The Student Peer Mentoring Program at Victoria University

Victoria University: Gill Best, Darko Hajzler and Belinda McLennan

The Institutional Context

Victoria University has grown from its beginnings as a technical college in 1916 to being one of only five multisector universities in Australia. A multisector university is defined as one that incorporates courses for vocational, further, and higher education. Vocational and further education programs are equivalent to courses found in community and technical colleges in the United States. The higher education sector offers traditional undergraduate and postgraduate bachelor's degrees, masters by coursework, and research masters and PhDs.

In 2009, 55,572 students enrolled at VU, with 47,371 onshore, 20,151 in higher education, and 27,190 in vocational and further education. VU is a commuter university. It has 11 campuses located in the central business district and western suburbs of Melbourne, the capital of the state of Victoria. Melbourne's western suburbs are characterized by their lower socioeconomic status population compared with the east of Melbourne, and its cultural diversity has grown rapidly as successive waves of refugees and migrants have settled in the region. In 2007, 40% of VU's Australian students reported the use of a language other than English at home (Messinis, Sheehan & Miholcic 2008). Many of the students are the first in their families to attend university "and about 75% of students in the University come from families in the bottom half of Melbourne's socioeconomic distribution" (Messinis et al, p. 6).

The University College

The Victoria University College (VUC) was created in 2007 to maximize access and success for its students. The VUC incorporates courses and staff from each of the vocational, further, and higher education sectors, providing nationally accredited courses in English language, access, preparation, transition (transfer), and further education. In addition, the VUC coordinates and runs non-accredited institutional programs and initiatives to support students' English language and learning needs. One of these programs is the Student Peer Mentoring Program (SPMP), which is part of Students Supporting Student Learning (S3L), a wider, new student peer-learning initiative driven by the VUC (McCormack, Best, & Kirkwood, 2009).

The Student Peer Mentoring Program

The SPMP consists of a variety of group-based, face-to-face student peer mentoring programs located within and sometimes across faculties and sectors. One staff member of the VUC has an overall coordination role for the SPMP and is aided in this role by the manager of Counselling Services. The SPMP coordinator in the VUC works collaboratively with staff members to devise, maintain, develop, and assess the programs, including the conduct of student mentor training sessions and student mentor support. The SPMP has evolved through the creative application of evidence-based practice, which in turn has been adapted to meet the characteristics of a culturally and linguistically diverse student population. The SPMP focuses on building connectedness between students, their course of study, the institution, and the students and staff therein.

Each individual SPMP is group-based and exists in order to improve students' experience in a specific course, program of study, or transition. Individual programs vary in their structures and durations. The number of programs occurring at any one time also varies. Supplemental Instruction

(i.e., SI, referred to as Peer Assisted Study Sessions or PASS in Australia) is a student peer mentoring model that is likely to increase in the institution after 2010. SPMPs align with Karcher, Kuperminc, Portwood, Sipe, and Taylor's (2006) recommendation that programs focus on both academic and social integration but with differing emphasis depending on the aims, context, and students' needs. Each individual SPMP can be described as being single session, adjunct, integrated, or embedded. Below is a structural taxonomy of student peer mentoring programs coordinated by the VUC. Examples illustrating each type are also included.

Single Session Programs

Single session programs run one time over a few hours outside the formal curriculum. Examples include programs that orient students to a specific University transition, such as articulation or entry into first year. The Chinese Mentor-Guide program, for instance, aims to improve the University transition experiences of students at partner institutions in China who are intending to study at VU in Australia (Best, Hajzler, & Henderson, 2007). The student mentors are Chinese students who have been studying at VU in Australia for six months. The mentors in Australia participate in a live chat on Blackboard with the students in China and exchange practical information and knowledge about studying at VU in Australia. On arrival at the VU campus, the student mentors conduct informal sessions with the new students to help them settle in during their first few weeks in their new environment. The program is supported by a dedicated Blackboard site and a student/teacher workbook with an accompanying DVD in which Chinese students discuss their transition experiences.

