Mentoring …Value adding to the University

Glenn Pope
Counselling Careers and Health
Central Queensland University

Marilyn Van Dyke
Counselling Careers and Health
Central Queensland University

Abstract

Facilitating a student mentor program across a number of campuses, faculties and cultures presents challenges for the organisation and management of such a program. With the current climate of reduced Government funding to higher education, combined with increasing competition for student numbers, mentoring is a cost efficient strategy to add value to the University’s teaching and learning environment. Providing students with a quality program for students that has cost effective and efficient systems of operation has been the aim of the student mentor program at Central Queensland University. In order to efficiently manage the program a number of successful strategies have been employed. These strategies include:

- Use of flexible learning technologies
- Mentors’ role as small group facilitators
- Faculty support through staff and student mentor groups
- Student ownership through student clubs
- Networking and ownership of the program across the University.

This paper reports on the development of these strategies and discusses the outcomes for the University.

Preamble

This paper reports on the development and operationalisation of the on-campus Mentor Program that is an important value adding strategy for Central Queensland University (CQU). Originally funded as a mechanism to decrease attrition rates, the CQU Mentor Program is now seen as providing a range of other benefits to the University’s teaching and learning community. The program has now evolved to incorporate the use of flexible learning technologies that are an integral part of the teaching and learning environment of a geographically dispersed University such as CQU. The program is operational across four of the five campuses in Central Queensland. Its success is linked to broad ownership by staff and students who are involved in a number of operational and support structures that are an integral part of the Student Mentor Program.

Introduction

Central Queensland University has a total population of 15000 students and operates five campuses in Central Queensland and commercial operations in Melbourne and Sydney with further initiatives in Brisbane and Perth being planned. It also has overseas campuses in Hong Kong, Singapore, Dubai and Fiji. The student profile on the Central Queensland campuses consists of 5000 students who are mostly from rural or isolated backgrounds (73.5%) (CQU Equity Plan, 1998). Sixty-five percent of these CQU students are likely to be the first members of their families to undertake study at a tertiary level (Wallace, 1998). Because of the particular profile of our students it is necessary to adopt special measures to ensure that their transition to the tertiary environment is a successful one.

The main impetus for the development of the CQU Student Mentor Program was the awareness that the attrition rate for students in their first year of study averaged one third in 1995. The Counselling, Careers and Health Section, as a mechanism to address transition and support issues for first year students, developed a student mentor program submission. The focus of the CQU Mentor Program was the development of peer support mechanisms rather than academic or tutorial support. In a 1994 survey of 1000 on-campus and off-campus students, conducted by Counselling, Careers and Health at CQU, the need was identified for an efficient and responsive learning environment, where information and support were provided in an appropriate and timely manner. The survey also
identified that students primarily appear to listen to other students for this support and information. It also identified that students did not tend to seek out support services. McInnis, James and McNaught (1995) have supported these findings. Substantial literature exists reporting the benefits of student peer support programs in a number of environments (Jacobi 1991; Schulz 1993; Tang 1993; Tinto 1995).

Development of the program
The program at CQU was piloted in 1996 across one Faculty and one Department with 380 first year students supported by 48 third year Mentors. The program has now evolved to encompass all undergraduate students in their first year on campus, in all faculties, on four geographically dispersed campuses (Bundaberg, Gladstone, Mackay and Rockhampton). In 1998, this included 2500 students and 220 Mentors. First year student participation in the program is voluntary, and approximately 95% of those first year students linked to a mentor maintained contact with their mentor. The program has had a full time coordinator since 1997 with funding being provided by project funds from the Vice Chancellor. On the three non-Rockhampton campuses, regional campus support officers (counsellors) have incorporated mentoring activities into their work schedules. From 1998, the integration of the mentor and orientation programs at the University has resulted in a number of synergies benefiting both programs. By the involvement of mentors as small group facilitators in the University orientation program, a number of successful outcomes for both programs have emerged. The role and value of the mentor is enhanced by their participation in faculty and mainstream activities such as campus and library tours, learning-to-learn and study skills workshops, flexible learning workshops, and faculty information sessions as well as the usual array of social activities. Student mentors’ involvement in these activities has expedited the establishment of effective learning groups of new students in the University environment. Student mentors report that they perceive that their role and value in the University community is enhanced by their involvement in the orientation activities. Increased staff and student approval for the University orientation program has provided support for these innovations. In an orientation survey of 1002 first year students undertaken in first semester 1998, 92.4% reported that they found the program useful or very useful. The orientation process itself is now seen as an important strategy for enhancing the transition process for first year students. By combining the mentoring and orientation programs the value of both programs has increased for all stakeholders including first year students, student mentors, faculties and the University.

