

# **An Evaluation of the Peer Mentor Program at UBC's Okanagan Campus**

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## Executive Summary

Having peers as mentors in the university setting is understood to be effective practice to help first-year students succeed. There are several reasons why such peer programs have been developed including students in specific disciplines helping others to connect to their chosen major, peers assisting varsity athletes balance the demands of a high performance sport with the rigors of academia, and peers in residential halls bringing together like-minded students for social causes. Whatever the specific reason, the overall goal of peer mentor programs seeks to have senior students engage, teach, recruit and retain junior students. While post-secondary environments engage peers as mentors with a general understanding that this is an effective way to assist the typical student based on a small pool of research, there is also little research on what effect these programs have on institutional goals. This evaluation project was conducted on a peer mentor program that was specifically designed to contribute to larger institutional goals such as improved academic performance of first-year students and lower attrition rates between first and second year, issues that affect many four-year research intensive institutions.

The project is an evaluation of a peer mentor program at the Okanagan campus of the University of British Columbia. The Peer Mentor program was initiated to address the problem of high attrition between first and second year. It is unique in that it is not discipline specific nor is it attached to a specific user group. It is a program designed to assist with the multitude of transition issues for first-year students. Additionally, it is a program that was specifically designed to affect academic success and first year retention. Little empirical research exists to quantify the effect that peer mentor programs have to such significant institutional issues and this particular project is an important piece of research linking student affairs activity with critical institutional priorities. This study adds to the important and growing body of literature regarding how projects initiated in the Student Affairs department contribute to the overall goals of the institution.

The program matches every first-year student with a peer mentor in the same discipline. The peer mentors are expected to have regular correspondence with a group of first-year students to help with their adjustment to post-secondary, and to assist with any academic challenges that arise. The three expected outcomes of the program are: to increase the social and emotional wellness of first-year students, to increase the academic success of first-year students, and to increase support for faculty teaching first-year courses. Ultimately, the program is intended to have a positive effect on student retention from year one to year two.

While the evaluation was conducted to identify if the program was meeting its goals and to find ways to improve the program, there was also a financial rationale for conducting the evaluation. The Peer Mentor program was funded through a grant from the Provost and Vice President Academic and requires additional financial resources to continue. Institutions across the country, including the Okanagan campus, are experiencing fiscal challenges and must make thoughtful decisions about where and how to allocate their resources. Given this environment, the client is interested to know the effect of the program before requesting additional funding. Specifically, he is interested in answers to the following five questions:

1. What effect does the Peer Mentor program have on the emotional and social wellness of the first-year students

2. In what way does the Peer Mentor program contribute to the academic success of the first-year student?
3. How does the Peer Mentor program affect faculty teaching first-year students?
4. How does the Peer Mentor program contribute to improved retention of first-year students on campus?
5. To what extent has the Peer Mentor program at UBC Okanagan met its stated goals?

A sequential explanatory mixed methods design was selected to provide both quantitative and qualitative data in order to answer the above questions. The qualitative data provided a rich understanding and explanation of the quantitative information. Quantitative data came from weekly logs kept by the peer mentor and qualitative data came from focus groups and interviews. Data from all sources was collected and compared for three years (beginning in September of 2010 and concluding in April of 2013).

The analysis showed that the Peer Mentor program was successfully meeting three of four goals. Specifically, first-year students reported that having a peer mentor significantly assisted them deal with the transition issues associated with post-secondary studies. These issues ranged from dealing with the demands of instructors and work load to balancing the multitude of social and emotional challenges. This satisfied the first question and verified that the Peer Mentor program was positively associated with an increase in the emotional and social wellness of first-year students.

The second question expressed a curiosity regarding the Peer Mentor program and academic success of first-year students. The data indicated that students who interacted with their peer mentor performed better than their peers and this pattern was repeated all three years and was statistically significant. On average, students who interacted with a peer mentor completed the term with a sessional average four points higher than students who did not interact with a peer mentor. Additionally, first-year students reported that having activities that helped them study, or referred them to an academic resource on campus was a benefit. The Peer Mentor program is positively correlated with academic success of first-year students.

The third question explored the experience for faculty teaching first-year courses. Faculty reported that the program was beneficial to them for three reasons: it helped provide individualized supports to a degree that would otherwise be impossible in large classes, it provided much needed emotional support, and it provided a link to academic supports and normalized the shock of getting lower grades than in high school.

The fourth enquiry related to retention of first year students. The data suggested that students who engaged with a peer mentor program were retained at a greater rate than those that did not, but the relationship did not meet the confidence interval test to be a statistically relevant finding. More analysis would need to be done to determine what other variables would possibly be impacting the retention issue.

In answer to the final and overarching question regarding the extent to which the program has met its stated goals, the conclusion is that the program is a success. The quantitative analysis provided evidence of a strong relationship with academic success and the qualitative data suggested that

both faculty and students see value in having the program. The client can, with confidence, suggest that the Peer Mentor program contributes to the success of students, the satisfaction of the faculty members, the goals of the division, and the mission and vision statement of the institution. It is a program that is firmly nested in the ideals of the institution and contributes to an enriched educational experience for students.

This evaluation project concluded with five recommendations which, when implemented, will make an already high quality program even stronger. The first recommendation was about the process of data collection in the weekly logs. It is the suggestion of the evaluator that the staff team involved with the project look to an on-line excel sheet to record and track the interactions between peer mentors and first-year students. For many good reasons, the current practice involved paper based log records. An on-line tracking system would provide a quicker and more efficient way to understand the effect of the program. Additionally, an on-line system would standardize the way of reporting the type and duration of interactions. This recommendation would make the data more meaningful and would also make the data easier to track and report for all the staff involved in the program.

The second recommendation was also about the collection of data but it was related specifically to the tracking of faculty referrals. The data in this evaluation indicated that faculty members are referring the right students to the program but that the tracking of these students was not possible due to the fact that these students were not differentiated or tracked differently in the logs. Faculty involvement in the program is a unique and powerful element of the program and improving the tracking of referred students would allow more analysis and would help those involved understand the impact of these interventions.

The third recommendation related to the utilization of different statistical tests to look at retention of students interacting with peer mentors. While this evaluation did see a relationship between students who interact with a peer mentor and retention from year one to year two, the relationship was not statistically relevant. Performing a linear regression analysis on the data would help to control for variables and may provide a better understanding of the factors that are affecting retention.

International students participating in the focus groups reported unique benefits of having a peer mentor but examining this particular population was outside the scope of this particular project. The well-being of these students is important to the institution so the program would benefit from understanding how the peer mentors contribute to the transition of international students to the campus. Recommendation four suggests that this is a particular group of students that should be analyzed separately.

Finally, focus group participants had some useful suggestions for improving the effect of the program. These related to the timing and focus of the peer mentors. Students suggested that first-year students would benefit from more interventions in the first term and specifically interventions that related to study strategies and academic success. The final recommendation provides advice to the program related to the feedback from the students.

## Acknowledgements

A master's project of this magnitude, and sustained over the required period of time cannot be successful without the support and assistance of many. I would like to particularly highlight the commitment and support that I have received foremost from my family. Secondly, the project is not possible without the patient and sage advice of a project supervisor and to this end I would like to express my gratitude to Dr. Kimberly Speers. Finally, a project in the MPA program depends on the willingness and openness of a client to invest the time it takes to cultivate, and nurture a student through a process. A process that at times has been both research and practice. My thanks to Mr. Ian Cull, for his willingness to sponsor the project, to find his way through the confusion, and to celebrate the progress.

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## **1.0 Introduction**

### **1.1 Purpose and Importance of Report**

This project evaluates a Peer Mentor program for first-year students in the student affairs division of UBC's Okanagan campus. The Peer Mentor program was initiated to address the problem of high attrition between first and second year. Specifically, the evaluation seeks to understand to what extent the outputs align with the goals of the program and whether or not the activities and outputs successfully met both the short and long term goals.

It has long been understood that the first year of university for students who enter directly from high school is filled with significant transition issues (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p. 7). These transition issues are predominately due to the different level of expectation that accompanies post-secondary studies. These demands are coupled with the challenges of leaving home for the first time, making new friends, learning new life skills, and balancing distractions. All of these contribute to, what some experience as overwhelming. Students who fail to navigate these new demands leave the institution for alternate paths, more markedly after first year (Upcraft, Gardner & Barefoot, 2005, p.5).

Institutions are interested in understanding what they can do to mitigate some of these challenges. In particular, the student affairs division concerns itself with programs and services that can help compensate for the transition issues of first-year students. The Peer Mentor program at the UBC Okanagan campus is one such program.

A current trend in the post-secondary environment suggests that institutions are interested in developing a deeper understanding of performance measurement and learning outcomes than in the past (HEQCO, 2013, p. 3). Institutions are interested in methods that allow them to understand how they align with their own strategic goals and measure outcomes that demonstrate these values. Student affairs professionals across the country are included in this trend and many are interested in ensuring that the programs and services they operate fulfill the stated goals and contribute to the overall mission of the university. This topic, and in particular the evaluation methodology would be of interest to other Canadian student affairs professionals as they search for practical ways to measure their successes.

This evaluation of the Peer Mentor program fulfills several objectives for the client. First, it provides information to determine if the program is complementary to the institution's strategic plan. Second, the evaluation provides information to the client to improve the performance of the program. Thus, the evaluation is both timely and relevant and provides information about an important initiative for first-year students at the UBC Okanagan campus.

### **1.2 Identification of Client and Problem Context**

The client for this evaluation is the chief student affairs officer at UBC's Okanagan Campus, Ian Cull, and he is interested in this evaluation for two reasons. First, he subscribes to the idea that it is best practice to ensure that programs within the portfolio are performing in the manner intended. Second, and perhaps more importantly, the program has become an important budget consideration. The first-year Peer Mentor program has been running from a grant provided by the

Provost and Vice President Academic in 2010. It was started as a pilot project and in order to continue, it will require an investment from the institution. If he proceeds with a request for additional financial investment, it is his preference that there is evidence that the program contributes to the institutional goals. This campus, like many across the country, is under financial restraint and must make important and meaningful decisions about how money is spent. They are faced with difficult decisions about where to best use their resources and the evaluation provides guidance on whether or not to recommend the institution make this program a priority.

The University of British Columbia, Okanagan is a medium sized research-intensive post-secondary institution located in Kelowna, B.C. It was opened in 2005 by the provincial government and was part of their commitment to expand the number of post-secondary seats in the province and to improve access to education for the southern interior region (Ministry of Advanced Education, 2005, para. 4). This initiative was unique for the province in that the legislation dissolved one institution called Okanagan University College (OUC) and created two new ones; Okanagan College and UBC Okanagan. Okanagan University College was an institution with 5 campuses in the Okanagan valley aimed to provide a range of educational services to British Columbians in the southern interior including trades training and university transfer courses. The ministry legislation allowed UBC to name the north Kelowna campus of the former Okanagan University College as its own and the other 4 campuses would become Okanagan College.

The UBC Okanagan campus started with a population of 3500 and has grown to its current population of approximately 8400 students in seven years. It was developed to deliver a high quality educational experience in an intimate environment with a focus on teaching and research at the undergraduate level (UBC, 2006, p.3). The initial population of students had been attending OUC and there was an understanding that these students had entered into their post-secondary studies with the intent to transfer to another institution. Since OUC was designed to be a university transfer institution, it expected to have a high attrition rate after second year. Initially, this trend was expected to continue but over time, the ministry and the administrators of UBC Okanagan believed that the campus would become a desired destination and would attract and retain highly qualified and invested students who would stay and complete a four year undergraduate degree.

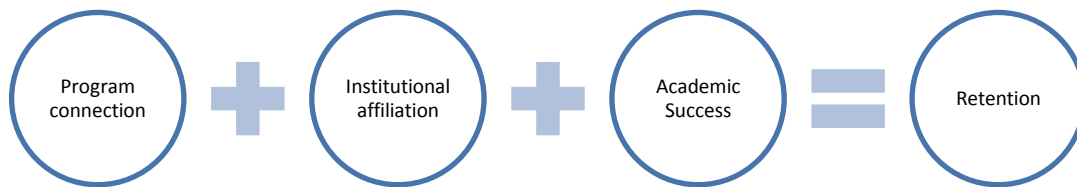
Upper level administrators expected that by 2010 they would see evidence that students were choosing to study at the Okanagan campus and were being retained through to degree completion. In fact, some administrators believed that because the campus was designed to focus on the student experience that the attrition rate would be better than 15%, which is the nation average (Shaienks & Gluszynski, 2007, p. 15). The table below details the retention rates for the campus in 2010 for first year students who started in 2009.

