

Supporting International Graduate Students Through Participation in Graduate Peer Mentoring Programs

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Introduction/Need for Idea

Balancing home, work, and academic demands can be challenging for graduate students returning to school after many years in a professional career. To assist in balancing and adjusting to student life, these graduate students need support systems that positively impact their abilities to succeed. Mentoring has been suggested as an effective strategy to address these issues (Kramer et al., 2018). According to Kramer et al. (2018), mentoring is a peer learning technique based on building a humanistic caring relationship between two people in the same place in which knowledge, support, and skills are exchanged with an emphasis on holistically supporting the beginner. A student can simultaneously be both a recipient and a provider, a leader, and a follower, a teacher and a learner, and a mentor and a mentee through mentorship, which builds a caring relationship and forms a community of learners. Through interactions and partnerships, peer mentoring enables the mentor and mentee to share activities, learn from one another, and develop a support network (Anderson & Watkins, 2018). It offers the mentee an opportunity to have a head start on the expected realities and also helps the mentor gain more knowledge and boost their self-confidence as well as gain a needed skillset for future careers in academia. Several studies (Nora & Crisp, 2007; P-Sontag et al., 2007) have reported that mentors need to be emotionally supportive, knowledgeable in their respective fields, role models, and fully aware of the program's goals to effectively support a mentee. In addition, peer mentorship programs can improve students' performance as well as retention rates and help students meet their academic needs (Crisp & Cruz, 2009); it builds caring relationships that stimulate higher self-awareness, knowledge, empathy, honesty, trust, humility, hope, and courage (Kramer et al., 2018). Further, these relationships extend beyond the goals of learning and skill development. And can be transformative since they are a developmental growth process that will affect participants' capacity to care for others in the future (Kramer et al., 2018).

While NC State University housed this program, our department had not previously participated. With an increase in international students and an increased need for mental health support, departmental graduate students were encouraged to apply and participate in the program to allow increased mentorship for our new graduate students who previously relied on advisors only.

How It Works/Methodology/Program Phases/Steps

Doctoral students interested in participating in the graduate peer mentorship program (GPMP) at NC State University must apply by completing the application form and submitting their resumes for consideration by their respective colleges. Each department is able to submit a nominee who will apply to participate in this program. Graduate peer mentors (GPM) are prepared to guide others after being admitted into the program and attending approximately 30 hours of virtual and in-person mentorship training before serving as peer mentors in their department or program for the academic year. The mentor and the mentee sign a formal document outlining their expectations from the mentoring relationship. They agree on when and how to meet but allow flexibility to accommodate unforeseen challenges that may not wait until the scheduled meeting dates. The mentors create an atmosphere where their mentees set realistic goals, develop successful behaviors, and feel psychologically supported. GPMs explore and recommend university and other resources relevant to their well-being and academic success. Student mentors are mentored by two faculty members who counsel and provide practical support, track the progress of the GPMs and mentors, and provide resources to

facilitate the GPMs' meetings with their mentees.

Results to Date/Implications

Volunteer mentors receive peer mentoring training, develop and strengthen connections with students inside and across departments, and contribute to the well-being of their peers. In the Agricultural and Human Sciences Department at NC State University, two students enrolled as mentees in the mentorship program and stayed with their mentor until the end of the academic session. They reported that the program contributed to their success in the academic year. One student said, "My mentor gave me excellent study tips, which increased my confidence in my abilities to pass my classes. We could discuss subjects I was hesitant to discuss with a professor or advisor." Another student also shared their experience; "as a mentor, the GPMP had an impact on my life; participating in the program further strengthened my talents and thereby helped change the lives of others. This program's mentoring skills expanded my knowledge of mentoring roles and responsibilities through training sessions, interacting with fellow students, attending mentoring retreats, and partnering with faculty to build an initiative for graduate students within my department and at the college level."

Future Plans/Advice to Others

Graduate students should not wait until they have academic challenges to enroll in the GPMP; instead, they should enroll at the commencement of their academic programs. More students should volunteer to serve as mentors because the experience will increase their capacity and help them develop crucial career skills. Communication is essential; it should be open and flexible so that neither party becomes overburdened. The mentor-mentee load could be a future challenge for the program. As more mentees join the program, the demand for mentors grows, which can strain the mentors' academic work-life balance. It is recommended that a mentor have no more than three mentees at a time. Furthermore, peer mentoring should not be an added-on activity; it should be embedded into the graduate school program. Within our department, the GPMP was instrumental in assisting two new international students to become acclimated to the university, and new international students should be encouraged to participate as a mentee and then hopefully will agree to serve as a mentor in the future. This was the first time our department had participated in the program, and quickly realized that participation in the program greatly impacted the graduate student cohort and community.

Costs/Resources Needed

The GPMP necessitates time for the GPMs, program leaders, and GPM advisors/principal investigators (PIs). Advisors/PIs are impacted when their students are required to take time away from their departmental responsibilities to attend training organized by the GPMP. The program leaders have to schedule meetings and training sessions and source external personnel to hone the mentoring skills of the GPMs. Additionally, the GPMs are compensated with an annual stipend for their effort. Therefore, institutions of higher learning need to cater to the graduate students' general well-being and academic success by allocating part of their budget to graduate peer mentoring programs.

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