Aims of the program
Although the original rationale of the program and the primary reason for funding was to reduce the University’s attrition rate, the program is now seen to achieve much more than the original aim. The program’s broader objectives include:

- fostering a sense of belonging amongst students;
- providing first year students with access to vital information in a more efficient and effective manner;
- smoothing the transition process to University life for first year students;
- enhancing the relationship between CQU staff, student mentors and first year students as they interact within the program framework;
- helping students to get to know each other so that natural formations of study support groups can emerge;
- improving the teaching and learning environment at CQU.

These objectives are now recognised by the University’s stakeholders as equally important outcomes from the program. The program endeavours to promote a sense of belonging throughout the student body, fostering closer links with the Central Queensland community, as well as providing a structure to enhance the development of an integrated multi-campus University and a
stronger CQU culture. The program provides an opportunity to emphasise CQU’s commitment to a
caring environment for its students and to operationalise its positioning statement of “Where
Students Come First”.

A further aim of the Student Mentor Program at CQU and a concept promoted by the Vice
Chancellor, Professor Lauchlan Chipman, is that the University is in the business of fostering
character formation and the need to focus on the attributes of our graduates. Professor Chipman
stated in CQU UniNews Weekly (1998) the following about the purpose of universities:

*From time immemorial universities, whatever they were called, were not only concerned with what
their students managed to learn, but also with what sorts of people they should become. Universities
were frankly and expressly in the business of character formation. It was only when you had
determined what sorts of people you wanted your graduates to be that you could work out what they
should be taught ... I believe universities will once again be judged not only on the quality of their
research and the breadth of their curriculum, but on the sorts of people their graduates become ... If
Central Queensland University can employ staff and produce graduates who are all personally
committed to truth, accuracy, honesty, civility, and courage in our professional and personal lives,
then we will have truly deserved our place in the sun.*

Through participation in the Student Mentor Program, character formation can be seen as an
outcome for both student mentors and student mentees. The mentors’ acknowledged role as leaders
in the University community, combined with the program’s training in generic communication and
people skills, provides opportunities for character formation and assists in enhancing the attributes
of our graduates. As part of their role as mentors, senior students have a responsibility to foster the
character formation and personal attributes of their mentees. This is an important aspect of the
mentoring process. The program appears to encourage social responsibility to the University
community amongst our mentees. This aspect of the program was highlighted during the interview
process for 1998’s potential mentors. Many first year students reported that the reason that they
aspired to be a mentor was to make their contribution back to the University community as they had
found that the mentoring process had assisted them in their transition to University.

In addition to character formation, the purpose of universities is viewed as building a ‘community
of scholars’ and facilitating the inclusive socialisation process as outlined by Coaldrake and
Stedman (1998). Mentoring, with its fostering of social responsibility within the University
community, augments these processes relating to the role that universities fulfil. McInnis and James
(1994, p.3) state that:

*Universities and academics have a responsibility to respond to the problematic nature of the transition
process, especially in the face of the wider range of student abilities and experiences following the
rapid expansion of the higher education system.*

Central Queensland University, with its particular profile of students for whom transition is
specially important, has found its evolving model of student mentoring an effective way to respond
to these requirements of a university in the late 1990’s.

**Strategies used in the mentor program**

The Central Queensland University model of mentoring has developed in response to the particular
needs of a geographically dispersed university committed to using flexible learning technologies
whilst operating in a tight fiscal climate. Strategies in place include the use of flexible learning
technologies, the mentor’s facilitation role in orientation and stakeholder ownership through faculty
support and networking mechanisms across the University.