<b>Program</b>	<b>Attrition rate 2009 into 2010</b>
Bachelor of Arts	32.0%
Bachelor of Applied Science	22.2%
Bachelor of Fine Arts	25.6%
Bachelor of Human Kinetics	18.55
Bachelor of Management	20.2%
Bachelor of Science	21.0%
Bachelor of Science in Nursing	6.2%
Pharmacy	38.9%

*Table One: Attrition Rates by Degree for first year students in 2010.*

The Provost and chief academic officer of the campus was alarmed by some of these rates and suggested these rates were unacceptable for an institution dedicated to deliver an exceptional experience. He made a commitment to improve student retention in his strategic action plan (Abd-El-Aziz, 2010, p. 6). One initiative in the plan was the development of an early intervention program specifically designed for first-year students which responded to their emotional, social, academic and career needs (Abd-El-Aziz, 2010, p.6). To help develop such a program, the Provost solicited the help and support of the AVP Students, Mr. Ian Cull, and his student affairs team.

Mr. Cull had already been researching the issue of retention in the post-secondary environment and like many, he thought that retention was a by-product of a good experience (Noel, 1985, p. 450; Astin, 1993, p. 314). However, he also believed that a great experience is cultivated by ensuring students develop in three main areas. The first area of importance is that all students need to establish a passion for a discipline or program. Without feeling connected to a discipline, students do not understand the value of post-secondary education and fail to persist. Second, he believed that students must develop a strong affinity to the campus. To establish affinity, students have to be engaged with the campus both inside and outside of the classroom and develop a sense of belonging with the campus. Finally, he believed that students have to progress towards degree completion as evidenced by successfully passing their courses. *Figure One* below visually depicts the assumptions inherent in the pillars that he endorses and defines as his model of student success.



*Figure One: Model of Student Success*

All programs in his portfolio are required to contribute to the development of one or more of these pillars. In turn, these pillars inform the strategic goals of the institution and contribute to the performance measures at the macro level. Speers (2004, p. 6) refers to this as an integrated approach to performance measurement where performance is complementary across different levels of the organization.

This provided the context within which the program was developed. The program had to capture the commitment of the Provost to establish a unique program for first-year students and it had to nest in one or all of the pillars established by the AVP Students. With these parameters, the Peer Mentor program was developed in 2010 to fulfill the directive from the Provost and to align with all three of the pillars established by the AVP Students.

### **1.3 Background: Development of Peer Mentor Program**

Specific design of the program was delegated to a group of student affairs professionals with a mandate to report back to the Provost and AVP Students. To develop the program, the student affairs staff depended on the literature regarding first year transition. In addition, they had the advantage of researching best practices with colleagues who were already employing customized first-year experience programs. Based on both the literature and best practices, the student affairs team created a peer mentor program that matched all incoming first-year students with a third or fourth year student in the same discipline to assist with transition issues and ensure that first-year students developed an affinity to the campus. The program was developed on the following principles:

1. Senior students who are in the same discipline have the greatest ability to connect with first-year students and assist with emotional and social transition issues.
2. A first-year experience program needs to have the ability to identify students at risk academically and offer services and support to mitigate the challenges
3. Faculty members teaching first-year courses are critical partners in the goal of increasing student engagement and first year retention thus, the peer mentor program needs to work in tandem with the academic program.

The development of the peer mentor program was designed as an initiative that responded to the needs of the whole student and linked student affairs staff and faculty teaching first-year students to meet the overall goal of increasing first year retention. While improving retention was the long-term goal, there were also three short-term goals:

1. The Peer Mentor program would improve the social and emotional wellness of first-year students,
2. The Peer Mentor program would improve the academic success of first-year students and
3. The Peer Mentor program would increase the support for faculty teaching first-year courses.

The following section details the specific characteristics of the program.

#### **1.4 Program Description**

The incoming class of first-year students, which is just over 1800 students each year is divided into cohorts of 30-40 students and matched to a senior student in the same discipline. This requires between 40-50 peer mentors who were trained and supervised by the First Year Experience Coordinator, a staff member in the student development portfolio. The peer mentors are employed by the University up to a maximum of 12 hours per week beginning in July and ending in April. The program consists of four major components:

1. One-to-one communication between a peer mentor and a first-year student;
2. Social events that established rapport between and amongst a cohort of students in the same discipline;
3. Events and interventions that responded to the academic demands of first-year; and,
4. A system where faculty could refer students seamlessly to a centralized service if they were concerned about either the academic success or the emotional or physical well-being of the student.

Each of these individual components is described in more detail below.

##### One to One communication

Each peer mentor was asked to initiate contact with their group of first-year students in July. After this initial contact, the peer mentor had monthly email communication with their whole cohort of students to share upcoming events and to provide information on resources available on campus. This communication was time specific and responded to the issues that would naturally be occurring. For instance, the correspondence in September was mainly geared to welcoming the student and getting them connecting with each other and for social events. The correspondence in October was specifically about studying for mid-terms, how to reduce stress and what was available on campus to assist with preparing for exams. In addition, the peer mentors responded to any email messages they received and at the request of the first-year student, they could meet in person.

## Social Events

On a monthly basis, the peer mentors were required to host a relevant event for their constituent group. This included programs such as after class coffee houses, weekend ski trips or referrals to on-campus resources.

## Academic Interventions

On a regular basis peer mentors were required to ensure that students knew about the on-campus resources for academic assistance. In addition, the peers were encouraged to provide extra study groups, share their own study strategies or make arrangements for more formal study options with campus resources.

## Faculty referrals

Faculty members who teach specific first-year courses were invited to participate in the program as a source of referral for at-risk students. The referral prompted a response by the coordinator to assess the nature of the referral and determine a plan of action. Most often the plan was for the peer mentor to do a check-in with the at-risk student. The peer mentor was not informed of the issue that led to the faculty referral but connected to see how the first-year student was doing. Faculty used a variety of factors to identify students who may be struggling including: classroom performance, attendance, participation rates, apparent anxiety or stress. Because the program served just over 1800 first-year students, faculty played an important role by helping to identify those students who would most benefit from a timely invitation to connect. A referral simply “bumped” a student to the top of a peer mentor’s list.

## **1.5 Main Questions for the Evaluation**

Based on the short and long term goals of the program, the primary question for this evaluation was:

1. To what extent has the Peer Mentor program at UBC Okanagan met its stated goals?

Secondary to this overarching question are the following questions:

2. How does the Peer Mentor program contribute to improved retention of first-year students on campus?
3. What effect does the Peer Mentor program have on the emotional and social wellness of the first-year students?
4. In what way does the Peer Mentor program contribute to the academic success of the first-year student?
5. How does the Peer Mentor program contribute to the experience for faculty teaching first-year students

## **1.6 Outline of the report**

The remainder of this report is divided into five additional sections. Each section pertains to a specific element of the overall report. For instance, section two outlines the methodology and the approach to the evaluation study. This includes the theoretical constructs that provide the foundation of the methodology and details of the way the research was conducted and what type of analysis was used to provide the results. Section three provides a brief overview of the relevant literature that influenced and molded the preparation and development of this evaluation study. Section four presents the findings and the analysis. This includes information about the breadth and depth of the program, the effect the program had on academic success and retention, the perspective from the first-year students and the perspective of faculty members. Section five is a discussion of the findings and presents conclusions based on the data. Finally, the report concludes with section six which presents a number of recommendations to the client for program improvement.

## **2.0 Methodology and Methods**

Consistent with Patton's (2002, p. 297) suggestion that case studies are valuable when there is only a single entity to study; this project has been designed as a case study. The case is the peer mentor program at UBC Okanagan but there are multiple units of analysis in the case including documents, first year students and faculty members. Case study lends itself well to the collection of both qualitative and quantitative evidence (Yin, 2009, p. 19). This evaluation will be a mixed methods design garnishing data from both qualitative and quantitative methods and it will employ a sequential explanatory strategy. This means that the quantitative data will be collected and reviewed first, followed by the collection and analysis of the qualitative data (Creswell, 2009. p. 211). The qualitative data is used to explain and interpret what was discovered in the quantitative data.

The evaluation seeks to determine program effectiveness and as such is a goals-based formative design (Patton, 2002, p. 213). The goals of the program form the basis for the research questions and indicate that this evaluation case study is looking for evidence that the program influenced retention, contributed to the academic success of first-year students, and improved the student experience. The unit of analysis in the study is the Peer Mentor program while data sources within the unit of analysis are key informant or elite interviews, focus groups and various documents.

### **2.1 Theoretical Perspective**

This evaluation research is grounded in objectivist epistemology but from the theoretical stance of post-positivism (Crotty, 2003, p. 9). For the client, the value in the project is embedded in the idea that truth and meaning can be objectified and thus can explain a relationship between the goals and the outcomes of the program (Crotty, 2003, p. 19). However, the client also recognizes that proving causal relationships in a social context is inherently problematic and understands that multiple methods are needed to generate the richest data and provide the greatest probability of not only answering the question but also understanding the complexity of the questions (Patton, 2002, p. 248). While the quantification of the study is important, the client values the student experience and the qualitative data that can help provide understanding of the effect, aligning it closely with post-positivist theory.

### **2.2 Data Collection**

Consistent with the mixed methods design, data will be collected using both quantitative and qualitative methods. Each of the data collection methods is outlined below.

#### Quantitative Data

In this particular study, the quantitative data comes from three sources. First, the weekly logs that the peer mentors complete provide information regarding the breadth and scope of the program. Specifically, the logs will indicate the number of first-year students that connect with their peer mentor, the frequency with which they connect, and the issues that prompt the contact. The logs also provide student numbers that allow tracking of the student from one year to the next. This

provided opportunity to compare retention statistics between students that interacted with a peer mentor and those that do not and explored the association between utilization of service and retention into the following year. In addition, the student numbers gave access to data regarding academic success as defined by a final grade point average for the semester. This allowed comparison across two distinct populations to determine if there is was a relationship between interacting with a peer mentor and overall sessional average.

The second source of quantitative data was the Undergraduate Experience Survey (UES) that is administered annually by the institutional research department. The information on the UES triangulated the data from logs regarding scope of the program. The UES had specific questions related to the Peer Mentor program that helped to understand how often the first-year students were receiving information from the peer mentor. The institutional research team standardized the responses and controlled for variables, which will allow the information to be aggregated back to the student population. See *Appendix A* for a detailed list of the questions from the UES. These responses provided an understanding of the percentage of first-year students who indicated they were using the program and whether or not they thought the program had an impact on their transition to the campus.

### Qualitative Data

The qualitative data was collected using three different methods: 1) focus groups with first-year students, 2) interviews with faculty members and 3) answers to a text question on the UES. The richest source of data for this project came from the focus groups with first-year students. A total of six focus groups were held over a two year period, three in the spring of 2012 and three in the spring of 2013. These focus groups provided an opportunity for the students to express their opinion about the value of the Peer Mentor program. Students were invited to the focus groups through their individual peer mentor. *Appendix B* is an example of the letter of invitation to the students. The focus groups were held at a variety of times in order to capitalize on the greatest number of students that could attend. Each year the invite to the focus group was sent to all first-year direct-entry students. In 2012, 18 students attended the three focus groups and in 2013, 38 students attended resulting in a total of 56 students participating in the focus groups (n=56).

In both years, a focus group was held during a lunch hour and two were held over the dinner hour. Participants were offered pizza and received a \$25 gift card for the campus bookstore for their participation. The focus groups were facilitated by a staff member in a different area in order to remove any fear that the information they share could compromise their particular peer mentor or any staff member associated with the program. *Appendix C* is a copy of the focus group guide. At the beginning of each focus group the facilitator reviewed the terms of informed consent and secured the consent from each participant. A copy of the informed consent form is attached in *Appendix D*.

Interviews with faculty members also provided data and were instrumental in assisting to answer the research questions. Ten faculty members were invited for interviews and they were specifically faculty who made referrals to the coordinator during the academic year 2012-13. A total of eight (n=8) faculty members were available to participate in the interviews. The interviews were hosted by three members of the research team due to time constraints at the end of the term and availability of the faculty members. A copy of the invite letter for faculty members is attached in *Appendix E* and the interview questions are attached in *Appendix F*. As with the

focus group participants the interviewer reviewed the conditions of informed consent with the faculty member prior to commencing the interview. A copy of the faculty consent form can be found in *Appendix G*.

