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Peer-led transition strategies and the first year experience - implementation, implications and insights

Sarah E. O'Shea

University of Wollongong, saraho@uow.edu.au

Pauline Lysaght

University of Wollongong, pauline@uow.edu.au

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Session Topic : This session will explore the practicalities of introducing peer-led transition programs within two distinct university environments. The presenters will provide details about how these programs were initiated, the target student population, the evaluations and also, suggestions / advice for others interested in introducing similar initiatives

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If other, please specify :

First Name : Sarah

Last Name : O' Shea

Position Title : Co-ordinator, Adult, Vocational and Higher Education

Address : The University of Wollongong , Northfields Avenue

City : Wollongong

State : New South Wales

Zip : 2522

Country : Australia

Phone : +61 2 4221-5838

Fax : +61 2 4225-8312

Email : saraho@uow.edu.au

Biographical : Dr Sarah O'Shea is currently the Coordinator of Adult, Vocational and Higher Education at the University of Wollongong and holds a PhD from The University of Sydney. Prior to this position, Sarah managed a Student Transition and Retention Unit; in this capacity, she researched approaches to improving

university teaching and learning experiences for first year students from the recognised equity group of low socio-economic status (low SES). Sarah has also implemented a range of transition initiatives designed to improve university access and participation.

Abstract1 : This presentation provides an overview of a peer-led transition strategy targeted at equity groups that the program chair has been involved in implementing at two separate universities. The difference between this and other programs is that this strategy is grounded within the actual experience of students, who design, develop and facilitate a program that provides authentic insight into the culture and environment of university life. Participants will hear how program was introduced, suggestions around initiation and feedback from program participants.

Assessment : The program has been evaluated annually since its inception in 2007 at The University of Newcastle. Initially, this evaluation was in the form of written feedback forms and also, focus groups. In 2009, this evidence also included follow-up telephone interviews with the student participants who were contacted later in the semester and asked to reflect upon the impact of this initiative.

The program has now been introduced to a second university institution and has received research funding to explore the impact of this initiative not only for the students involved but also, the student facilitators who design and deliver the program. Ethics approval has been gained to conduct in-depth focus groups with the student facilitators and also, each facilitator has been asked to supply a reflective journal highlighting the impact of their involvement in this initiative. In addition to hard-copy evaluation forms, semi-structured interviews will also be conducted with self-selecting students who participated in the program, all of whom are derived from the recognised equity group of low socio-economic status. Preliminary data from this research will also be presented at the conference.

Summary : In an increasingly mass system of education, the difficulties associated with creating and maintaining contact with students are clear. Learners frequently have a number of competing demands for their time and some may not spend a huge amount of time on campus. This can mean that creating and sustaining relationships with peers may not be a priority or a possibility. Equally, for teaching staff, larger classes means that students may be one face in many, particularly in the early stages of their degree program, only in the latter years emerging as individuals. With this in mind, it is important that institutions themselves explore ways to assist in the creation of social networks not only to improve the social wellbeing of learners but also, their learning.

This session will detail one approach to engaging students in the university community and thereby assisting the transition to this learning environment. The Uni-Start: Transition to University program and its more recent reiteration

UStart@UOW are initiatives that focus on new university students who are derived from disadvantaged backgrounds. Both programs seek to prepare students for the realities of study by creating a social learning network with more experienced students. Uni-Start relies on authentic and contextualised resources and sources of information, which ultimately serve to reveal the cultural tools embedded within the university environment.

The presentation is designed to provide an overview of the program and will cover the following areas:

- Describe how this initiative was implemented in two different institutions
- Suggest sources of funding and provide advice about how other institutions might implement the program
- Highlight how the program has been adapted and explain why particular approaches have been adopted.
- Describe how these programs have been evaluated at both institutions and highlight the results from these evaluations.
- Explain the multi-layered nature of interaction that occurs as a result of these types of programs
- Draw on the student reflections written by student facilitators and participants

The objective of the presentation is both to encourage those present to explore the opportunities offered by these peer transition programs and also reflect upon the practicalities of introducing such initiatives within their own professional contexts.

Implications for Institutional Improvement or Advancement : For those learners who are returning to education after a significant gap or who have few formal educational qualifications, the student-centred nature of the program offers a non-threatening way of exploring this new educational environment. This initiative has been successfully targeted at various student cohorts including older students, those from disadvantaged backgrounds, first-in-family and also, indigenous students. From an administrative or institutional perspective, the relative ease with which this program can be initiated makes it an appealing choice as while student facilitators require some institutional support, the design and delivery of the program ultimately lies with the students themselves. The session will provide the necessary information for audience members to introduce a similar initiative in their own institutions, the flexibility and nature of this approach making this a possibility for both administrators and academics alike.

Institutional Description : The University of Wollongong was established in 1951 and has grown from an enrollment of 300 students to a large international university with a student population of 26,008. The university has three separate campuses and five access centres. During 2010, UOW was placed in the top 2% of universities in the world by its performance in three international rankings.