

## Improving the Interpersonal Communication Skills of Peer Mentors

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With a 25% average attrition rate among first-year students, a common concern for college leaders today is retention (Horneff, 2001). Added to concerns about reflecting institutional quality, the cost of attrition in financial terms to colleges and is substantial (Howard, 2000). Students enter college with various backgrounds and academic skills, and institutions have implemented freshman and other first-year seminars to support them in the transition to their new collegiate environments, often with the dual mission of helping students succeed and to reduce attrition rates.

Howard (2000) identified one of the most effective way to enhance student success is to augment a freshman or first-year student seminar with "peer mentors." These peers assist in assimilating the first-year students into college life by educating them in areas such as academic study, social support skills, alcohol awareness, campus activities, and services (Horneff, 2002). For peer mentors to provide this support they must possess strong interpersonal communication skills (Miedel, 2000). A real difficulty for many colleges implementing peer mentoring, however, is the variation of the interpersonal skill levels. A common response has been the creation of specialized seminars to improve interpersonal skill abilities (Howard, 2000; Miedel, 2000). Despite the recognition of the need to enhance peer mentors interpersonal skills, few colleges and universities have constructed meaningful, coherent programs to facilitate peer mentoring training in this area.

One of the dominant interpersonal skills necessary for peer mentors are related to providing 'feedback.' Feedback skills have been referred to as the foundation for improving interpersonal communication skills (Kirkland & Manoogian, 1998) and are needed to learn more advanced skills such as conflict mediation and group presentation (Munter, 2000). The basis of all communications training is tied to interpersonal communications skills, specifically the active listening (Johnson & Johnson, 2000).

Another important aspect of interpersonal communication skills are nonverbal signals that can help a student or peer mentor understand the effectiveness of other communication encounters and signals (Alessandra & Hunsacker, 1993). Often, confusion or misunderstanding of a message that is sent can result in a "mixed message," meaning that one message is being verbalized and a different message is being sent through vocal tones and body language.

Feedback skills are important to understand the underlying motivation and the

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overall accuracy of communication (Alessandra & Hunsacker, 1993). This understanding builds trust and rapport among speakers creating congruence between verbal and nonverbal messages. This congruence then acts as the linchpin to effective interpersonal communications.

McDaniel College, a small, private liberal arts college in Maryland is committed to supporting the intellectual, physical, and emotional needs of young adults during the critical college years. One of the ways the College supports the assimilation of incoming students is with an initiative called The First-Year Program (FYP). The FYP is augmented with a peer mentoring component that is unique in that it provides support to all first-year students throughout their entire first academic year.

The need to improve the interpersonal communications skills of the peer mentors at McDaniel resulted in a focused research effort with the applied research question of "How can peer mentors identify skill gaps in their required interpersonal communication competency areas and close these identified gaps?"

### **Research Methods**

A needs analysis, including both quantitative and qualitative tools, was used to develop a profile of the ability level of peer mentors' interpersonal communications skills. A self-assessment questionnaire was initially used with the peer mentors to identify baseline levels of ability. The results identified skill gaps between the current skills of the peer mentors and the competency levels defined by the institution. The Instructional Systems Design (ISD) Process was then used to design and develop learning objectives to cover what were institutionally defined as skill gaps. The process utilized was consistent with that advocated by Chaudron (2002) that focused on a building data collection instruments that are valid and reliable.

### **Participants**

The students involved were 41 peer mentors responsible for mentoring 440 first-year students. The average peer mentor was 19.8 years old, female (60% female, 40% male), had 13.9 years of education, was Caucasian, from a middle class socio-economic background, an above average verbal ability, was somewhat experienced in small group interaction settings, and was very interested in learning new skills relevant to their duties.

### **Data Collection**

Data were gathered through the distribution of two, 18-question researcher-developed surveys instruments. The content of the two surveys was similar; however, one was distributed and completed by peer mentors and the other was distributed to and completed by first-year students. The survey consisted of 15 questions on a Likert-type scale and three free/open response items. The survey design was linked to the interpersonal communications skill areas of feedback, conflict mediation, and



presentation skills.

