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Peer Mentoring of At-Distance Students: A Resource for Tertiary Institutions

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Introduction

This resource is a practical guide for tertiary institutions establishing a student peer-mentoring project. It focuses on the peer mentoring of at-distance students but is also relevant to on-campus student mentoring, and offers particular guidance in the mentoring of Māori students. The resource includes examples from the pilot *Extramural Student Peer Mentoring Project* established by the Social Work programme at Massey University's Manawatu campus. That project, funded by Ako Aotearoa, led to the development of this resource for use in other student mentoring projects.

Project background

In 2008 we ran a pilot Extramural Student Peer Mentoring Project in the Social Work programme at Massey University in response to the problem of high rates of failure and non-completion among our first year students. The aims of this project were (a) to assist achievement and retention through peer mentoring; (b) to develop a resource for at-distance peer mentoring; (c) to maximise student use of existing university supports; and (d) to extend current research on student achievement and retention.

The problem of non-completion is widely acknowledged by institutions and researchers in New Zealand, and is increasingly a focus of tertiary education policy. Scott and Smart (2005) found that only 40% of domestic students starting a qualification in 1998 had completed after five years; 51% had left after five years without completing, and 9% were still studying towards that qualification¹. The highest level of attrition appears to be among 'non-traditional' tertiary students from groups that have been under-represented in tertiary education².

As a group, our first-year undergraduate extramural social work students conform closely to the profile of non-traditional students who are most 'at-risk' of non-completion³. Our students are often mature and returning to study with very rusty academic skills and no formal school qualifications (or obtained many years ago). Many are Māori and Pasifika students from backgrounds where tertiary education represents a very foreign, inaccessible culture. Many are supported in their study by family, church and employers. The majority are part-time students juggling significant non-study commitments such as paid work, community work and care-giving. As extramural students, most are quite isolated from their peers by distance and, frequently, by limited access to and knowledge about computers and the Internet. Yet, by disposition many of these students would prefer to learn in a group environment. And as students seeking

¹ Scott, David and Warren Smart (2005). *What factors make a difference to getting a degree in New Zealand?* Wellington: Ministry of Education.

² Zepke, N. & L. Leach (2005). Integration and adaptation: Approaches to the student retention and achievement puzzle. *Active Learning in Higher Education* 6 (46).

³ Elliot, A. (2002). Factors affecting first year students' decisions to leave university, in *Changing agendas 'Te Ao Hurihuri', proceedings of the Sixth Pacific Rim Conference on First Year in Higher Education*, 8-10 July 2002, University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand.

practice-based vocational qualifications, many find academic learning quite challenging and have little knowledge of tertiary study skills and institutional expectations.

We ran our pilot peer mentoring project for students in two 100-level papers over two semesters in 2008, employing senior social work students to mentor new at-distance students with the aim of improving retention and achievement rates. Our mentors worked as a team, operating on weekday evenings, communicating with students by phone, email, text, and occasionally in person. We recorded the process, interventions and outcomes. We also evaluated current literature on mentoring and tertiary achievement and retention and integrated it with our findings and this resource.

Summary of findings and overall observations

Our peer mentoring interventions had positive outcomes in terms of achievement and retention, but not entirely in the forms expected! We saw a small improvement (overall 4% of students) in successful *paper* completions by first-year at-distance students (it is too soon to evaluation completion of whole qualifications). The more significant improvement was an increase (overall 8% of students) in rates of formal withdrawals by students, and an equivalent decrease in student DNC levels ('Did Not Complete'). We regard a formal withdrawal from one or more papers as a better outcome than DNC, both in terms of academic and financial penalties, and for prospects of future study. Students who make a positive decision to formally withdraw from some courses, rather than simply 'drop-out' are more likely to successfully complete their remaining study programme; those who withdraw from all study in that semester may also be more likely to 'stop-out' and return to tertiary study at a later date, rather than 'drop-out' and never return⁴.

We can also make a number of observations about student achievement and retention based on our pilot project (the remainder of this resource develops a set of recommendations and directions for peer mentoring)

It quickly became clear from our pilot project that peer-mentoring teams need a well-defined brief. Many of the obstacles to successful completion that students encounter are beyond our control and concern other aspects of students' lives. Our student peer mentors were not professional counsellors; their focus was on study related support although this often had a strong pastoral/social support dimension.

Many of our new students find the academic and institutional environment very foreign; this is particularly so for adult students and Māori and Pasifika students. A key mentoring function is to help students *learn how to learn*, how to be a student and to function within university systems.

Effective mentoring needs to be 'front-end loaded' – focused on early interventions and course planning support, to ensure that new students are ready for study and have manageable study commitments. Accurate, timely course planning and course advice proved critical. Our at-distance students often have *very unrealistic* study workloads, given their other non-study commitments and their lack of experience as students. For

⁴ DesJardins, S., D. Ahlburg and B. McCall (1999) An event history model of student departure. *Economics of Education Review*, 18 (3), pp.375-390.

many students, mentoring support within a paper is insufficient; they actually need course planning assistance and, quite frequently, counselling to reduce their study load. Consequently, our mentors had to work closely with academic administrators on course advice matters. It was also quite apparent that some students were enrolled in full-time study (rather than part-time study) to qualify for student allowances. Such students may be very under-prepared for the demands of study.

Mentoring is time-consuming and resource-intensive; therefore, an effective project needs to be based on clear goals and a plan of interventions that are tailored to the needs of students (see later sections in this Resource). Without clear goals, the resources required and transaction costs are likely to make mentoring work unsustainable. It is often difficult to assess the effectiveness of specific interventions in the short-term. At times, mentors will put considerable time and effort into individual students to limited effect for reasons outside the mentors' control.

