

Enhancing Performance: The Effectiveness of a Faculty of Fine Arts Peer Mentoring Program

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II. The institution and its students

York University is a publicly funded university situated in Toronto, Canada. The third largest university in Canada, York has a population of approximately 46000 undergraduate students and 5000 graduate students across eleven Faculties. Females comprise 62% of the undergraduate population and 84% of the students are pursuing their studies full-time, defined as taking a 60% course load. Toronto is acknowledged as one of the world's most multicultural cities, and the York student population reflects the city's diversity: 82% of undergraduate students are Canadian citizens with the remaining 18% coming from 174 other countries; 41% of first-year students had neither parent attend university; and 64% of first-year students live at home with a daily commute to school of 40 or more minutes each way. The majority of students are under age 25 (80%), but 17% of the student body falls in the age range of 25 to 50 years.

III. The Initiative

The Faculty of Fine Arts at York University houses 2756 full-time undergraduate students and 217 part-time undergraduate students across seven units (Design, Dance, Film, Fine Arts Cultural Studies, Music, Theatre, and Visual Arts). The Fine Arts Peer Mentoring Program was launched in 2006, created for first year students in order to support them in maximizing their academic and social experience. All first year students face challenges for many reasons, both academic and personal, but students in the fine arts experience unique stressors, including performance and competition anxiety as well as significant time management issues. Matching mentees with successful upper year

students (mentors) in their own artistic disciplines enables them to receive peer guidance from someone who has successfully managed the transition into university.

At the end of each academic year, students with a minimum B average entering year 3 or 4 are invited to participate in the program as mentors. In their letter of invitation from the dean, they are told about the program and the commitment required of a mentor. Mentors are required to participate in a structured training program delivered by the Faculty of Fine Arts Student and Academic Services staff as well as by experts from various university service areas such as the Counselling and Development Centre. The training program focuses on communication skills, knowledge of campus resources and support services, stress management, time management, motivation, and life skills. During the academic year, mentors are expected to meet one-on-one with their mentee(s) for at least one hour per week, to attend mentor/mentee forums and “coffee house” sessions, and to volunteer two hours per week in the Peer Advising Centre. Here, they work with other mentors advising Fine Arts students on a drop-in basis, they answer the help line, they respond to email inquiries, and they contribute to the mentor/mentee blog. At the end of the academic year the mentors attend a special reception where they receive completion certificates from the dean and hear from selected Faculty of Fine Arts alumni on “Mentoring for Life.”

IV. Research methods

In 2007/08, the Peer Mentoring Program in Fine Arts was evaluated qualitatively through the administration of surveys, and assessed quantitatively through analysis of institutional-level student information data and NSSE data. There were 822 students in the 2007 Fine Arts entering class; 188 (23%) elected to participate in the peer mentoring program; 675 Fine Arts students met the criterion of < 30 credits completed for assessing GPA; and 172 first-year Fine Arts students completed NSSE surveys.

The two principal questions driving the research were:

1. Does participation in the peer mentoring program have an impact on the academic performance of first-year Fine Arts students?
2. Are there non-academic benefits for first-year Fine Arts students who participate in the peer mentoring program?

V. Research findings

In 2007-08 we did an analysis comparing the mean grade point average of first year students who had a mentor with the mean grade point average of first year students who did not have a mentor. Students who had a mentor performed better academically than students who were not in the mentoring program, earning GPAs approximately one grade point higher.

Figure 1: Impact of Peer Mentoring on GPA

FFA students < 30 credits completed		
	major gpa	overall gpa
mentor (n = 143)	6.48	6.19
no mentor (n = 532)	5.67	5.32

In the York scale, 5 is equivalent to a C+, 6 is equivalent to a B, 7 is equivalent to a B+.

Additionally, first-year Fine Arts students with mentors completed more courses.

Figure 2: Impact of Peer Mentoring on Credits Completed

FFA students < 30 credits completed	
mentor (n = 143)	27.74
no mentor (n = 532)	25.60

At York University, the usual maximum full-time course load is 30 credits over the fall and winter terms.

Many students at York carry less than the 30 credit full course load because of their commuting times and the pressure to work. The high average of courses completed by those with mentors bodes well, indicating that the majority should graduate at the end of four years.

A review of the academic decisions for all first year Fine Arts students at the end of the 2007/08 academic year (n = 822) indicated that 3.6% (n = 30) of students in the first year class were placed on academic probation (defined as those achieving a GPA under honours standing of 5.0, or C+). No first-year Fine Arts student with a mentor (23%, n = 188) was placed on academic probation.

