

References

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CASE STUDY

Freshman - Upperclass Student Partnership

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Introduction

College attrition studies indicate that a significantly large number of college drop-outs experience little or no close personal identification with other college students or groups. According to Astin, student involvement, including extracurricular activities, is one key to reducing attrition. Astin states that "efforts to increase student involvement will not only enhance the student's ability to persist but will also intensify the impact of the undergraduate experience on the student's personality, behavior, career progress, and satisfaction." If indeed, this lack of close identification with other students and groups is a primary causal factor it seems reasonable to assume that a systematic program to provide support of this nature for college freshmen would have a significant impact upon a student's persistence in college. An experimental program designed to address this problem was implemented during the fall semester of 1982 in the College of Agriculture at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

The purpose of the program referred to as Ag Partners was to provide incoming freshmen students with an opportunity to identify on a more personal basis with a supportive upperclass student; introduce college freshmen to groups and or organizations with whom he or she had similar interests; acquaint college freshmen with good study techniques, e.g., budgeting time, use of the library and taking notes and examinations; and reinforce the academic advising program by encouraging students to seek assistance from their academic advisors concerning educational and professional planning and goals.

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Situation

The College of Agriculture at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln offers seventeen majors in agricultural and natural resource fields. Approximately 1900 undergraduate students were registered in the College of Agriculture during the first semester 1982-83. Each fall the freshmen class consists of approximately 400 students. Approximately 20 percent of the student body in the College of Agriculture is female. A large majority of these students come from small towns and rural areas located throughout Nebraska.

Sample

Twenty-two freshmen and twenty-two upperclassmen, enrolled in the College of Agriculture during the 1982-83 fall semester were selected as participants.

Upperclassmen. The upperclassmen were students who had taken a course in interpersonal communications and relationships offered through the College of Agriculture. It was assumed that by choosing students who had excelled in this course a group of upperclassmen with greater positive interpersonal relationship skills could be obtained as compared to selecting students at random from the student body.

Two criteria were established for selecting potential upperclass participants. First, they must have received an A in the course and secondly, they must have demonstrated excellence in the completion of a project which meets one of the requirements of the class. This project required the student to work on an individual basis throughout the semester with one or more people to apply interpersonal relationship and communication skills acquired in the class.

Thirty upperclassmen were selected and invited to attend a meeting at which the program was explained. Twenty-two of these students elected to participate in the project. This group consisted of sixteen males and six females. Each of the upperclass students was allowed two hours credit for their participation in the program.

Freshmen. Twenty Freshmen Ag students were selected from the 1982-83 fall semester students enrolled in a course on interpersonal communication and relationships, the same course the upperclassmen had previously taken. Students were selected from this class because it was a readily accessible means of identifying freshmen agriculture majors. Two additional students were selected at random from a freshmen agronomy class, making a total of twenty-two freshmen Ag partners.

Matching. The following criteria constituted the basis for matching the partners: gender, major area of study, and interests. When possible, freshmen were paired with an upperclassman with either the same major area of study, similar interests, or combination of both. All participants were paired with members of the same sex.

Methods and Procedures

Upperclassmen were expected to meet with their partners on a weekly basis. The contacts with the freshman involved a planned meaningful activity which would help achieve the overall objectives of the program. In addition, group activities involving both freshmen and upperclassmen were also an important part of the program. Some of the activities involved all of the freshmen and upperclassmen while others involved smaller special interest or cluster groups.

A graduate assistant met individually with each upperclassman approximately two weeks following the matching of each freshman. The purpose of this meeting was to evaluate and reinforce successes and relationships; identify concerns; and to review and emphasize the importance of the goals of the program. A structured set of questions was discussed with each upperclassman to insure consistency in the individual conferences.

Freshmen Partners Meeting. Early in the semester a meeting was held with just the freshmen participants. This meeting was designed to help the freshmen become better acquainted with each other; with the program; and to identify special concerns involving all aspects of college adjustment. The meeting also provided an opportunity to insure that each of the freshmen had become acquainted and met with his or her upperclass partner on an one-to-one basis.

Freshmen-Upperclassmen Activity. Approximately a week following the meeting with the freshmen both the upperclassmen and freshmen participated in a picnic. This provided an opportunity to establish greater group identity through recreational activities, refreshments, and a specially designed get-acquainted exercise to help each person learn something of personal interest about every other person. Smaller cluster groups were formed in which the students felt more comfortable in discussing and exploring directions and ways in which the partners program could be most effective.

Partner Patrols. Throughout the semester small cluster groups referred to as partner patrols involving two or more upperclassmen and their freshmen partners were formed on the basis of special interests. Every two weeks the members in the groups were rotated which provided for an expansion of relationships and interest areas.