Adjunct Programs

Adjunct programs (i.e., Supplemental Instruction in the United States) are connected to specific courses during most of a semester. For example, students enrolled in *Accounting for Decision Making* opt to attend the sessions outside their normal class time. Pairs of student mentors are recruited and selected based on their prior grade in the course and their performance in mentor training. They facilitate weekly review sessions for 10 weeks with a group of students studying the subject for the first time. Student mentors are also available on Blackboard at specified times during the week for live chats with students about the subject and to respond to posted questions.

Integrated Programs

These semester-long programs form part of the formal curriculum for student mentees, in which student mentors participate on a voluntary basis. An example is student mentors in Paramedics who are trained to provide peer support for lower-division Paramedic students in formal clinical sessions. In Paramedics, two integrated programs have been piloted. One is situated within the higher education sector and the other crosses both the further and higher education sectors. Selected student mentors facilitate discussion and guide mentees during weekly practical clinical classes, to assist them with clinical skills, familiarize students with paramedic equipment, and aid the development of clinical judgment (Best, Hajzler, Ivanov, & Limon, 2008).

Embedded Programs

In embedded programs, both mentors and mentees participate as part of the formal curriculum during most of a semester. Student mentors receive academic credit for their participation. For instance, students of the Graduate Diploma of Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) choose to do a traditional essay or mentor students in the Certificate III English as a Second Language Further Education course. As a mentor, students conduct practical spoken English language and communication skills sessions on 12 occasions across two semesters. Students also write a reflective journal and deliver a presentation about their experiences.

The VUC's Integrative Role

The VUC plays a critical role in maintaining an overview and understanding of the breadth and depth of student peer learning across the institution

through its Student Peer Mentoring Governance Committee. The VUC's central role is key to the peer program's long-term viability, sustainability, and credibility and guarantees that institutional knowledge of the SPMP and the new, wider S3L initiative are maintained despite inevitable staff and policy changes.

Results and Lessons Learned

Assessment tools vary between individual programs due to their differing aims and requests by teaching staff and the SPMP coordinator to focus on specific issues as a program evolves. However, all the assessment tools focus on the twin elements of social and academic integration to determine how influential the individual programs are on student learning and engagement. Typically, a five-point Likert scale is used, including statements about the mentoring program (e.g., helped my knowledge in the subject, helped my confidence in the subject, increased my friendship networks).

The successes of the SPMP relate to its documented and recognized breadth of impact on student learning. In the Paramedics program in which all students in the specific cohort participate in the mentoring program as mentees, there is no control group with which to compare grades; therefore, assessments focus on the impacts of the program on the students' clinical skills and judgment (Best et al., 2008). In *Accounting for Decision Making*, the impact of the program on students' academic and social integration has been evaluated. More recently, final grades for participants and nonparticipants have also been compared (Hollingsworth, Sng, & Best, 2008a; 2008b). In the offshore to onshore Chinese Mentor Guide program, assessments focus on the impact of the program on students' pre-departure transition issues (Best et al., 2007). For the dual sector program in which Graduate Diploma TESL work with Further Education students, the benefits of the program to mentors' developing teaching skills and mentees' satisfaction with an extra opportunity to practice English language skills have been assessed (Best, Hajzler, Brogan, Judd, & Fitzsimon, 2006). In addition to assessing the impact of the individual programs, mentor training is also regularly evaluated (Hollingsworth, Sng, & Best, 2008c).

Meeting the learning needs and demands of a culturally and linguistically diverse student population and responding to a complex multisectoral institution have been major challenges. The significant lessons learned have been to create a variety of peer mentoring programs rather than apply a single model. The major strengths of the SPMP are its diversity and adaptability.

The SPMP occurs on five onshore campuses, two offshore campuses, and bridges the further, vocational, and higher education sectors. Staff involvement in a partnership with the VUC has helped to develop a community of practice and increase the program's institutional profile. The receipt of a Vice Chancellor's Award for *Enhancing the Student Experience* in 2006 and SI/PASS Outstanding New Leader Award in 2009 are institutional and national acknowledgements of the success of the overall program.