Peer mentoring is an approach to supporting student retention and achievement that focuses on providing an affirming and accepting environment⁵. However, mentoring is only ever part of a student retention and achievement strategy. Tertiary institutions can also provide a range of other academic and pastoral supports that address various aspects of students' wellbeing. Institutions can both assist the student to integrate, and modify their own practices to better accommodate diverse students. The remainder of this report focuses on the specifics of establishing a peer mentoring project.

⁵ Rivers, Janet (Ed.) (2005). *Supporting students in tertiary study: A summary of a synthesis of research on the impact of student support services on student outcomes in undergraduate tertiary study*. Wellington: Ministry of Education

Section One: Setting up a peer mentoring project

Selecting and training the peer mentoring team

The ideal mentor has a mix of academic and pastoral skills. Projects will often be based in a particular department and disciplinary area, so that mentors should have up-to-date knowledge of the institution and the course(s) content – we think that, ideally, mentors should be current or recent senior students in the same programme because of their familiarity with the subject area. Such an approach, matching mentors and mentees' content knowledge has been recommended elsewhere⁶, although other mentoring schemes that adopt a one-on-one approach tend to focus on matching age, ethnicity and other variables.

Regular meetings and team interventions mean that mentors should be based locally. Mentors must be able to commit to a project that often requires work out of regular hours, as the team must undertake mentoring when students are most contactable. This is particularly important for at-distance students, many of whom are unavailable during work hours. Mentoring projects, particularly those with research components, require team members with strong IT skills to manage databases, email contacts, and electronic case note reporting.

We intended that students see our mentors as 'peers' and "friendly faces in a totally new situation"⁷ rather than authority figures. In this approach, mentors need to have the skills to quickly establish trust and friendly rapport with students. This rapport is often gained when mentors can establish connections with students through study, work or leisure interests that they have in common – hence, the value of senior students as 'peer' mentors. Rapport-building skills are both natural and learnt; therefore it may be necessary for mentors to have formal training in the interpersonal and counselling aspects of this work.

Mentors may need some formal training, depending on the skills that they bring to the project. Our mentors were senior social work students, with relevant skills in counselling and interpersonal processes, so that our formal training focused on the basic technical skills required, and on the particular objectives of the project. The technical skills include:

1. Good familiarity with institutional databases and administrative systems
2. Telephony skills, including inputting passwords, transferring calls, muting, and conference calling.
3. Keeping case notes – using databases to record case notes in a concise, relevant and non-judgemental form.
4. Keeping field notes - what should be recorded and why.

⁶ Thomas, J., M. Casey and S. Houston (2006). *Peer mentoring: A support strategy moulded by students for students*. University of Surrey; Phillips, R. (2006). Research to investigate peer mentoring in UK higher education. *Link 15*, Journal of the UK Higher Education Academy, pp.16-17.

⁷ Ibid:16.

Mentors need a clear understanding of the project objectives and design, as this helps to focus their mentoring interventions. A briefing on the project should be held in advance of the semester, addressing the following:

1. The full name and working title of the project
2. Funding source
3. The project objectives
4. Statistics relating to the interventions
5. Relevant literature on peer mentoring models and frameworks
6. A calendar of academic dates and planned interventions
7. The roles of supervisor, mentors and other key stakeholders
8. Ethics and confidentiality
9. Expected attitude when engaging students
10. (If in paid employment) pay periods, time sheets and other administration.

Further short briefings should be held prior to each 'phone team' session to address specifics of the session.

We recommend that mentors be compensated in some way for their work, either through paid employment or otherwise. This is particularly important where most mentoring demands attendance out-of-hours in 'call-centre' style projects. We acknowledge that effective peer-mentoring can also be based on volunteer-type schemes⁸, where the rewards for mentors may be more reciprocal and vocational.

Working to a semester-based timetable for peer mentoring

Mentoring projects should offer regular student support across the whole period of study, in a form and at a time that meet students' needs while aligning with institutional deadlines. At least four points of contact are critical to successful mentoring:

1. Pre-semester and early semester contact

Early contact with students is important for establishing a genuine connection and to identify any potential barriers to study. If possible, students should be contacted prior to the course start date to allow time for course changes, and to work with the student on time management, and minimising any possible barriers to study.

2. Assignment submission

Contact up to one month prior to submission of the first assignment allows mentors to assess students' understanding of the assignment task. Where students lack necessary academic skills, mentors can then ensure that students are accessing academic supports such as a student learning centre.

3. Non-submission of first assignment

Immediately following the due date of the first assignment a report should be

⁸ Stewart, J., Rawhiti, L. (2004). Creating tertiary retention programmes for indigenous peoples in NZ moving toward a holistic approach: incentives, outcomes and issues raised by the variety of programmes at Victoria University of Wellington, NZ. *Journal of Australian and New Zealand Student Support Services Association*, No. 24, 26-46.

generated to identify students who have not completed and have not been granted an extension. These students are tagged and then become a priority for mentor contact by telephone. When enquiring about non-submission, mentors should aim to be supportive and to 'trouble-shoot' issues, using careful questions that elicit solutions from the student, e.g. "So what needs to happen for that assignment to be completed?"

4. **Withdrawal dates**

When students are assessed as being at-risk of non-completion, mentors should contact students to discuss options for reducing study loads and, if possible, for withdrawals without financial and academic penalties (see the section below on Identifying and Assessing At-Risk Students). Scripting should encourage students to realistically assess their study commitments. Mentors should aim to be authoritative and directive where necessary, in order to give students confidence in the decision to reduce their study to manageable loads.