Weekly Meetings. The upperclassmen met as a group on a weekly basis to give feedback on progress with their partners, obtain input, and develop goals and plans. The format was similar for the meetings throughout the semester. At the beginning of the meeting common concerns related to the specific goals of the program such as the mechanics of helping freshmen pre-register for second semester classes were discussed. Following the group discussion the upperclassmen were divided and separated into two subgroups. A staff member met with each subgroup to serve as a facilitator and resource person during which the upperclassmen shared individual progress reports concerning interactions with their freshmen and set goals and discussed plans for achieving them during the following week. The upperclassmen also served as resource persons as they shared ideas and suggestions with each other.

Throughout the subgroup meetings the focus of attention was not only on the freshman partner but also addressed how their interaction was helping to achieve the overall goals of the program. Before the meeting was adjourned the two subgroups were brought together and the staff gave a general summarization of the feedback and highlighted special concerns, ideas, or suggestions that may have been unique to each of the subgroups.

Evaluation

Each participant kept a reaction journal. The format for this journal required upperclassmen to describe each meeting with the freshman including the following:

1. Goal to be accomplished.
2. Plan - how it will be accomplished.
3. Activity - discuss what happened during the activity.
4. Evaluate the activity and meeting.

The freshmen also kept reaction journals in which they described their reaction to the activity or experience with their partner. These journals were handed in periodically throughout the semester and reviewed by the project staff.

Also, each of the participants wrote a final evaluation of the project. The format for the upperclassmen was as follows:

1. State how your partner has grown. To what extent and how has the Ag Partners program contributed to this?
2. State how you feel you have grown through this experience.

3. Suggestions on how to improve the program in the future.

The freshmen also wrote a final evaluation of the project including a brief explanation of the activities in which they took part and evaluated how they felt they had grown through these experiences.

An inventory was also designed and administered early in the semester to determine changes that might occur in the participants' college adjustment. This inventory was also administered to a randomly selected control group of freshmen majoring in Agriculture. The freshmen were asked to rate on a scale ranging from a low of one to a high of five, their degree of concern toward various areas of college life. Some yes or no questions were also asked. The inventory was administered to both groups of freshmen during the third week of the semester. It was again administered to both groups during the last week of the semester. This made it possible to observe changes in various areas for each group and detect any differences that may have existed between the two groups.

Table 1. Concerns of Freshmen During the First Three Weeks of College

1. Meeting people
2. Time management
3. Organizations and involvement
4. Study habits
5. Knowing advisor
6. Classes (size and materials)
7. Communicating with others
8. Transportation
9. Instructors
10. Scheduling future classes
11. Grades (failing)
12. Finances
13. Lonely (homesickness)

Results

Early in the semester upperclassmen asked the freshmen to express their concerns about college. A list of the concerns ranked in order of frequency may be seen in Table 1.

The above list appears to be a rather typical list of concerns that might be expected of freshmen in general.

As mentioned previously, this list of concerns became the basis for planning individual, subgroup, and total group goals and activities and the project activities were tailored to fit the concerns of freshmen within the framework of the overall program goals.

On a separate basis freshmen and upperclassmen made a list of what they perceived to be some of the most important ways they helped or received help through participation in the program. Table 2 shows the students' perceptions.

The above list has been arranged in order of the frequency with which the perceived activity or experience was mentioned. There is a high degree of

Table 2. Perceived Help From Participation in Partners Freshman

1. Preregistration for second semester classes
2. Meeting with advisor
3. Learning proper study skills
4. Getting old tests
5. Learning how to use the library
6. Meeting other people
7. Getting involved in campus clubs
8. Learning about campus organizations
9. Learning about UNL computer system
10. Planning goals for post graduate work
11. Developing time management skills
12. Touring campus
13. Touring Lincoln
14. Visited classes to better help me

Upperclassmen

1. Preregistration for classes
2. Meeting with advisor
3. Introducing their partner to others
4. Learning about use of the library
5. Getting partner involved in a club
6. Helping with learning proper study habits
7. Learning about campus organizations
8. Getting old tests for freshmen
9. Learning about UNL computer system
10. Touring campus
11. Planning for postgraduate future
12. Developing time management skills
13. Touring Lincoln
14. Set up freshmen with study counselor
15. Visit freshmen class to help

similarity between the freshmen and upperclassmen even though the lists were made separately.