Conclusion

The creation of the VUC has provided an enhanced opportunity to broaden and deepen the understanding and scope of student peer learning across the University. This has resulted in improved student learning outcomes and has supported staff in their search for strategies to help them respond to a diverse student population.

Addendum: Gill Best

"It is the talents, skills, experience, generosity, enthusiasm and energy of students themselves that are the most powerful yet under-utilised resource at our disposal in enhancing student learning" (McCormack, Best and Kirkwood, 2009)

Since the original article on student peer mentoring was published in 2010, the elements of student mentoring at VU including the program names and structures and the ways that Student Mentors are supported have been developed and refined considerably. There now exists an overarching term for student mentoring programs connected to academic colleges and those which are centrally located within the university's various Learning

Victoria University Footscray Park campus

Commons. Known as Students Supporting Student Learning (SSSL), the term is also the title of the associated work unit, situated within the Centre for Student Success.

Longitudinal evaluation data on the programs' impacts on students' learning and sense of belonging consistently demonstrate the positive impact of SSSL's programs over many years, so much so that they are now an accepted and significant element of VU's suite of approaches used to support students' learning.

PHILOSOPHY

The underlying principles and philosophies of SSSL programs remain the same as when the original monograph chapter was written, that is, to unlock the potential for students to learn with and from each other in order to build stronger student academic and social communities and in turn to encourage and improve student success. SSSL's theoretical underpinnings are situated within Vygotskian social constructivism, the social nature of learning being the key to its operations and success and with a strong focus on anti-deficit models of student learning approaches, "focussing on the collaborative strengths of Victoria University's students rather than on students' real or imagined individual academic weaknesses." (Best, 2014 p.249)

SSSL programs employ existing VU students to be Student Mentors providing not only the opportunity to work on campus but to learn as they work, the aim being to provide students with an opportunity to experience 'learningful work' (McCormack, Pancini, Tout, 2010 page 7). That the Student Mentors are paid for their student mentoring work acknowledges the importance of the students' contributions to enhancing students' learning and success and to the positive impact they have on students' experiences of VU. Significantly, in terms of how we wish our Student Mentors to be perceived and understood, their employment is based on the students maintaining and emphasising their 'studentness'. In other words, the Student Mentors are employed to be students, to be "students as students rather than students as staff." (McCormack, Pancini and Tout, 2010 page 8).

PROGRAM MODELS

Organisationally, SSSL programs are either connected to units of study within the academic colleges or provide support across academic colleges from within five campus Learning Commons.

Student Writing Mentors

The Student Writing Mentor program was implemented in 2011. Its inception was inspired partly by the tradition of Writing Centres in the US and more specifically on my personal observation of a student assisting a student with their writing in the UTEP Writing Centre. Over and above reading about Writing Centres and feeling instinctively and philosophically that something similar could be successful at VU, it was my observation of the student at UTEP assisting another student that convinced me that students could help other students with their writing in settings more formal than friends' study groups but less formal than seeing an academic support lecturer. Student Writing Mentors work within what we have named a Writing Space. We began with one Writing Space at one Learning Commons, quickly expanding the program to four Writing Spaces across four Learning Commons. Student Writing Mentors provide assistance to students within each Writing Space venue on a 'drop-in' basis, that is, without an appointment, and where possible and practical Student Writing Mentors encourage collaboration between students, especially when the students are seeking assistance with the same assignment or writing issue. In turn this encourages the broadening of friendship networks and connectedness.

