

**Alumni Mentoring and First Year Seminar: A Valuable Link**

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**Abstract**

For a number of years, Western New England College has invested in the value of initiatives targeted at first-year students. The work of John Gardner and Lee Upcraft (1989) has provided ample documentation to support the worth of such endeavors. With that work in mind, the First-Year Program at Western New England College specifically focuses on helping first-year students develop a sense of purpose, attain a realization of place and develop future direction. Additionally, the work of Arthur Chickering (1969) has provided a theoretical framework for these objectives and, together with institutional experience, has provided an increased awareness that engaging students from multiple perspectives is more often than not responsible for helping students develop academically and socially.

Success as a college student requires development of a strong personal network of support, connection among peers and purposeful awareness of their course of study. Studies of how college affects students by Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) offer citation after citation as to the value and importance of the concept of mentorship, i.e., connection to faculty, staff, students and others within the chosen college community. Two concepts clearly emerge from the literature: 1) successful freshman are more satisfied when they feel that their learning will somehow have usefulness in later life; and, 2) freshman need to understand and accept the relevancy of the college experience to their personal development. (Gardner and Upcraft, 1989) To foster realization of these conditions for its first-year students, the School of Engineering implemented a unique partnership with recent engineering alumni. The Alumni Mentoring Program (AMP) pairs first-year engineering students as protégés with recent engineering alumni as mentors to provide regular opportunity for learning beyond the classroom. The AMP is configured within the context of a required first-year seminar in order to give the AMP a point of reference and a vehicle for implementation. The principal focus of the AMP is to assist first-year engineering students in assembling a practical look at their area of career interest, establishing a point of relevancy for the engineering curriculum and building personal and professional contacts.

During the 2000-2001 academic year, a voluntary pilot AMP utilized standard e-mail communications between students and alumni as the principal source of communication. Forty first-year engineering students and thirty engineering alumni participated. Both protégés and mentors appreciated the opportunity to share perspectives, protégés benefited from the experience of mentors, mentors benefited from being able to share

their experience. While the feedback from the participants was encouraging, several deficiencies were noted, principally in the context of feeling vested in the mentoring relationship. As a result of this feedback, the following program changes were made. Training workshops for mentors were developed; opportunities were provided for face-to-face meetings between mentor and protégé; structured discussion topics were suggested that allowed protégés to gain and use information from their mentor; and improvement was instituted to an on-line communication network.

For the fall semester of the 2001-2002 academic year, the pilot was expanded to include all first year engineering students enrolled in ENGR 102, First-Year Engineering Seminar. Alumni were recruited so that every student could be paired with a mentor. In order to foster regular communication, a virtual classroom was established that enrolled both mentors and protégés and which allowed for posting of training materials for mentors, discussion topics and interview guides for protégés, program announcements and other materials particular to the needs of either protégés and/or mentors. Coined as AMP101, the virtual mentoring classroom promises to be a valuable addition to Western New England College's First-Year Program.

## **I. Introduction and Rationale**

Contrary to the student support infrastructure utilized in the standard configuration of services at many colleges and universities, Western New England College has adopted a multifaceted approach to the first-year student transition. It is an approach founded on theory but implemented according to the unique needs of Western New England College students. Since 1989, Western New England College has purposefully constructed a network of support that decries the notion that "one size fits all." Rather, what one alumnus called a "web of support" has been formed that allows students to choose the level of support most appropriate to his or her needs. As these first year initiatives have continued to unfold and adapt to changing environments and student needs, the School of Engineering has often sought to collaborate with the Office of Freshman and Transfer Students, recognizing that engineering students are first-year students first and engineering students second. Without a solid infrastructure of support, student success would be left to chance.

Most recently, the School of Engineering has implemented an Alumni Mentoring Program (AMP) for first-year students that builds upon more general mentoring initiatives sponsored through the Office of Freshman and Transfer Students. The goal of this program is to foster in first-year engineering students a practical look at areas of career interest, build professional and personal contacts, and develop a supportive relationship with a Western New England College engineering alumnus (mentor) while in the early stages of their academic program. Recognition is thereby paid to the stage of student development when the uncertainty surrounding the selection of engineering as a major is at its highest level.