The third source of qualitative data is one open-ended text question on the UES instrument that is administered by institutional research. This provided opportunity to do a thematic analysis of the question to triangulate data found in the focus groups. All UES questions relevant to the Peer Mentor program can be found in *Appendix A*.

## **2.3 Sampling**

Non-proportional quota sampling is a method used to achieve a specific number of participants in a subgroup (Trochim & Donnelly, 2008, p. 50). This method secured 56 first-year students for the focus groups. The faculty interviews were conducted with individuals who participated in the program by making referrals. Purposive sampling is employed when looking for members of a specific group (Trochim & Donnelly, 2008 p. 49) thus, this method was used to secure the sample of faculty members.

## **2.4 Data Analysis**

### Quantitative Analysis

The quantitative data provided numerous opportunities for analysis. First, the weekly logs provided a simple count of frequency and they allowed the researcher to understand the number and type of issues prompting first-year students to interact with the peer mentors. These issues were counted and then rank ordered. The logs also provided the basis for a population, namely a population of students that interacted with a peer mentor. This was combined with institutional data to create a second population of students from the same year that did not interact with a peer mentor. Establishing these two populations allowed a number of statistical comparisons as they relate to academic success and year over year retention. All statistical tests were performed using SPSS statistical analysis software.

The tests used in this evaluation study explore the relationship between both academic success and year over year retention. Academic success is determined by sessional grade point average for the student. Retention is defined by a student registered in the following year. As mentioned, the logs provided the opportunity to divide the first-year students into two populations: those students who initiated contact with a peer who and those that did not. The *t*-test is a comparison of means and tests a hypothesis between different populations (Field, 2009, p. 540). This test allowed comparisons using a categorical variable, such as a population, against a continuous variable such as sessional average. This particular test allowed the determination of relationship between the categorical variable and the continuous variable. While the *t*-test provided information on whether or not to reject the null hypothesis it did not indicate direction. Additional analysis was required to understand how the categorical variable was related to the continuous variable. In this case, descriptive statistics such as mean and standard deviation provided information regarding direction. Once a statistically relevant relationship was determined the descriptive statistics provided a picture of how the variables were correlated.

To understand year over year retention, a number of statistical tests were administered. As with academic success, the logs provided the basis to determine two distinct populations. The institutional database provided information on year over year retention in a yes or no format. Retention analysis was performed only on data from years 2010 and 2011 as it is too early to determine the retention statistic for 2012. Initially, descriptive statistics determined by a Chi-square tabulation provided information on the relationship between two categorical variables. In this case the two categorical variables were: 1) contact with a peer mentor or not, and 2) retained or not. To determine the statistical relevance of any relationship that existed, the Pearson Chi-square test of correlation was performed. The Pearson Chi-Square test of correlation compares two populations to a categorical variable (Field, 2009, p. 180). The output provided a significance value that indicated the statistical relevance, or strength of the relationship.

The UES survey provided two important opportunities for analysis. This survey was administered and analyzed by the institutional research team and was aggregated back to the student population. This helped to understand participation rate of the first-year class and an overall statement of effect. Additionally, the UES allowed the students to indicate, on a Likert scale, how useful the program was in helping them deal with transition issues. Essentially, the UES data was used to triangulate and verify information found in other areas.

The final piece of quantitative data was from the faculty referral spread sheets. These were analyzed to see if there is a relationship between faculty referrals and academic performance. As with the retention statistic, a Chi-square analysis provided some descriptive information about the two different populations. Additional descriptive statistics such as the mean and standard deviation of the sessional averages of the populations provided some basic information regarding the profile of the students being referred. Finally, a Mann-Whitney U test provided information on the statistical relevance of any relationship.

### Qualitative Analysis

The focus groups were digitally recorded and transcribed. The transcription was analyzed by establishing a framework, indexing the transcripts and then thematically mapping associations (Richie and Spencer, 1994, p. 178). The concepts were triangulated and indexed against the thematic framework to ensure an accurate application of the index. The themes were then mapped to try to explain what was already discovered in the quantitative analysis (Richie and Spencer, 1994, p. 191).

The faculty interviews were not digitally recorded but rather extensive notes were gathered and those notes were forwarded to the interviewee for member-checking or informant validation (Patton, 2002, p. 436). Interviewees were asked to check for both interpretative and descriptive validity. After the interviewee had the opportunity to check and validate the responses, a similar pattern of thematic mapping was applied.

The final piece of qualitative data used in this evaluation study is a text question on the institutional Undergraduate Experience Survey. The text question allowed the respondents to comment on how the Peer Mentor program helped them deal with transition issues in their first-year. This text was compiled and analyzed thematically in a similar way to the focus groups and the interviews. In this sequential explanatory case study, the evaluation was looking for how the

themes of the focus groups, the interviews, and the text question explain the patterns that emerged from the quantitative data.

## 2.5 Conceptual Framework

This project is a formative evaluation project and will use a logic model and a performance measure framework to anchor the investigation. The Kellogg Foundation (2004, p. 3) suggests that logic models are useful ways to visually represent the connections between program inputs, activities and outcomes. Logic models help to explain linkages between the theory that drives the program, the implementation activities and the outcomes (Patton, 2002, p. 163). The logic model provides answers to questions that seek to understand the changes that have occurred as a result of the particular program. This theoretical framework matches well as the project ultimately seeks to understand relevance of the program.

The logic model anchors the evaluation process and provides a map that charts the context in which the evaluation will take place (McDavid, Huse, & Hawthorn, 2013, p. 47). *Figure two* below outlines the logic model for the Peer Mentor program.

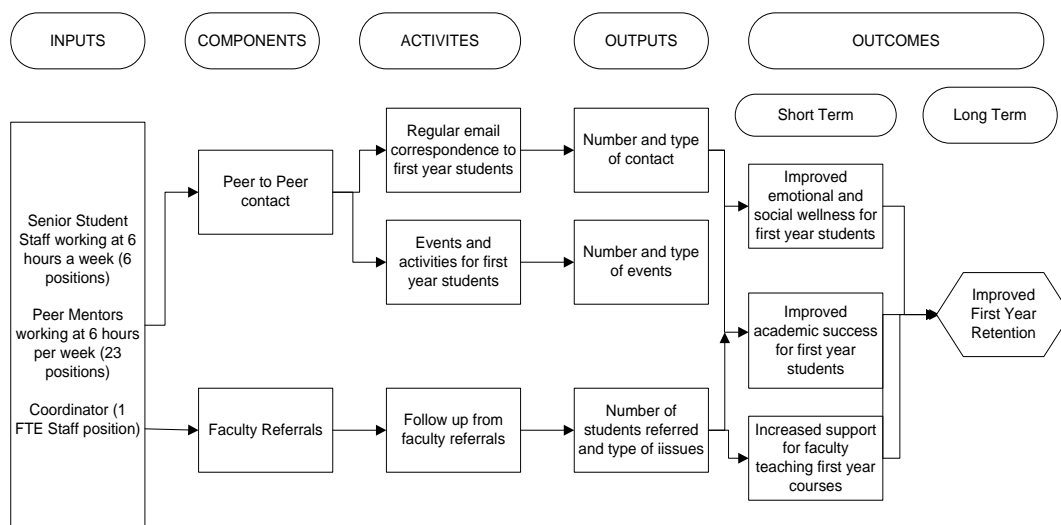


Figure Two: Logic Model for Peer Mentor Program

Using the logic model as a guide, it is evident that the Peer Mentor program has two main components: peer to peer contact and faculty referrals. The peers engage in two types of activities, which are: 1) regular email correspondence and 2) events for first-year students. Faculty members refer students to the coordinator for reasons such as absence from class, poor performance on a test or obvious stress or anxiety in the student. The peer mentors then provide a personal call or correspondence to see what type of service might be helpful.

The email correspondence allows the researcher to understand the frequency and type of communication that is happening between mentors and first-year students. A tabulation of the events allowed the researcher to understand the type and the number of activities that mentors planned. The faculty referrals allowed the researcher to understand what issues most commonly

were referred as well as the type of follow up that was completed. The activities are linked in the logic model to the outcomes, both short term and long term. There are three short term outcomes to the program which are: 1) improved emotional and social well-being of first-year students, 2) improved academic success and 3) increased support for faculty teaching first-year courses. There is one long term goal for the program which is: 1) increased retention of first-year students. It is a useful exercise in the planning phase to create this type of road map as it helped to understand the program and the sources of information that informed the evaluation. This program nests nicely into the three pillars outlined by the chief student affairs officer as it focused on building student success and ultimately hoped to affect retention.

The logic model helped to frame the intended goals of the program but the performance measurement framework presented below in *Table Two* helped to clarify how the data collected would apply to the model and to the questions that motivated the evaluation. The performance measurement table illustrates what type of data was collected, the reason it was collected, the source, and the analysis performed. Each piece of the data was instrumental in answering one or more of the questions and the combination of the results provided evidence to comment on the overall question.

Expected Outcome	Indicators	Data Sources	Analysis Performed
Improved retention after first year	Decrease in attrition between students who engaged in the program and those that did not	Weekly Logs to determine two populations compared against SISC institutional data base regarding retention	Pearson Chi-Square Test of correlation
Improved emotional and social wellness of students	Self report that the peer mentors assist and a positive answer on the UES question regarding assistance with transition	Focus groups and UES text question	Thematic mapping for the focus groups as self report triangulated with UES survey analysis
Improved academic success of first-year students	Self Report and difference in sessional average of students who use the program compared to those that did not	Focus Groups, Weekly Logs, and SISC institutional data base	<i>t</i> -test of comparison between the the means of two populations and sessional GPA And Thematic mapping of first year focus groups for self report.
Increased support for faculty teaching first-year students	Faculty report that the program assisted Faculty referral lists	Faculty interviews	Thematic mapping of faculty interviews.

*Table Two: Performance Measurement Framework*

## 2.6 Limitations of Performance Evaluation as Performance Measurement

This evaluation is a formative, goals-based evaluation designed to assist in a decision about continued funding for a program currently offered for first-year students. It is important that the evaluation provide advice on whether or not the Peer Mentor program met its goals. The audience is a senior level administrator who intends to share the internal report with a budget committee made up of senior level administrators in the post-secondary environment. Thus, this project is intended to both measure the performance of the program and make a judgment about the value and merit of continuing to provide the service. There are a number of considerations and challenges for this particular evaluation that require explanation.

Investigator bias: One challenge in this goals-based formative evaluation project is the relationship between the researcher and the project. In this case, the researcher is also the manager of the program. In the field of evaluation research there is controversy around whether or not the manager of the program can provide an unbiased evaluation. Some believe that involving managers in the evaluation results in more relevant recommendations and thus increases the chances that the recommendations will be implemented (Patton, 2008, p. 32). Others argue that managers are inherently vested in preserving and enhancing their own programs and are challenged to provide an objective judgment of the merit of a program (McDavid, Huse & Hawthorn, 2013, p.424). To enhance researcher credibility and decrease the possibility of researcher bias several strategies were employed. First, the client selected the evaluator of the program understanding that the evaluator was also the manager of the program. The client believed that the manager had the ability to provide the information in a way that was as free from bias as possible. In addition, the mixed methods design was chosen to provide multiple sources of data that could be triangulated and decrease the possibility of bias. Finally, the ethics review board identified this power-over relationship and requested several steps to mitigate the potential problem. Specifically, they requested that a neutral third party facilitate the focus groups, and they insisted on full disclosure in the informed consent.

Attribution: There are a number of challenges as it relates specifically to attributing the results of the study to the program. The first challenge relates to the fact that at the time of this study the campus was in a growth phase and was heavily invested in student success. A number of programs such as orientation programs, supplemental learning programs, and other academic supports were introduced in tandem with the peer mentor program. This study did not control for the influence that the development of these other programs might have had on the outcomes. Additionally, there are a variety of factors that influence a student's choice to return for further studies many of which are related to the personal experience of career path of each student. Controlling for the variety of personal variables that affect retention is beyond the scope of this project. Instead, the mixed methods approach allows the triangulation of data sources to be used in complementary ways to answer the questions. The triangulation approach enhances the credibility of the report and will help to establish correlations. This evaluation will be able to make a suggestion about the plausibility of the effect of the program but establishing a strict cause-effect relationship will remain outside the scope of this project and may be a subject a further exploration.

