

UCET Teaching Fellow Report
Betsy Lucal

In my application, I proposed to “research best practices for faculty working with peer mentors and develop and implement a training curriculum to maximize the effectiveness of peer mentors and the peer mentor-faculty relationship to help ensure we are doing all we can to retain our students to the second semester and beyond.” This project was intended to reflect the increasing use of peer mentors on our campus and the research that shows peer mentors contribute positively to student success. I included tutors and supplemental instructors because, like peer mentors, they often work closely with both students and faculty members. For example, the Academic Centers for Excellence (ACE) now embeds supplemental instructors in certain courses.

When I submitted my application, I expected my fellowship to involve a mix of reviewing literature and talking to individuals on campus who had experience either using a peer mentor or being one. I expected to be able use the existing literature to identify best practices for working with peer mentors.

As I began my project, I realized that very little appeared to have been written specifically about these relationships between instructors and students. I tried a variety of search terms but didn’t find a substantial body of literature on this topic. One book that I did find helpful is Judith E. Miller, James E. Groccia and Marilyn S. Miller’s 2001 book, *Student-Assisted Teaching: A Guide to Faculty-Student Teamwork* (Bolton, MA: Anker Publishing Company). While this volume includes descriptions and assessments of a wide range of programs that variously incorporate students as some kind of assistant, mentor, tutor or supplemental instructor, it offers little concrete information about the processes involved in ensuring that students and instructors work well together.

Due to the dearth of useful literature, I turned my attention to gathering information from students and instructors on our campus. I sought out the names of instructors who had experience working with peer mentors and/or tutors/supplemental instructors as well as the names of students who had held one or more of these positions.

Here is the set of questions I used. (Instructors received questions that referred to working with a peer mentor/tutor/supplemental instructor and students received questions that referred to working with a faculty member.)

1. Looking back, is there anything that would have improved your relationship with the faculty member/peer mentor (or tutor or supplemental instructor) you worked with? What is it?
2. What advice do you have for a faculty member who is working with a peer mentor for the first time? (Both groups received the same question.)
3. Anything else you think I should know about faculty/peer mentor relationships?

I asked an additional question to First-Year Seminar (FYS) instructors and peer mentors:

1. Should we be doing something as part of our FYS faculty sessions to facilitate relationships between faculty and peer mentors? What should we do?

This question was intended to provide some additional information for me that I could use to continue to improve the professional development provided for instructors and peer mentors in the FYS program that I direct.

During the fellowship period, I met with Virginia Heidemann, Director of ACE, because I knew she had a good deal of experience working with tutors and supplemental instructors, as well as faculty members. This discussion also provided me with additional names of individuals to contact.

Seven students and fifteen instructors responded to my questions. (I had hoped for more responses but completing my project during the summer was likely a factor in the lower response rate, particularly from students.) They ranged from instructors in FYS, EDUC U100, and the cohort program run by the Leighton School of Business and Economics who use peer mentors in their classes to lecturers in math who use supplemental instructors in their courses. Peer mentors from the three programs for first-year students were included among the student respondents. I was unable to get responses from student tutors or supplemental instructors.

After compiling individuals' comments, I analyzed them to find patterns and to prepare advice from instructors teaching courses that include students in these positions and from students working as peer mentors, tutors or supplemental instructors. I created one list of advice from the student perspective and a second list of advice from the faculty perspective.

As I was completing the information-gathering phase of the project, I also provided consultation to one associate faculty member who teaches a course that includes peer mentors but who felt that they had been insufficiently trained to work with such a student. In addition to talking via email, I provided the instructor with the materials on working with a peer mentor that I had previously prepared as part of my work as Director of IUSB's First Year Experience program.

In August 2016, I offered a UCET workshop on facilitating relationships between faculty and peer mentors/tutors/supplemental instructors. I also provided the lists of advice that I compiled to the FYS instructors as part of our annual training session.

I remain available to speak to instructors and students about creating good working relationships. My handouts are available on the UCET web site.

As we continue to increase our use of students in these positions, I expect to provide advice to growing numbers of faculty and students.

