program but of the educational system as a whole.[20]

Challenge 3: Differences across Practicum Courses

The greatest challenges were mentioned by participants who were associated with the two courses that were incorporating mentors for the first time during the study period.[21] The two findings noted by all three participants were:

1) Class size affecting the mentor-student ratio
2) Lab structure instead of classroom structure

Integrating mentors into the lab component of the course rather than the lectures meant that mentors would not be paired with course instructors but instead with the GAs, who were responsible for leading the labs. Each lab had approximately 60 students, which was coupled with an unexpectedly low mentor enrolment for both of these disciplines. This translated into an inconsistent number of mentors per lab, generating a mentor-to-student ratio of between 1:20 and 1:60. The findings reveal a general sense of frustration as the challenges this structure posed. There were no small group breakout sessions and mentors had to instruct rather than facilitate activities. This structure did not allow for the type of learning that

19 See Appendix C, Table 3.
20 See Appendix C, Table 3.
21 See Appendix A, Figure 1 for differences between courses.

occurred in the other FASSMP courses, and the difference between the role of the mentors and those of the graduate assistants was unclear. This changed the dynamics and did not allow for consistent interaction with mentors and first-year students in the way the program has typically encouraged. These findings will be considered in future iterations of the program, as the FASSMP continues to grow within the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences.

Discussion and Research Limitations

Overall, the findings point to both an academic and relational impact for first-year students, mentors and instructors alike. The two initial institutional goals of the FASSMP were to increase first-year retention rates and enhance the first-year experience. The results of this study indicate that not only were these goals met, but they were also surpassed when accounting for the significant positive impact on the mentors themselves.

Moreover, findings throughout demonstrate that when mentors have a strong sense of affiliation to the university through specific classroom and instructor relationships, they feel a greater sense of ownership and contribute in ways that they might not otherwise. Embedding an academic mentorship model into departments (instead of simply integrating it as a student service) thus has the potential to increase student engagement within the classroom and at the departmental level.

It is our hope that these findings will spark additional research and reflection. In particular, the impact of a centralized mentorship program on mentors is a subject that merits further attention. Questions for further research in this direction could include whether mentors' grade point averages increased after their experiences. Another subject worth further study includes the impact of mentorship on specific departments: is there a greater sense of departmental community; do professors in the department notice a difference?; do mentors inspire professors to alter their teaching methods?

Lastly, it would be interesting to evaluate the FASSMP in the future and analyze techniques departments use to create buy-in. Without institutional buy-in, such a program cannot be sustainable. Likewise, learning communities and networks must be nourished and sustained with each new generation of mentors and mentees. It would thus be fascinating to study whether or not generations of students who have been mentored are more likely to enroll in Mentorship and Learning.

Recommendations

These findings inform several best practices for the development and implementation of an academic mentorship program in first-year classes.

- Create an environment that encourages communication between all parties and allows for healthy interactions in both the first-year classroom and the FASSMP classroom.

With all three participant groups noting significant academic impact and increased student engagement, the FASSMP recognizes the importance of a safe space in which mentors and students can learn and grow. Creating a community where learners can physically gather to engage and interact with limited distraction is central to the program's overall success. Our findings suggest that equipping mentors with resources and opportunities to assemble a group of students and focus on a given task (i.e., breakout sessions) can inspire critical thinking and self-reflection at all levels. Doing so can also generate a positive learning environment for recipients (the first-year students), contributors (the mentors) and observers (the instructors).

- Ensure that there is a clear understanding of the roles and responsibilities of student mentors in the classroom.

Establishing a clear understanding of how roles work is critical to building a strong foundation from which to grow. As findings demonstrate, confusion in this regard was typical at the outset; however, regular demonstration and communication of the mentor role will help all parties understand and accept the benefits of the program.

- Create opportunities to develop professional relationships between instructors and mentors by ensuring ongoing dialogue via structured communication mechanisms.

These findings point to the importance of deliberately designing and creating opportunities for mentors to learn how to communicate professionally with their instructors so that they may become skilled at engaging in dialogue using vocabulary that supports effective and meaningful teaching and learning practises. This is shown to contribute to the mentors' growth and confidence as they engage in dialogue concerning pedagogy that is not typically accessible to undergraduate students. Additionally, it will create the space needed by instructors to formally communicate with mentors regarding course content and provide the direction that was seen as critical to the continuation of the program.

- Develop a plan to promote interest, investment and involvement in the mentorship program within university departments.

Growing and developing a sustainable program is an on-going process for the FASSMP, as it is necessary to preserve the integrity of the program while expanding and recruiting suitable mentors and faculty. It is important to gather support from senior administration within departments by highlighting the significant impact that a program like the FASSMP has or could have on the student experience. Providing evidence describing the benefits of student mentorship in higher education is necessary, but we have discovered that conversations and presentations also help to garner support and investment. Piloting the program gives data to show and share with others. The FASSMP continues to investigate ways to further this investment.

Summary and Conclusion

The findings from the qualitative data from all three participant groups indicate that mentors generally had a positive impact on the student experience within the classroom. Participants reported a richer learning environment, with increased pedagogical connections due to the mentor-led breakout groups. Not only did these breakout sessions provide additional peer support within an academic setting, they connected students to the course content in innovative ways. Additionally, all three participant groups noted an increase in social connections, as mentors were able to bridge the professor-student divide successfully. The implications of this finding are significant as universities endeavour to increase retention rates for first-year students. Additional and targeted research could be conducted to better understand how mentors bridge this gap, as our findings were aimed at determining the effect on the student experience.

While the original intent of the program was to use mentors to help first-year students transitioning from high school, the data overwhelmingly indicate the significant impact of the FASSMP on the mentors themselves. Mentors reported feeling a sense of personal growth, as weekly group facilitation helped them develop a host of skills. 78% of past mentors responded that they had either often or very often used the skills they gained while participating in the FASSMP. Additional research in this area would be beneficial to determining how these skills transfer and what the impact on mentors' professional careers beyond university might be.

Lastly, the instructors found that the FASSMP positively impacted the classroom by creating a positive, engaging and innovative learning environment for first-year students. The findings also reveal that mentors positively impacted their own teaching practises, leading instructors to rethink and alter their course development and assessment techniques. Lastly, instructors reported wider impact, with the benefits of the FASSMP reaching beyond the classroom into the department as a whole. This would be an area of additional research, in which introducing mentors to a department could be observed to determine how mentors facilitate greater departmental unity and relationships.

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