Informed Consent: First-year students are automatically enrolled in the Peer Mentor program upon registering at the campus. While they can unsubscribe at any time, the researcher needs to be mindful of the power differential that the students may perceive. First-year students may perceive some risk to their participation in the study and researchers will need to secure informed consent. The students, both first-year students and peer mentors, need to understand how the information will be collected, how their anonymity will be secured and what will be done with the information. As mentioned above, a neutral third party will host the focus groups, the students will be advised of the nature of the project in the invitation letter and will be reminded of the information at the start of each focus group. Similarly, informed consent was secured from faculty members participating in interviews.

Ethics Board Approval: This research study is done to fulfill a component for a course (ADM 598) at the University of Victoria and involved human subjects, requiring approval of the ethics review board at the University. There is a standard application and procedure detailed through the School of Public Administration. While the project is completed for and approved by the University of Victoria the focus groups and interviews occurred on the UBC Okanagan campus. UBC and UVIC have a research agreement that allowed the project to have an expedited review at UBC once approval was granted from UVIC. Approval from both ethics review boards was secured prior to undertaking the project.

### 3.0 Literature Review

The purpose of this literature review is to provide a critical analysis of the scholarly literature related to this evaluation project. There are a number of relevant themes that inform the context of the evaluation and it is important to understand how this project is informed by previous scholarly work and how this particular project will also contribute to the field. First, the literature review provides information on the importance of performance measurement and performance evaluation as a discipline in the public sector. Secondly, it provides background on performance measurement in the post-secondary environment. Additionally, it describes a shift that is taking place in performance measurement in post-secondary education that mirrors a paradigm shift in government. The literature will help to understand how this change has affected the division of student affairs within institutions. The program at the crux of this evaluation is a response to a problem of retention in a four year research intensive institution. Thus, it is important to provide prior research detailing the evolution of thought with regards to retention in the post-secondary environment. Finally, information that describes the value of peer mentor programs concludes the literature that is important to this study.

Historically, claims of success in the public domain have lacked a systematic method of validation (Marsh & McConnell, 2010, p. 565). Success was associated with resource utilization as opposed to whether or not the policy or program achieved the intended goals (Gagne, 2011, p. 1). This caused concern amongst policy makers, administrators and politicians as the desire for transparency, accountability and effectiveness increased (Agocs, 2005, p. 9). This desire for increased transparency and accountability accompanied a larger paradigm shift in government that was moving public administration management from a position of power and dominance to a set of values that were responsive to the public both in terms of efficiencies and effectiveness, often referred to as New Public Management (Osbourne, 2006, p. 378; Gagne, 2011, p. 1). In this new paradigm, Governments began to experiment with performance measures which required systems that that could evaluate effectiveness (Poister, 2003, p. 86). Performance measures were intended to improve accountability, inform decision makers, and provide evidence of the impact of programs (Plant & Douglas, 2005, p. 26). Program evaluation developed as a field of inquiry to help organizations assess measures and determine if the programs or services successfully met their stated objectives (McDavid, Huse & Hawthorne, 2013, p. 4). The post-secondary environment was not immune to the changes that were happening within government. As a publically funded entity it was influenced by the paradigm shift of New Public Management and as the ethos of government evolved, so too did the culture in post-secondary institutions.

There is a wide array of opinions about what constitutes quality in post-secondary education, and like the changes in government, the thinking about what constitutes quality has evolved over time. Like many public institutions or organizations that are subject to government pressure, performance measures are prone to shift in response to different parliamentary priorities such as New Public Management. Historically, performance indicators in the post-secondary environment have rested on reputation and resources (Borden, 2011, p. 319). Reputation has been defined as talented researchers, high performing students, international recognition, number of patents, number of publications and citations, and amount of research money secured for the institution (Usher, 2013, para. 3). Resources were defined as faculty to student ratios, operating revenue per student, class size, retention rates, or graduation rates (Zhao, 2011, p. 2). Researchers have long

argued that these measures are elements of efficiency of the system and do not adequately determine if any quality of learning has been achieved (Fried, 2006, p. 3).

During the 1990's, there was a trend towards standardized assessments to capture quality in education. These included rankings, customer satisfaction and key performance indicators (Zhao, 2011, p. 3). More recently, institutions have turned to standardized tests to determine quality of learning. Critics suggest that standardized tests, ranking and key performance indicators are only pieces of the picture and fail to completely satisfy the question of quality (Finnie & Usher, 2005, p. 17).

Some researchers would suggest that universities throughout the world are at a crisis with regards to what should be their function. Santos (2010, para 3) describes this as the conflict between the traditional role of the institution to cultivate knowledge in the elites and the growing pressure to provide education to the masses for the purpose of developing a highly qualified labour force. For publically funded organizations this shift in priorities originates with both parliamentary concerns and economic downturns. As New Public Management ideals pervade the legislature and the fiscal challenges of this decade unfold, universities and institutes of higher learning come under scrutiny. Their large budgets, autonomous operating practices and performance measures that seem to lack accountability have fueled the debate regarding quality in education (Keeling & Hersh, 2011, p. 16).

While Canada enjoys a reputation for high quality post-secondary education there is still pressure to improve accountability and demonstrate their value to government and to the public (Zhao, 2011, p. 2). However, a clear, consistent way to understand and measure quality in the post-secondary sector is lacking (Canadian Council of Learning, 2009, para 3). Learning outcomes are the relatively new trend in determining quality in the post-secondary environment and provide promising opportunities for institutions to gauge their effectiveness (Kinzie, 2011, pg. 201). Researchers suggest that learning outcomes may provide a way to define and measure what institutions teach, help understand what students are learning, and integrate this with the needs of the labour market (HEQCO, 2013, p. 19).

Researchers will continue to investigate the possibilities of learning outcomes for external accountability purposes but institutions in Canada are also invested in performance measures for the purpose of process improvement (HEQCO, 2013, p. 20). Performance measurement and evaluation that can aggregate up to institutional strategic plans have become a best practice for many learning organizations. Many institutions have robust systems of internal quality control but integrating those with the external will serve all stakeholders well (Canadian Council on Learning, 2009 p. 20).

Kinzie (2011) writes that “student affairs is plainly implicated in the current climate of heightened demands for accountability and increased expectations for evidence of student learning” ( p. 202). As the institution grapples with meaningful performance measures so to do leaders in the student affairs profession (Kuh, 2008, p. 13). Many see the development of learning outcomes and data-driven performance measures as an integral part of their work (Culp, 2012, p. 1). Data driven evidence gives student affairs professionals the ability to understand how their programs and services contribute to student learning, student retention and to the strategic goals of the institution (Wall, 2011, p. 216).

Historically, retention was thought to be solely related to characteristics within the student thus, if the institution recruited motivated, mature and academically qualified students there would not be a problem of attrition (Hossler & Anderson, 2005, p. 67) However, even though institutions crafted stringent admissions policies which would seemingly cultivate better and better students, retention remained a problem (Tinto, 2005, p. 1). Of course, retention is not defined as a problem for all those that work in the post-secondary sector. There are those that believe retention is a natural part of the selection process, a “survival of the fittest” idea (Upcraft, Garder & Barefoot, 2005, p. 1). Administrators understand that retention is a matter of reputation but it is also an important matter of economics. It is less expensive to invest in the retention of students than to continuously recruit for the first-year class in addition to replacing those lost to attrition (Tinto, 2006, p. 4).

Institutions have shifted from seeing retention solely as a product of the individual characteristics of incoming students to understanding that the context could play a role in mitigating the factors that cause students to leave (Krause & Coates, 2008, p. 494). More recently, retention is thought of as a by-product of a high quality student experience (Tinto, 2005, p. 5; Kuh, 2009, p. 688). Institutions that invest in interventions that enhance a sense of belonging and assist students in making friends will increase success and retention in first year (Pittman & Richmond, 2008, p. 344; Kuh, 2007, p. 2). Research studies have suggested that the more students are involved in academic and social activities on campus the more they benefit in terms of learning and personal development (Kuh, 2009, p. 697; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p. 18).

A body of literature has developed that correlates student engagement with a number of learning outcomes important in the work done in student affairs. These include student satisfaction, better performance, social networks, and persistence (Tinto, 2006, p. 6; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh & Whitt, 2005, p. 35; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p. 20).

Since the late 1990’s, research into student learning and engagement suggests that institutional goals of deep learning and transformative experiences are best achieved when curricular and co-curricular activities are intentionally combined (Shushok, Henry, Blalock & Sriram, 2009, p. 12; Gardner, 2013, para. 5). Many researchers now believe that it is the collective effort of the entire university community that provides greater opportunities for engagement and deep learning (Evenbeck & Hamilton, 2006, 17; Krause, 2006, p. 8; Kuh, 2009, 696). Building a high quality student experience and maximizing all that post-secondary has to offer is dependent on partnerships between faculty and student affairs staff (Shushok, et al., 2009, p. 10; Arcelus, 2011, p. 73). Similarly, Krause (2006, p. 9) suggests that institutions need to be strategic and build a supportive community for first-year students. What is clear from the research is that there is not one particular blueprint for success in programming for first-year students. There is however, an understanding that initiatives aimed at their emotional, social and academic needs will increase their engagement and thus retention.

Due to the developmental and cognitive stage of first-year students in transition, they tend to rely on their peers for information, more than any other age group (Astin, 1993, p. 106; Sawyer, Pinciario, & Bedwell, 1997, 218). Positive interactions between peers can affect the academic and social development of students (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckely, Bridges, & Hayek, 2006, p. 3). This makes an orchestrated peer mentor program a useful model to assist with transition issues and retention rates (Goff, 2011, p.2).

However, there is a wide variety of definitions, goals, training and outputs of peer mentor programs (Crisp & Cruz, 2009, 526). Some are designed for a specific target group or within a specific discipline (Slack & Vigurs, 2006, p. 2). Some are co-hort driven with the specific goals of increasing student engagement, social integration and role modeling (Krause, 2006, p. 7). Still others are specifically designed to provide academic interventions (Milne, Keating, & Gabb, 2007, p.7). Nora and Crisp (2007, p. 355) suggested that good peer mentor programs include elements of the following: psychological support, degree and career support, academic interventions and opportunity for role modeling.

The literature suggests that performance measurement and evaluation are increasingly becoming important to post-secondary institutions in a number of ways. It is a response to governmental pressure for accountability, it connects programs at the department level with the larger strategic goals and it provides information for process improvement. Some would argue that one evaluation cannot respond to all three of these demands. Others suggest that learning outcomes are a promising trend that fosters uniqueness amongst institutions while providing a consistent framework for reporting. Additionally, the development of learning outcomes would allow institutions to meet the needs of the labour market without compromising the greater goal of transformative learning. There is a growing understanding that a student's education extends beyond the classroom and includes the programs and services supported by the student affairs division. As the institution establishes and refines learning outcomes it is imperative that the student affairs division also become clear as to how they contribute to the strategic goals of the institution.

The literature suggests initiatives in the student affairs area need to be mindful of working across the campus with faculty partners and setting learning outcomes that work in tandem with the academic enterprise. Peer mentor programs have demonstrated good potential to effect success and retention when built with intentional outcomes and consider the multi-dimensional needs of students. Evaluation in the student affairs area provides opportunity for the division to both improve practice and be accountable for the value they add to the institutional goals. It is also imperative that the student affairs division embrace evaluation as a best practice to understand the effect of their programs and services and how they would improve the way they do business. In this way, this evaluation project will contribute to the discipline and to the body of literature and is both timely and relevant to the client and to the field.

## **4.0 Findings and Analysis**

This section presents the data from both quantitative and qualitative sources. As with a typical sequential explanatory study, the quantitative information helps to understand the breadth and scope of the program while the qualitative information helps to explain why the data might look the way that it does.

This section begins by presenting quantitative information that helps to understand the breadth and scope of the program. This will specifically indicate how many students are engaging with a peer mentor and for what types of issues. The data will also indicate how the breadth and scope has changed over the three years it has been operational.