Student Rovers

The Student Rover program was implemented in 2007 and has been implemented across four of the university's Learning Commons. The Student Rover program operates on the assumption that many students find libraries complex and sometimes challenging to use. As students themselves, Student Rovers provide assistance with basic enquiries and to refer where necessary to other services but they do so based on "their own student experience and practical judgement, supported by regular and ongoing

reflective conversations with other rovers and the staff supporting them." (McCormack et al 2010 page 11)

SSSL Program Models Connected to Units of Study

Peer Assisted Study Sessions

Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS) are free, regularly scheduled group study sessions connected to targeted units of study. We trialled the first PASS program as far back as 1998 but seriously embarked on implementing PASS in 2003. PASS targets challenging units, and focuses on providing a supportive, student-facilitated, collaborative learning environment for students in targeted units, which is teacher-free. The Student Mentors plan and conduct the weekly PASS sessions. With the students who attend they collectively review the taught content from lectures and tutorials and share the study skills required to succeed. Student Mentors function as excellent role models of the discipline, rather than authority figures. They help students to deepen their understanding and engagement with what has been taught in lectures and tutorials. They help to create a positive group learning environment where students feel comfortable to ask questions and encourage students to build a network of friends who they can turn to for support.

Peer Assisted Tutorials

On visiting UTEP in 2010 I observed UTEP's Peer Leader program in action. My observations of this program were the catalyst for the creation of what became the Peer Assisted Tutorial program at VU. In particular I saw its potential for working where PASS programs were not appropriate. In a typical tutorial there is a lecturer/tutor and the students. In a Peer Assisted Tutorial (PAT) there is a lecturer/tutor and two Student Mentors. In PATs, students who have previously studied and been successful in the unit attend the tutorial to support students with their academic work and their academic skills.

The Student Mentor in a PAT is a student who has recently studied the unit and received a high final subject grade and is understanding and empathetic of the difficulties that students can face. Student Mentors move around the tutorial room sitting and talking with individual and groups of students helping them to understand the work they are engaged with from the perspective of a student who has succeeded in the unit. A Student Mentor might also help to facilitate group discussion, share experiences of assignment writing and general study techniques and general experiences of being a student. Student Mentors also build positive working relationships with the tutor, being able to offer insights to the tutor about topics or concepts that students are finding difficult.

Trident

Trident is a large scale student mentoring program that was developed specifically for first year engineering students studying Maths and Physics but more recently expanded to include other first year units. The program's name derives from its three original elements namely PASS and PATs (each described above) and Study Space. Study Space consists of two rooms situated alongside each other in which a team of Student Mentors are timetabled across the week to be in attendance to assist students with first year engineering units. Trident's three tiered design is intended to increase the opportunities for students to interact across the week, and to build positive relationships with and gain assistance from Student Mentors. For example, Student Mentors working with students in PATs encourage students to seek further assistance and have further interaction with Student Mentors in a PASS or Study Space session to develop their understanding of the concepts being taught in the unit. This increased interaction between peers leads to increased opportunities to build friendship networks, and to less student isolation.

Conclusion

Each program model has been developed in such a way that they can be adapted to suit differing learning contexts and needs. The programs actively situate students in contexts where they can help other students to learn and succeed and to broaden their friendship networks. While we have strong connections and collaborations with other Australian universities, the collaboration between VU and UTEP is an example of how international

collaboration can inspire and enhance student-led academic support and in turn improve student success.

REFERENCES

Best, G, 2014, Chapter 8, Students Supporting Student Learning (SSSL) and Practices of Empowerment, Strong Starts, Supported Transitions and Student Success, Edited by Andrew Funston, Miguel Gil and Gwen Gilmore.

Best, G, Hajzler, D J, Brogan, M, Judd, R, & Fitzsimon, I, 2006, December, Cross-sectorial peer mentoring: A pilot project, Paper presented at Learning Matters Symposium: Beyond Boundaries, Victoria University, Melbourne.

Best, G, Hajzler, DJ, & Henderson, F, 2007, Communicating with Chinese students offshore to improve their transition and adjustment to Australia: A pilot program, Journal of Academic Language and Learning, I, 78-90.

Best, G, Hajzler, D J, Ivanov, T, & Limon, J, 2008, Peer mentoring as a strategy to improve paramedic students' clinical skills, The Australian journal of Peer Learning, I, 13-25.

Hollingsworth, K, Sng, K, & Best, G, 2008a, Accounting mentoring semester 2, 2007 report, Unpublished paper, School of Learning Support Services Portfolio of Language and Learning, Victoria University, Melbourne.

