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Developing an Honors Peer Mentoring Program in Higher Education

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Recommended Citation

Culverhouse, Kate, "Developing an Honors Peer Mentoring Program in Higher Education" (2016). *Honors Senior Capstone Projects*. 4.

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Developing an Honors Peer Mentoring Program in Higher Education

December 15, 2015

Senior Honors Capstone

Kate Culverhouse

The Merrimack College Honors Peer Mentoring Program is currently one of the effective and successful aspects of the Honors Program. The purpose of the peer-mentoring program is to help first-year honors students with their transition not only into the Honors community, but Merrimack as a whole. Peer mentors provide students with assistance in getting oriented to the college campus, introducing them to the Honors Program and its requirements, social or roommate issues or questions and getting involved on campus. Currently in its third year, the peer-mentoring program has 22 mentors that serve 110 first year Honors students, which marks the largest number of first year students and mentors that the program has faced. The dedicated mentors of the Honors Peer Mentoring Program have made the immense workload and time required to start and run this program worthwhile.

Prior to coming to Merrimack for my first semester in the fall of 2012, I was nervous, yet excited about moving off to school and challenging myself socially and academically at Merrimack and in the Honors Program. My hometown of Palmer, Massachusetts is located about 1.5 hours away in Western Mass, therefore relatively out of the norm for a Merrimack student. Because I am the only student from my graduating class of 98 to come to Merrimack, and one of the few from any of the surrounding towns, my nerves were exacerbated, as I did not know a single person in the new place where I was moving. Granted, I was nervous for college as a whole, but more importantly I was nervous about being a student in the Honors Program. At the time, my older brother was a junior at Stonehill College and I had witnessed his successful transition into college and felt at ease knowing that I would be able to do the same. However, he was not in the Honors Program at Stonehill, and although the programs would have been different, I found myself at a loss

when it came to navigating the Honors Program. Not only did I not know a single student at Merrimack, but I also did not know anyone in the program, therefore making my transition more difficult.

As someone who had been heavily involved in sports, clubs and volunteering throughout high school, I knew that I needed to do the same at Merrimack in order to find my place. With this in mind, I began working two jobs on campus, joined the Education Club, Relay for Life and signed up to be an orientation leader. Although these organizations were great stepping-stones for me in my college involvement, I also wanted to get involved in the Honors Program. I put my name in to serve as a “school representative” on the Honors Student Council (HSC). I was elected to serve as the “School of Education” representative and was incredibly excited about this opportunity.

Quickly I found myself becoming more and more involved in the HSC and began taking on additional leadership opportunities within the council. In November of 2012, Dr. Wians invited the members of the HSC to join him at the National Collegiate Honors Council Conference (NCHC) in Boston as an outstanding leadership opportunity, as well as a chance to find ways to improve Merrimack’s young Honors Program. While at the conference, we had the opportunity to attend sessions that interested us and I found myself constantly going to sessions on Peer Mentoring Programs from across the nation. As I sat through each of these sessions, I began to think about the impact that a mentoring program could have on Merrimack’s honors students. After attending at least ten sessions on the topic, I initiated a conversation with Dr. Wians and our graduate fellow at the time, Lauren Cappuccio, and discussed the potential for establishing a peer-mentoring program for Merrimack Honors. Dr. Wians gave me the full support of the Honors program and pushed

for me to move forward with creating a program. Upon our return from the conference, Lauren and I began discussing my findings from the conference and researching additional materials with the hopes of implementing a peer-mentoring program the following fall. At this time, I had never established anything of this magnitude and was admittedly significantly over my head.

Throughout the summer, I exchanged conversations with our new graduate fellow, Theresa Hamilton-Foley, who had thankfully run a peer-mentoring program while at a previous position. With her help and the foundation established from Lauren the following semester, we rolled out the pilot version of the Honors Peer Mentoring program in the fall of 2013 for the class of 2017. For the first year of the program, we solicited students who were actively involved in the Honors Program the past year and asked them to volunteer to be our peer mentors for the semester. We then matched our mentors with their first year students solely based on major and provided the mentors with a brief outline of expectations of them in this program. These expectations included checking in on their assigned students 2-3 times throughout the semester and essentially just serving as a recognizable face for them in the program. During this semester, I once again attended the NCHC conference, this time in New Orleans, Louisiana, and gained more insight into what made a successful peer-mentoring program. Each of the sessions I attended provided me with more ideas and ways to improve our program to truly reach and benefit our students.