Noel and Levitz note that students do not come to college as "finished learners." (Noel, Levitz and Saluri, 1985) Rather, students are to be "moved from a state of dependency to

that of interdependence through the use of intrusive strategies that reach students *before* they falter, become discouraged, confused and subsequently fail.” (Noel, Levitz and Saluri, 1985) One of the methods often viewed as indispensable is connected with concepts of mentorship. Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) cite connection with faculty and meaningful peer relationships as critical components in student adjustment. When viewed within the context of educational purpose, those relationships seem best centered on helping students clarify the reasons why they are enrolled in college, understand the value of their educational endeavors and achieve a realistic view of the outcome. More specifically, it is believed that educational relevancy and career direction are intrinsically related to student success and to student satisfaction.

Any student development program is only as good as its delivery mechanism. Noel and Levitz (1985) argue that “first year student success is enhanced when every freshman feels attached to some person in the institution.” At Western New England College, Peer Advisors, Faculty Advisors, Resident Assistants all have a history of tradition within this context. Developmental advising is the method of choice used by any of these resources to foster that attachment. Alumni, however, have not often been seen as a valued resource within the context of fostering student connection. Perhaps, the value of alumni has been by oversight or by conscious choice. Whatever the reason, Western New England College has elected to explore the impact of alumni on student success and on student satisfaction.

When considering the use of alumni within the advising context, attention was turned to yet another educational precept, mentoring. Mentoring freshmen was noted as early as 1911 when engineering faculty at the University of Michigan were asked to help new students. (Maverick, 1926) Mentoring takes many forms and is both formal and informal. What seems to transcend variation, however, is the notion embodied in Anderson and Shannon’s definition of mentoring. The authors define mentoring as “a nurturing process in which a more skilled or experienced person teaches, sponsors, encourages, counsels, and befriends a less skilled or experienced person for the purpose of promoting the latter’s professional and/or personal development.”(1988) Some practitioners argue that mentoring can only occur within the context of a lasting, self selected relationship (hardly characteristic of what this program entails). (Canton and James, 1999) However, an equally convincing argument can be made for “assigned” relationships outside the parameters of traditional mentoring, just as people can practice parenting behaviors without being parents. Mentoring, therefore, refers to a recognized set of behaviors that others (alumni) have practiced to achieve success.

Kramer, et.al. (1987) suggest a taxonomy of academic advising services for the first-year student that conveniently links to the premise of an AMP. Specifically, several components of that taxonomy offer insight into the value of alumni as mentors. Alumni have “been there, done that.” They are in a position to understand the relationship of academic program-to-career preparation. Alumni are able to identify with student indecisiveness about area of study and provide suggestions as to how to balance what may be unanticipated rigor in the study of engineering. Recent alumni are also seen as

credible resources by their protégés as they evaluate whether major and career choices match interests and motivation.

## **II. Program Development**

Western New England College's AMP program in the School of Engineering is modeled after an alumni mentoring program developed and implemented by Spittle and Murzyn at DePaul University (2000) and Danielson (2000) at Minnesota State University. The DePaul program is made available to all first-year students at the University while the program at Minnesota State requires student participants to be in their junior year with a minimum GPA of 3.0 in their major. Both of these programs require that all interested students apply for consideration of participation. Participation in the AMP program at WNEC, however, is required for all first-year engineering students as an integral component of the First-Year Engineering Seminar. Through this linkage, the program is given both structure and a point of reference. It also allows for the continuation of support beyond that of the First-Year Seminar. Since the First-Year Seminar is restricted to the fall semester only, the AMP provides a vehicle to continue a segment of the support into the spring semester (and possibly beyond).

During the 2000-2001 academic year, a volunteer pilot AMP utilized traditional e-mail communications to connect students and alumni in an electronic mentoring relationship. No face-to-face contact was structured into the program nor were mentors given any formal training as to how to function as a mentor. Both alumni and students were largely left to their own devices to engage a relationship through the common bond of the study of engineering. Participants consisted of forty first-year engineering students and thirty engineering alumni. Despite the loose configuration, feedback gathered from participants was encouraging. Both sets of participants reported that they enjoyed the contact and benefited from the participation. Both were quick, however, to point to deficiencies in the program and suggested specific shortcomings, namely the lack of face-to-face contact and feeling unprepared to begin a relationship. Noting these concerns and feeling buoyed by the overall positive response, a decision was made to move forward the AMP as a required component for all engineering freshman in the First-Year Engineering Seminar for the 2001-2002 academic year.