**Flexible Learning Technologies**

Teaching and learning strategies at CQU incorporate the use of Web based material, electronic mail,
videoconferencing and teleconferencing and are an important part of the CQU Mentor Program.
The Mentor Co-ordinator communicates regularly with mentors across the four campuses via
electronic mail and the mentor Web pages. With limited resources for the management of the
program, planning activities have incorporated the power of Web-based software to facilitate the
required detailed project planning of such an operation. This impacts on the skills required by the Mentor Co-ordinator in that a high level of computer skills is required in addition to good people-skills, training skills, and networking and facilitation skills. In a tight fiscal environment, funding can no longer be budgeted to employ dedicated resources for specific aspects of this student-based program. With a budget of $50000 from recurrent University funds, and small amounts for particular aspects of the project from other stakeholders of the University, the program achieves its aims. By the Program’s retention of numbers of first year students, this expenditure is arguably recouped by the University.

An internet web site has been developed for each campus with assistance from mentors. Mentors are actively encouraged to visit this site regularly to gain information on program status, training schedules, relevant information to pass on to their first year students and general contact information. The site also provides a photo gallery of the various campuses’ 1998 orientation programs and training and briefing sessions. The web page (http://www.cqu.edu.au/cch/mentor.htm) is also utilised to advertise support for the Mentor Program received from various stakeholders.

Student mentors are encouraged to utilise all forms of communication in their role as mentor, especially electronic mail. Various electronic mailing lists have been established to facilitate communication with and between mentors. A mentor e-mail newsletter called “Mentorzine” has been developed with the support and involvement of mentors from various campuses and is distributed on a fortnightly basis. This newsletter provides an important means of communication and interaction amongst the mentors from the four campuses, as well as the University.

Videoconferencing has been used for some of the training programs in an attempt to reduce the training budget costs. However, feedback from these training sessions was not favourable and there is a need to reassess the use of this technology in the future. It has been shown that students prefer face to face training rather than videoconference with the facilitator at a different location. Mizell and Carl (1994) report that students need to practise in a videoconference virtual classroom before they feel comfortable with the medium. However, the use of videoconferencing has proved to be invaluable in enabling the Co-ordinator to communicate with staff on other campuses to assist in the facilitation of the program, and there is potential for student mentors to interact using this medium.

**Mentor Facilitation Role in the Orientation Process**

In 1998, the Student Mentor Program became an integral part of CQU’s orientation programs at the four campuses. Representatives from campuses and faculties have reported less demand on their staff to answer basic information questions from first year students, especially during the orientation program. It appears that mentors are fulfilling their role of communicating such basic University information to their first year students. Where appropriate, mentors are also referring students for course, administrative or counselling assistance, with the result that these students are receiving help in a timely fashion.

The proactive involvement of mentors in the University’s orientation process and in particular their facilitation of campus and library tours, as well as their involvement in sessions concerning e-mail/web/video-conferencing and students’ rights & responsibilities, has “value added” to the Mentor Program and the University’s orientation program. CQU is realising the value of using student mentors in a number of University activities such as recruitment activities, Multi-Cultural Fair, Open Days, Family Welcomes and Library Tutorials.

**Stakeholder Ownership**

**Faculty Support**

From its inception as an Action Learning Research activity that involved staff from Faculties and Divisions across the University, the evolving Student Mentor Program has continued to involve staff and student stakeholders. The model has continued to encourage and maintain involvement of all stakeholders, through faculty support groups and social activities for students and all levels of
staff. Faculty staff involvement (academic and general) commences at the beginning of the Program, with faculty staff involved in the selection and interviewing process of choosing the student mentors. All levels of faculty staff are invited to participate in faculty mentor support groups. The role of these groups is constantly being developed, but is primarily to provide support to mentors from a faculty perspective and represents a symbolic acknowledgment by their faculty of their importance. It also is a recognised avenue for staff to hear student concerns without delay and for students to gain a better understanding of the realities of a tertiary system.

The Mentor Program involves all students in their first year on campus, student mentors (second and third year students), academic and general staff and CQU Student Association personnel. Anecdotal evidence indicates that the Program has greatly enhanced the relationships and understanding between all active participants. The Student Mentor Program has been successful in drawing together representatives from the aforementioned groups to work effectively together. An avenue for such interaction has not before been available on such a broad scale and involving four campuses.

The model utilises various social activities including lunches, morning teas, BBQs, graduation functions and training sessions to encourage the involvement of all stakeholders within the University community. Some of these activities are organised by student mentors through the framework of the Student Mentor Association and staff are invited to participate in all these activities.

