

AC 2007-1460: A SUCCESSFUL ENGINEERING PEER MENTORING PROGRAM

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A Successful Engineering Peer Mentoring Program

Abstract

With the number of U.S. students entering engineering degrees programs declining, it is extremely important to focus efforts on not only recruitment, but also on student retention. Many universities have tried different strategies to increase retention, but to no avail. At the University of Arkansas College of Engineering, a freshman peer mentoring program was created for fall 2005 that, in its pilot year, had astounding results. Peer mentored students returned for the spring semester in engineering at a significantly higher rate (94% vs. 78% for the non-mentored students). Peer mentored students were twice as likely as their non-mentored colleagues to have a first semester GPA greater than 2.5, and the average GPA of the peer mentored students was 9% higher than that of their non-mentored cohort. Yet, the admission profile of the peer mentored group was equivalent to that of the non-mentored group. Forty students chose to participate in the peer mentoring pilot program.

The success of this peer mentoring program can be attributed to several key factors, including: 1) proper mentor selection (juniors and seniors), 2) mentor training, 3) freshman mentee training, 4) proper mentor-mentee matching, 5) weekly targeted one-on-one meetings with mentees, 6) well-timed information and mentee support, 7) proper referrals, 8) group mentee social activities, and 9) mentor handbook development.

For fall 2006, the Engineering Peer Mentoring Program was expanded to allow all students to participate on a voluntary basis. One hundred forty freshmen (35% of entering freshmen) were mentored by ten mentors. Improvements to the program, based on feedback, include: 1) hiring and training mentors earlier, 2) advertising at new student orientation, 3) starting mentoring in the first week of class, 4) expanding the mentor handbook, and 5) adding more group mentor/mentee socials.

Assessment of the pilot program includes retention rates for spring semester, 1st year retention rate, a mentee satisfaction survey, mentor and mentee debriefing, mentor retention, and eventually the graduation rate.

Overall, our pilot peer mentoring program was a success.

Introduction

Throughout the U.S., the number of students seeking engineering degrees has continued to decline¹, and the retention rates of those students already in engineering programs is poor. It is extremely important for engineering schools to focus their efforts not only on recruitment, but also on student retention. In a study by the Center for Institutional Data Analysis and Exchange at the University of Oklahoma, only 67% of students who began engineering and science programs returned for their sophomore year, and only 38% of the cohort actually graduated with an engineering or science degree.²

The freshman year is the most important in terms of retention, because 57% of all students who leave from 4-year institutions do so within their first year.³ Major causes of students leaving include academic difficulty, adjustment difficulties, incongruence and isolation.³ Programs for retention must address the holistic freshman experience, since over half of freshman drop outs leave because of their first-year college experience, not their academics.⁴ Student support during the transition to college is the prime influence on whether a student stays or leaves.⁵ As a support mechanism, successful peer mentoring can significantly impact students' desire to remain in engineering and at the university, especially for minority students.⁶ In fact, data shows that mentors also gain significantly from their mentoring experience, both academic and interpersonally.⁷

To help increase our retention, the University of Arkansas College of Engineering has created a freshman peer mentoring program that, in its pilot year, had astounding results. Peer mentored students returned for the spring semester in engineering at a significantly higher rate than the non-mentored students (94% vs. 78%). Peer mentored students were twice as likely as their non-mentored colleagues to have a first semester grade point average greater than 2.5, and the average GPA of the peer mentored students was 9% higher than that of the non-mentored cohort. The first year engineering retention for peer mentored students was 72% compared to the non-mentored student retention rate of 63%. The first year retention at the university (any major) for peer mentored students was 91% compared to the non-mentored cohort retention rate of 85%. Although the program was voluntary, the admission profile of the peer mentored group was equivalent to that of the non-mentored group. The peer mentoring program implementation was the only change made to the engineering FYE experience during the pilot study period.

These results were achieved through peer mentors easing students' transition from high school to college by offering guidance, providing moral support, connecting students to campus resources and helping students retain perspective, thereby addressing the freshmen in a holistic approach.

