Award Title

Lehigh University Peer Mentor Program for Students with Learning Disabilities

Awards Categories

International, Multicultural, Cultural, Gender, LGBTQ, Spirituality, Disability, and related

Executive Summary

Since 1998, Lehigh University students with learning disabilities and ADHD have provided support to one another and to our first year students with learning disabilities. This program utilizes a self-determination model to assist students with identity development, leadership development, self-advocacy, and self-efficacy.

The Peer Mentors are comprised of upper class students who have a diagnosed learning disability or attention deficit disorder. Each mentor has demonstrated leadership capability and has been academically successful at Lehigh University. First-year students are matched with a peer mentor by college and/or major. The rationale for matching students in this manner is because upper class students of the same major and/or college have most likely taken the same courses, the same professors, and have experienced the same challenges as the first year students with whom they have been matched. The first-year students who have participated in the Peer Mentor program and who have worked with the Office of Academic Support Services have traditionally performed significantly better than students who have not participated in support services. This is a voluntary program for both mentors and mentees.

Award Description

Now entering its thirteenth year, the Peer Mentors Program at Lehigh University was initiated by four students to provide emotional, social, and academic support for students with learning disabilities and ADHD. It initially began as a support group in 1996 and grew into a mentoring program in 1998 when twelve students volunteered to participate in a leadership training seminar to assist our new students with learning disabilities transition to a competitive university. At that time, students with learning disabilities were at a higher risk of academic probation or dropping out of college. The results of the peer mentoring interaction on our first year student’s grade point average (GPA) were significant.

Although only ten first year students participated in that first year, their mean GPA was a 3.08 with a 100% retention rate after the first semester, when compared to the fourteen first year non-participants who obtained only a 1.94 mean GPA and a 78% retention rate. This initial data was significant and the mentors recognized the impact of their involvement with the new students. Increased GPA has continued to be a significant factor in students who have participated in the Peer Mentor program. Since the program is student driven, the activities have changed over the years; however, it has maintained its focus of providing emotional, social, and academic support.
A review of the literature reveals that cross-age mentoring programs provide a number of benefits for both the mentor (upper class student) and the mentee (first year student). Although most of the research has been done with elementary and secondary schools, the benefits appear to be consistent with what we observe on a post-secondary level.

- Peer mentor programs provide personal growth and learning opportunities for both mentors and mentees, resulting in a “double impact” which is appealing when dealing with limited staff and resources.

- Fewer resources are needed to recruit peer mentors for the following year since the mentees are recruited by the mentors to carry on the mentoring role.

- Peer mentoring programs capitalize on the importance of peer relations. First year students are more likely to listen to and look up to upper class students as role models.

Observed benefits to mentees include:

- Connectedness to the university community

- Increased feeling of confidence and self-efficacy

- Increased grade point average

- Normalization of their disability as it integrates into their identity development

Observed benefits to mentors include:

- Connectedness to the university community

- Increased leadership skills

- Increased interpersonal communication and conflict resolution skills

- Modeling self confidence and comfort with their disability

The most effective peer mentoring programs utilize a program design which clearly outlines stated goals and learning outcomes. Lehigh University’s Peer Mentor Program is tied directly to the University mission statement and student affair’s core competencies. These developmental core competencies skills include intellectual development, individual identity development, interpersonal relationships, and community development. In order to meet these learning outcomes, the Peer Mentors are involved in three student leadership training retreats. These are one day retreats which focus on roles and responsibilities, communication skills, confidentiality, effective leadership, and team building. A second retreat is scheduled in January before the spring semester, and a third retreat is scheduled at the end of spring semester to usher in the new mentors.
The first major event of the year is the New Student Orientation Program for students with Learning Differences. New students who have self disclosed by presenting the appropriate documentation are invited to attend this orientation session during New Student Orientation. This gives the new students an opportunity to meet with Assistant Dean, Director of Learning Disability Support Services, and the Peer Mentors. The new students are then divided up by college to meet with the Peer Mentors about university expectations and “What I wish I knew as a first year student”. We typically have about 30-35 new students attend the orientation, with about 25 choosing to participate in the mentoring program. Once matched, our mentors begin inviting the first years to planned events. They also check on their mentees at critical times throughout the semester.

Assessment Data

Over the years we have conducted a variety of assessments, including student evaluations, student testimonials, and grade point average data. Most recently, a representative from Strathclyde University in Glasgow, Scotland conducted a site visit and interviewed approximately twenty current and former peer mentors. We look forward to reading her findings as she is using our program as a model to initiate a similar program at Strathclyde University. Within the last several months, we have also received inquiries from Buchnell University, University of Connecticut, and Southeastern University of Florida. The most rewarding and valuable assessment is the student connections that continue beyond graduation. Our Peer Mentors continue to stay connected with us and with each other long after they have graduated. In addition to them sharing their lives with us through wedding invitations and baby photos, they are eager to return to Lehigh to share their wisdom with new students during our “Life After Lehigh” event which we hold every few years. One of our Engineering graduates recent emails says it all…

“Erika got in touch with me today. She moved here two weeks ago to start work. I’m onsite (only 15 minutes away) and my company’s main office and her office are a block away from each other! We are meeting for happy hour tomorrow to catch up and show her the area. I had to laugh today thinking of being Erika’s mentor when she was a freshman. It goes to show you that you never graduate from the peer mentors family. We benefit from the hard work you both put into the program long after leaving Lehigh. Thank you for that and so much more." -Sarah