Finally, the first-year Fine Arts students who participated in the peer mentoring program responded more positively than their Fine Arts colleagues and other first year York University students on a number of NSSE questions.

Figure 3: Selected NSSE Results

NSSE Question	Fine Arts with mentor n = 46	Fine Arts no mentor n = 126	other 1st years n = 1742
often asked questions in class	32.7%	25.6%	23.7%
very often worked with classmates outside class	30.0%	27.6%	11.5%
often discussed ideas from class with others outside class	50.0%	33.3%	31.9%
very often had conversations with students very different from themselves	35.6%	31.5%	26.4%
had done community service or volunteer work	35.6%	24.8%	28.2%
plans to study abroad	60.0%	45.8%	41.3%
York very much helped them to think critically and analytically	48.9%	45.2%	39.0%
York very much helped them to develop personal values and ethics	31.0%	25.9%	20.7%

The NSSE responses from first year Fine Arts students with mentors indicate that the benefits of access to a mentor appear to extend beyond improved academic performance to include being more comfortable interacting with others and being more adventurous than their first year peers.

Qualitative data has been collected in both years of the program (2006/07 and 2007/08) to assess other aspects of the student experience. Surveys were distributed twice during the year, at the mid-point and at the end. In their survey responses (n = 30), 94% of the mentors stated that they had learned new mentoring strategies and 94% indicated that what they had learned in the training sessions had helped them in their mentoring role. They indicated that the most useful training was in the area of stress and time management. Other comments included: "I learned that mentoring a fellow student helped me to grow as a person and an artist as I learned valuable communication skills that I can continually build on," and "One of the best programs I've had the privilege to participate in throughout my four years at York."

In their survey responses, first-year students acknowledged that having a mentor was beneficial in many ways, including: "I loved having a mentor as I felt more confident and learned more than just from my courses." The increased confidence expressed by this student was reflected in the NSSE responses by those with mentors.

VI. Implications

Our goal for the mentoring program is to support first-year Faculty of Fine Arts students in their transition to university and to the academic and social experiences unique to post-secondary students with majors in the fine arts. The analysis of grade point averages after first year indicates that students with mentors performed better than those without mentors. It is important to note that the entering grade 12 final averages for those students who elected to have mentors was only slightly higher (84.8%, n = 156) than the entering grade 12 average for those who did not opt to have a mentor (83.3%, n= 684). Given the positive results apparently associated with having a peer mentor, we are now more proactive in encouraging entering students to sign up for the program. For 2008/09 we have a significant increase in the number of students applying for mentors. 37% of the incoming first year class have applied for mentors compared with 23% of the 2007 incoming first year class. Interestingly, upper year students are also becoming increasingly aware of the benefits of involvement in the program, with the result that we have 125 mentors in 2008 compared with 65 in 2007.

The anecdotal feedback from the mentee and mentor groups indicates that involvement in the Peer Mentoring program has a positive impact on their overall experience as a student in the Faculty. Mentors indicated that volunteering in the Peer Advising Centre provided them the opportunity to interact with students from other fine arts disciplines for the first time. This interdisciplinary interaction has resulted in artistic and academic collaborations.

We have retained the basic training structure of the program for 2008/09 but have added more discussion groups with guest speakers, providing increased opportunities for meetings between mentors and mentees. This year we also are introducing a Senior Mentor training program which offers in-depth leadership and communications training to a group of twelve senior students who have already completed the existing mentor training. They will be mentoring a new mentee group of twenty second-year and third-year students who are experiencing serious academic difficulty. In addition, the senior mentors will be matched with successful Faculty of Fine Arts alumni to enhance their own experience of being mentored as they prepare to embark on their lives and careers beyond university. In 2008/09, alumni involvement will extend beyond the Senior Mentoring program to include several key events such as a “Speed Mentoring” evening, a discussion forum on “Mentoring for Life,” and an end of year celebration that will focus on mentoring and career planning.

The Faculty of Fine Arts Peer Mentoring program has been an enriching experience for all participants, including staff and faculty members. Through the forum of the York University Retention Council, we have shared the details of our mentoring program with other Faculties across the university and we plan to collaborate so that first-year students in all Faculties will have access to mentoring opportunities.

References used in the development of the Faculty of Fine Arts Peer Mentoring Program:

Ender, Steven C., and Fred B. Newton. *Students Helping Students: A Guide for Peer Educators on College Campuses*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2000.

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Zachary, Lois. *The Mentor's Guide: Facilitating Effective Learning Relationships*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2000.