Reporting and evaluating the project

Reporting and project evaluation are important to future success, and consequently, any decisions about record-keeping requirements should be made before peer mentoring commences. Areas of reporting depend on the project aims (e.g. is it a pilot? An ongoing project where trends are important? Is it also intended to produce publishable research?). Reports are likely to include statistics on student grades and completions. Qualitative data, both from mentors and students (quotes, testimonials, emails) should be collected throughout the project in order to assess the effectiveness of interventions.

Setting up operations

Systems for peer mentoring of at-distance students differ from on-campus student mentoring in two important ways: Firstly, most mentoring takes place remotely, via phone, email, texts, e-learning forums such as *WebCT*, *Blackboard* and *Moodle*, and written letters. Secondly, the bulk of mentoring inevitably takes place outside daytime work hours, on weekday evenings or weekends when students are most contactable.

Hours of work

Our assumption is that peer mentors are employed or otherwise compensated for the mentoring task. As a rough guide, we estimate that a team of one supervisor (10-15 hours per week), and three mentors (4-5 hours per week each) could provide a comprehensive peer mentoring support for 75-100 students. That support is based on one evening's mentoring (3 hours) and a 1-2 hour period of follow-up emailing/texting each week. Clearly the work level for mentors will vary over the study period as assignments and exams come and go. Where exclusion decisions are made throughout the semester, this gradually reduces the number of students to be mentored, so that a higher ratio than 25 students to each mentor may be workable.

The peer mentoring team also requires general administrative support from the departmental administrators or elsewhere.

Project administration

The administrative task of running a peer mentoring project, particularly in its first year of operation, should not be underestimated! Mentoring requires considerable time and this relies heavily on well-established connections and support with departmental and academic administrators.

The physical location of an at-distance peer mentoring team should be in a shared 'call-centre' style space, with computers, phones and access to the student database records. The timing of access to such a space (e.g. in evenings) may dictate its availability, so that mentoring may have to fit around other uses of the same space. The storage and movement of confidential information is a risk factor, and ideally a peer mentoring team would be physically located within the department running the project.

Tools for intervention

Establishing a student database

A computerised master database is necessary for recording student details and status of students in the project (e.g. at-risk, behind on assignments, on target), and institutional status (e.g. withdrawn). Databases must be updated as new information is obtained, including changed contact details, preferred names, attendance at classes, tutorials and on-campus courses.

Identifying and assessing at-risk students

Each mentoring project can establish its own criteria for identifying at-risk students. However, most at-risk students fall into a few common categories – many of which can be flagged as potential indicators in advance from institutional student records. Clear indicators of at-risk students have been established in the New Zealand literature⁹, and are supported by our experiences in the pilot Student Peer Mentoring Project. Those at-risk factors include:

- Extramural / at-distance study
- Māori and Pasifika ethnicity
- High study workload for at-distance students (*i.e.* more than two papers)
- No record of recent tertiary study or formal school qualifications
- Mature students (particularly over 40)
- Having a default email address supplied by the institution (this could indicate a lack of internet and email access)
- A prior academic record indicating non-completion or failing grades

Once the study semester is under way, students can often be quickly identified as at-risk from the following factors:

- Non-submission of the first assignment

⁹See for example, Leach, L. and N. Zepke (2005). *Student decision-making by prospective tertiary students: A review of existing New Zealand and overseas literature*. Report to the Ministry of Education; Scott, David (2005). Retention, Completion and Progression in Tertiary Education. *New Zealand Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, Vol. 27, No. 1, March 2005, pp. 3–17; Scott, David and Warren Smart (2005). *What factors make a difference to getting a degree in New Zealand?* Wellington: Ministry of Education.

- Non-attendance at classes and on-campus courses
- Unable to be contacted by mentors or will not return calls and emails

When contacted by mentors, students will often self-report on difficulties with study; excessive study load and the problem of juggling study with other commitments, and a lack of confidence in their academic ability and skills. Mentors should also seek to foster good relationships with academic staff, so that staff will be ready to refer students for support.

Using a wall planner to schedule interventions

The schedule for mentoring activities is dictated by the institution's timetable and by course assignment due dates¹⁰. A yearly academic wall planner is a great way to highlight key dates and provides a visual reminder of upcoming deadlines and cut-off dates. A template of interventions can then be developed as the basis for planning of peer mentoring team activities. A clear plan allows for appropriate staff training and resource preparation that are tailored to student needs.

Key institutional relationships

Administrative services

Relationships and communication between the mentoring team and the tertiary institution's administrative services are very important. The core relationship is within the academic programme(s) that are supported by the mentors. Other important relationships are with the academic administrators responsible for enrolment and withdrawal processes, assignment collection and dispatch services, contact centres, and information technology support services.

Student services

Student mentors need to establish strong relationships with academic student services including the library, student learning support services, and pastoral supports including medical and counselling services. Informing those services of the mentoring team's project will help to maintain strong relationships and will encourage those services to respond quickly to student enquiries and requests for support.

Avoiding duplication of service provision

It is difficult to avoid situations where mentoring projects provide services that partly duplicate those provided elsewhere within the institution. For example, mentors will sometimes provide course advice that students have already or subsequently gained from another office. Duplication cannot be avoided but can be minimised by negotiating which services will be offered and by whom, and in what instances students will be referred on. At times it may be tempting to react to a student's need, rather than refer to appropriate existing services. However the scope of the peer mentoring project and limitations of budget and staffing are likely to mean that the project services must be kept to manageable levels.

¹⁰ See the earlier section on '*Working to a semester-based timetable*' for suggested key dates.