Program Overview

The UofA College of Engineering peer mentoring program provides freshmen with a junior or senior engineering mentor. Mentor and mentee meet weekly to discuss the mentee's life and to address specific topics, such as how the mentee is preparing for next week's calculus test or getting along with her/his roommate. The mentor's role is to listen, refer, advise, help the student gain perspective, and to serve as a role model. Mentors also meet weekly to discuss the upcoming week and any problems, situations or recurring themes from the previous week. The peer mentoring program is voluntary; students who begin the peer mentoring program can opt-out at any time.

Both mentors and mentees benefit from this program. Mentees gain individual recognition, confidence and self esteem; receive encouragement and support; learn perspective alternative solutions to their problems. Mentees are challenged to achieve new goals; to remain focused on school while still balancing their work and social life; and to make friends and network. During their training, mentors learn about the services offered on campus, and then use these services themselves. They also improve their interpersonal skills by mentoring, feel an even greater commitment to engineering, and enjoy the experience of helping others.

The organizational structure of the peer mentoring program is shown in Figure 1. Mentors report to the program coordinator, who is an experienced senior and an active peer mentor. The coordinator runs the program's day-to-day operation, holds the training and weekly mentor meetings, and provides guidance and supervision to the peer mentors. The coordinator reports to the director who has oversight of the program and is responsible for the assessment. The Associate Director of Recruitment, Retention and Diversity (a full-time staff member) serves as our program director.

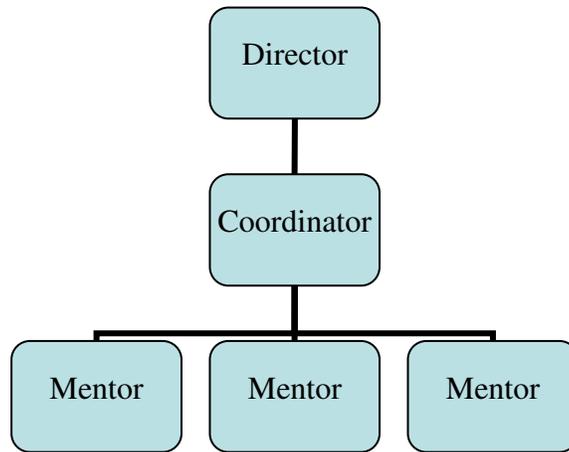


Figure 1. Organizational Structure

Development of the Program

Our College of Engineering peer mentoring program is based on a combination of several different programs currently in existence for students of different majors at other universities, such as the University of Hawaii at Manoa⁸, University of Montana⁹, Kansas State University, Dakota State University, and Kennebec Valley Community College. At the National Academic Advising Association's (NACADA) national conference, much information can be gained through session presentations. Also, Suzanne Brainard has an excellent resource for creating a comprehensive peer mentoring program.¹⁰ Although Brainard's program is geared for people in industry mentoring students, the concepts are still relevant, as are the training methods and many of the forms. After reviewing the retention literature and many existing peer mentoring programs, we devised a program to specifically fit our situation and the engineering students at the UofA.

Key Factors to Success

The following are the ten key factors that comprise our peer mentoring program.

1) Solicitation and Selection of Mentors

A peer mentoring program is only as good as the mentors, so finding the right people is imperative. Mentors must be mature, trustworthy and enthusiastic engineering juniors and seniors who want to help others succeed. They must have good communication and interpersonal skills, have a positive attitude and be team players. Cultural sensitivity is essential. Our program requires mentors to have one year experience as a full-time student on our campus, have a 3.0+ cumulative grade point average, and be willing to commit 7-10 hours per week. Applicant solicitation is through colorful and appealing emails and flyers. Interested students must apply, the best candidates are interviewed, and mentors are selected. Ideally, each mentor will be assigned ten to twelve mentees. During the mentor solicitation for our 2006-2007 program year, many of the pilot program mentees wanted to become a mentor, however only juniors and seniors were eligible. The interest of becoming a mentor will grow significantly as the program ages, thus making the future mentor selection pool larger.

Incentives, besides altruistic, need to exist for mentor accountability and the success of the program. Most successful programs provide credit hours for mentoring work, such as a leadership course with their grade based on mentoring performance, or the mentors can receive an hourly wage for their work. In our program, we chose to pay our mentors.

2) Mentor Training

An initial mentor training session is critical before the mentors meet their mentees. Mentors must be well versed on campus resources, understand the ethics involved, avoid making decisions for their mentees, understand how to listen, be prepared to handle both typical and difficult situations, be professional in all dealings with the mentees, and learn how to gain the mentee's respect.