Information regarding the effect of the program on both academic success and retention follows the discussion about breadth of the program. This quantitative data compares and contrasts two populations of students: those that interacted with a peer mentor and those that did not. The analysis provides an opportunity to look for relationships between the two populations and academic success as defined by sessional GPA and retention as defined by registered in courses the following year.

This section concludes with the presentation of the qualitative data secured in both focus groups with first-year students and interviews with faculty members. This information provides an opportunity to hear a description of the program in the voice of the first-year student and allows them to provide their best advice on how to strengthen the program. Similarly, the qualitative data garnered from faculty interviews indicates the value that faculty members see in the program and affords them opportunity to provide advice and recommendations for improvements.

### **4.1 Breadth and Scope of the Program**

Two sources of data were used to understand the breadth and scope of the Peer Mentor program: weekly logs and data from the UES. Each of the sources provided a unique perspective on the program: the weekly logs indicate the frequency of contact from a first-year student to a peer mentor while the UES provided similar information from the perspective of the first-year student. In this way, the two different data sources were triangulated to improve the reliability of the information. The logs were analyzed for three academic years: 2010, 2011, and 2012. During the second year of the program, peer mentors started to interface with first-year students in the summer, but logs from the summer contact are not available for this evaluation.

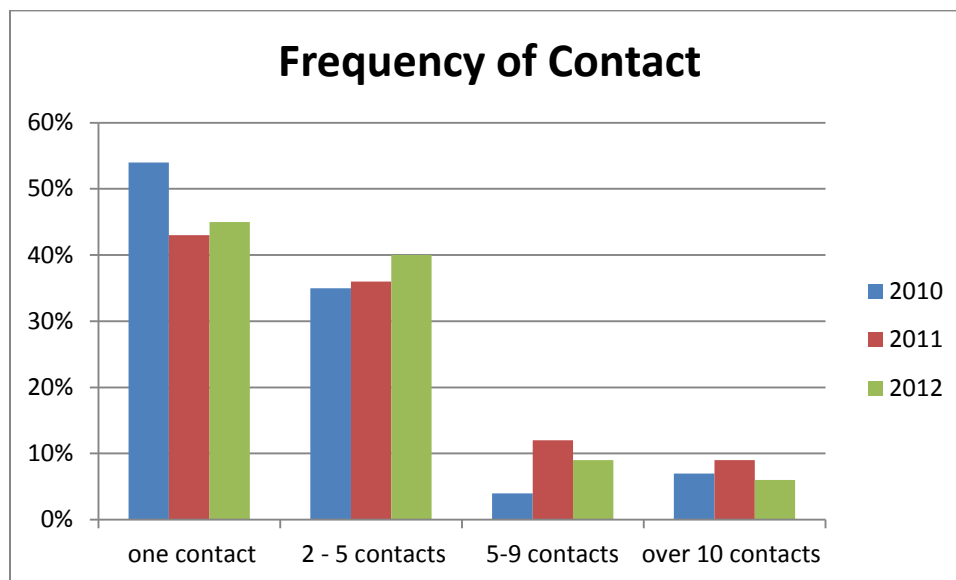
As mentioned in the description of the program, each new incoming student is matched with a peer mentor; however, not all first-year students engage in the program. The logs provided a perspective on how widely the program is utilized. Peer mentors recorded interactions they had with first-year students who make contact with them to ask a question or seek advice. The following table provides a year-over-year look at the breadth of contact between first-year students and peer mentors.

	2010	2011	2012
New direct entry intake	1427	1625	1745
Number of first-year students engaging with peer mentors at least once.	259	430	693
% of students who engaged with peer mentors at least once	18%	26%	40%

*Table Three: Percentage of first-year students contacting the PM*

Based on the peer mentors' logs, there was an increase in the number of first-year students connecting with their peer mentor over time. Initially, only 18% of the first-year class was initiating contact but by 2013 this had increased to 40%.

The logs also offered information regarding frequency of contact. The graph below visually displays the frequency of contact from first-year students to peer mentors.



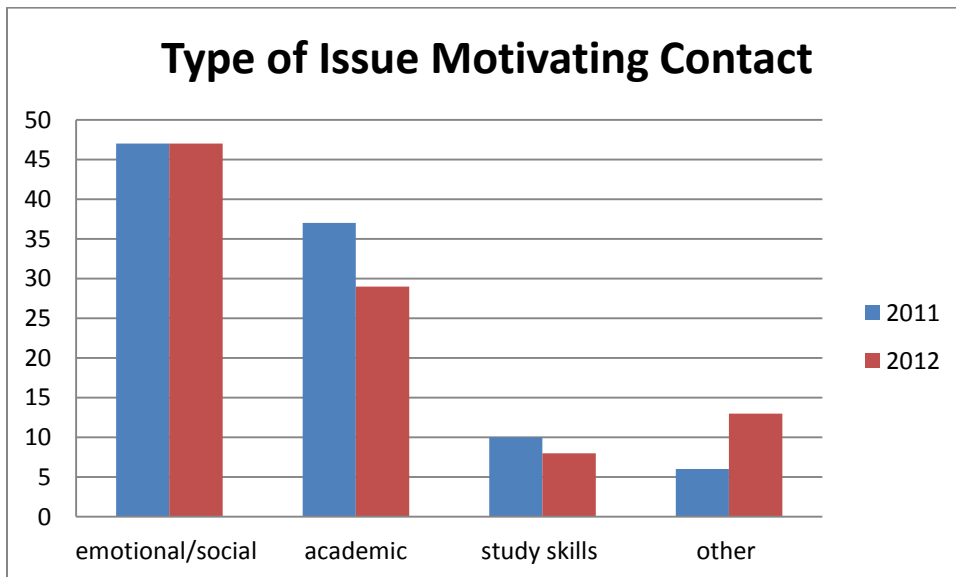
*Chart One: Frequency of Contact*

The logs indicated that the largest percent of the students are contacting the peer mentor between one and five times throughout the year. This has remained true for all three years with a small percentage (less than 10%) of the first-year students reaching out more than 10 times in the year.

The peer mentor logs also tracked the type of issue that prompts a first-year student to be in touch. In 2010, there was not a standardized way of documenting this type of contact so these logs were not included in the analysis. The definitions of the types of contact were standardized in 2011 and were used again in 2012; these fall under the following four broad categories: 1) Emotional/Social issues, 2) Academic issues, 3) Study Skills, and 4) Other. The specifics of these categories are listed below:

1. Emotional/social questions: includes issues with family, challenges with transition issues, homesickness, social/life balance, medical issues, loneliness, or room mate issues.
2. Academic issues: includes clarification on assignments, information on class projects, clarification of terms, referral to on-campus supports, or informal study sessions.
3. Study Skills: includes APA format, time management, paper writing, or managing the work volume.
4. Other: includes future studies, transferring to Vancouver, Go Global, or practicum placements.

The chart below indicates the types of issues that prompted a first-year student to contact a peer mentor.



*Chart Two: Frequency and type of issue prompting contact*

Chart two illustrates the most common concern that prompts a first-year student to connect with a peer mentor. Emotional or social transition issues are the most common element of contact and this is consistent between the two years.

The UES is a useful tool to understand frequency and type of correspondence that the first-years reported. The UES data details the mode of communication and the type of correspondence first-years received. Data used in this evaluation was collected over the spring of 2012 and 2013 and is presented in the table below for a year-over-year review.

	2012 often or very often	2013 often or very often
Email	67%	88%
Phone	12.5%	14%
Social networking	17%	27%
In-person contact	20%	32%

*Table Four: Method of contact from peer mentors*

As evidenced by the table above the most common form of communication is email followed by, to a lesser degree, in-person meetings.

The table below indicates how students describe the content of the messages.

Type of Events	2012
Social events	69%
Academic events	64%

*Table Five: Content of messaging*

Each peer mentor is required to plan and execute events for their constituent group. The first few weeks of school they are asked to focus those events on making social connections between and amongst their peers. Around the time of mid-term examinations, the peer mentors are asked to turn their attention to referrals for academic supports or even to host informal study sessions. In 2013, the UES asked the question “How often did you attend an event sponsored by the peer mentor?” On the survey, 17% indicated that they attended social events often or very often and 44% indicated that they attended sometimes. For academic related events, 17% of students indicated that they attended often or very often and 39% indicated that they attended sometimes.

Overall, this information provides the picture of breadth and scope of the peer mentor program. Participation has been increasing since its inception and is now at about 40% participation rate for first-year students. The majority of the students are initiating contact with their peer mentor less than five times in the year and a few students are connecting more than ten times in the year. The most common reason for a first-year student to connect with his or her peer mentor is for assistance with an emotional or social issues and the second most common reason for contact is to seek assistance with an academic issue. The most common form of communication is via email and students feel they are being advised about both social and academic events. First-year students are not attending events sponsored by the peer mentor in a robust way preferring to attend only sometimes. This helps understand the scope of the program but is only one dimension of the affect. The following sections provide additional information to further describe the effect on academic success and retention.

## 4.2 Effect on Academic Success and Retention

As mentioned in the methodology section, the weekly logs were used to determine a population of students who initiated contact with their peer mentor. This was augmented with institutional data to provide the second population of students from the same incoming year that did not interact with their peer mentor. These populations were then analyzed to determine if there was a relationship to academic success and to retention. In order to control for some external variables, the data was cleaned up to include a more homogeneous group; for instance, first-year students were neither all in the same age bracket nor did they have similar educational backgrounds. The Peer Mentor program was created with a first-year direct-entry student in mind; thus, the data was restricted to include students who had no previous educational credit. Additionally, the data was further restricted to include only students who were 19 years old or younger. These same criteria were applied to all three years of the data as an attempt to control for some of the external factors that can affect the outcome of analysis. Once the data set was cleaned up to reflect these conditions, the analysis for academic success and retention was applied.

Descriptive analyses to determine the mean and the standard deviation provided information about the nature of the relationship. In 2010, the mean sessional average for students who initiated contact with a peer mentor ( $n=178$ ) was 71.3% with a standard deviation of 11.3. For the students in the same year who did not contact a peer mentor ( $n=1444$ ), the mean was 66.0 with a standard deviation of 14.2. In 2011, the mean sessional average for students who initiated contact ( $n=547$ ) was 69.5% with a standard deviation of 11.1. In that same year for students who did not contact a peer mentor ( $n=1282$ ), the mean sessional average was 66.7% with a standard deviation of 12.8. Similarly in 2012, the mean sessional average for the population of students that interacted with a peer mentor ( $n=514$ ) was 70.4% with a standard deviation of 12.5 while the mean sessional average of the population of students not interacting with a peer mentor ( $n=1281$ ) was 66.1% with a standard deviation of 15.2.

In all three years the *t-test* indicated a statistically significant difference ( $p<.001$ ) between the distribution of sessional averages and peer mentor contact. In 2010, the effect was significant for students who contacted a peer mentor,  $t(238)=3.67$ ,  $p<.001$ . In 2011, the effects was similar,  $t(1122) = 2.91$ ,  $p<.001$  and similarly in 2012,  $t(1814) = 2.97$ ,  $p<.001$ . The null hypothesis could be rejected establishing a statistically relevant relationship between population group and sessional average and specifically indicating a statistically relevant positive relationship between contact with a peer mentor and improved academic performance.

It is interesting to note that the difference in the means for 2010 was significantly greater than in either 2011 or 2012. This was influenced by the fact that the campus had been in a steady growth curve in the early years but in 2010 had met the target numbers to be considered full. Thus, in 2011 admission to all programs became more competitive which drove the admitted GPA up for all new students. In 2010, due to the fact that the institution wasn't full, the admitting GPA was lower with a much greater variation of admitting GPA's. This was not the case for subsequent years. However, in all three years, the students who initiated contact with their peer mentor on average performed better on their sessional average and had a smaller standard deviation when compared to the mean sessional average and standard deviation for the students who did not initiate contact. The table below provides a quick glance at these findings.

	Mean Sessional average and standard deviation for students contacting a peer mentor	Mean sessional average and standard deviation for students not contacting a peer mentor
2010	71.3% (SD11.3)	66.0% (SD 14.3)
2011	69.5% (SD 11.1%)	66.7% (SD 12.8)
2012	70.4% (SD 12.5)	66.1% (SD 15.2)

*Table Six: Mean sessional average and SD of two populations*

Both the descriptive statistics and the results of the *t*-test provide evidence that there is a statistically relevant positive relationship between peer mentor contact and academic success as defined by sessional average.