During the summer of 2001, e-mail requests were sent to one hundred and fifty engineering alumni in order to recruit mentors that had graduated within the last five years. Fifty engineering alumni were selected from the sixty that volunteered to participate in this program. Selection was based on implied commitment of the reply to the invitation and on the level of success that the alumnus had as a student. Twenty-five of the sixty alumni that volunteered also participated in the 2000 pilot program. Based on the student-to-alumni ratio, two students (protégés) were matched with each alumnus (mentor) according to his/her respective declared engineering major: Industrial, Mechanical, Electrical, or Biomedical Engineering. Female students were matched with female mentors and students that did not specify a major were randomly matched with any available mentor.

In order to make regular and consistent communication possible, arrangements were made with the College's IT Department to establish a virtual classroom in which all 100 first-year engineering students and all 50 alumni mentors would be registered. The College was fortunate to already have in place a virtual course module known as Manhattan. Thus, it was simply a matter of identifying the most useful modules of Manhattan and establishing the classroom roster and corresponding mechanisms for control. A more complete description of Manhattan is contained later in this paper.

### **III. Program Implementation**

The content and form of an already existing first-year seminar for engineering students gave rise to what became known tangentially as AMP101. One of the long time characteristics of the First-Year Seminar was the resulting mentoring relationship that evolved between students and the assigned student seminar assistants and faculty. In some ways, the process was as important as the curriculum content. AMP101 was in its most simple form an extension of that process.

AMP101 was launched under the joint supervision of the Associate Dean of Engineering and the Dean of Freshman and Transfer Students. Further partnership was secured with the Office of Alumni Affairs by way of funding of common events. With volunteer alumni selected and students enrolled in the seminar, matching of mentors and protégés was completed based on academic interest and gender. Students were subsequently provided with the name of their assigned mentor, and mentors were given the name of their protégés. Both mentors and protégés were then invited to attend a "kick-off" event approximately midway through the semester. The timing of the inaugural event was more related to logistics than any program design decision.

During the time preceding the kick-off event, a training program was conducted for the mentors in order to address the pilot program deficiency of feeling unprepared for the relationship. The training was in seminar form and was scheduled to allow for maximum attendance of mentors. While the training was not mandatory, approximately half of the mentors were able to attend. Seminar content was also posted to the Manhattan classroom so that the mentors not able to attend could avail themselves of the content outline and review critical information pertaining to mentor expectations and responsibilities. Mentors could further question training faculty via a chat feature to seek clarification of training materials.

Training was divided into the following sectional components:

- Definitions of Mentoring
- Establishing a Common Reference Point in Mentoring
- The Mentoring Process for Personal Growth
- Multiple Roles of a Mentor
- The Mentoring Relationship: Stages and Characteristics
- Strategies for Effective Mentoring

## Benefits and Outcomes: Protégés and Mentors Resources for Support of Mentors

In order to provide a common point of reference, a position guide was formulated to assist mentors in understanding their role. The work of Canton and James (1988) was used heavily in designing the training and program principles that are noted below.

- 1) The role of the alumni mentor is one of establishing a partnership with a currently enrolled student.
- 2) Mentors offer opportunities to their assigned protégés to test ideas, discuss life options, consider challenges and develop specific and attainable goals for the immediate and distant future.
- 3) Mentors provide information, not prescription. Decisions need to be left to protégés.
- 4) Mentors offer advice, not rules.
- 5) Mentors celebrate student success and assist protégés in self-identification of strengths and skills.
- 6) Mentors share life experience both as a student and practicing professional.
- 7) Mentors prompt protégés to evaluate and document experiences and decisions.
- 8) Mentors are alert to occasions when protégés may be sponsored in networking and career development.