We have developed a Peer Mentoring Handbook that all mentors must read and follow. The handbook includes sections on the definition of peer mentoring, desired program outcomes, and the mentor's role. Common issues such as the professor/student feedback loop, session note-taking, missed meetings, mentee/mentor relations, conflicts and sticky situations are also addressed. Effective communication tips are included, as are talking points for mentor-mentee discussions and weekly special topics to address.

3) Mentee Solicitation

To solicit voluntary mentees for the pilot program, we chose 160 students at random (using student ID numbers and a random number generator) to offer the participation opportunity. The solicitation was done solely through email. Our target was to have 35-50 students in the program. Forty students opted to participate.

The second year of the program, all engineering freshmen were extended an offer to participate. The program was advertised during Freshman Orientation, and the first week of class students were sent an email. Interested students were asked to attend one of two mentee training sessions. 140 students opted to participate in the program, which was 35% of our new freshman cohort.

4) Mentee Training

There are expectations for mentees who participate in the peer mentoring program, which must be conveyed up-front, preferably in a training session the first week of class. This session provides students details of the program and its benefits, conveys mentee responsibilities, and provides the opportunity to officially sign up for the program.

Participants complete two forms during the training session. The first form is the Peer Mentoring Program Questionnaire, used to make the best matches between mentors and mentees. Engineering disciplines of interest, hometown, high school GPA and ACT/SAT scores, hobbies and interests, what the student does for relaxation, why they chose to major in engineering, how they spend a typical day, adjectives they use to describe themselves, and what kind of music they like are all used to help match the mentee to the mentor.

The second form is the Mentee Expectation Worksheet. This provides the mentee with a menu selection of expectations for the relationship, plus the ability to write in additional expectations. This form is adapted from Brainard.¹⁰ The mentee can select reasons the mentee wants a mentor, activities she/he would like to do with the mentor, topics they hope to discuss with their mentor, and things that the mentee feels are off limits in the mentoring relationship.

5) Proper Mentor- Mentee Matching

If the mentor's and mentee's personalities mesh, though not necessarily match, the relationship will be a success. To mesh, they must have a mutual respect or a mutual enjoyment of each other's company. If one of these aspects exists, the relationship will be a success; having both helps ensure a top mentoring experience. With mutual respect, each person wants to be viewed by the other in a good light, creating a culture of honoring meetings and valuing each other's opinion. Enjoyment of each other's company provides that extra incentive to make time for the mentoring session and to talk more candidly.

The Peer Mentoring Program Questionnaire mentioned above is used to match mentors to mentees. The mentors meet, go through each questionnaire, and select the mentees that they feel will most likely mesh with their personality. Of course, mentor load leveling must also be achieved.

6) Weekly Targeted Meetings

As mentioned earlier, the mentor meets one-on-one with each mentee weekly during the fall semester, beginning the second week of class. The first meeting typically lasts 50-60 minutes, with subsequent meetings typically lasting 20-30 minutes. During the spring semester, they typically meet every 2-3 weeks. After each meeting, the mentor records notes of the session to review before their next session.

At the first meeting, the mentor and mentee get to know each other better, set up a weekly meeting time, and talk about the items on the questionnaires the mentee completed during the

training session. The mentor specifically talks with the mentee about why the mentee is in college - a theme for future discussions. They also discuss the benefits of going to class, where to get free tutoring, and study habits. At the end of the first meeting, the mentor and mentee both sign the Mentor and Mentee Agreement. This agreement, adapted from Brainard³, sets in writing the expectations and conditions of the mentor and mentee relationship. The form spells out: a) the objectives, b) the confidentiality issue, c) the frequency of meetings, d) the duration of the mentoring relationship, and e) the no-fault termination clause. It is important for the student to know they can terminate the relationship for any reason at any time, without guilt, hence the no-fault termination.¹⁰ This agreement is signed by both the mentor and the mentee.

7) The Right Information and Support at the Right Time

Each week there are certain topics that the mentor will discuss with the mentee. These topics are timed to coincide with a freshman's life at that point in time. Clemson University's advisor's website¹¹ has a week by week description of the emotional and academic stresses in a freshman's life. For example, they show that in week four, roommate problems typically surface as politeness wears off. Therefore, our peer mentors will ask how the mentee is getting along with his/her roommate(s). If there are difficulties, the mentor can suggest ways to help the situation, and if the situation seems irresolvable, the mentor will discuss with them how to request a room switch and/or get counseling from the counseling center.