The faculty referral lists were also analyzed to determine if there was a relationship between academic success and a faculty referral. Unfortunately, the referrals was inconsistently tracked which provided a number of challenges in the analysis. For instance, students who were referred were not tracked in terms of their response to an intervention. This means that there was not a clear way to determine if a referred student responded to a peer mentor’s intervention. Thus, the analysis included all students who were referred as opposed to students who responded to a peer mentors contact. In 2010, 192 students were referred from a variety of faculty members. In 2011, 110 students were tracked through the referral program and in 2012, 71 students were tracked through this system. A similar process for analysis was deployed for these two populations as with the students who initiated contact with a peer mentor. This included a *t*-test to determine if a statistically relevant relationship existed between the two populations followed by descriptive statistics that indicate the direction of the relationship. In all three years the *t*-test suggested that a statistical relevant relationship ( $p < .001$ ) between a faculty referral and the sessional average existed. Descriptive statistics on all three years indicated that students who were not referred, on average, had stronger sessional averages than those that were. This is helpful to understand that the profile of the referred student is, in fact, a student who is struggling academically. These are exactly the students who should be referred to the program but there is no evidence that an intervention by a peer mentor had an impact on the academic success of these students. A more refined tracking system would result in better data that would provide better opportunities for analysis. Additionally, it is difficult to compare referred students to the whole first-year population. Any future analysis should restrict the data to include only students from the same course and this would result in more sophisticated information.

The test to determine retention could be performed only on the populations of 2010 and 2011 as data on retention for 2012 would not be available until after the completion of this project. The Pearson chi-square cross tabulation was conducted with the two categorical variables to do a preliminary comparison of the different populations. The Pearson Chi-square cross tabulation compared students who had contact with those that had no contact and whether or not they were retained into the following year. In 2010, 76.4% of the students who had contact with a peer mentor (n=178) were retained into the following year as opposed to 71.3% of those that did not have contact with a peer mentor (n=1444). In 2011, 80.8% of those students who had contact with a peer mentor (n=442) were retained into 2012 as compared to 79.5% of those with no contact

with a peer mentor. While this suggests a correlation it is not sufficient enough to indicate statistical relevance and additional analysis was required.

The Pearson chi-square tests provided information around the strength of the relationship for both years. The percentage of students interacting with a peer mentor retained into 2011 is a greater percentage but it is not statistically significant  $\chi^2(1, n=1292) = .93, p = .33$ . In 2012 the Pearson chi-square test also suggested that the relationship was not significant  $\chi^2(1, n=1162) = .02, p = .87$ . In both cases the significance value is greater than .05 suggesting that these results are not statistically significant. While the cross tabs hint that there may be a relationship between peer mentor contact and retention, the Pearson chi-square test results are not statistically significant and may be due to some other unexplained variable.

While the tests indicated that the result did not meet the threshold to be considered significantly relevant it can be argued that the results have substantive significance. Substantive significance is concerned with understanding the effect that the findings had on a population. In this case, the results do suggest that the peer mentor program is linked to retention and can be considered a substantive relevance.

### 4.3 First-Year Students Perspective

To understand effect of the Peer Mentor program from the first-year student's perspective, a series of focus groups were held over a two-year time frame. In both the spring of 2012 and spring of 2013, three focus groups were held. In 2012, 18 students attended and in 2013, 38 students attended resulting in a total of 56 students (n=56) in six focus groups. Each focus group was assigned a number from 1-6, 1 being the first group held in 2012 with 6 the last focus group held in 2013. Any quotes from students included in this section are attributed to the focus group in which the student participated.

Participants attending the focus groups were predominately female (86%) and mostly domestic (81%). The chart below represents their programs of study.

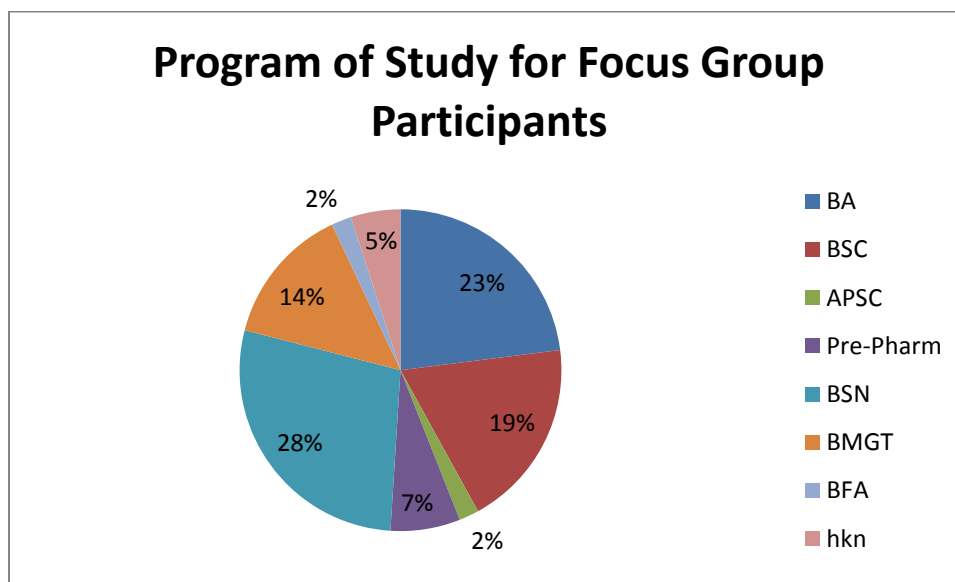


Chart Three: Program of Study for focus group participants

The greatest number of participants was from the Bachelor of Science in Nursing program followed closely by students in the Bachelor of Arts.

Comments from the focus groups regarding type, volume, and content of the messages are consistent with the data reported above. Students are regularly receiving email correspondence from their peer mentor for academic and social events. They are less likely to phone or text, and a few joined a Facebook group set up by the peer mentor. Some did report that they meet up with their mentor for coffee but more often they attended an event sponsored by their mentor. Students report that they like the email correspondence the best because they can choose to respond or save the information for their use at a later date. This allowed them to customize the amount of contact and engage on their own time. There was consensus that they received far more correspondence from the peer mentor than they reciprocated, but they liked the fact they could be anonymous and choose the level of engagement that was right for them. One theme emerging from the focus groups suggested that the most valuable correspondence happened in the summer as suggested by this participant, “It was comforting to get the message in the summer because they gave you lots of answers before you got here. I was really nervous so they helped me that way” (FG3, 2012).

What was most similar within the six different focus groups was that first-year students recognized they have significant transition issues during the first year. These challenges are described below in rank order to the number of times cited by students. The most often cited transition issue mentioned by students in the focus group was the difficulty they experienced maintaining good grades as explained by this student, “I’m getting B’s now whereas before I was like darn, I got an 80 but now if I get a B it’s like YES!! This is satisfying but it’s definitely a big change” (FG4, 2013).

The second most often mentioned transition issue included challenging work load and professor demands as demonstrated by this focus group participant:

keeping up with the work load and the demands like how midterms are all in one week and it’s such a strain on everybody and you barely get any sleep during that week. Just a different change from high school. (FG5, 2013)

The third most often mentioned transition issue suggested that first-year students had some unexpected difficulties balancing academic demands with social demands as evidenced by this comment:

I think it is hard to balance your social life and your academic life, because yes you have to study but if you don’t fulfill your social needs, I don’t know about anyone else, but I go crazy. I completely lose focus, I have to do it but I also have to study most of the time, so it really is just finding the balance. (FG2, 2012)

Students in all six focus groups also noted challenges with increased autonomy and independence as demonstrated in this quote:

You are kind of on your own as well, there is not a teacher there the next day to check and make sure you did your homework. You are expected to do the readings

all on your own, no one makes you do anything in a sense. You have to do it for your own good. (FG 5, 2013)

Lastly, students in the focus groups spoke of the difficulty with balancing distractions and dealing with procrastination, “It’s just so easy to procrastinate you could so easily get distracted by step brothers [TV show] or something, you know” (FG 6, 2013).

The following quote captures the overall thoughts about transitioning to the post-secondary environment and summarizes the common opinion with regards to how it feels to be a first-year student:

It’s not like middle school to high school where everything is just a bit harder this is from high school to a whole new life and you have to learn how to transition to that accordingly. (FG6, 2013)

The most often cited benefit from having a peer mentor for first-year students is that the peer mentor helps them cope with the multitude of transition issues. The UES asks to what extent do you feel your peer mentor has made a meaningful contribution to your transition to university life at UBC? The students were asked to respond on a scale from extremely to not at all. In 2012, 20% of the first-year students suggested that the peer mentor was extremely or very helpful. In 2013, 41% of the respondents indicated that the peer mentor was extremely or very helpful with regards to transition to university. This matches the statements from the focus group suggesting this is one of the main benefits of the program.

While assistance with the transition to university was the most common cited benefit of the Peer Mentor program, participants were also able to identify specific strengths of the program. Having a peer in the same discipline was valuable to the first-year students as they suggested that getting advice from a senior student in the same program alleviated stress as evidenced by this participant:

Even like, one morning for one of my classes I didn’t know if I needed a lab coat or goggles so I emailed him in a panic. Do I need this for first lab or this...he was like right away don’t worry about it and I knew he knew so I could calm down. (FG 2, 2012)

First-year students also indicated that the academic study sessions and referrals to the academic resources on campus were a positive aspect of the program:

I like all the help available on campus like with the math and science stuff. My peer mentor was always referring me to those services or inviting me to join a group for studying. I wish I had participated more often. (FG 1, 2012)

While the first-year students felt that the academic supports were critical to their success, they also thought that the social aspect was fun, not necessary helpful, but fun. “My peer mentor organized an ice-cream sundae social and it was great to hang out and watch stupid movies. Not so much helpful but it was really fun to connect with everyone” (FG 6, 2013).

A few students recognized the emotional challenges of first year including loneliness and anxiety and credited their peer mentor with assistance with these issues:

If I am stressed, mine talks me through it. She tries to relate to me about professors and classes. She gives me a heads up about what I'm getting into. It's nice to complain to someone and then they let me know its ok. That helps with my learning because if I'm stressed out then I don't learn. (FG 4, 2013)

Focus group participants were asked about the weaknesses or challenges with the program and they had a number of suggestions that, in their opinion, would improve the program. The prominent theme related to consistent and clear communication. Not all students had the same experience with their peer mentor. It was evident that some mentors were better able to engage their constituents, had more regular correspondence, and provided more timely information. Some students in the group who reported a lack of correspondence from their peer were envious of those students who had regular correspondence. They recommended that the mentors be trained and held accountable for their communication with first-year students. There was consensus that the information was useful and that it assisted with the transition issues. Some indicated that initially they felt that they would not need the assistance but shortly after the start of the year found the messages very helpful.

One theme that emerged in terms of improving the program was to increase the supports around studying and study skills. Many students suggested that their biggest surprise about coming to university was work load issues and managing the complexities of demanding courses. They felt that programming for academic supports would be a good investment of the mentors' time. Some mentors shared their own personal study tips, which were quite helpful, but the program could be strengthened by added regular group study sessions as evidenced by this participant, "They just don't have enough study events!" (FG 5, 2013).

There was the suggestion by two students in two different focus groups that there should be a pre-orientation program focused solely on the development of university study skills and managing the demands of the first year:

Maybe if we had an opportunity before coming to school to learn how to study properly. This is a lot of work and honestly I never studied in high school so coming here I was surprised at how hard it actually was. We could sign up for seminars during orientation – this would help with university expectations. (FG 6, 2013)

Finally, a third theme for improvement suggested events and programs planned by the peer mentors should consider the needs of commuter students. There was an indication that many of the events were geared too much to students who live on campus. They recommended that events planned at convenient times for commuter students would provide greater opportunity for participation by a wider variety of students. Specifically, commuter students were less likely to return to campus for evening events. The participants did not think that the events needed to be off campus but they could be more attractive to commuters if they were available in the day:

I feel that a lot of the events are geared towards those that live on campus and they are scheduled at times that work for those that live on campus like the evenings

when it's difficult for commuters to get home. They are already integrated into campus life so they get triple the experience that we do. (FG 4, 2013)

In summary, the data from the first-year students suggests that the Peer Mentor program benefits their ability to cope with the variety of transition issues that they experience during the first year. Having a senior student in the same discipline offer guidance and advice helps with questions and uncertainty related to the demands of the university environment. Peer mentors make the biggest impact in the summer and first term by responding to questions that reduce confusion and anxiety for students. The greatest reported benefit is the support regarding academic study groups, study tips, and referrals to academic resources on campus. A secondary benefit is the flow of information about events or opportunities for engagement on campus contained in the email correspondence. To a lesser extent, but still important, is the opportunity that the peer mentor provides to connect first-year students in a safe social environment.

