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## Course-Embedded Peer Mentor Program

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## **Course-Embedded Peer Mentor Program**

Part of the journal section “Forum: Cornerstone” [Contribution to Cornerstone: An Experiment in Interdisciplinarity and Community]

Kristin Woods, “Course-Embedded Peer Mentor Program”

The involvement of peer leaders has been a key feature of First-Year Cornerstone since early in its development, reflecting the value placed on collaboration between students, faculty members, and student affairs staff from the beginning of the Foundations of Excellence process. Early on, we envisioned course-embedded peers as teaching assistants who would collaborate with Cornerstone faculty members on classroom activities and provide academic assistance to first-year students. After the first two years of the program, it was clear that students viewed their peer teaching assistants (PTAs) as helpful, approachable guides through their transition to college. While academic support was one element of PTA engagement with students, we soon realized that the mentoring and relationship-building aspect of their work was most valued by students, and often contributed to the development of classroom communities characterized by support, friendship, and peer accountability. This shift in emphasis led to a name change, from peer teaching assistants to peer mentors.

Faculty members with peer mentors have shared overwhelmingly positive feedback about the program, noting that peer mentors bring a valuable student perspective to the development of coursework, help them understand current student issues and concerns, and in some cases change the way faculty members approach teaching first-year students. As excitement around course-embedded mentoring grew among the faculty, we made the decision to apply this model beyond First-Year Cornerstone to courses throughout the Liberal Arts Core.

The peer mentor program started with 11 peer mentors working within 9 sections of First-Year Cornerstone. In the 2014-2015 academic year, we have peer mentors in each of the 25 sections of First-Year Cornerstone, along with 28 peer mentors working within 26 first-year only sections of Liberal Arts Core courses. The program continues to thrive in courses ranging from large sections of Math and Decision Making and Human Identity and Relationships to small, writing-enhanced sections of Religions of the World. Peer mentors adapt to the needs of their students and faculty members, facilitating a range of activities including study sessions, out-of-classroom participation in community service activities and intramural sports, peer consultations on writing and speaking projects, individual meetings about first-year transitions issues, and classroom presentations on topics such as time management and preparing for finals.

As the program has grown and adapted, so has the training and preparation of peer mentors, from an emphasis on academic assistance to a focus on mentoring and referrals to campus resources. The peer mentor seminar, UNIV 3186: Studies in First-Year Mentoring, allows us to educate peer mentors on campus resources as diverse as counseling, financial literacy programs, victim advocacy, and academic support services. This information is framed by student development and transition theory, which provides a rich context for peer mentor reflection and discussion.

In our work as students affairs staff members, we often struggle to reach and support students who don't engage in out-of-classroom learning communities such as residence hall programs, student organizations, or campus employment. Though ongoing collaboration with faculty members, academic administrators, and campus resource offices, this program allows us to meet students where they are – in the classroom – and share important resources within the context of mentoring relationships.

Vincent Tinto (1997) suggested that engaging, collaborative classroom communities provide an initial entry point for students into the academic and social life of the university, and become gateways to further campus involvement. I would argue that the development of these classroom communities through First-Year Cornerstone, first-year only Liberal Arts Core sections, and the peer mentor program have also become a gateway to greater involvement and partnership among faculty members, academic administrators, student affairs staff, and peer educators. The result has been growing numbers of referrals and collaborations, and a shared focus on student success.

Reference: Tinto, V. (1997). Classrooms as communities: Exploring the educational character of student persistence. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 68 (8), p. 599-623). Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2959965>.

[Go to the narrative [Cornerstone: An Experiment in Interdisciplinarity and Community](#) article.]



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