Other topics covered in the first semester sessions are: taking the first test, study habits, how to put a bad test score in perspective, not repeating the same mistakes, professor etiquette, organizational skills, dropping classes, midterms survival, perspective changes, co-ops and research projects, pre-registration, roommates and friends, health center, grade forgiveness, and surviving finals. Of course, mentors and mentees discuss any issue of concern with the mentee. It is not limited to the special topics listed above.

The second semester, mentees have grown substantially over the first semester and typically choose to meet every 2-3 weeks with a mentor, if at all. Topics for the second semester include personal goals, problems outside of class, changing majors, study groups, group projects, pre-registration, and housing on or off campus for next year.

8) Proper Referrals

A good mentor must know when and how to refer a student in a compassionate and tactful manner. A peer mentor is not an academic advisor, tutor, psychologist, nurse, or career counselor. A tactful referral from the peer mentor often makes the difference in the mentee actually seeking help from the appropriate resource. The mentor must know the resources available on campus and tell the student how to access these resources when appropriate. The Clemson University advisor's website¹¹ gives some indicative signs when a referral may be beneficial.

9) Group mentee social activities

Mentees enjoy meeting other students and making new friends in a relaxed setting. Mentors occasionally schedule group outings at the campus coffee shop or meet for pizza and games while talking about the topic of the week. Since mentees were placed to mesh with mentors, students in a mentor's group usually mesh very well together, forming new friendships. Once or twice a semester, mentors will schedule fun (hanging out, movies), games (dodge ball, volleyball, basketball) and food for all program mentees to socialize even more.

10) Mentor Handbook Development

Using upperclassmen as mentors creates a regular significant turnover as the mentors and the coordinators graduate, leave for co-op and internship positions, or become heavily involved in their job search during their final semester. The Mentor Handbook passes information to the next generation of mentors describing appropriate behavior, regulations, special weekly topics, and how to handle serious situations.

Costs

The costs of this peer mentoring program are approximately \$95/mentee per year, not counting any facility or furniture costs. We created cubical space for peer mentors to meet with their mentees in one of our engineering buildings. Each cubicle has a computer, phone, file drawer, and comfortable chairs.

Assessment

Measures to assess the program include fall-to-spring retention rate, first year retention rate, grade point average, mentee satisfaction survey results, mentor retention, and mentor debriefing. We will track the peer mentored cohorts for future retention and graduation rates.

The pilot program was much more successful than we had anticipated. Peer mentored students returned for the spring semester in engineering at a significantly higher rate than the non-mentored students. Table 1 shows the overall spring retention of the peer-mentored and non-mentored engineering students.

	Mentored	Non-Mentored
<i>Returned to engineering</i>	94%	78%
<i>Returned to university, different major</i>	6%	15%
<i>Left university</i>	0%	7%

Table 1. Overall spring retention of freshmen engineering students

Peer mentored students were twice as likely as their non-mentored colleagues to have a first semester grade point average greater than 2.5, and the average GPA of the peer mentored students was 9% higher than that of the non-mentored cohort.

Table 2 shows the overall first year engineering retention for peer mentored and non-mentored freshmen engineering students.

	Mentored	Non-Mentored
<i>Returned to engineering</i>	72%	63%
<i>Returned to university, different major</i>	19%	22%
<i>Left university</i>	9%	15%

Table 2. Overall first year retention of freshmen engineering students

After the last fall mentoring session, each student completed an anonymous mentee survey. 20% of the mentored students said that the program had been very helpful, 80% somewhat helpful, 0% not helpful, and 100% would recommend it to other freshmen. 75% of the mentees wanted to continue the relationship for the second semester. We also asked open ended questions on the strengths of the program and how we could improve the program. The most commonly mentioned strengths were the ability to talk to an upperclassman about her/his experiences and thoughts on different subjects, get tips on classes, and updated them on events. Ideas to improve the program are mentioned below.

Continued participation week after week was a strong indicator that the mentees valued the program, otherwise they would simply quit attending.