#### Data Analysis

Objective questions were scored on a Likert-type scale of 1-to-4, with a maximum score of 60, with an initial benchmark set at 30, which is an average score of 2 ("Sometimes") per question. With no historical data available for comparison, the benchmark is set for future comparison in follow up studies. Free response items provided qualitative data on the skill areas.

#### Content Validity and Reliability

The three content areas of the survey were feedback, conflict mediation, and presentation skills. This was aligned with the institution's goal to improve the interpersonal communication skills of peer mentors, ensuring that they are capable of meeting the needs of first-year students.

The survey had three to five questions per content area meeting the main requirement of content validity (Chaudron, 2002). The focus on achieving valid questions enhanced the long-term reliability of the survey. As a parenthetic note, the initial data collection was intended to provide some baseline descriptor of abilities, with future data collections being completed over time to create normative behavioral expectations.

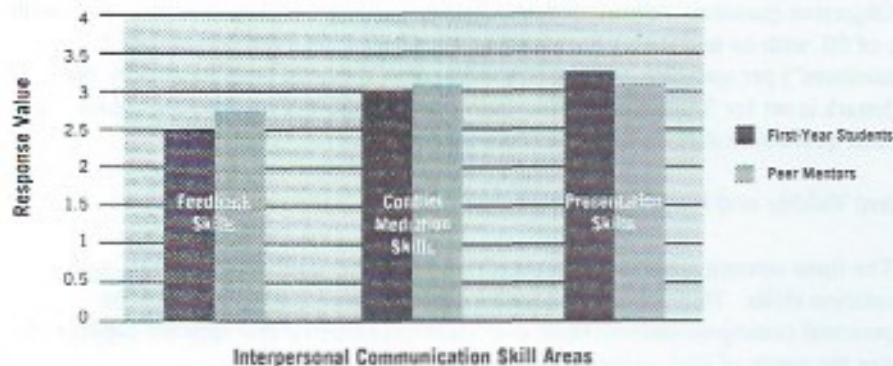
#### Results

Data illustrated that peer mentors need to bolster the interpersonal communication skills of giving and receiving feedback. Peer mentors perceived their feedback skills as stronger than what the first-year students rated them. First-year students also responded with lower scores than the peer mentors about their ability to assist in mediating interpersonal conflict. Finally, first-year students evaluated the presentation skills of peer mentors slightly higher than the peer mentors self-ratings.

#### Quantitative Data

The first-year students recorded lower mean responses than peer mentors in the areas of feedback skills (mean score of 2.463 as compared to 2.725) and conflict mediation skills (3.016 as compared to 3.105). However, the first-year students evaluated the presentation skills of peer mentors higher than the Peer Mentors themselves (3.254 as compared to 3.102). Figure 1 provides a depiction of the comparison between the responses of first-year students and peer mentors. As illustrated, there is 'gap' between the perceptions of first-year students and peer mentors.

**FIGURE 1. Comparison of Aggregate Mean Responses From First-Year Students and Peer Mentors About Interpersonal Communication Skills**



#### Qualitative Data

The qualitative data from the free response questions provided further insight into the abilities of peer mentors. The most commonly cited barrier to understanding a verbal message by first-year students was that the peer mentors "talk too fast," cited by 35% of first-year students. The second most common response by first-year students (11% of responses) was that peer mentors "didn't understand" them. The main critique about the effectiveness of peer mentors in mediating interpersonal conflict was that they "don't understand" their point of view. Responses on presentation skills were very positive with both first-year students and peer mentors using the responses of "organized" 29% and "clearly" 20% of the time respectively.

A deficiency in the communication skills of the peer mentors was identified by the responses of "talking too fast" and "don't understand" coupled with the quantitative results identifying feedback skills as the peer mentors' weakest area. Since Peer Mentors assimilate and support the first-year students during their transition to college life, this shows the need for improving their interpersonal communication skills and specifically feedback methods.

#### Intervention

The interpretation of the data resulted in the design and development of training for the interpersonal communication skills area of feedback methods. The Instructional Systems Design (ISD) process for developing training was utilized to create and develop this program for improving interpersonal communications. The training intervention and

supporting materials included enabling learning objectives, lesson plans, and classroom materials (available on request), all of which were targeted at improving feedback methods.