Hollingsworth, K, Sng, K, & Best, G, 2008b, Analysis of the accounting mentor program semester I, 2008, Unpublished paper, School of Learning Support Services Portfolio of Language and Learning, Victoria University, Melbourne.
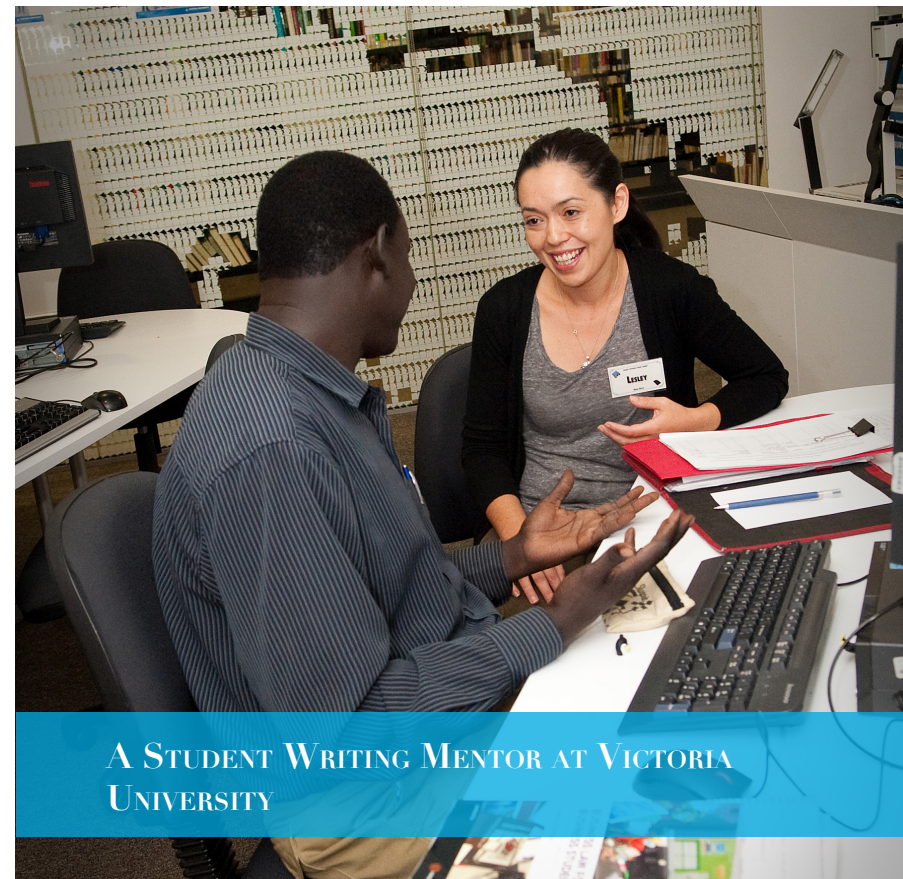
Hollingsworth, K, Sng, K, & Best, G, 2008c, Review of peer mentoring 2008, Unpublished paper, School of Learning Support Services Portfolio of Language and Learning, Victoria University, Melbourne.

Karcher, M J, Kuperminc, G P, Portwood, S G, Sipe, C L, & Taylor, AS, 2006, Mentoring programs: A framework to inform program development, research, and evaluation. Journal of Community Psychology, 34, 709-725.

McCormack, R, Best, G, & Kirkwood, K, 2009, Students supporting student learning, Victoria University, Melbourne.

McCormack, R. Pancini, G, Tout, G, 2010, Learningful work: Learning to work and learning to learn, Volume 8, Issue 1, International Journal of Training Research.

Messinis, G, Sheehan, P, & Miholcic, Z, 2008, December, The diversity of the student population at Victoria University. Update of Report to the Vice-Chancellor, Victoria University, Melbourne.

A STUDENT WRITING MENTOR AT VICTORIA UNIVERSITY