Higher Education
Quality Council
of Ontario

Conseil ontarien
de la qualité de
l'enseignement supérieur

An Agency of the Government of Ontario

Stakeholder Summary

Study examines Windsor mentorship program's impact on student retention

A peer mentorship program at the University of Windsor has a positive impact on first-year students as well as senior student mentors, according to a new report from the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO).

Established in 2005 to improve enrolment and retention by enhancing the first-year experience, the program in the university's Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences integrates peer mentors into first-year foundation courses in five academic departments.

Project description

Evaluating the Effects of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences Mentor Program explored the program's impact on first-year student retention rates and perceptions of student experience. The study also examined impacts on mentors and instructor perceptions about the program's effectiveness.

The study used the Classroom Survey of Student Engagement – an adaptation of the National Survey of Student Engagement – as well as focus groups, interviews and institutional data on retention. Participants included more than 225 first-year students, 24 student mentors, 63 past mentors and five course instructors from the departments of drama, history, political science, psychology and sociology. All data were collected in the fall and winter semesters of the 2011-2012 academic year.

Findings

The study found a positive relationship between the mentorship program and retention rates from first to second year, based on comparisons with general first-year enrolments. Retention rates for the mentored courses were consistently higher across the years examined.

The qualitative data from students, mentors and instructors indicated that mentors generally had a positive impact on the student experience within the classroom. Participants reported a richer learning environment, with increased engagement due to the mentor-led breakout groups. All three participant groups noted an increase in social connections.

Mentors reported feeling a sense of personal growth, as weekly group facilitation helped them develop a host of skills. More than three-fourths of past mentors said they had either often or very often used the skills they gained while participating in the mentorship program.

Instructors said that the program created a positive, engaging and innovative learning environment for first-year students. They noted that mentors also had a positive impact on teaching practises, leading instructors to rethink and alter their course development and assessment techniques.

Higher Education
Quality Council
of Ontario

Conseil ontarien
de la qualité de
l'enseignement supérieur

An Agency of the Government of Ontario

Recommendations

The authors recommend a clear understanding of the roles and responsibilities of student mentors in the classroom and open dialogue that creates opportunities to develop professional relationships between instructors and mentors. The authors also encourage planning to promote interest, investment and involvement in the mentorship program within university departments.

"Creating a community where learners can physically gather to engage and interact with limited distraction is central to the program's overall success," the authors note. "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)."

Additional research could explore the program's impact on mentors' professional careers beyond university as well the ways in which mentors facilitate greater departmental unity and relationships.

Other HEQCO studies that examine peer-assisted learning were conducted at the University of Guelph, Queen's University and Carleton University.

Authors of *Evaluating the Effects of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences Mentor Program* are Tina Pugliese, Tamsin Bolton, Giavana Jones, Giovanna Roma, Sarah Cipkar and Ryan Rabie, University of Windsor.