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## Peer Mentors in the Religions of the World Classroom

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## Peer Mentors in the Religions of the World Classroom

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

Martha Reineke, “Peer Mentors in the Religions of the World Classroom”

**September 3, 2013:** Samantha is giving her first presentation as a peer mentor on “Time Management Skills.” Her hands are visibly shaking, notwithstanding her death grip on her notes. In a trembling voice, Samantha hesitantly makes her way through several PowerPoint slides.

**December 10, 2013:** Samantha is giving her last presentation on “Studying Tips for Finals.” Her voice quavers only with the first slide, and she delivers a strong speech without cue cards. After answering students’ questions, she smoothly transitions into a 50-minute lecture on “Misconceptions about Islam.” As she speaks, Samantha walks around the room, asks students questions, and weaves their answers into the next points in her presentation. The students listen attentively, taking notes.

Clearly, the UNI peer mentor program offers outstanding leadership training to its participants. As the mentors embrace the multi-dimensional responsibility of enhancing first-year students’ success, they build exceptional skills in oral communication, planning, and decision-making. Not surprisingly, they excel in subsequent class and campus leadership roles. But are the lives of the students they mentor enhanced? Does the program also support teaching excellence? Several features of the program suggest that the answer to these questions is “yes!”

**Peer Mentors Assist Students in Acclimating to a New Academic Culture:** Research suggests that first-year students face a number of challenges.<sup>1</sup> Trained as test-takers in high school, they are unfamiliar with the range of study skills they will need for college success. They also are unprepared to meet their professors’ expectations for critical thinking. Possessing weak face-to-face social skills, they also may struggle with group work. Many are risk-averse and reluctant to try new things.

My peer mentors help students meet these challenges. During each class period, they participate in small group discussions, guiding students in critical reflection. They give presentations that encourage students to explore new approaches to studying. Some of their most important contributions occur in the 15 minutes before class starts. Informally conversing with students,

the mentors build a strong sense of community, which enhances student capacity for group work. The mentors invite risk-adverse students to take on new challenges. For example, this fall, one mentor organized a car pool to an open house at the local mosque. In the absence of her support for this activity, few students would have participated.

**Peer Mentors Model Involvement:** Research shows that student engagement is crucial to college success.<sup>ii</sup> Yet many UNI students remain largely disconnected from co-curricular and community activities. Offering regular presentations on opportunities to get involved, the mentors promote engagement as a “must do” aspect of being a UNI student.

**Peer Mentors Facilitate Connections:** First-year students sometimes find their professors intimidating; in turn, professors typically have all but forgotten how it feels to be a first-year student. Mentors build bridges that support student learning. As students observe the friendly relationship between mentor and professor, the professor becomes more approachable; in turn, the mentor offers the professor a window into the first-year student’s life. Working in partnership, mentor and professor identify students in need of support, stave off potential miscommunication, and foster empathic and astute interactions with students.

In these ways, the UNI peer mentor program makes a profound contribution to the first-year experience, enhancing student learning and boosting teaching excellence.

## Endnotes

<sup>i</sup>Ivan Fuller, “Redesigning the First-Year Orientation Course,” *Liberal Education* 100, no.3 (2014): 22-27.

<sup>ii</sup>George Kuh, *High-impact Educational Practices: What they are, Who Has Access to them, and Why They Matter*. (Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities). See also: [http://nsse.iub.edu/html/high\\_impact\\_practices.cfm](http://nsse.iub.edu/html/high_impact_practices.cfm)+

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



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