Mentor satisfaction was also very high. Mentors felt they contributed to the success of their mentees and helped the mentee mature faster and navigate their first semester more smoothly. All wished they had a mentor when they were freshmen. Mentors also felt that their interpersonal skills improved by being a mentor. All mentors completed their year-long commitment to the program. One mentor became the mentor coordinator for the 2006-2007 year, one mentor graduated, and two mentors were too busy to continue for another year due to senior year courses and job interviews. All mentors helped us recruit new mentors for the 2006-2007 year.

Improvements for the 2006-2007 program, based on feedback from the pilot program, include: 1) hiring and training mentors earlier, 2) advertising the mentoring program at new student orientation, 3) starting the mentoring in the first week of class, 4) expanding the mentor handbook, and 5) adding more group mentor/mentee socials.

Retention data for the 2006-2007 program is not yet available, as spring semester just started. However, this information will be available for the conference presentation. Although our pilot program indicated that peer mentoring successfully impacts retention, this larger study will yield more reliable results. The 2006-2007 program was open to all interested freshmen; 140 mentees chose to participate, requiring twelve mentors. Peer mentoring will be mandatory for the 2007-2008 freshman cohort.

Peer mentored students retention will continue to be tracked each year through graduation.

Conclusions

Overall, our pilot peer mentoring program was a success. The first year engineering retention for peer mentored students was 72% compared to the non-mentored student retention rate of 63%. The first year retention at the university (any major) for peer mentored students was 91% compared to the non-mentored cohort retention rate of 85%. All peer mentored students said that they would recommend the program to other freshmen, and all students rated the program a success.

Feedback from mentees and mentors instigated improvements in the program for 2006-2007. Peer mentoring will be mandatory for all engineering freshmen at the University of Arkansas beginning fall 2007.

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Appendices

- Appendix A Mentee Questionnaire
- Appendix B Mentee Expectation Worksheet
Mentor and Mentee Agreement
- Appendix C Mentee Solicitation Email
- Appendix D Mentor Solicitation Email

Appendix A: Mentee Questionnaire

Peer Mentoring Program Questionnaire

Note: This information will be used to make the best matches between mentors and mentees and will not be used outside of the mentoring program.

Name:

E-mail Address:

Contact Number:

Major or if undeclared, most interested:

Hometown (City, State, Country):

Ethnicity (optional):

High school GPA and ACT/SAT scores:

Hobbies/Interests:

What I do to relax:

Why I chose to major in engineering:

How I spend a typical day:

Adjectives that describe me:

Appendix B: Mentee Expectation Worksheet/Mentor and Mentee Agreement

MENTEE EXPECTATION WORKSHEET

Directions: Use this worksheet to help you develop an understanding of what you expect to gain from your mentoring relationship. Add your own items whenever you do not find them listed.

The reasons I want a mentor are to:

- ◇ Receive encouragement and support
 - ◇ Increase my confidence when dealing with professionals
 - ◇ Challenge myself to achieve new goals and explore alternatives
 - ◇ Gain a realistic perspective of the university and classroom
 - ◇ Get advice on how to balance work and other responsibilities and set priorities
 - ◇ Gain knowledge of the classroom “do’s and don’ts”
 - ◇ Learn about networking
 - ◇ Other reasons I want a mentor: _____
-
-
-

I want my mentor and I to:

- ◇ Tour my mentor’s school facilities/make a tour of labs/university tour
 - ◇ Go to mentoring events
 - ◇ Meet over coffee, lunch, or dinner
 - ◇ Go to educational events such as lectures, talks, documentaries
 - ◇ Go to student organization meetings
 - ◇ Other activities I want to do with my mentor: _____
-
-
-

I hope my mentor and I will discuss:

- ◇ Academic subjects that will most benefit my future career
 - ◇ Job opportunities, co-op opportunities, Career Development Center
 - ◇ The realities of the university and engineering
 - ◇ My mentor’s experience
 - ◇ How to network
 - ◇ How to manage school, social, and family life
 - ◇ How to balance school and the real world
 - ◇ Campus resources
 - ◇ What it’s really like
 - ◇ Critiquing resume
 - ◇ Other topics I hope to discuss with my mentor: _____
-
-
-

Adapted from Brainard¹⁰

The things I feel are off limits in my mentoring relationship include:

- ◇ Going to restaurants to meet
- ◇ Using non-public places for meetings
- ◇ Meeting behind closed doors
- ◇ Other situations or topics that I feel are confident or off limits with my mentor: ___

MENTOR AND MENTEE AGREEMENT

We are voluntarily entering into a mentoring relationship from which we both expect to benefit. We want this to be a rich, rewarding experience with most of our time together spent in career development activities. To this end, we have mutually agreed upon the terms and conditions of our relationship as outlined in this agreement.