Not unlike the position guide for mentors, protégés were provided a set of expectations in a separate orientation. That orientation was given in a general introduction in the First-Year Seminar, with a more detailed version in a posting of their position guide on Manhattan. Again, the work of Canton and James (1988) influenced the noted principles.

- 1) Protégés seek to develop a partnership with a more experienced alumnus who can identify with student lifestyle and life decisions.
- 2) Protégés commit to sharing of relevant life opportunities made available by mentors.
- 3) Protégés actively solicit the advice and perspective of mentors.
- 4) Protégés show interest in the lives of assigned mentors, especially that which pertains to lifestyle and career options.
- 5) Protégés seek to accept the invitations of mentors to events and opportunities for self-improvement.
- 6) Protégés invite mentors to share their lives in college through attendance at campus events.

Both the protégé and mentor position guides were not meant to be mandates but rather guides for a successful experience. Since the formation of the mentoring relationship was forced rather than chosen, a way of responding to the relationship was felt to be critical.

To launch the relationship, mentors and protégés were brought together in a face-to-face meeting over a catered dinner. Formal invitations were mailed to both mentors and protégés soliciting their participation. Seating was pre-designed to foster connection of

mentor and protégé. Immediately following dinner, general words of introduction were provided as to benefits and outcomes of the mentoring process. Both groups were then provided an interview guide to allow for personal self-disclosure, a non-threatening activity designed to help mentors and protégés get acquainted. The session then adjourned with an urging of timely and frequent contact. Future contact was further encouraged by the use of interaction prompts discussed later in this document. For those mentors and protégés not able to attend the kick-off event, the interview guide was posted to the Manhattan classroom for use as an electronic submission between mentors and protégés.

### **Interaction Prompts**

The feedback gathered from the pilot program indicated that communication guidelines needed to be established to enhance protégé/mentor communication. As a result, “prompts” or discussion topics for e-mail exchange were provided to both mentors and protégés. These prompts were coupled with assigned course deliverables that served both as assessment tools to determine whether or not the prompts were being successful in facilitating communication, and if protégés were completing assigned work in a timely manner. The need for prompts to serve as “suggestions” to help facilitate communication between mentors and protégés was noted and implemented by Danielson. The six prompts selected for the AMP program are noted below.

- (1) Resume Exchange
- (2) Job Challenges
- (3) Interviewing
- (4) Networking
- (5) Preparation for the “Real World”
- (6) Lessons Learned

Prompts were planned to be introduced once every three weeks beginning with the week of the program kick-off dinner. The dinner was held during the eighth week of the semester on October 16, 2001. This later than anticipated start date of the program only allowed for the first two prompts to be introduced before the end of the semester. The first prompt required protégés to submit to the program director (First-Year Seminar instructor) both their resume` and their mentors’ resume`. The second prompt required the protégé to write a one-page summary of the communication with their mentor incorporating in the paper answers to several questions. Namely, what “big” job challenges did the mentor encounter throughout his/her career? How was the mentor able to deal with these challenges? What decisions, if any, would the mentor have made differently? Submission of the paper to the program director was required with a copy sent to the mentor. Regardless of the format, the prompts were intended to keep the protégé focused on the development of the mentoring relationship and to provide the mentor continuing insight into the life of the protégé.

#### **IV. Manhattan Virtual Classroom**

##### **Communication Link**

The feedback gathered from the pilot program indicated that improvements to the on line communication network (simple e-mail) needed to be made before the program's full potential could be realized. As a result, it was decided to utilize the College's Manhattan Virtual Classroom as the communication link in the AMP program. Manhattan is a free, Open Source, web-based course management system developed by Steven Narmontas, Manager of the Educational Technology Center at Western New England College. Used at Western New England College since 1997, it has proven to be a capable system. Manhattan's web-based, password-protected environment provides the usual array of communication tools found in online classroom systems, including asynchronous discussion boards, synchronous chat, listings of web-resources, file exchange, a grade module, and a unique web-based e-mail system open only to students in the class. Manhattan's capabilities are best understood by considering each of the thirteen 'modules' that comprise the system. A Manhattan classroom rarely uses all thirteen modules, and the teacher has the ability to turn the modules on or off at any point during the progress of the course.