Section One – Summary of key points

- We recommend that mentors be 'peers' who are both friendly faces and familiar with course content, ideally a senior student who is able to establish rapport with students. Mentors need sound IT skills, accurate practices, and the ability to learn technical skills such as telephony.
- We recommend that peer mentors are paid or otherwise compensated for at-distance mentoring, because of the scale of the commitment required and the out-of-hours time demands.
- There are four critical periods of support during semester; pre-semester and early semester contact; assignment submission; non-submission of first assignment; and withdrawal dates.
- Setup of operations requires a high level of administrative support – not to be underestimated.
- Robust mentoring requires good databases, a system for assessing at-risk students, and a working calendar and timetable for interventions.
- Key institutional relationships for mentors are with administrative and student services. Aim to reduce or avoid duplication of service provision where possible.

Section Two: Working with students

Supporting student motivation

Students are motivated by a range of factors, including regular attendance and/or contact with their institution. Mentoring provides one means by which students can be supported to maintain their motivation. Most students are appreciative of mentoring contacts and are eager to engage in conversations about their studies and will ask for advice and support. A minority of students will disengage and become evasive and brusque – often because their study is not going well. In those instances persistence sometimes pays off for mentors, but peer mentoring teams must also recognise that many student problems are outside their brief. Occasionally, a student will declare that they are fully independent in their study, but those students are exceptional.

Addressing personal problems

Students often cite a range of personal problems that impact on their ability to study. Mentors cannot 'fix' these problems, but an overview of the personal factors that impact on students will help mentors to support the student to focus on study. Students often have many other commitments besides study, such as voluntary work, child-caring and elder-care responsibilities. Health problems frequently arise, as do difficulties with personal relationships. Once mentors are aware of these obstacles to study, they can support students to establish realistic goals and study programmes. Where appropriate, mentors should provide guidance on reducing study loads and can refer students to allied support services. Mentors can initiate these often difficult conversations with questions such as "What gets in the way of your study?" or "What else do you have on besides study?"

Managing study goals

Manageability is the key concept in relation to study workloads. As students become experienced at study, most will learn about the study load that is realistic for their situation. As new students, however, many will enrol in unrealistically high study loads, perhaps because they want to complete a qualification in the minimum of time, or to be eligible for financial assistance. Not infrequently, at-distance students enrol in full time study while working, adding study to already very busy lives. As a general rule, we have found that new at-distance students who are enrolled in more than two papers are less likely to pass. Whether on-campus or at-distance, it is important to assess students' other commitments (including work, home, sport and church) as early as possible and advise students on manageable study loads. Mentors should aim to advise students who have a high level of extracurricular commitments to begin with a modest study load that is achievable, and that allows them to build study skills and become familiar with the study process. Early success in study will aid retention, while early failure will often lead to non-completion.

Mentors as peers, not authority figures

Most students will readily seek advice and support from staff who they perceive to be their peers, and are less likely to contact those considered 'authority figures', such as course coordinators and lecturers. Mentors can make use of their more approachable status to elicit information on problems with study, and to act as a go-between for students and academic staff while building students' confidence to approach lecturers

directly. When recruiting mentors, project leaders should consider whether they are likely to be seen by students as peers, rather than as academic staff. We recommend current senior students or recent graduates act as mentors.

Working with Māori students

Māori participation in the tertiary sector is growing, both at the undergraduate and postgraduate level. However Māori students generally do less well than non-Māori and often require specific interventions to be effectively supported. Perhaps most importantly, many Māori students will respond more positively to mentoring where an ongoing genuine connection with mentors is established. Where mentoring is a series of discrete interventions (particularly with different mentors) it is unlikely to be very successful. An approach to peer mentoring as an ongoing friendly relationship will strike a strong chord with Māori students in terms of *whakawhanaungatanga*¹¹ and *manaakitanga*¹².

We recommend that mentors spend time making connections with Māori students – where possible by establishing common interests in study, sports, family connections and suchlike. Mentors should seek to establish common interests before proceeding to more formal project objectives. Such an approach certainly takes time, but it is important to allow the process to unfold, and to establish a strong connection before the more focused mentoring work is done. Our Māori mentors reported that it was ‘second nature’ to make these connections, although some non-Māori mentors may need support in developing this culturally aware approach.

Overall Māori students are likely to want to discuss a range of topics beyond study, including *tangihanga*¹³, marae commitments, upcoming family celebrations and commitments and for older Māori, discussion about their *mokopuna*¹⁴ is inevitable! When supporting Māori students, mentors need to allow time for these discussions. Such conversations will provide important insights for mentors into the levels of extracurricular commitments and responsibilities that Māori students often have.

Applying peer mentoring principles and roles

In our pilot Student Peer Mentoring Project it quickly became apparent that our mentors needed a clear understanding of the project design and of the principles and roles underpinning the project. Without that clarity, our mentors would waste valuable time and risked making inappropriate interventions.

Peer mentoring principles

Our principles, informed by a ‘community development’ approach¹⁵ were as follows:

¹¹ Connection

¹² Care

¹³ Funeral

¹⁴ Grandchildren

¹⁵ Munford, R. & Walsh-Tapiata, W. (1999). *Strategies for change: Community development in Aotearoa/New Zealand*. School of Social Policy and Social Work. Massey University: Palmerston North

1. Provide warm, friendly mentoring contacts, consistent with the principle of *manaakitanga*. Mentoring cannot occur without the willing engagement of the student. Thus, mentors were instructed to aim to establish rapport with students, and be helpful in all their dealings. Mentors were asked to minimise comments that could be construed as negative, for example, in situations of non-submission of an assignment the mentor's initial question might be "where are you at with your assignment?" or 'what's holding up your progress in getting your assignment done?' rather than a more judgemental question 'why haven't you done your assignment?' or 'when are you going to submit?'
2. Connect our students to existing support services, to staff, and to other students, consistent with the principle of *whakawhanaungatanga*. We actively encouraged students to maintain contact with their lecturers, and to other students through study groups. We also sought to establish a semester-long relationship between students and the mentoring team.
3. Support the achievement of social justice for students by defining issues for students and then identify strategies for change and improvement; and by seeking ways to help overcome the oppression of students.
4. Manage our peer mentoring project in ways that are accountable and transparent, and open to scrutiny.