At the end of the fall semester, Theresa conducted a focus group and facilitated a survey about the class of 2017's experiences with the peer-mentoring program. Much as we had expected, the results of the program were mixed and fell more heavily on the negative side. The results suggested that mentees wanted more contact, a more friendship-

like relationship with their mentors, and a way to pick their mentors, instead of being assigned one. During the focus group, some students voiced their concern over the lack of connection that they felt with their mentor. However, the majority of the students who responded to the survey, approximately 38 students, reported that they believed that the program was relatively effective and should continue in the future. After the findings of the survey and focus group, I reevaluated the peer-mentoring program and began planning the changes that would occur for the following year.

During the 2014 spring semester, I recruited Joe Fisher, a first year at the time, to assist me in improving the program as he showed genuine interest in the success of this initiative. Throughout this semester, we began focusing heavily on the necessary changes that would be implemented the following year. Our first step was running the mentor recruitment and application process. Instead of asking for volunteers based on personal experiences with the students, we created applications and held informational sessions for students interested in becoming peer mentors. We received 16 applications and accepted all of them to serve the incoming class of 2018. Next, we focused on designing the Peer Mentoring Program section on the Honors Program page of the Merrimack website. Here we included information for prospective students about the program, who to contact, what to expect, important dates, etc. One of the most important features that we placed on this page were the mentor bios that gave prospective students information on our mentors and would allow for them to select a mentor based on their major, involvements, experiences, among many other things, hopefully contributing to a more positive mentoring experience. The most daunting task that we experienced during the transition into the second year of the peer-mentoring program was establishing how we would run mentor selection for our

first year students. Joe and I created a Google selection form, which would be available on the mentoring section of the Honors Program page, composed a letter to be sent out to mentees from their mentor, and crunched the numbers to find the best cohort size for the mentoring groups in the class of 2018.

Prior to opening up the mentor selection process for our mentees, Joe and I met with the class of 2018 during June Orientation, as we were both orientation leaders. During the Honors Program session, we provided the first years with a brief overview of the program, as well as information regarding how to select their mentors. We decided to allow for the incoming students to rank their mentor preferences, with the hopes that matching students with their first or second choice would contribute to their enjoyment and success in the program. During July 2014 at the end of the mentor selection time, I gathered all of the responses and worked to match the mentees with their mentors, hopefully based upon their first choice. This process, which was done through the use of the Google forms, an Excel spreadsheet and computer paper on my kitchen table, was tedious yet aimed to please as many students as possible. Mentors and mentees were then informed of their matches and the first connections were established by the end of July. Mentors were instructed to send out an email to each of their mentees introducing him/herself. Going into the fall semester, Joe and I had a mentor training event planned, as well as a Mentor Meet & Greet/Trivia Night planned, both of which were ideas gathered from the 2013 NCHC conference. Most importantly, moving into the fall 2014 semester, Joe and I provided the mentors with a mentor handbook that we created, which outlined mentor responsibilities and expectations in an organized and firm manner.

The fall 2014 semester ran significantly more smoothly than the previous year and showed great success in the peer-mentoring program. At this time, Joe and I decided to implement monthly mentor report forms, which would serve as a check in on both the mentors and the mentees. These forms became incredibly beneficial as we began being able to track student needs, students of concern and the overall effectiveness of the Honors Program. During this semester, we were granted the opportunity to present at the National Collegiate Honors Council Conference in Denver, Colorado on the peer-mentoring program that we established in Merrimack Honors. Our session, titled “Surviving an Avalanche: The Importance of Peer Mentors for First Year Students”, was presented to honors students, faculty, staff, and deans from around the world and was incredibly successful. In this session we were able to not only provide feedback on our experiences in the program’s first year, both the successes and failure, but also gained insight and suggestions from other institutions. The feedback that we provided others with as well as attained from this conference led to the implementation of more initiatives for the following semester and year.

As a suggestion that came from the conference, we realized the importance of having peer mentors for students who transfer into the honors program during the spring semester. We then selected three mentors, based upon the number of transfer students who were arriving , and allowed for the mentees to select their mentor. This was an incredibly successful implementation, as the survey that we conducted with the transfer students revealed nothing but positive feedback. We had also sent out a survey to the students who had completed the fall 2014 peer-mentoring program and received significantly better results than the previous year. At this point, we felt that the program

had grown tremendously in size, organization and recognition, and had positively impacted the program students, which was the primary goal.

