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INTEGRATING PARTNERSHIP INTO AN ACADEMIC PEER MENTORING PROGRAM: MOVING FROM A FOCUS ON STUDENT TRAINING TO A FOCUS ON BUILDING STUDENT-INSTRUCTOR CONNECTIONS

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The notion of who works with whom and in what ways to support undergraduate student learning has changed over the last decade. While there are longstanding and increasingly popular models of peer education through which students support other students, such as the learning assistant (Otero, Pollock & Finkelstein, 2010) and peer-led team learning (Gafney & Varma-Nelson, 2008) models, there is also a growing number of examples of students and faculty working together, as partners, to support student learning (Cook-Sather, Bovill & Felten, 2014). This essay is a reflection on how I have been working to shift the program I coordinate from a student-student mentoring to a student-instructor partnership model. I present a story of the process and challenges of transitioning a campus-wide peer educator program, the Academic Peer Mentoring Program (AMP) at the University of Maryland, towards a greater focus on students (particularly those in peer educator roles) as partners with instructors.

Peer educator programs typically involve select undergraduate students returning to support their peers' learning both in and out of class for a course they have recently taken and done well in. Students in peer-educator-supported courses benefit from increased active learning, feedback, and mentorship, and the peer educators themselves benefit by developing leadership and communication skills while reinforcing course concepts. Peer educators may also develop close relationships with course instructors and provide instructors with valuable student perspectives and support in developing instructional materials. However, in some cases, peer educator programs focus more on preparing peer educators for interactions with students than on supporting partnerships between instructors and peer educators.

While a focus on preparing peer educators to support student learning makes sense in many ways, I was compelled to shift AMP towards a model of partnership to increase opportunities for growth, changing perspective, and pedagogical advancement for both the peer educators and the instructors. When I began working with the program, I noticed many missed opportunities for collaboration between instructors and the peer educators working in their courses. In several cases, communication between instructors and peer educators was either one-directional or essentially non-existent, in that the instructor directed peer educators to work with students without any follow-up or back-and-forth interaction. The peer educators were having a significant impact on the students in the course but were not necessarily giving or receiving valuable feedback from the instructor. I thought it was critical, for the sake of the instructor, peer educators, and students in the course, to promote increased interaction and collaboration between the instructors and peer educators.

As current coordinator of AMP, I have been working over the last year to integrate aspects of partnership into the program by connecting instructors more to the peer educator's professional development, creating resources to help instructors build strong partnerships, and encouraging increased reflection from instructors and peer educators on the outcomes of partnership. Below, I

introduce the current program structure and goals, which explicitly include a focus on students as partners. Then, I describe the changes that were made to transition to this greater focus on students as partners, associated challenges, and ideas for continual movement in a direction towards partnership.

The Academic Peer Mentoring Program (AMP)

The Academic Peer Mentoring Program (AMP), as I have reshaped it, supports the integration of undergraduate academic peer mentors (referred to as AMPs) into courses and research settings to work *with* instructors, *as part of a team*, to promote student learning and engagement. With this shift from a focus on mentoring to the focus on partnership, the overall goal of the program is to create more active and inclusive instructional experiences in courses and research settings, while recognizing students as partners in the instructional process and helping to build relationships among instructors and students. The program helps AMPs to gain professional skills and leadership experience through studying fundamental concepts from scientific research on teaching and learning and applying those concepts to their roles as an AMP and as a student. The goal for instructors is that they enhance their pedagogical practices and increase their use of effective and inclusive teaching practices by incorporating the AMPs' perspectives and experiences. Through successful AMP-instructor partnerships, students in AMP courses will ideally demonstrate greater learning gains, practice better metacognitive and self-regulated learning strategies, and perceive an increased sense of inclusion in learning spaces.

AMP is coordinated through the University of Maryland's Teaching and Learning Transformation Center (TLTC). The program provides instructors with guidance and community to help them develop beneficial partnerships with AMPs and determine appropriate AMP roles and responsibilities. The program also offers a one-credit pedagogy course that AMPs take during their first semester in their role, which helps them develop the knowledge and professional skills to be an effective peer mentor and instructional team member. I have co-taught the course since becoming involved with the program, and have worked with my colleagues to integrate aspects of partnership into the course content and assignments.