Mentoring roles

Our mentoring roles were based on established social work roles, as befitted our disciplinary home in Social Work & Social Policy. Those five roles were:

1. Peer mentoring students, *e.g.* guiding students through assignments; providing information on how to access support services.
2. Advocating on behalf of students with staff and services, *e.g.* students will sometimes be unwilling to make contact with their course co-ordinator to ask for an extension. Given our focus on supporting new students, mentors may advocate by emailing the course co-ordinator directly and including the student in the email.
3. Taking a brokerage role, *e.g.* students will sometimes fall behind at an early stage in their course of study. In such situations, the mentor can liaise with academic administrators to seek a withdrawal and later re-enrolment, thereby providing a fresh opportunity for the student.
4. Networking and maintaining connections with relevant student support services, so that student referral is quick and easy.
5. An education role, so that students can make informed choices about administrative issues such as enrolments, study loads and withdrawals.

These five roles address the individual requirements of students and are also informed by a 'strengths-based' approach¹⁶ that considers the relationship between the assets that students bring to study and their success in study. New students (particularly those from minority cultures) often express the tension between their identification as a student, and the multitude of external commitments that draw attention away from their studies. Peer mentoring systems can encourage students to believe and accept their role of students, so that they take full advantage of the institutional supports that are available. Through mentoring, the institution can recognise the diverse needs of students and *adapt* to suit those needs, rather than simply seek to *integrate and assimilate* the student¹⁷. Mentoring then becomes part of a process of '*dual socialisation*'¹⁸, in which the institution welcomes diversity and adapts to the culture of minority students, thus allowing students to function effectively in the two worlds that are present for them: their cultural and social backgrounds from which their cultural capital (habits, values, manners and learning styles) arise; and the institutional academic culture.

Section Two – Summary of key points

- Mentors should aim to identify motivators and barriers to student achievement and retention. The most common de-motivators are excessive study loads, lack of organisation, and personal problems.
- Students will relate well to mentors when they see them as peers rather than authority figures.
- Many Māori students have needs that can be addressed through manaakitanga and whanaungatanga. Mentors should aim to establish genuine, ongoing connections with Māori students.
- Clear principles and roles need to be established for a peer mentoring project.
- A 'strengths-based' mentoring approach focuses on the skills that students have, encourages resiliency in continued study, and seeks to bring students into the tertiary culture in a way that is safe and that acknowledges their own cultural values.

¹⁶ Unger, M. (2006). Nurturing hidden resilience in at-risk youth in different cultures. *Journal of the Canadian Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*. (15)2, p. 53-58.

¹⁷ Zepke, N. & L. Leach (2005). Integration and adaptation: Approaches to the student retention and achievement puzzle. *Active Learning in Higher Education* 6 (46).

¹⁸ Elliot, A. (2002). Factors affecting first year students' decisions to leave university, in *Changing agendas 'Te Ao Hurihuri', Proceedings of the Sixth Pacific Rim Conference on First Year in Higher Education*, 8-10 July 2002, University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand.

Section Three: Beginning peer mentoring

Promoting a peer mentoring project

Promoting a peer mentoring project to all stakeholders helps to ensure that the services are well-taken up by students. A project can be effectively promoted by writing to students, staff and other stakeholders (see *Appendix One – Letter to introduce Student Peer Mentoring Project*). An introductory letter for students should be collegial and somewhat informal. Other avenues for promotion include e-learning forums such as *WebCT*, *Blackboard* and *Moodle*, email, and notices in class and on-campus.

Once students are aware of a mentoring project they are more likely to welcome the first individual approach by mentors, particularly if phone calls and emails have strong, 'positive' scripting.

Regular email updates and reporting to staff also promotes ongoing engagement and helps to establish the legitimacy and accountability of the project.

Types of engagement with students

Once the initial letter has been received, telephone contact with at-distance students is most likely to be effective, although texts, emails, letters and cards are all useful. When possible, face to face contact between mentor and student can be valuable. Contacts can be allocated to mentors by their supervisor, along with information about the purpose of any intervention (See *Appendix Two: Allocation of contacts for phone team*). The engagement with students can be outlined in a briefing at the start of each mentoring session (See *Appendix Three: Briefing to mentors on Week Two of semester*).

It is important to establish a link between the student and mentors, if possible based on common interests and experiences, e.g. students appreciate hearing about mentors' experiences of being a student. The aim is to establish a comfortable relationship between students and mentors.

Telephone

Telephone contact with at-distance students is very effective. A mentor can expect to average 4-6 calls per hour (including recording case notes), though experienced telephone mentors may make upward of 12-14 calls.

Students will usually enquire about issues such as paper content, programme and course advice and student services. Students may also want information such as assurances about academic staff, perhaps wanting to know 'what they are like' or 'if they are friendly'.

1. Skills in interviewing and assessing

Inter-personal skills are needed by mentors to establish rapport and trust. Such skills include active listening, ability to paraphrase, showing genuine interest and concern

and being non-judgemental. Once information is gained, a good interviewer can then make an accurate assessment of students' needs as well as easily following new lines of enquiry.