Overall benefits the freshmen and upperclassmen felt they gained from their involvement in the Ag Partners program were categorized and may be seen in Table 3. The list of categories was derived as a result of

Table 3. Program Benefits Derived By Freshman and Upperclassmen

Freshman

1. Answered questions
2. Familiarized me with instructors
3. Having a special friend
4. Acquainted me with my advisor
5. Scheduling my classes
6. Made more friends
7. Helped me with my classes
8. Learned how to use the library
9. Developed better study skills
10. Helped set post graduate goals.
11. Involvement in extracurricular activities

Upperclassmen

1. Meeting new people
2. Self satisfying and rewarding
3. Became more empathetic
4. Became friendlier
5. Developed effective leadership skills
6. More accepting of others
7. Forced me to set a good example
8. Joined new organizations
9. Developed better listening skills
10. Became more open to others
11. Manage time more efficiently

Table 4. Pre and Post Partners Inventory Results for Partners and Control Group

	Partners				Control Group			
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
*1. Comfortable with instructors	3.75	3.85	3.60	3.55				
2. Comfortable with classes	3.75	3.75	3.35	3.25				
3. Confidence in relating to college students	3.10	3.95	3.45	3.65				
4. Confident in meeting people	2.90	3.55	3.15	3.65				
5. Comfortable with major	4.00	3.75	3.12	3.55				
6. Knowledgeable about your college	2.60	3.70	3.00	3.25				
7. Feel about short range goals	3.15	3.70	3.50	3.65				
8. Decision concerning long range goals	2.95	3.25	3.30	3.70				
9. Help received from advisor	3.65	4.15	2.70	2.80				
10. Worried about scholastic average	3.55	3.85	3.95	3.70				
11. Budgeting time, studying, taking notes and exams	3.55	2.80	3.15	3.15				
12. Knowledgeable about extracurricular activities	3.15	3.60	3.20	3.30				
	YES	NO	YES	NO	YES	NO	YES	NO
13. Interest in extracurricular activities	20	0	20	0	14	6	16	3
14. Leadership roles	3	17	3	17	2	18	2	18
15. Do you know your advisor	17	3	19	1	15	5	13	7
16. Met with him	12	8	19	1	12	8	13	7
17. How many times		1.35		3.80		1.00		1.32
18. Friends and acquaintances made		33.80		88.40		42.20		58.00

*Descriptions of statements have been abbreviated.

a content analysis of the evaluation reports received from each group. Categories were rank ordered from most to least frequently mentioned benefits.

The benefits from the program listed by the freshmen are very much in agreement with the ways the upperclassmen perceived they had helped their partners. The benefits also are in good agreement with the expressed overall goals of the program.

The list of benefits derived by the upperclassmen from the program appear to be heavily loaded with interpersonal relationship and leadership skills that are unlikely learned from typical classroom experiences.

The pre and post results of the Partners Inventory for the partners and control group of freshmen may be seen in Table 4.

The pre and post ratings have been averaged for the statements rated on the scale ranging from a low of 1 to a high of 5. Also, the number of times met with advisor and number of friends and acquaintances made have been averaged for both groups. Most of the changes reflected in both groups appear to be rather subtle and this no doubt may be a result of the small size of both groups, short duration of time between administrations, and lack of sensitivity of the measuring instrument. However, some rather pronounced changes are notable. These changes are clearly positive and favorable for the freshman partners for the items concerning making acquaintances and friends; meeting and receiving help from advisors; knowledge of college major; and budgeting time, studying, taking notes and examinations.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The purpose of the Ag Partners Program was to provide incoming freshmen students enrolled in the College of Agriculture with an opportunity to: identify with a supportive upperclass student; introduce college

freshmen to groups and or organizations with whom he or she had similar interests; acquaint college freshmen with good study techniques; i.e., budgeting time, use of the library, taking notes and examinations; and reinforce the academic advising program by encouraging students to seek assistance from their academic advisors concerning educational and professional planning and goals.

The results reveal that freshmen participants feel the program made a positive difference in the following areas: making acquaintances and friends; meeting and receiving help from advisors; increasing knowledge of college majors; and budgeting time, studying, taking notes and examinations. When compared with a control group of freshmen majoring in agriculture the positive differences in the above areas are clearly pronounced. A significant residual result of the program was the positive growth in the area of interpersonal relationships and leadership skills upperclassmen felt they had experienced as a result of their participation in the program.

Because of the short duration of this program it is difficult to assess its impact upon retention. The persistence of the participants, however, will be monitored as they progress through college to determine the program's effect upon retention.

The positive effects upon the participants have been sufficient to justify the adaption and expansion of the program as an on-going experience available to entering freshmen at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. During the 1983-84 fall semester the program was increased to forty-five partnerships making a total of ninety freshmen and upperclass participants. Plans for the 1984-85 fall semester call for further expansion of the project until the goal of providing each freshman student with an upperclass partner is eventually met.