As we moved forward into planning for the fall of 2015 mentoring program, we once again began with mentor recruitment and applications. At this time, we received 25 mentor applications for 22 mentor positions. Joe and I were ecstatic, as the program that we once had to beg students to volunteer for had now become competitive and truly sought after by the program students. In April of 2015, we held the first peer-mentoring training session for our new mentors as we felt that it would be most beneficial to train and inform them as much as possible before their position officially began. This change was successful as it alleviated some of the stress that mentors had felt last year and allowed for the mentors to form a cohort of their own to support each other throughout the year. During training, we covered the basics of the program, the mentor's roles, administrative requirements, and common scenarios that numerous mentors experienced in the past year. By doing this, all mentors and co-directors were on the same page, allowing for a smooth transition into another successful year for the program. Once again, we created mentor bios and updated the mentoring section of the Honors Program page on the Merrimack website and created the Google form for first year students to complete to select their mentor. In addition to what we had done the previous year, one of our program students assisted us in creating a mentor welcome video that was sent to first year students. We also created a more effective form that shut off mentor availability after they reached the maximum of 6 responses. This year we had decided to have mentor cohorts serve between 4-6 students based upon feedback we received from mentees and mentors the previous year.

The first year students were once again greeted and informed during June orientation and participated in the mentor selection process. This year, the process went significantly more smoothly as the Google generated spreadsheet essentially did all of the necessary matching and eliminated the need for my computer paper and kitchen table. Once again the mentors and mentees were informed of their matches and communication between the two was initiated in late July. Joe and I also instituted other changes to improve the success and effectiveness of the program. For the fall 2015 semester, each mentor was given a budget to be used on mentee cohort bonding and required to complete bi-weekly mentor reports. These two implementations proved to be necessary and beneficial as the semester began.

In reflection on the fall 2015 semester of the Honor Peer Mentoring program, the bi-weekly mentor reports have been one of the most beneficial and essential elements for the mentoring program, as well as the Honors Program. In these report forms, there is a section that asks for mentors to list "Students of Concern". As the mentors were informed during training, students of concern can range from those who may be overly anxious or stressed out, homesick, or even those with whom they had no contact. During the first few weeks of the semester, the mentors flagged over 30 students as students of concern. These students were then reported up to the Honors Program Manager, Lisa Cavallaro and Interim Program Director, Dr. Kerry Johnson. Depending on the concern and needs of the student, we wrote CARE reports and informed the necessary individuals about our concerns for the students. As a result, we were able to help almost 1/3 of the class of 2019 who were struggling with their transition. With an incredibly high and unprecedented number of students of concern, Dr. Johnson suggested that Joe and I reach out to Hamel

Health and Counseling and ask for assistance in preparing our mentors for the high needs students that they were working with. With the gracious help of Jim Howland and Erin Hetzel, Joe and I provided our mentors with a workshop on dealing with needy students, establishing boundaries and self-care that brought a feeling of relief and support to our mentors and ourselves.

Once again, Joe and I had the opportunity to present on our peer-mentoring program at the NCHC conference in Chicago, Illinois this November. This year we had nearly 60 attendees at our session and engaged in a presentation and discussion that was more successful and beneficial than year's past. The experiences that we faced with our students, especially with our students of concern, informed other institutions of our best practices and what has best served the Merrimack Honors students.

In looking at the success of the peer-mentoring program, the greatest outcome is program retention. The retention rate of students in the Honors program has steadily increased since the implementation of the program. The class of 2016, which did not have a peer-mentoring program, entered into the Honors Program with approximately 60 students. At this time, there are less than 25 students remaining in the program, showing a loss of nearly 35 students (over 50%). The class of 2017, which entered with 66 students, currently has 52 students, therefore only experiencing a loss of 14 students. The dramatic decrease in the number of students who dropped the program after experiencing the peer-mentoring program can be seen as a success. Most successfully however, the class of 2018 entered the Honors Program with 91 students, and currently has 85, netting a loss of only 6 students. Although there are additional factors that contribute to the increased retention

of Honors Program students, the peer-mentoring program is most definitely positively contributing to these statistics.

In addition to retention, the Honors Peer-Mentoring has other longer-term positive outcomes for Honors Program students. The program has seen a significant increase in the number of student leaders in the program, in organizations such as the Honors Student Council and Ambassador programs, and an increase in the number of students opting to live in the Honors Living Learning Communities after their first year. Moreover, the program has seen an increase in the student success, in terms of co-curricular involvements and academics. While the mentees appear to glean the most benefits of the Honors Peer Mentoring Program, the mentors are also making long-term impacts on their lives. The mentors take on an incredible leadership position that is only available to a select number of students on Merrimack's campus. Through this position they are developing strong interpersonal, organization, time-management, and support skills that may not be as easily and readily available elsewhere. Additionally, the impact that their mentees have on them is incredibly beneficial. For some of our mentors, they have developed friendships with their mentees outside of the program, which make substantial impacts on both parties.

