

**Interview an Upperclassman:
The Value of Peer Mentorship to First-Year Students in an Orientation Course**

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Introduction/Need for Innovation

First year students often experience difficulty transitioning to college academically, socially, and personally (Robinson, 2018). Both hierarchical and peer mentoring are considered best practice strategies for student success (Collier, 2017). However, because role modeling is present and students perceive their peers as more credible, peer mentoring may be a more effective strategy in mentoring undergraduate students (Collier, 2017). Research from Shin et al. (2017) also shows that endorsement of course material from a student's peer is more essential to motivation than an instructor's endorsement.

At NC State University, first-year students in the Department of Agricultural and Human Sciences are required to take an orientation course designed to help acclimate them to the university and department. Topics discussed in this course include academic policies and planning, goal setting, career opportunities within students' majors, time management, and many other skills essential to success at NC State. To promote the importance of peer mentoring relationships and to reinforce concepts taught by the course instructor, an Interview an Upperclassman Assignment was developed and implemented for students to complete in AEE 103: Foundations of Agricultural and Extension Education at NC State University.

How it Works

Prior to the start of the semester, the instructor of the course sends an email to faculty in the department requesting nominations of worthy upperclassmen to serve as peer mentors for this project. It is explained that the assignment is designed for students in the course to build a network within the department and learn from their peers about how to be successful within the department.

Once nominations have been collected, nominated upperclassmen are informed of their nomination through email. They are congratulated and asked if they are willing to be interviewed by a first-year student in AEE 103: Foundations of Agricultural and Extension Education. It is explained that they would be committing to a thirty-minute interview where first-year students will ask questions related to time management, student involvement, class recommendations, and more. If the nominated upperclassmen are willing to participate, they are asked to fill out a Google Form with their contact information for the incoming students.

Around the third week of classes, students in AEE 103: Foundations of Agricultural and Extension Education are assigned the "Interview an Upperclassman," assignment. First year students are told to sign up for an upperclassman to interview on a Google Sheet. It is explained that the assignment is not due until closer to the end of the semester, but they are challenged to reach out to their Upperclassman sooner rather than later so they can coordinate a time to meet. They are told this interview must be completed in-person and there is a list of required questions on the class Moodle page. These questions included questions about their favorite part of being a student in our department, favorite courses, how they managed their time, organizations they are involved with, and their great lesson learned at NC State. Additionally, they are expected to come

up with three questions of their own and write a reflection on their interview experience. Three weeks before the end of the semester, students will turn in this assignment. The assignment makes up 10% of their final grade.

Results to Date

Ninety students have completed the “Interview an Upperclassman,” assignment in the Fall of 2022 and the Fall of 2023. Numerous peer-mentor relationships were established through this assignment. Through collected reflections on the assignment, an estimated 95% of first-year students said they found the advice of their assigned upperclassman valuable and intended to implement some of their advice in the future.

These are some quotes pulled from student reflections on the impact of the assignment:

- “It was very inspirational to hear from someone who faced a lot of the same obstacles I am right now. It seems that many freshmen go through the same struggles but it is always good to hear it firsthand.”
- “Her answers have provided me lots of comfort and insight on the things that individuals don’t usually think to ask or are not clear in orientation sessions, information sessions, and intro courses.”
- “[Student]’s discussion on his transition from living in a small town to attending NC State resonated with me because I came from a small town as well. It made me feel like I had someone who understood.”
- “Her response really got me thinking about what impact I want to make while I’m here, even though my time at NC State has just begun.”
- “...She said not to be embarrassed because everyone around me is just trying to do the same exact thing I am. This really helped me to let go of some of the expectations I had placed on myself.”

Advice to Others

For other departments that would like to implement a similar program, it is recommended to solicit nominations of upperclassmen mentors from trusted colleagues. If students are able to find an upperclassman of their choosing to interview, the advice given cannot be vetted. It is also recommended that face-to-face interviewing is highly encouraged to facilitate relationship building among the upperclassman and first-year student.

Additionally, when first-year students are signing up for an upperclassman to interview, it may be helpful to provide a link to a short biography so first-year students can choose an upperclassman to interview who has some sort of shared interest. It is also recommended to have a fairly large group of upperclassmen for first-year students to interview, so that no upperclassman must participate in more than two interviews.

Cost/Resources Needed

A group of intelligent, kind, motivated, and participative upperclassmen students is essential to the success of this project. The utilization of Google Sheets and Google Forms are also essential to the success of this project, as they are helpful for collection of participant information and interview sign-ups.

References:

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