#### **4.4 Faculty Perspective**

A total of 10 faculty members were invited to participate in interviews to discover what the impact of having a Peer Mentor program meant to them. A total of eight faculty members were available to participate (n=8) in the time that this evaluation was active. Each interview was coded with a number from 1-8 and any quotes below are referenced from the coded number of the interview.

Participating faculty members had a fair degree of knowledge about the program and connected with the program over the year in some capacity; either to refer a student or to support a peer mentor with promotion and advertising. While this fact skews the responses in support of the program, the information that they were able to provide is useful to make program improvements.

All faculty members interviewed had a good understanding of the fact that first-year was a major transition for students for a number of reasons including; different and more demanding academic expectations, ill prepared students for the peer pressure and balancing of social demands, and unexpected freedoms. Over half of the interviewees felt that a customized program such as this was essential to support with these challenges. It was described well in the following comments, "Yes this program helps them become acculturated to academia and its particular expectations" (1), and "Yes hands down this should continue...if there is anywhere we should put investment it is in the first year. Early intervention is very important" (3).

When asked what particular benefits there were of the Peer Mentor program, there were three primary responses: 1) the program compensates for their inability to treat each student in the class individually, 2) the program provides much needed emotional support, and 3) the program provides a link to academic supports and normalizes the shock due to the decline in students' grades.

Specifically, as it relates to the way the program compensated for some of the challenges they experience in teaching large first-year courses, the faculty felt that the peer mentors helped to retain students when the time and attention of the faculty member was diverted to the needs of many as demonstrated by the following quote:

The benefits to this program are huge; it makes their first year more successful and helps to retain them. Students who feel supported stick around. It's intimidating to go to a faculty member so access to a peer is critical. (4)

Additionally, faculty commented that the peer mentor program makes the first-year student feel welcome, and cared for. "If students know that a service is customized for them they feel welcome and cared for. It helps them to feel wanted and makes them feel as if they are receiving special treatment" (8).

Some interviewees were very aware that the peer mentors provided emotional support. "I have seen the peer mentors work wonders in terms of students who were isolated and lonely...and in my opinion they were amazing" (2). Another faculty member appreciated access to this type of support when the support was needed:

I make a lot of referrals to the program and I have even had the opportunity of seeking assistance with an upset student on a weekend. It was invaluable to me to have a timely, thorough and thoughtful response after business hours. (7)

The third benefit that faculty members identified with this program is the link it provides to academic supports. "We especially need the peer mentors to support students in academic areas such as writing. Peer mentors can support skill development that extends beyond their field and into all disciplines" (3). One interviewee appreciated the fact that the peers can help students understand that some of the challenges are normal first-year experiences:

Peer mentors are especially helpful with students who are used to getting high marks in high school and can't accept that their marks may be lower in university. The mentors make this a fairly normal experience by telling stories of their own and then connecting them with resources on campus. (8)

When asked about improvements to the program the interviewees were able to provide some insightful comments. There were four recurring themes in the interviews presented in order of frequency reported: 1) improve the communication, 2) involve the TA's in training, 3) provide better feedback to those that participate, and finally 4) consider developing a program such as this for other constituent groups. These points are further explained below.

Universally, all interviewees felt that the program needed better communication. They felt that they knew a fair amount about the program but that their colleagues were not informed. One interviewee had the following advice, "Keep the program simple and get the message out early to increase the possibility that faculty will participate" (6).

In addition, they felt that particular information about the referral process needed to be clear to encourage faculty members to participate. "I would like specific phone numbers for my bulletin board and more information on the actual services offered. I also think you could share more statistics" (7).

Three of those interviewed felt they were removed from the student and the student experience, especially in the larger sections and felt their TA's could benefit from "additional training" (2) or "customized workshops just for the TA's about the program" (3).

Two faculty members felt that the program would be improved by providing better feedback to those that did make referrals as stated by this one interviewee, "I often make referrals and I trust that the students are being cared for but feedback specifically about my referrals would be good" (6).

Lastly, two faculty members felt there may be other constituents interested in a similar program, "Transfer students might benefit from something like this" (8) or "students in second year, I'm concerned about the second year cliff so think that we might need something for them" (5).

#### **4.5 Summary**

This section has presented both quantitative and qualitative data to help understand both the nature of the program and the effect of the program. What the data indicated was that the scope and breadth of the program has increased over the three years with approximately 40% of first-year students now interacting with a peer mentor. The data also indicated that the majority of students are interacting with their peer mentor between one and five times per term and they are mostly contacting a peer for emotional or social issues. These characteristics have remained the same over time.

The data also indicated that students who interacted with their peer mentor had a statically relevant positive relationship with academic success as defined by sessional average. Specifically, students who engaged with a peer mentor were achieving, on average, four percent higher on their final grade point average and this was consistent for all three years. Similarly, the data indicated a positive relationship between students that interacted with a peer mentor and retention. Each year, that retention was analyzed there was a greater number of students retained that interacted with a peer mentor. However, this correlation did not meet the criteria to be considered statistically significant but is substantively relevant. Additional review is needed to better understand what factors are affecting the results.

The qualitative data from the first-year focus groups helped to explain the effect from the perspective of the first-year student. Specifically, the students expressed the fact that their peer mentor assisted them deal with the multitude of transition issues including the challenge they experienced maintaining good grades, the difficulty they had with balancing the academic demands with the social pressure, the issues of their new found autonomy and independence and balancing all the distractions that come with the freedom of being away from home for the first time. Of specific benefit to the first-year student was having a peer in the same discipline, getting referrals from the peers for academic support and dealing with the emotional challenges inherent in first year. The students had a number of valuable suggestions for improvement which included consistent training for the mentors and having a heavier emphasis on academic supports.

The qualitative data from the faculty interviews provided an opportunity for faculty members to detail the benefits and to indicate what improvements would strengthen the program. The faculty indicated that there were three main benefits to having the Peer Mentor program including the following; 1) the program compensates for their inability to treat each student individually,

especially in larger sections of first-year courses, 2) the program provides much needed emotional support, and 3) the program links first-year students to critical academic resources. In terms of strengthening the program the faculty members suggested that the communication about the program could be stronger and would provide more opportunity for faculty to participate. The faculty members also thought that the coordinator of the program should include teaching assistants in the training as they are sometimes in a better spot to identify struggling students. Lastly, faculty members thought the program would be strengthened by providing better feedback to those that do make referrals. If the faculty member had a better understanding of what effect the referral process had for students it may increase the participation rate.

While this section has detailed the data, this needs to be linked to the questions that guided the evaluation and provide some answers and guidance to the client. The following section does exactly that. It reviews the questions and explains the answer to the questions and provides an overall conclusion for future consideration.

## 5.0 Discussion and Conclusion

The intent of this evaluation project was to answer a number of questions. The main question guiding this evaluation asked if the Peer Mentor program met its stated goals. The long term goal of the program was to improve retention for first year students. Subsequent to that, there were three short term goals. Specifically, the program was designed to increase academic success of first-year students, to increase the emotional and social wellness for first-year students and finally, the program was designed to provide better support for faculty members teaching first-year courses. Before explaining if the program did meet all of these goals this section will detail each of the questions and then explain how the data relates to the specific questions.

The first question asked, “How does the Peer Mentor program contribute to retention of first-year students?” The analysis presented in this report suggests that there is a pattern of increased retention amongst those students who interact with a mentor but it is not a statistically relevant correlation. While the focus groups indicate many positive aspects of the Peer Mentor program, the correlation with retention does not meet the statistical relevant confidence interval suggesting that other factors could be influencing the outcome. All the data taken together suggests that the program is substantively relevant to retention but more research needs to be done to understand and perhaps control for additional variables that affect the retention statistic. This analysis focused specifically on campus retention and it would be interesting to expand this analysis to include retention to the multi-campus system to determine if there is any statistical relevance.

The second question guiding this evaluation asked “What effect does the Peer Mentor program have on the emotional and social wellness of the first-year students?” The focus groups provided the first-hand voice of the student to suggest that having a peer mentor was very useful in students’ transition to the campus. The comments of the first-year students indicate that a peer mentor improved the emotional and social wellness of first-year students by assisting with a multitude of transition questions.

The third question asked “In what way does the Peer Mentor program contribute to the academic success of the first-year student?” The evidence suggests that there is a statistically relevant, positive relationship between interacting with a peer mentor and sessional average. On average, students who interact with a peer mentor complete the term with a GPA that is four points higher than students who do not interact with a peer mentor. Information from the focus groups collaborate this and suggest that students appreciate the information regarding academic supports on campus. Specifically, the first-year students would like to see more focus on programs that contribute to their academic success.

The fourth question asked “How does the Peer Mentor program contribute to the experience for faculty teaching first-year students?” The faculty interviews provided evidence that, for these particular faculty members, the Peer Mentor program helped them in three important ways: the program compensated for their inability to personally reach out to all students, provided help with transition issues, and normalized the shock and demands of the post-secondary environment. The data also suggested faculty is appropriately referring students to the program. The profile of the referred students suggests that they are struggling academically and may need academic supports. However, this particular data set did not provide evidence that a referral resulted in improved

performance. Better data collection, further analysis and a feedback system to faculty would improve this process and possibly provide more relevant results.

The overarching question that guided this evaluation is “To what extent did the Peer Mentor program meet its stated goals?” The conclusion is that the Peer Mentor program met three of the four stated goals. The program does increase social and emotional wellness for first-year students and is positively correlated with improved academic performance. Additionally, faculty members who are familiar with the program indicate that it increases the support for them teaching first-year courses. However, the program did not meet the goal of providing evidence of a statistically relevant relationship to retention.

The conclusion is that the Peer Mentor program has met or is meeting three of the four stated goals. Additionally, the program can claim to fit within the pillars of the student success model for the client. Specifically, it is contributing to the pillar of academic success. Overall, the conclusion suggests that not only is the program meeting the pillars of the student success model but is also contributing to the overall mission and vision of the institution to develop a world class, intimate learning community with a focus on the undergraduate experience. With confidence, the client can suggest that this program contributes to strategic goal of the Provost and adds value to the first-year student experience.

## 6.0 Recommendations

The conclusion suggests the program is meeting all but one of the stated goals and adds value not only to the student but to the goals of the division and to the institution. However, there is always room for process improvement in any program. The following recommendations are developed to improve the program and provide advice on the focus for any future evaluations. The recommendations are a result of two issues experienced during the evaluation process. First, recommendation one and two would make it easier to work with the data and to garnish quicker and more relevant information about the program. Both recommendations would be minimal cost but would provide much better information to quantify the effect of the program.

Recommendation three is related to the retention analysis. This evaluation project suggested a substantive relevance between students contacting a peer mentor and retention but it was not statistically relevant. The thrust to develop the program was related to retention thus, the program would be strengthened by further analysis to understand the effect the program has on this variable. Recommendation four is to determine the relevance for international students. This is a result of the information from the focus groups where there was an indication that the program was especially useful to international students. This is a recommendation that would fit well with the goals of the institution going forward and the importance they place on the experience for international students. Recommendation five resulted from the qualitative information offered from the first-year students. The students indicated that they found the academic information and referrals most helpful so the recommendation is to adjust the training for the mentors to fit with what students found most useful. The recommendations are listed below and are presented in priority order.

### **Recommendation One: Improve the Process for Data Collection in the Weekly Logs**

The weekly logs were a rich source of information but they are not currently collected in an electronic format. This makes it time consuming to collect and evaluate the information. An on-line or excel format for the frequency of contact would be valuable. This would be relatively inexpensive to implement and would require the support of technical services to set it up and provide training on how to use an excel spreadsheet. There are a number of software programs that would support this type of program but the cost of these would make it prohibitive for the program. The program would be well served with a shared excel workbook. Implementing an on-line recording system would provide the coordinator of the program quicker access to data about the breadth of the program. It would also indicate, in a timely way, the accuracy and consistency of the data the mentors are submitting. This would be a valuable way to understand any training needs about data collection that the mentors might require.