In the past few weeks, Joe and I conducted a survey that was sent out to first year students. Nearly 80 first year students responded to the survey, which asked them to address the effectiveness of their mentor in a variety of ways, such as "My peer mentor responded in reasonable time when I expressed a concern", "My peer mentor provided me with useful information", and "Overall my peer mentor was helpful with my transition to Merrimack and the Honors Program". Each of the fifteen statements were answered based

upon the rating scale which went as follows: 1- Strongly Disagree, 2- Disagree, 3- Neither agree nor disagree, 4- Agree, and 5- Agree. The results from this survey once again reflected success and a positive impact from our mentors. The average ratings for peer mentors based upon the above statements are as follows: for the “My peer mentor responded in reasonable time when I expressed a concern” - rating: 4; “My peer mentor provided me with useful information” - rating: 4; and “Overall my peer mentor was helpful with my transition to Merrimack and the Honors Program” - rating: 4.6. It is important to note that in categories that addressed topics such as time management and studying, the average ratings were 2.6. Looking at the results of the most recent survey conducted, the first year students, Lisa Cavallaro, Dr. Johnson, Joe and I are all in agreement that the Honors Peer Mentoring Program is a successful and necessary aspect of the Merrimack College Honors Program.

Moving forward and especially in reflection on this year, it is incredibly important to properly train student mentors on the best ways to interact and assist their students. Particularly examining the increased number of students of concern that we faced this year, peer mentors require adequate training to best help themselves as well as their mentees. In order for older students to successfully serve as peer mentors for this student population, I believe it is essential to provide trainings on academic, social, and mental/emotional support. In years past, I believe that we have sufficiently trained and prepared our mentors for academic and social questions, as many of them have had similar experiences in the past. However, I think that it will be essential to include training on mental/emotional support for the peer mentors prior to working with their mentees. For our mentors this year, I believe that many of them would have benefited from having training from Hamel

Health and Counseling on assisting needy students, establishing boundaries, and self-care. As highlighted in the training session, Honors students tend to be overly involved and self-critical. Additionally, as peer mentors, students wish to assist and help others as much as possible. The combination of these factors sum up an Honors Peer Mentor and should be addressed and assisted before larger issues arise. Most importantly, I think the students who serve as mentors need to be properly recognized and compensated. Currently, the Honors Peer Mentors are not paid and only receive Honors Participation Points for their service. In examining the practices of other institutions and the iTech mentoring program on Merrimack's campus, the lack of monetary or credit compensation for mentors is something that needs to be addressed. I believe that this is an issue because in order for mentees to be properly taken care of, mentors need to be taken care of as well.

Now that my time as the director of the Merrimack College Honors Peer Mentoring Program has come to a close, I find it astounding to see where the program is today in comparison to where it was just three years ago. To think that when I came to Merrimack this program was non-existent and now not only exists but also is nationally recognized, leaves me speechless, grateful and humble. Although I may have benefitted from having a peer mentor during my first semester at Merrimack, had I had one I would not have had the amazing opportunity of creating and directing this program for the past three years.

As a result of creating this program, I have been blessed with attending three additional National Collegiate Honors Council Conferences and presenting at two, as well as meeting and presenting to the Merrimack College Board of Trustees. More importantly than the presentation and professional experiences that I have had, the leadership, organizational and administrative skills that I have developed and improved are skills that

will carry me into the next phase of my life. From developing the program, to serving as a mentor and director simultaneously, and finally serving solely as the director, each of these positions has required me to manage my time effectively to schedule in additional meetings and complete the tedious and incredibly time consuming tasks of mentor matching, writing the mentor handbook and keeping up with mentor reports. The long nights and early mornings of ensuring that all of these tasks were completed have been rewarded with the success and recognition that the program has received since its inception.

In final reflection of my time developing, running and maintaining the Honors Peer Mentoring program, I am eternally grateful for each experience that I was presented with. Having the opportunity and genuine support as a first year student to create and implement a new program that would include each member of the incoming class was utterly incredible. Never in my wildest dreams did I ever anticipate the peer-mentoring program to grow to the size, outreach and success of its current status. However, I am excited and hopeful that the program will continue to increase retention, student involvement and success and impact the first year students of the Merrimack College Honors Program for years to come.