Attached:

Cultivating Good Relationships between Peer Mentors/Tutors/SIs and Faculty Partners
TOP TEN THINGS YOUR PEER MENTOR CAN DO FOR YOU!
ADVICE FOR FACULTY ON WORKING EFFECTIVELY WITH PEER MENTORS

Cultivating Good Relationships between Peer Mentors/Tutors/SIs and Faculty Partners

Presented by Betsy Lucal, UCET Fellow, Director of First Year Experience program and Professor of Sociology (blucal@iusb.edu)

Advice from Students (Peer Mentors)

*Communication is key: Both before the semester begins and throughout the semester itself; students want and need to know your expectations for them; they also want feedback about their performance.

*Collaboration and teamwork is important: The peer mentor/tutor/SI is an extension of the faculty partner and students should see them as being on the same page; approach the class as a team. Make sure students understand the peer mentor's/tutor's/SI's place in the class.

*Get to know each other: Learn about them personally and let them know something about you. Take time to find out their interests, strengths/weaknesses, opinions, ideas, etc. Be sure they know something about your approach to teaching, your communication style, etc.

*Provide clear expectations and offer feedback about their performance: Don't put the student in the awkward position of having to ask about these things.

*Trust is important: Students need to trust that you will talk to them when something isn't going right. Trust your peer mentor/tutor/SI; they might surprise you.

*Meet regularly with your peer mentor/tutor/SI.

Advice from Faculty

*Not surprisingly, it is often easier to work with a peer mentor/tutor/SI whom you already know. Also, working with them takes practice and there is no uniformity of experience.

*Meet before the course starts and regularly throughout the semester. Get to know your peer mentor/tutor/SI personally. Be sure they know your perspective, your approach to the course, etc.

*Make this a learning/growth experience for the peer mentor/tutor/SI.

*Communicate your expectations clearly; give your peer mentor/tutor/SI responsibilities. Make them feel like a valued part of your class. Challenge them to take chances with your support and assistance.

*Create opportunities for the peer mentor/tutor/SI to give honest feedback about the course. Ask them what ideas they have for the course (you don't have to incorporate all of them but be willing to listen to and consider them).

*Include the peer mentor/tutor/SI in the class explicitly and regularly. You may need to help students understand what their role in the class is. Students need to know what the peer mentor/tutor/SI can and cannot do for them. Sometimes they can do things more easily than the instructor can (e.g., communicate to students that it's time to be quiet and listen).

*If you are new to working with peer mentors/tutors/SIs, if possible, observe experienced peer mentors/tutors/SIs and faculty partners in the classroom.

TOP TEN THINGS YOUR PEER MENTOR CAN DO FOR YOU!

Composed by Betsy Lucal and the 2015 FYS Peer Mentors

1. Engage students in campus life; connect students to IUSB. Announce campus events.
2. Serve as a liaison between students and professor.
3. Teach problem-solving skills and help students address challenges they face.
4. Respond with empathy/sympathy to stress, anxieties, etc. Share personal experiences.
5. Help build academic skills and lifelong learning skills.
6. Connect students to appropriate campus resources.
7. Serve as sounding board for professor; serve as classroom “thermometer.”
8. Help students learn to navigate technology (e.g., email, Canvas, One IU). Manage social media presence for class.
9. Provide campus culture tips. Help students learn the “hidden curriculum” of college.
10. Serve as a positive role model; show enthusiasm, optimism, success, grit, perseverance, etc.

ADVICE FOR FACULTY ON WORKING EFFECTIVELY WITH PEER MENTORS

Composed by Betsy Lucal and the 2015 FYS Peer Mentors

1. Be collaborative.
2. Be open to constructive criticism (peer mentor and professor).
3. Be flexible and keep a balance between subject matter and FYS.
4. Be a good communicator.
5. Set expectations for your peer mentor.
6. Develop a personal (but professional) relationship with your peer mentor. Incorporate their experiences into the class.
7. Look for opportunities to involve your peer mentor in the class.
8. Have a positive attitude toward peer mentors and FYS.