2. Strong closure routines

Once a student feels comfortable with a mentor, they will often want to extend their talk time to include non study related topics. This engagement can quickly use up valuable mentoring team resources, even while it may seem important – particularly to the isolated at-distance students. It is essential that mentors can balance competing demands, so that the purpose of the call is achieved, and the student feels the contact is genuine, but the call is not unnecessarily lengthy (*See Appendix Four: Closure scripts*).

Email

Email is probably the most efficient way to contact students. Email does not engage students, *i.e.* creating a dialogue, but it can be used to encourage and advise and to seek a response. Bulk emails provide a means for disseminating critical information. To capture student interest, emails should be short, relevant and well-timed for academic deadlines. To get a response from students, an email should include a clear question.

Some institutions will provide students with an institutional default email. If this is the only email address that a student has, it may not be an effective means of contact, and further provision for contact may be needed either by text, telephone or letter.

Letters

Bulk letters are a good way to make initial contact with students (*see Appendix One – Letter to introduce Student Peer Mentoring Project*). Bear in mind however, that institutional mail is often regarded as junk mail by students, and may be discarded without reading. When an at-distance student is isolated from internet and telephone access, ongoing written letters provide an acceptable alternative.

Greeting cards or postcards

Cards are a light-hearted, friendly form of contact with students. Cards can be sent to congratulate a student on a good grade, or to wish them well on an upcoming assignment or exam. Cards in non-institutional envelopes are rarely discarded, making this an effective means of connecting with a hard-to-contact student.

Face to face contact with at-distance students

Face to face contact with at-distance students is very rewarding, but difficult to organise due to students' differing times on campus, and the varying availability of mentors. The easiest time to organise a general 'meet and greet' is during on-campus courses. These times at least allow students to "put a face to the name/voice" and to further establish a relationship. More intensive office visits by at-distance students with mentors and staff can be very worthwhile and should be encouraged.

Communities of learning for on-campus and at-distance students

The establishment of communities of learning in the form of independent, student-run study groups can greatly motivate students and extend their learning. Groups can be based remotely on email or e-learning forums such as *Moodle* and *WebCT*, or in

localities where a critical mass of students reside, or on-campus. Just three or four motivated students will sustain a study group. Be wary though – students will frequently express an initial interest in study groups but not maintain any commitment. Mentors can facilitate study groups by inviting students to join, and can offer advice on how to run groups. Mentors can offer to remain available to provide ongoing support.

SMS bulk texting

A good bulk text needs to be unambiguously short and to the point, relevant to all students, and with a ‘text back’ prompt. We suggest that bulk texting only be used once students are aware of the mentoring project and only to send simple messages, e.g. reminders about assignment deadlines and ‘good luck’ messages for exams.

Individual texting

Students often give clear guidance on their preferred methods of contact. While most at-distance students enjoy telephone contacts and follow up emails, almost all students are well-connected to their mobile phones! Individual texting is a good option for providing students with *brief*, relevant and timely mentoring contacts that address their specific circumstances. Individual texting is best undertaken via an SMS/Skype system that allows keyboard typing of text messages, displayed on a computer screen.

Resources and templates for project administration

A calendar of academic dates

A wall planner provides a visual reminder of key academic dates, including on-campus ‘block’ courses, enrolment and withdrawal deadlines, semester breaks and school holidays, exams, mentoring team schedules, graduation, and course assignment dates. A planner allows for timely organisation of interventions and helps to establish the focus for the mentoring team week to week. Students often enquire about academic deadlines during phone conversations, so that a wall planner allows mentors to provide a quick response.

A master list of student-related resources and services

Many students have needs that are beyond the mentors’ brief and that require referral to student services or university staff. An electronic list of resources and services should be maintained, so mentors can easily cut and paste and send relevant details to students via email. Each listing should include the name of the service and full contact details, and where appropriate, short explanations for the frequently-used services (e.g. how to access exam scripts online, or internet links to resources such as referencing sites).

Scripting for email and phone contacts

At important points in the academic year it is helpful to send reminders and encouragement to students via email or texts. An effective email or text script is carefully-worded, timely, short and relevant and will be seen as useful by the student.

It is good practice to send a follow-up email to every telephone call, especially when contact could not be made with the student via telephone (See *Appendix Five: An*

example of a follow-up email to a non-contactable student. Such scripting saves time and ensures a consistent message is given to students).

Using case notes and field notes

Mentors' case notes provide a vital record of student contacts that can be referred to at later stages. Case notes can be stored according to two criteria 1) generic information on student contacts and 2) personal information.

1. Generic information about a contact with a student is best recorded directly on the institutional student records. Care should be taken with the choice of information stored here; the record should be short, avoid personal information, and should include the mentor's name and contact details should other staff want to follow up. A prompt of potential future action provides a reference to mentors for follow up action. An example would be:

"Student contact via telephone was unsuccessful. No reply. Follow-up email sent encouraging student to make email contact. If student has not made contact by [date] then another phone call will be made. [Mentor name and contact details]"

2. Personal information offered by students and personal observations about students by mentors can be stored electronically but should be barred from general access. These records are best filed by student name and ID (see Appendix Six: Casenote template). For example:

"Student is experiencing work place bullying that is detracting from studies. She is addressing this problem directly and is well supported by family members. Her next assignment requires an extension and an email has been sent to the paper co-ordinator, copied to the student, requesting this."