The program is open to both faculty and graduate student instructors of record across campus from all content areas and disciplines. Involvement in the program begins with an instructor application and, after being accepted to the program, instructors are responsible for recruiting AMPs for their course. We have found that putting the responsibility on the instructor helps to establish a strong basis for partnership because the instructor is committed to working with students from the start and sets an expectation for collaboration by initiating the relationship.

The Process of Integrating Partnership into AMP

When the AMP program began, the program focused, like almost all peer educator programs, mostly on preparing AMPs to support their peers; the program description communicated that it "trains AMPs to advance the learning outcomes of their fellow students." In Summer 2019, with the support of my TLTC colleagues, I restructured the program description (to that which is

included in the section above) and the enrollment process to communicate an explicit focus on partnership between AMPs and instructors. Currently, the pedagogy course that AMPs take is still a main component of the program, but the focus has shifted from “training” the AMPs to working with students to building AMP-instructor capacity to work as an instructional team. I aimed to shift the messaging to communicate that instructors and AMPs are both part of the program and that the program intends to support the instructional team as a whole, rather than just prepare undergraduates to be effective peer mentors.

Small changes in wording and framing along with the addition of key reflective questions throughout the enrollment process have made a big difference in how instructors and AMPs approach participation in the program. Now, instructors interested in joining the program for the first time complete an application, part of which requires them to describe how they will work with AMPs *as an instructional team* including when and how they will communicate with AMPs for the purposes of planning, reflection, and feedback. In addition, each semester that instructors return to participate in the program they answer a set of reflective questions, including, “What changes are you planning to make in terms of how you work with AMPs as part of an instructional team, and why?” and “What challenges have you previously experienced when working with AMPs? How might you address those challenges in the coming semester? Is there anything the program coordinators can do to help address those challenges?” By asking instructors to consider the instructional team dynamics from the start and throughout their participation in the program, we have seen a significant increase in AMP-instructor interaction, and AMPs have reported greater involvement in the instructional process.

In order to increase communication with and between instructors and facilitate the distribution of resources, we created an online space for instructors through the University’s learning management system. Participation in the program requires that they join, because instructors submit their responses to the requisite reflection for participation through this space. I created a number of resource pages including inviting and recruiting AMPs, negotiating responsibilities, setting purposeful goals, and reflection at the mid and end of semester. I sent regular messages throughout the semester to keep instructors abreast of what AMPs were working on in the pedagogy course and the types of conversations they could have to support the AMPs’ learning and professional development. Having an online community space for instructors has allowed me to streamline communication, organize a variety of resources in different formats, and encourage virtual discussion between instructors.

With the help of my co-instructors, I made several changes to the pedagogy course to encourage and enhance a focus on partnership from the side of the AMPs. Every week, after the AMPs are introduced to a new teaching and learning related topic, they answer on a discussion board the question, “What do you plan to share with your instructional team regarding [TOPIC]?” The AMPs and instructors have noted that this question has provoked thoughtful and engaging discussion in their regular instructional team meetings, and that instructors have gained new perspectives on teaching and learning from the AMPs. In addition to the weekly responses, throughout the semester, the AMPs put together a portfolio to document their growth and development. One required component of the portfolio is to receive and reflect on a formative evaluation completed by the instructor they are working with. These additions to the course have

helped to encourage sharing of ideas between the AMPs and the instructors as well as increase ongoing feedback, which are both important aspects of partnership.

For the first time in Spring 2020, I will be partnering with three former AMPs as I teach the pedagogy course. My hope is that these experienced peer mentors will be able to provide valuable support to new peer mentors, both in terms of working through challenges they may face in their role as well as helping them to successfully complete the course. By working with these students, I will gain greater awareness of the AMP experience and be able to improve the course to better address their various needs and interests. Going through the process of establishing partnership myself, while promoting partnership among others, has been eye-opening. I now have a deeper understanding of what it feels like to go through recruiting student partners, negotiating responsibilities, scheduling, providing proper compensation, building relationships, and developing trust. I looking forward to working with these students and am expecting to learn a lot from this experience, both about my teaching as well as about the overall program coordination.