The teacher (AMP Program Director) and the students (mentors & protégés) comprise the Manhattan Virtual Classroom for the "course" AMP101. The three Manhattan modules used in the AMP program will be highlighted.

**Post Office:** The Post Office module is an e-mail system open only to program participants, members of the AMP101 class. The Post Office is not simply an interface to normal e-mail, but is a completely independent system operating within the Manhattan environment. One of its benefits is that it allows the sender of a message to see when the message was actually read. Manhattan's Post Office messages are always delivered and cannot be deleted. The Post Office module provides the opportunity for interaction between all members of AMP101: mentor and protégé, mentor and program director, mentor and mentor, protégé and program director, protégé and protégé.

**Handouts/Notices:** The handout/notices module provides a place for the Program Director to post messages, announcements, and anything else that would be pertinent to the mentoring program.

**Assignments:** The assignment module allows the Program Director to assign work, receive completed work submitted by the proteges, and provide feedback to that work, all the while keeping things very well organized. At the end of the program, the module contains a complete record of all the work assigned, the written work completed by each protégé, and the feedback provided by the Program Director. Use of this module also allows mentors to be informed of all of their protégés class assignments, thereby providing valuable information to the mentors on each assignment and their expected participation. For example, the first assignment was for each protégé to provide his or her



mentor with a resume` and in turn request a resume` from the mentor. (Mentors later appreciated the opportunity to update their resume`.)

Mentors and protégés access AMP101, their Manhattan classroom, using either Internet Explorer or Netscape web browser from any computer connected to the Internet. Username and password restrict access so that only participants enrolled in the program can gain entry. Unique passwords are assigned to both mentors and protégés.

## **V. Program Assessment**

With the changes that were made in the program to eliminate the deficiencies identified in the pilot program, promising results have been realized. Numerous anecdotal commentaries have given reason for continued development of the AMP. Results of a program evaluation instrument administered to all participants (150) at the end of the semester yielded 130 responses (80 protégés & 50 mentors). Noteworthy was the response to the question: What aspects of the mentoring program worked well? Participants ranked the use of Manhattan (40 % protégé, 35% mentor) and the opportunity for a face-face meeting between mentors and protégés (40% protégé, 45% mentor) the highest. When asked what aspects of the program could be improved, 85% percent of the protégés responded that more frequent communication with mentor was needed (85%), while the mentors recommended that more responsiveness from the protégés is needed (85%). Responsiveness was interpreted as an increased level of seriousness.

A unique feature of Manhattan that provides relevant information in assessing the effectiveness of the program provides the program director with the ability to view usage logs indicating the frequency and timing of participation of each program participant. After reviewing this information, it was apparent that the mentors' recommendation for improvement (more responsiveness is needed from the protégés) had validity. Logs also provided an opportunity to quantify written responses of protégés to the interaction prompts. Log data can also contribute to the earned grade of each protégé in First-Year Seminar.

It is hoped that, as time goes on, additional assessment may lead to a direct connection of student success to the level of participation by protégés in the AMP.

## **VI. Conclusions**

The program as developed and implemented has provided a learning beyond the classroom opportunity for engineering freshman within the context of a required first year seminar (ENGR 102). AMP has allowed students to get a practical look at their chosen area of career interest through the eyes of their mentors while students remain in the early stages of their academic program. Educational relevancy has been enhanced while at the same time providing another level of support for student purpose.

Any program is not without areas for improvement. The later than anticipated start to the program has delayed full realization of the program potential and a complete assessment of its effectiveness. Even with the late start, it quickly became apparent that one semester was not enough time to effectively deliver the program. Therefore, a decision has been made to continue the program during the spring semester as a “beyond the classroom” learning experience in the required freshman course ENGR110, Computer Applications in Engineering. As the program is further defined, increased emphasis needs to be paid to the importance of having protégés recognize the value of mentoring. Additional emphasis also needs to be paid to familiarizing mentors and protégés on the use of Manhattan as a communication tool. Future plans may also include production of a mentor and protégé handbook as a means of enhancing the state of participant preparedness.

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