Objectives

We hope to achieve:

- ◇ Ease transition from high school to college
- ◇ Offer career and school guidance
- ◇ Provide moral support
- ◇ Connect to campus resources
- ◇ Reality check

Confidentiality

Our discussions will be held in confidence.

Frequency of Meetings

We will attempt to meet 1 time each week. If we cannot attend a scheduled meeting, we agree to be responsible and notify our partner.

Duration

We have determined that our mentoring relationship will continue as long as we both feel comfortable or until May 2006.

No-Fault Termination

We are committed to open and honest communication in our relationship. We will discuss and attempt to resolve any conflicts as they arise. If however, one of us needs to terminate the relationship for any reason, we agree to abide by the decision of our partner.

Mentor

Mentee

Date

Date

Adapted from Brainard¹⁰

Appendix C: Mentee Solicitation Email (2006-2007 program)

WANT TO HAVE A MENTOR TO HELP GUIDE YOU THROUGH YOUR FRESHMAN YEAR?

THEN JOIN **PEER MENTORING! WHERE YOU WILL GET TO HAVE AN UPPERCLASSMAN HELP YOU OUT!**

Your mentor will help you:

- Learn "the ropes" and tell you things they wish someone had told them
- Adjust to college life
- Quickly find the campus resources you need to succeed
- Learn skills to help you succeed
- Help you get involved in campus life
- By listening to you and offering advice when you need it, similar to what a big sister or big brother would do

All you have to do is:

- Meet with your mentor on a weekly basis
- Ask questions when you need answers

How do you sign up:

- Attend the mandatory mentee session on Tuesday, August 22 or Wednesday, August 23 in Bell 282 at 5:30 pm (send an email to ajlacho@uark.edu if you can't make the meetings but want to participate)

DON'T FORGET THAT THERE WILL BE FREE FOOD!

Appendix D: Mentor Solicitation Email (2006-2007 program)

WANT TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE IN SOMEONE'S LIFE? BE A MENTOR FOR NEW ENGINEERING FRESHMEN!

The College of Engineering is looking to expand the co-ed mentoring program for new freshmen. **Only 10 students will be selected as mentors for this program!** Are you interested in being one of them?

Here are characteristics we're looking for in our future mentors:

- Mature, trustworthy and enthusiastic engineering junior or senior
- Communication and interpersonal skills
- Positive attitude and team player
- Cultural sensitivity
- UofA full-time student for at least one year
- Have a 3.0 cumulative GPA or better
- Willing to serve as a mentor for both Fall 2006 and Spring 2007 semesters
- Willing to work 7-10 hours every week, including mandatory one-hour weekly mentor meetings

BUT, YOU HAVE TO MOVE FAST:

- Application deadline is **Wednesday May 3**
- Interviews will be Monday and Tuesday, May 8-9
- Positions will be offered on Wednesday, May 10

How to apply:

- Fill out the attached application
- Bring your completed application to the Help Desk at Bell Engineering 3189 by **1:00 pm on Wednesday May 3**
- Students granted an interview will receive notification by email for interview scheduling by 6:00 pm on May 4th

General mentor duties:

- Mentor 10-15 new freshmen on a weekly basis
- Guide new freshmen through their adjustment to college life
- Be a positive role model
- Connect new freshman to campus resources
- Assist in formation of study groups
- Encourage positive group dynamics that enable all students to feel comfortable and safe in voicing their opinion, thoughts, and concerns
- Know about options and opportunities on campus, stay informed about events and activities, and direct students to appropriate offices and facilities
- Help students get involved
- Help students cope with stress
- Help put together materials for website and handouts
- Attend mandatory training sessions

Mentors will be paid \$8/hour.

Questions should be directed to:

Bryan Hill (bwhill@uark.edu) or 575-7780