

Pack Peers Make a Mentoring Difference

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Introduction/Need for Innovation

Transitioning to college can be an intimidating experience for many first year and community college students. Challenges can present themselves in a variety of forms - academic, personal, or social - and can include obstacles such as how to study effectively, navigating campus, and meeting new people (Robinson, 2018). Many entering agricultural education students come from towns with populations that are a fraction of the size of the student population at NC State University.

Similar to other institutions, NC State University holds a large “Welcome Week” for students including a new student convocation, student involvement fair, college-specific meet and greets, and recreational activities. However, the size of the crowd at these large events often does not encourage personal relationship building and may leave students feeling lonely and overwhelmed. In an attempt to combat this isolation and aid students in their transition to NC State University, Pack Peers – Peer Mentor Program was started in 2018. All incoming first year students in agricultural education and agricultural science majors are paired with an upperclassman to help with those often difficult, first few weeks on campus.

How it Works

An undergraduate student assistant was responsible for the development, implementation, and coordination of the Pack Peers program. Over the summer, the program coordinator obtained a list of incoming students; this list was used to determine the number of upperclassmen needed to serve as peer mentors. Typically, there are approximately 60 students enrolling in the department, so at least 30 upperclassmen were needed so that no one person has more than two Pack Peers.

In order to recruit upperclassmen to serve as peer mentors, a survey was created and sent to all current students explaining the program and asking for their participation. Students interested in serving as a Pack Peer completed a survey with general information about themselves and their interests. An email and questionnaire was also sent to incoming students to introduce the Pack Peers program, collect background information, and gather data regarding concerns about starting at NC State University. Responses were used to pair students based on at least one common interest. Incoming students who did not complete the survey still were paired with a Pack Peer.

After pairings were completed, each upperclassman serving as a Pack Peer mentor received a notification with the name and contact information with their incoming Pack Peer

mentee, as well as a reason for the pairing. Each Pack Peer mentor was provided a sample email that could be used in the initial contact of their Peer. Pack Peer mentors were encouraged to meet with their mentee on campus and assist them in walking out their class schedule. Mentors personally invited their mentees to attend the departmental welcome back event and the first departmental club meeting of the year. Beyond this initial meeting, the mentee/mentee pair determined how their mentoring relationship would continue. The goal of the Pack Peer program was to help incoming students establish a connection with at least one departmental student who could serve as a sounding board and help navigate the challenges of the first semester of college.

Results to Date

The Pack Peer program was introduced in Fall 2018 and continued in Fall 2019. One hundred and twenty students entering the Department of Agricultural and Human Sciences have had the opportunity to participate in the program. Approximately 45 upperclassmen volunteered to serve as mentors, with about 15 students who have served as mentors for two years in a row. An estimated 60-70% of new students have utilized their Pack Peer and 20% of former freshman/transfer students who initially participated as mentees have returned to serve as a mentor. The department plans to continue offering the Pack Peers program in the future.

Advice to Others

For other departments that would like to replicate the Pack Peers program, it is recommended to pair each entering student with a mentor even if they do not indicate initial interest. From the experience at NC State University, it was discovered that many incoming students are not in the habit of checking email on a daily basis and may miss the recruitment email and interest survey until right before they come to campus. Having the mentor/mentee pairs already established before welcome week activities allows new students to have a point of contact for questions or concerns. Additionally, some peer mentors may need reassurance if their Pack Peer is not very responsive or does not want to participate in mentoring activities. A few of the mentors expressed concern about the lack of interaction with their peers, but were reminded that some incoming students are more independent than others.

Cost/Resources Needed

Access to incoming students' contact information is imperative to the success of this program. The use of Google Suite or utilization of Google Forms is also very helpful for creating the questionnaires for incoming and upperclassmen Pack Peers. It is time consuming to match Pack Peers as an estimated 15 hours was spent in creating the matching mentors and mentees. However, making sure each pairing has a common interest is important in helping to build the initial mentoring relationship.

References

Robinson, D. (2018). *Perceptions of first-year college students: The impact of peer mentors on student success* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Southern Connecticut State University, New Haven, CT.