Field notes are also a useful way of tracking mentoring interventions and provide both detailed statistics and a rich written resource for project evaluation. Such field notes are particularly important where the project has a research component, as the complexity of the project is easily forgotten or information mislaid over the course of a project. Field notes also provide a means for mentors to reflect on their practices. Here is an example of a field note from the Massey University Student Peer Mentoring Project:

Name: [mentor name]

Date: 27 February 2008

Time: 1730 - 2030

Location: Te Putahi a Toi – Te Rau Puawai room

This was our first mentoring evening. I initially felt nervous, anxious and excited about this new journey. When I made most of the calls (14), the students seemed cold at first; however when I had notified them of who I was and what this project was, they settled down. Two of these students I have decided to flag. Reasons for this are:

- *One is taking 8 papers for their Certificate and they are currently on ACC, recovering from an arm operation*
- *One is a stay at home mother. She is only able to study while her children are not around.*
- *Both were feeling nervous and unsure of the processes for their papers.*

All of the callers I have spoken with have access to the internet and one stated they have accessed WebCT and was encouraged to know that she was not the only mature student studying. Two of them were excited that there was going to be someone who was going to keep regular contact throughout the paper. All of the students I spoke with were happy to receive text messages throughout the semester and were relaxed about the other mediums of communication.

Section Three – Summary of key points

- A peer mentoring project should be well-promoted from its beginning stages in order to establish good working relationships with students and other stakeholders such as staff and support services.
- Face to face, one-on-one mentoring is most effective, but is often not possible. For at-distance students, telephone and email mentoring is most suitable, supported by additional forms of communication such as cards, texts and letters.
- Mentors should facilitate opportunities for students to work together in study groups.
- Scripting of mentoring contacts provides consistency of practice and a reassuring resource for mentors.
- Essential tools include a calendar of events and important academic dates, and a master list of student-related resources and services.
- Well planned scripts and templates provide consistency in mentoring messages to students.
- All contacts should be recorded and field notes made by mentors.

Conclusion

Peer mentoring is challenging, but can be hugely rewarding! As academic staff, we are committed to supporting our students to succeed and continue with their studies. Often, students experience barriers to study that are outside our control. But, we're equally sure that most new students will go on to be successful returning students if they can acquire the skills for achieving in an academic institutional setting. That's where effective peer mentoring comes into the picture.

Based on our experiences, we see the following elements as essential to a good student peer mentoring project:

- Clear objectives that inform a comprehensive semester-long plan of interventions.
- Clear principles and roles that underpin actions and interventions and prevent a haphazard reactive approach to the project's work.
- Considerable time and resources to devote to the setup of a peer mentoring project – it is important to be generous with the budget and to have some funds for unexpected demands, and to not underestimate the resources required!
- Well trained mentors with the drive to provide friendly, helpful support to students.
- Strong administrative support, particularly in project implementation, and particularly with IT systems.
- A confidential, comfortable team space in which to run a regular phone and email mentoring team.
- Accurate electronic records of student contacts, both on the institutional system, and in protected systems storing personal and confidential information that is only accessible to the mentoring team.
- Ongoing relationships between mentors and key staff and services, which reduce duplication of supports and minimise the 'spamming' of students with information.
- Proactive mentoring that focuses on the strengths each student brings to their study, and supports students to build resiliency and complete under the weight of other commitments.

Kia kaha, good luck with your mentoring project, it's worth it!

Appendix One: Letter to introduce Student Peer Mentoring Project

STUDENT PEER MENTORING PROJECT for Students in 179.110 Community and Social Work Practice and 179.101 Social Policy: An Introduction

Kia ora and welcome!!



Your Mentoring Team:

Tepora Pukepuke

D.E.Pukepuke@massey.ac.nz, x2812

Michelle Chinn

M.R.Chinn@massey.ac.nz

Selina Moore

S.Moore1@massey.ac.nz

We are a small team of mentors whose task it is to support you in your studies. If you have any questions about study, you can just email us and we will try to help. Students often ask us about things like referencing, assignments, and how to contact lecturers. Sometimes students just want to talk about stuff that's slowing down their study. We mainly use phone and email.

We'd like to tell you about our Project. Our aim is to support all 100-level extramural students (yourself) enrolled in 179.110 *Community and Social Work Practice I* and 179.101 *Social Policy: An Introduction*. At the end of the year we will also provide some recommendations on how to help students pass these papers and how to support students to carry on with further study.

Here's a little bit about us:

Tepora Pukepuke – Ko Tuhoe me Whakatohea nga Iwi. My social work experience was with CYF for many years, and I was heavily involved in NZ Disabled Snowsports. I've been both an internal and extramural student, taking one paper per semester! I've graduated with the BSW and I'm still studying!! I live with my teenage son here in Palmy.

Selina Moore – Kia ora Koutou, Ko Mamari te waka, Ko Te Ramaroa te maunga, Ko Ngapuhi te iwi, No Whirinaki ahau. I have whanau that live throughout North Island, but I'm from Auckland.. I'm a 4th year BSW student, and this semester I've got my final placement @ CYF and then I'm finished! I like cycling, working with young people and socialising. At times I've struggled with study but had support when times got hard. Now I'm excited about helping you with your study.

Michelle Chinn – I am completing the BSW this year. I was born in the far north in a place called Kaitaia, raised on a small farm in Fordell, which is about half an hour from Wanganui and then moved to Palmy after High School. I love the beach and taking pictures. I'm looking forward to getting to know you and hope it goes well for you.

Contact us by phone or email if you have any questions.... nga mihi kia koutou

Tepora ☺

Michelle ☺

Selina ☺

Appendix Two: Allocation of contacts for phone team

Allocation of contacts for 6th August 2009 Week Four of Semester

[Mentor One]

1. Please email all 'flagged' students allocated to you. Try to ask a question that gains a response, e.g. "what sort of support might help you to get a better grade?"
2. [student without internet or email access] – write letter to tell her she got C+ for assignment and needs help with grammar and spelling.
3. [student without internet or email access] – can you please write to him too?
4. [rural student wanting support with literacy] – She will no longer require our support, I've referred her to Adult Literacy.

