

Symposium: *We all have our parts to play: The roles of students, peer-mentors and administration in creating pathways to higher education and student success for minority-language students*

Paper 3 : “Lean on me” : The experience of being a regional peer-mentor

There has been increased interest and scholarly research regarding postsecondary mentoring programs during the last thirty years. Undergraduate students are specifically mentioned to benefit from this practice, particularly in regards to improvement in grade point average or another form of quantifiable achievement (Bolender, 1997; Campbell & Campbell, 1997) as well as impact on the personal and psychological well being of the mentee. The groups that are often chosen to receive mentors include students at risk (Quinn, Muldoon & Hollingworth, 2002) and ethnic minorities (De Souza, 2006; Sanchez, Esparza, Berardi & Pryce, 2010). The two most common options for undergraduate students are faculty mentors (Campbell & Campbell, 1997) and peer mentors (Bettinger & Baker, 2011; Colvin & Ashman, 2010; Hall & Zarni, 2011; Smith, 2008). The second option has become more and more common in universities and colleges in North America and yielded particularly positive results.

Institutional analysis at the University of Ottawa in 2010 indicates that Francophone students who are not from the geographical region of the Ottawa valley (i.e. who are from cities and towns more than 150 km from the University, with most students coming from regions more than 500 km from Ottawa) have a lower persistence rate than their peers from the area near the University. This fact holds true for all students at the University of Ottawa, whether they are in the Francophone cohort or the Anglophone cohort. However, the persistence rate of Francophones is 10% lower than that of their Anglophone peers. To better understand the student experience during the first two to three years of undergraduate studies, the associate registrar recruitment of the University of Ottawa held a series of focus groups with students from linguistically minoritized regions studying at the University, in collaboration with a professor specializing in Francophone minority education and student experience, to identify factors that encourage persistence or abandonment within this linguistic minority group.

Results indicated that many of these students experienced great difficulty integrating social networks, as local students did not feel the need to enlarge their networks when their high school friends attended the same university. However, many students from these linguistically minoritized regions were either the only graduate from their school or part of a very small group of students who would travel the 500 or 1000km to attend the University of Ottawa. Furthermore, students experienced serious linguistic challenges when confronted with the language variety that forms and informs Francophone university discourse. This language register is often unknown to them. Added to the linguistic insecurity created when their Franco-dominant peers and professors do not recognize them as legitimate speakers of French, the ingredients for a perfect storm leading to abandonment are all present.

Based on the results of preliminary exploratory focus groups in 2010-2011, the University of Ottawa decided to implement a peer-to-peer mentoring program as a pilot

project. Launched officially in May 2011, this program was aimed at Francophone students coming to the University of Ottawa from one of four highly minoritized regions: Northern Ontario, Central Ontario, Southwestern Ontario and New Brunswick. The University hired current 2nd and 3rd year students from each of these regions to act as mentors, models of success that could relate to the transition about to be lived by their mentees. Their role was to be proactive and anticipate needs of students, by providing them with an insider's view of the university and directing them to essential services, as well as organizing social activities to help students create social networks with other students from their region and across the various highly minoritized regions.

Unlike the cited research on mentoring programs in postsecondary settings, the research project from which the data presented in this paper is drawn focused not only on the mentee's perspective, but on the experience of being a mentor. This data was collected from three focus groups conducted with the mentors, one at the end of the summer, another at the end of the first semester and a third at the end of the winter semester during the 2011-2012 academic year. Mentors were also asked to keep journals of their experiences, reflecting on their work, their perceptions of the program and its impact. The focus group transcripts and journals were analysed using thematic discourse analysis.

The mentors perceive the peer-to-peer mentoring program as being a unique service that reaches and guides students in grade 12 throughout the ups and downs of applying to and fielding offers from universities. Furthermore, the program stands out because of the ease with which students can contact their mentors through traditional methods such as the phone and e-mail as well as text messaging and social networking. What's more, the regional element is essential as mentors insist that regional belonging plays an integral role in the program's success. They stipulate that the mentors' responsibility is not necessarily to offer specific services to students, but rather to refer them to the already existing services at the University of Ottawa. The peer-to-peer mentoring program acts as an intermediary, a place where students can feel at ease sharing their concerns and asking their questions to their regional mentor. The mentors also explained that the program truly caters to the needs of students coming from distant regions, trying to help them with their academic, linguistic and social needs during their transition to postsecondary education.

References

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