Challenges related to shifting an existing program

Altering an existing program has proven to be quite challenging, particularly in terms of working with instructors who had been involved in the program prior to the changes being made. Before, instructors only had to indicate interest and then AMPs could sign up to work with them; program coordinators had little to no contact with instructors after the initial onboarding. During the first semester of change, many returning instructors did not understand that they now had to submit documentation and reflection to remain involved in the program. Some made assumptions that nothing had changed despite reminders and messaging about new program requirements and resources. A few instructors expressed discontent about being asked to submit additional reflections and information. It is difficult to say whether or not these few instructors were opposed to the idea of partnership or if they were just frustrated by being asked to document and reflect on their partnership. Throughout the transition, I made sure to explain why the program was shifting towards encouraging AMP-instructor partnership, how these additional requirements would help me to support them in partnership and understand each instructor's approach to partnership, and how everyone involved would benefit from this shift. Most instructors were very excited to see the program shift in this way and were appreciative of the additional advice, direction, and resources that were provided. This process has shown me that changes in framing and mindset take time, continuous messaging, and incorporation of the ideas in multiple ways, including through the AMPs' pedagogy course.

In addition to requesting that instructors submit initial descriptions of and reflections on how they would approach partnership at the beginning of the semester, I also held monthly instructor meetings so that instructors could discuss successes and challenges of partnership with each other. The conversations varied depending on the point in the semester. For instance, at the beginning of the year, instructors shared approaches for negotiating expectations and increasing AMP involvement in the course. Towards the middle of the semester, we discussed strategies for gathering feedback from students, providing AMPs with feedback, and supporting AMPs in developing their own tools to gather feedback from students. At the end of the semester, we

considered various ways to engage in end-of-semester reflection and the types of questions or activities that would be appropriate to do with the AMPs. While these meetings were generative, they were optional; thus, unsurprisingly, attendance was very low. I have questioned how to hold instructors accountable for attending regular meetings with program coordinators as well as logistically how to find a time that would work for all instructors.

Future Directions

Although I am very proud of the changes the program has gone through over the last year to move towards greater partnership between AMPs and instructors, there is still room for continual improvement. In the coming semester, I plan to create additional resources to support AMP-instructor communication and meaningful sharing of feedback. For example, I will provide various options and examples of informal, formative evaluations that both AMPs and instructors will complete to provide each other with feedback mid-way through the semester. I plan to check in with each instructional team (AMPs and instructor for a course) semi-regularly, as time permits, by attending at least one instructional team meeting and one in-class session during which the AMPs are working with students alongside the instructor. I will be adding more questions to the surveys that AMPs and instructors complete each semester about the perspectives and outcomes of partnership to get a sense of the impact the changes are having and ways I can continue to improve the program to promote partnership.

For further down the road, my colleagues and I are contemplating how we can continue to increase instructor engagement and whether or not we can require instructors to meet semi-regularly. Ideally, instructors would have significant ongoing interaction with each other as well as program coordinators to be able to discuss successes and challenges related to partnership with AMPs. Even better, although likely logistically impossible, we would have larger meetings for instructors and AMPs from multiple courses to be able to come together and hear about each other's experiences and perspectives. As we continue to move toward a focus on partnership, we must consider time and availability of program coordinators, instructors, and AMPs in terms of what is reasonable to require. Presently, the most impactful step has been conscious and continuous revision of the language we use throughout the program to reflect a commitment to AMP-instructor partnership.

I am thrilled to see AMP continue to grow, especially as the program focuses more on students as partners. In Fall 2019, the first semester after the shift, over 50 instructors and over 100 AMPs were involved, and about half of those instructors were new to the program in that semester. Since this program is open to instructors all across campus, I am hoping that the program sparks a larger campus shift towards recognizing students as partners in teaching and learning. Hearing and reading comments from both instructors and AMPs about how much they've enjoyed working together and how much they've learned from each other drives my continued dedication to a focus on partnership. As mentioned before, I am most excited to take the program to the next level by engaging in partnership myself by working with former AMPs to further drive the movement towards partnership.

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