[Mentor Two]

1. Please email all 'flagged' students allocated to you and flagged. Try to ask a question that gains a response, e.g. "what sort of support might help you to get a better grade?"
2. Please email all the 'unflagged' students allocated to you and I (not including the flagged ones) to see how things are with them.
3. [student who hasn't been contacted recently] – I don't know how she's going, maybe a quick call?
4. Can you identify some others that you haven't heard from and give them a call?
5. [student who had submitted work which required more attention] – She is in the middle of a remark for assignment one, so no need to contact.

[Supervising Mentor]

1. [student who had identified pregnancy status] check on how she's getting on with her work.

Appendix Three: Briefing to mentors on Week Two of semester

23rd July 2009 – Week Two of Semester Two

We have 148 students, 101 are enrolled in 179.101 and 77 in 179.110. 52 students are Māori.

Last week allowed us to come together for the first time as a team, and this week we are getting into the work. A list of students have been flagged and allocated to each of you. Our focus is on making personal contacts via phone and making a written record of that contact (Case Notes are to be emailed to me at the end of mentoring team session).

Case note recording must include:

- **Student name and ID.**
- **Brief description of home and work situation.**
- **Study status – work they have begun, barriers to study, etc.**
- **Action required for the student, if any.**

There are three more working days for Withdrawal Without Financial or Academic Penalty, so if students are considering WD, please encourage them to act immediately by transferring them to the call centre and tell them to leave a message with their name, Student ID and that they want to WD. Massey Contact will call them back the next day.

As with last week, please assess those students flagged as being more at risk. This week students were flagged by ethnicity, or as needing follow-up from last week. Notes from last week are available.

Assess risk criteria

- Study load (how many papers are they enrolled in?)
- Access to email?
- Paid work commitments?
- Any other key commitments?
- Potential barriers to study (e.g. young children, sick whanau, church or sport, stressful job)?

Encourage students to:

- Access WebCT and introduce themselves to other students.
- Diarise all assignment dates.
- Load their paper co-ordinator's email address onto their computer.

Script

- Hello, this is a support call for your social policy/social work paper. My name is OR Hi.... You got a call from the phone team last week, what's happened since last week?
- What do you think will make it hard for you to study this semester?
- Do you have good access to email?
- Where are you up to with your first assignment?
- What questions have you got about this paper, or about Massey?

Appendix Four: Closure scripts

(Note the large font to make scripting easy for mentors to read while on the phone)

These are suggested scripts where the purpose of the call has been achieved but the student is reluctant to end the call:

- Attempt to close the conversation by using minimal encouragers such as “um” or “OK”
- Try a statement such as “I better let you go”
- If students persist in talking, consider summarising what you believe are their main issues, for example “From our talk tonight it sounds as if your work has been taking a big priority, I wish you well with sorting this out so you can study more.”
- This summary can be followed with a clear statement of your intention to end the call “Well, I’m going to have to go now, I have many other students to contact”.
- If the student still engages, you can add a short comment such as “My supervisor wants a word with me, I have to go” or “I’ll send you an email now so that you can keep me up to date with your circumstances”.
- If necessary, pass the phone to your supervisor who can end the call.

Here’s some nice feedback sent to us by a student in Week One: “Thanks for the remote support - you were the first person I met from Massey and it’s made the whole study experience very personalised and easy for me!”

Appendix Five: Example of a follow-up email to a non-contactable student

Example of email sent in 2008 - This email was sent to a student in response to an earlier email contact by the student. This email was sent immediately after a phone call failed to establish contact.

Staff member

Sent: Wednesday, 12 March 2008 7:09 p.m.

To: [student name]@yahoo.com

Tēnā koe [student name],

I've left a message on your phone. It's great to see you are pacing your study nicely. Well done.

The School of Health and Social Services is running a Student Mentoring Project (SMP) this year for the introductory social policy paper, and the social and community work practice paper.

If you are feeling overwhelmed by your paper and think you need to withdraw, please ensure that you do so before 24th April. If you do withdraw before then, you will not incur an academic penalty and it will look better on your academic record.

[Staff member] is the Paper Co-ordinator for Social Policy and she wants to encourage you to get onto WebCT as often as possible and post messages. If you are not able to meet an assignment deadline then contact [staff member] (email is best) to request an extension. You must do this before the due date! Assignment One is due on Friday 21st March.

Lastly, please register for your 179.110 Contact Course which is on 31st March - 1st April. This course will be well worth attending and will be very enjoyable. To register, just call 0800 MASSEY.

Mauriora

[Staff member], Student Mentoring Team

Appendix Six: Casenote template

A casenote requires pertinent information and requires enough detail for a reader at another time to understand the key points. To this end a casenote requires:

- The students' name
- Student ID
- Name of the recorder/mentor
- Date of the casenote
- Date of the contact with student
- Type of contact
- Key points
- Action to be taken
- Any observations

Below is an example of a project casenote likely to be held in personal electronic records, rather than the institutional student records.

Tania Toolittle

83777646

3/4/2008

Today the student was contacted via phone regarding her outstanding assignment. She reported she had finished her first draft and had sent this to Student Learning Services for pre-reading. I advised her to schedule 2-3 hours to make any editing changes and then to post it to the distance education office. She did not have an assignment cover sheet and I have emailed her the website link. She thanked me and said she 'feels on top of things now' and will use the pre-reading service again now that she knows about it.

It will be good to follow up with the student records next week to ensure the assignment has been received. If not then we should contact the student at the next phone team night.

The student has made noticeable progress in completing assignment, and is now accessing appropriate support services.

[Phone team mentor]