**Student Mentor Association**

In late 1997 the Student Mentor Association was formed at the Rockhampton campus and was affiliated with the CQU Student Association Clubs and Societies. The Student Mentor Association consisted of 10 mentors from various faculties, elected by their fellow mentors, together with the Coordinator as Executive Officer. The Program Coordinator initiated the formation of this Association with the aims of providing a sense of unity amongst mentors as well as providing an opportunity for mentors to share in the ownership of the Program and its ongoing development. Other aims of the association are to develop a support network for current mentors and to develop leadership skills amongst mentors, as well as promote the mentor community throughout the University and wider community.

In 1998 the Rockhampton Student Mentor Association has continued to develop and support its members (current mentors) as well as the Mentor Program, in a number of positive ways. The Rockhampton Student Mentor Association is very active and in recent months has undertaken an income raising activity that entailed working for the CQU Alumni Foundation. These activities provided work placement opportunities for the mentors involved, as well as leadership opportunities. To date in 1998, the Mentor Association has coordinated a number of lunchtime functions involving staff and students across the University. A recent function included 65 mentors and 25 staff across all faculties socialising in a non-academic setting. The Student Mentor Association is an add-on to the Program and its success is driven by the student mentors’ commitment to the Program and the University.

Due to the successful implementation of the Student Mentor Association concept in 1997, a Student Mentor Association has been established at the Bundaberg Campus. Plans are being developed to establish a similar association for Mackay campus mentors in the near future. A positive outcome of establishing such Mentor Associations is the growing awareness between the mentors at the various geographically dispersed campuses, of a commonality under one University. As an example, discussion has occurred between the Rockhampton and Bundaberg Mentor Associations with a view to fostering relationships between the two campuses. A joint function is currently being planned which will see Bundaberg mentors travelling to Rockhampton campus (330 kms) for a weekend excursion. We believe that this Program is fostering the sense of belonging to a University community despite it being geographically dispersed.
Other Activities

Publicity of the program’s achievements and regular reporting to all stakeholders is an integral part of the model. Designated mentor T-Shirts, bookmarks with mentor contact details, photographs on mentor noticeboards, Web pages and social activities celebrating milestones such as graduations, all contribute to increasing the profile of the program within the University and its wider community. News articles in both student and local media reinforce the existence and benefits of the Program.

The establishment of a designated space within the University (Mentor House) albeit a transportable building, provides a tangible place for mentors to meet with mentees throughout the academic year. The allocation of precious physical space within the campus reinforces the commitment by the University to the Program.

Outcomes of the program for the university

Evaluation

A 1997 survey of approximately 650 first year students indicated their support for the Program. In response to the question “Do you think a Mentor Program is helpful for first year students,” approximately 90% answered in the affirmative and stated that they found the Mentor Program valuable and helpful and that the contact with their mentor assisted with their adjustment to tertiary study.

A survey of first year students undertaken in the first few weeks of the autumn semester 1998, has revealed that the Mentor Program was well received by the majority of first year students. The various orientation week sessions that the mentors facilitated, were rated the highest amongst a list of orientation activities. The survey of 1002 first year students at Bundaberg, Gladstone, Mackay and Rockhampton campuses revealed that 82.2% of the students found their student mentor useful or very useful in orientation week.

Other orientation week activities conducted by the faculty mentors also obtained high ratings of usefulness - eg. library services and campus tour (84.7 percent & 82.9 per cent respectively). In general, staff across the campuses again reported a reduction in basic student inquiries, and an increase in positive attitudes towards the University by first year students. Mentors regularly refer students for course, administrative or counselling assistance, with the result that these students receive help in a timely fashion. Feedback from mentors (obtained in weeks three and seven during debrief and training sessions) also indicate that the mentors are contacted to a greater degree than in previous years by their first year students.

The increased activity may be due to the fact that this year’s mentors have been given a greater role in University activities such as orientation week, faculty processes and disseminating information. They are recognised by first year students as a valuable source of information with regard to their University life.

As part of the program, CQU’s mentors agree to be available to their students for the whole of the academic year. They also agree to make contact with their students at least four times each semester. This contact is initially instigated on the first day of the University’s orientation week. Most mentors have organised meetings with their students in weeks two and three to discuss any issues that their students may have had after their first series of lectures and tutorials. Some of these meetings have occurred in social settings off campus. As in the 1997 program, the comment that CQU is a “friendlier than expected” place has again been stated in 1998 by many first year students, to their mentors.