The first intervention designed following the data analysis was a four-hour seminar that focused on the area of interpersonal communication skills identified by the needs analysis. The seminar combined self-study, classroom instruction, self-analysis tools such as questionnaires, and role-playing to build knowledge, competency, and confidence in the desired skills. Subsequent application of the ISD process resulted in training for other areas of communication skills such as presentation skills and conflict mediation.

#### Evaluation

Evaluation of the training intervention had three parts. First, the needs assessment was benchmarked to create a measurement for future training and evaluation. As this was the first measurement, the mean ratings of each question and question set was the point of comparison used for future assessments. Three months after the training, the survey was re-administered to peer mentors and first-year students. An increased score, as compared to the initial benchmark, indicated that attitudes towards improved feedback skills were positively affected. The second part was a questionnaire that offered student feedback on the instruction, the instructor, equipment, and facilities, all information that helped to improve future training.

#### Discussion

These interpersonal communication skills were the foundation for the more advanced skills of conflict mediation and applying situational leadership. Future training moved into more advanced skill areas in a natural progression. All sessions followed the same seminar format, combining self-study, classroom instruction, self-analysis tools such as questionnaires, and role-playing to build knowledge, competency, and confidence.

Following the training, the peer mentors were then better equipped to serve first-year students. This enabled the peer mentors to assist the transition of first-year students, boosting their confidence and often their self-esteem. Peer mentors used knowledge from this training to help them think and act in a creative and intelligent manner to enhance the personal achievements of first-year students. This success is reciprocated to the peer mentors in a strong sense of self-satisfaction and finally is extended to the college by having vigorously supported its mission.



## References

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FIGURE 1. Learning Objectives and Sample Lesson Plans

**Terminal Performance Objective (TPO):** In all settings a Peer Mentor will be able to apply and utilize effective interpersonal communication skills to deliver his or her message.

Lesson Plan	Enabling Learning Objectives (ELOs)	TIME
I	1.5: Given information about listening skills and feedback methods a Peer Mentor forms a basic understanding of the concepts.	40 minutes
II	1.4: Given instruction on listening skills and the four types of feedback a Peer Mentor will be able to understand how and when each is applied.	60 minutes
III	1.3: Given a matching test a Peer Mentor will be able to correctly define feedback communication methods 80% of the time.	60 minutes
IV	1.2: Given written scenarios a Peer Mentor will be able to correctly identify verbal, fact, feeling, and non-verbal feedback methods.	60 minutes
V	1.1 In a small group of 4-6 Peer Mentors, the Peer Mentors create a 5-minute skit to demonstrate at least two of the four feedback methods.	1 hour 20 minutes
<b>TOTAL TIME:</b>		<b>5 hours</b>

TIME (minutes)	EVENT	ACTIONS
5	Introduction	Introduce yourself, interest device (personal example, humor), special instructions, facilities orientation
5	Describe tasks and discuss read ahead packet	Discuss ELO 1.5 describing the linkage to ELO 1.4 and how the accomplishment of the ELO supports TPO #1; Handout Overview Sheet, Terms and Definitions, and Task Analysis*
25	Peer Mentor reviews information packet	Form a basic cognitive understanding of material identifying any questions for discussion during seminar
<b>35 minutes</b>		

\* Handout Overview Sheet, Terms and Definitions, and Task Analysis

TIME (minutes)	EVENT	ACTIONS
5	Introduction	Introduce yourself, interest device (personal example, humor), special instructions, facilities orientation
5	Describe tasks	Discuss EO 1.4 describing the linkage to EOs 1.5 and 1.3 and how the accomplishment of the EO supports TPO #1
15	Discuss read ahead packet	Ensure Peer Mentors understand information ensuring that points covered in later instruction are not discussed in detail*
25	Instruction about Listening Skills and Feedback methods	Discuss CARESS Model and the four types of feedback using slide presentation; select Peer mentors to demonstrate examples of each
10	Break	
<b>60 minutes</b>		

\*Feedback Methods Task Analysis Diagram (handout given to Peer Mentors) is made into a poster and placed on wall for reference