Chapter 2

Building, Shaping, and Modeling Tools for Literacy Development and Civic Engagement

ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the researchers examine the important inclusion of peer mentors as role models for new students. This is an area of research that has typically been explored with younger student populations and has been limited to the classroom environment. The First-Year Reading, Thinking, and Writing Initiative expands on this literature by using peer mentors with a commitment that extends beyond the classroom borders. These peer mentors, along with the faculty, play a vital role in building, shaping, and modeling tools for college literacy development and civic engagement. Peer mentors in the Initiative are volunteers from the previous year's cohort.

…seen how much just a little bit of help can do to a community, and the events that I have gone to, encourage new ways of thinking. – First-year student

INTRODUCTION

The impact of classroom-embedded role models and peer mentors in students' lives has been extensively examined in the field of education, though much of this research has focused on students at younger ages. While there has been research on the effects of teaching assistants (TAs) on student performance in the classroom, less research has been done on the emerging role of *peer mentor*. In contrast to traditional academic roles, there has been very little research into the influence of classroom-embedded peer mentors or role models in at the college/university level. Our work in the yearlong Reading, Thinking, and Writing Initiative has helped us to develop tools to actively engage in the construction of a community of peer mentors for our millennial college students. The structure of our linked courses helped us to develop ongoing relationships with our students and helped us to create an institutional model that transcends the typical teaching assistant (TA) model that continues to exist at most higher education institutions. Historically, older students have served in the role of teaching assistant for a given course; TAs are often silent in courses as the professor lectures, and the TA may be expected to run a separate study lab for students in the course and that is the extent of their engagement with students. Our peer-mentoring model breaks with this traditional model; peer mentors are an integral part of the learning experience that occurs within and beyond the walls of a particular course.

Our peer mentors are volunteers from the previous year's cohort of students. This ensures a certain level of continuity with the two professors and the course curriculum. The peer mentors devote a great deal of time to interacting with our first-year education majors and modeling appropriate collegiate behavior within the classroom setting. For instance, the peer mentors work with our students in smaller breakout groups comprised of 6-8 students per peer mentor. At the start of the semester, the peer mentors take their breakout groups around campus, showing them where key campus resources are located that are available to all students enrolled at Keene State, such as student support services including the Math Center and the Center for Writing. In addition to helping our students locate these services through the tour itself, this interactive experience allows the students in the class not only to hear from the staff about the services offered in each location, but also to hear directly from the peer mentors about how they benefitted from using these services when they were first-year students. Our students tell us

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