Feedback from the non-Rockhampton campuses involved with the Student Mentor Program also provides very positive outcomes for the University, its students and its community. Heads of Campus all report the success of the Program on their campuses. Assoc.Prof. A. E. Grady, Head of Bundaberg Campus stated that:
All reports about the Mentor Program are in the positive-to-glowing range. Our Admin staff found that mentor involvement took almost all of the ‘overpressure’ off them during orientation week. In addition the number of student inquiries during Weeks 1 and 2 was considerably lightened (excluding those relating to enrolments). Academic staff have a positive attitude to the program, reporting that their work has been made easier, and that quite definitely this group of new students seems to have settled in more easily than previous ones.

Rex Metcalfe, Head of the Gladstone Campus stated that ‘It is my view that the orientation program as it is run here is a vital bridge in the transition from school to uni, and the mentors are key players in the process’.

From evaluations and feedback about the Program, it is clear that first year students are receiving vital information and advice on matters such as timetable schedules, add/drop dates, study skill workshops, computing usage, overdue assignments and examination preparation, in a more efficient and effective manner. Appropriately trained mentors, who personally contact each individual student in their group, provide such information and advice. The benefits of the program have been reinforced by comments from general and academic staff stating that their workload has decreased because first year students had already spent time with their mentors and thus smoothed the transition process.

Promotion of a sense of belonging within the university community

Anecdotal evidence exists to again suggest that the program is promoting a sense of belonging throughout the student body and general University community. The role played by student mentors in the University’s orientation program, as well as their developing role within the faculties, has heightened the concept of a community spirit within the University. The fact that fellow students (mentors) make positive proactive contact with first year students reinforces the concept of a caring environment at CQU.

This concept of a caring and supportive environment promoted by the Mentor Program has extended beyond the boundaries of the University and provides opportunities for social interaction between mentors and their first year students. The rapport developed between some first year students and their mentors can be demonstrated by the increased level of social interaction that has occurred in this year's program. The socialisation aspect of the Student Mentor Program assists in filling the social vacuum sometimes experienced by first year students in higher education learning. McInnis and James suggest “that successful learning, and a positive view of the first year University experience, are less likely to occur in a social vacuum” (1994, p.14).

E-mails and verbal reports received from mentors have indicated that first year students value their assistance. This is indicated by the fact that numbers of mentors have received various tokens of appreciation from their first year student groups. In addition mentors report the personal satisfaction they receive from their involvement in the program.

Value adding to the university

By the establishment of a peer support program that is available to all students in their first year on campus, CQU is able to differentiate itself from other tertiary providers. The Program does add value to the existing range of support services provided by this and other universities.

The success of the Student Mentor Program continues to be recognised by the University and the University’s Vice Chancellor. Professor Lauchlan Chipman stated at the mentor award ceremonies in 1997, that last year’s attrition reduction must to some degree be as a result of this program. Although this is encouraging, the fact remains that attrition rates are affected by a number of variables that are outside the influence of this program and therefore other evaluations have been undertaken to demonstrate the success or otherwise of this student based support program. Funding for the project is predicated on the Mentor Program decreasing attrition rates and therefore more than paying for itself.
In 1998 the success of the Program has been recognised not only within this University, but also amongst other Australian and overseas universities. Positive feedback from other sources outside the University can only enhance and add value to CQU’s reputation and marketing potential. This Mentor Program is emerging as an effective advantage in promoting this University to potential students. Mentoring is now seen as a “value adding” concept to students who choose CQU as their provider of learning.

Conclusion

The Central Queensland University Student Mentor Program has been a major success for all stakeholders and is now thriving in its second year of full operation across four campuses. The Program has contributed to enabling Central Queensland University to develop a unique teaching and learning community for its first year students. Because of the nature of the University, with its dispersed geography and increasing use of flexible learning technologies, the Student Mentor Program provides a mechanism to humanise the global University of the late 1990’s. With increased competition for student numbers among tertiary education providers and reduced Government funding to higher education mentoring makes good sense. Mentoring is now recognised as a cost efficient strategy to value add to the University’s teaching and learning environment, as well as being an effective marketing tool in a competitive tertiary education sector.

We cannot hold a torch to light another’s path without brightening our own.

References

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