Additionally, there was not a consistent way among the peer mentors to categorize the type and reason of contact. The logs would be far more useful if the peer mentors employed a consistent schema to record the nature of the interactions. It was interesting to note that the mentors indicated that the main reason a student interacted with them was for emotional and social support but the first-year student said that the main benefit of the mentor program was for academic support. Developing a consistent schema would help with this discrepancy. This would have implications for budget as it would increase the cost of training for the mentors but it would be minimal.

## **Recommendation Two: Tracking Faculty Referrals**

It is evident that one key to success of the program is to engage and satisfy the needs of faculty. This element of the program makes it unique and is one of the strengths of the process. The data did suggest that faculty members were referring the correct students, those that are struggling academically. However, the method to collect, track and report back on the students that are referred is inadequate. This leaves the program coordinator with no useful information on what the result of referrals might be and it leaves the faculty member devoid of information on the students that have caused them concern. It is recommended that the coordinator of the Peer Mentor program implement a tracking process for referrals for the program so as to inform faculty members of what supports have been put in place, as well as provide statistical relevance of the referral process. This recommendation would work in tandem with the first recommendation and would have minimal cost associated. The cost would be related to the time of both the coordinator and IT services within the institution to create a coding system that would allow a better tracking process for referred students. Implementing a process for feedback would give the program more credibility with faculty members but also would provide more information for the retention analysis.

## **Recommendation Three: Retention Analysis**

This particular evaluation project did not discover a statistical relevant relationship between the Peer Mentor program and retention, yet it did hint at some correlation. The program would be well served to investigate a linear regression model to determine what variables may have the most significant impact on retention. Retention is the basis from which the program started and it would be useful to the client and to the longevity of the program to understand the effect as it relates to retention. Understanding the statistical relevance of retention may provide more opportunity to negotiate at the budget table for the client. This recommendation does not have budget implications as the coordinator of the program has access to the institutional license for SPSS and has the ability to operate the software to run a regression analysis. However, this recommendation cannot be implemented without first getting a better on-line tracking system for the logs and the faculty referrals.

## **Recommendation Four: Relevance for International Students**

This evaluation did not do any particular analysis for international students but some answers from participants at the focus groups would suggest that this is a population of interest. The needs of international students were different than those of the domestic students and it would be in the best interest of the program to examine any differences that the mentor program had on this population. Implementing this analysis would not have budget implications but would be very relevant to the institution. The institution is very interested in the retention of international students and the program would be well served to understand what effect the program had for this particular cohort. As with the above recommendation, this would be easier to implement once an on-line log system is implemented.

### **Recommendation Five: Timing and Focus of the Peer Mentor Interventions**

First-year students indicated that the academic interventions provided the greatest value to them. This is also reinforced in the quantitative analysis where it is evident that those students who interacted with a peer mentor do better academically. Given this information, it is the recommendation of this evaluation that the program expands the academic interventions. Additionally, the program provides the greatest benefit when contact starts in the summer and continues through the first term. The recommendation is to be very intentional about the interventions and programming especially for the first term. To increase contact in the first term would have budget implications regarding the number of hours the mentor is working. This could be offset by adjusting the hours the mentor works in the second term to minimize the budget implications.

Overall, the program was meeting all but one of the goals and was adding value to the experience of the first-year student. However, implementing these recommendations would make the program even stronger. Having the logs on-line would provide more opportunity to do analysis with different constituent groups such as; students referred from faculty and international students. Retention was the driving factor for the development of the program and improving the ability of the program to understand the impact of this variable would be politically astute for the program and would add relevancy for the client. My thanks to those who so freely and readily shared information about this initiative and it is my sincere hope that the program persists as it does provide a unique and valuable program at a distinguished institution with an interest and commitment to the undergraduate student.

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## **Appendix A: Questions on the Undergraduate Experience Survey**

*This survey is administered by Planning and Institutional research every February and the following are the questions specific to the Peer Mentor program.*

- 1) Have you been contacted by your peer mentor by email?
- 2) Have you been contacted by your peer mentor by text or phone?
- 3) Have you interacted with your peer mentor via social networking?
- 4) Have you met your peer mentor in person?
- 5) Have you been informed of social events by your peer mentor?
- 6) Have you been informed of academic-related events by your peer mentor?
- 7) To what extent do you think that the peer mentor has made meaningful contributions to your transition to university life?

Please Describe:

## Appendix B: Email Invite for Students

Note: each peer mentor will be encouraged to introduce this message in their own way but the content will remain the same.

Subject Line: UBC Okanagan Invitation to focus group

Dear (insert name):

My name is Mary DeMarinis and your peer mentor has sent this invitation out to you today to invite you to a focus group. The intent of the focus group is to get your opinion about the impact of the Peer Mentor program here at UBC Okanagan. For those of you that know me, I am the Director of student development and advising and I am the supervisor of Greg Mather, the coordinator of the Peer Mentor program. In this case, I am also the primary researcher conducting an evaluation research project to satisfy the requirements of my Master's of Public Administration degree. My supervisor for this project is Dr. Kimberly Speers and she can be reached at [Kspeers@uvic.ca](mailto:Kspeers@uvic.ca) if you have any questions.

You have receiving this email because your peer mentor identified you as someone who has been involved in the program this year. Each year we like to invite first-year students to a focus group to hear what type of impact the program has had for you and to learn the things that we need to improve.

Your participation in the focus group is voluntary and does not impact your standing as a student nor your academic performance. If you do participate you may change your mind and leave at any time and you have the right to refuse to answer any of the questions. The focus groups will be tape-recorded and any information identifying you will be removed in the transcriptions. A copy of the consent form is attached and these details will be reviewed prior to starting the focus group.

I will have pizza available for you at the focus groups and to thank you for your participation I will be able to give you a \$25 gift certificate for the UBC bookstore. Please let me know if you are able to attend one of the following four times and dates.

Date:

Time:

Location:

Sincerely,  
Mary DeMarinis  
Director, Student Development and Advising  
University of British Columbia, Okanagan Campus  
University Center UNC 325E  
250-807-8210  
[Mary.demarinis@ubc.ca](mailto:Mary.demarinis@ubc.ca)

## Appendix C: Focus Group Guide

**Purpose:** First-year students will be asked to participate in a one-hour focus group that will ask them to talk about aspects of their first-year experience and involvement with the peer mentoring program. To maintain accuracy for reporting these findings, these interviews will be digitally recorded.

**Script:** *Thank you very much for joining in our discussion group today. We are committed to improving the student experience for UBC students especially in the first year. To help students transition to university life here we implemented a Peer Mentor program as a pilot project. I just want to remind you that the information you provide here is treated as confidential will not be identifiable to any one individual. To help ensure this, I ask that we respect each other's confidentiality both in terms of identities and remarks. As stated in your invitation letter, providing information for this program is not related to your academic studies in any way and is only used to improve the program for other first-year students.*

*We are pleased you are able to join us and give us your feedback on how the first year is going for you. We appreciate you giving us your candid thoughts and insights and want to remind everyone that this is a safe environment to share your honest opinions. Please feel free to provide differing perspectives from others in the room, and please be respectful of each other's voice and time to speak. This focus group is also part of a research project for Mary DeMarinis to fulfill the requirements of her Masters in Public Administration. We'll need to take a few minutes right at the beginning to complete the informed consent.(go through the consent form)*

*Thank you for your time to complete those forms. We are going to digitally record the session so that we accurately portray your comments. For that reason, I ask that one person speak at a time because it makes it easier to understand the recording. Thank you.*

**Introduction Activity (5 min)** – *To begin, let's go around the room and introduce yourself by identifying your name, area of study, and tell us what has been your biggest surprise about becoming a university student?*

### **Formal Questions (50 min):**

1. Please describe some of the demands and expectations you've faced in your first year here at UBC.
  - a. Prompt: What would you say are some of the major challenges for first-year students?
2. Do you think this is typical of students at other universities?
  - a. Prompt: Is there anything specific to this campus/university you think differs from first-years at other universities?
3. Since September, have your academic expectations changed? Why?
4. How/When did you first find out about your peer mentor?
5. How often are you communicating with your peer mentor?
6. Do you feel the communication with your peer mentor is open and effective?
7. What sorts of activities have you engaged in with your peer mentor?
8. Have the events been useful to you?
  - a. Prompt: How have they been useful?
  - b. Prompt: How have they not been useful?
  - c. Prompt: How has the Peer Mentor program helped with some of those challenges addressed earlier?
9. How does the Peer Mentor program relate to your learning experience at UBC?
  - a. Prompt: How has it impacted your academic experience?
  - b. Prompt: Are you planning to return to the institution next year?
  - c. Has having a peer mentor influenced your intention to return next year?
  - d. Has your peer mentor influenced your career goals?
10. What would you recommend to improve the Peer Mentor program?
  - a. Prompt: How would we achieve this?
  - b. Prompt: How can your peer mentor be more supportive to you?
  - c. Prompt: How can your peer mentor engage more students?

11. What suggestions do you have for us to make the first-year academic experience at UBC better?
  - a. Prompt: For example, make the first year more challenging? Exciting? Academically meaningful? Build student community on our campus?

**Wrap-up and any final comments (2-5 min)**

**Script:** *Are there any other comments you'd like to make to us that we have not covered yet? Thank you very much for taking time out of your schedule today to speak with us. Your comments have been very helpful in providing us with a deeper understanding of the first-year student experiences – successes and challenges - on our campus. If you have any additional comments, please do not hesitate to email or phone us. [Hand out gift certificates].*

## Appendix D: Student Consent Form

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# [UBC LETTERHEAD]

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### Evaluation of the Peer Mentor Program

You are invited to participate in this evaluation study of the Peer Mentor program that is being conducted by Mary DeMarinis.

Mary DeMarinis is a graduate student in the department of Public Administration at the University of Victoria and you may contact her if you have further questions by email at [mary.demarinis@ubc.ca](mailto:mary.demarinis@ubc.ca).

As a graduate student, I am required to conduct research as part of the requirements for a degree in Public Administration. It is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Kimberly Speers. You may contact my supervisor at [kspeers@uvic.ca](mailto:kspeers@uvic.ca)

#### **Purpose and Objectives**

The purpose of this research project is to determine the impact that the Peer Mentor program has for first-year students. Specifically, I am interested to know if the peer mentor program has helped you transition to first year, has increased your academic success or assisted with your intent to return to the campus next year.

#### **Importance of this Research**

Research of this type is important because it provides information to assist the staff of the program make improvements. In addition, it provides good information to the senior management team regarding priorities for the institution and it is good practice to understand the impact of the programming done for students.

#### **Participants Selection**

You are being asked to participate in this study because your peer mentor identified you as someone who has been active throughout the year in the program.

#### **What is involved**

If you consent to voluntarily participate in this research, your participation will include a 60 minute focus group at a time that is convenient for you. The focus group will be held in the boardroom of the University Center (UNC 325). An audio tape of the focus group will be taken and a transcription will be made.

#### **Inconvenience**

Participation in this study may cause some inconvenience to you, including the time that it takes to get to the focus group and participate.

#### **Risks**

There are no known or anticipated risks to you by participating in this research. Participation in the focus group is not related to any course and will not affect your standing as a student nor will it impact your

academic performance. There will not be a record of your participation on your official transcript nor in any official documents with the institution.

### **Benefits**

The potential benefits of your participation in this research include the opportunity to provide feedback that will help to improve the program for future students.

### **Compensation**

As a way to compensate you for any inconvenience related to your participation, you will be given a \$25 gift certificate to the UBC bookstore. In addition, there will be pizza available for you to enjoy during the focus group. If you consent to participate in this study, this form of compensation to you must not be coercive. It is unethical to provide undue compensation or inducements to research participants. If you would not participate if the compensation was not offered, then you should decline.

### **Voluntary Participation**

Your participation in this research must be completely voluntary. If you do decide to participate, you may withdraw at any time without any consequences or any explanation. If you do withdraw from the study your data will only be summarized and no identifiable information will be included but you are welcome to keep the \$25 gift certificate to the UBC bookstore.

### **Researcher's Relationship with Participants**

The researcher has a relationship to potential participants as supervisor/employee. To help prevent this relationship from influencing your decision to participate, the following steps to prevent coercion have been taken 1) the employee has been invited to participate as a partner in the process, 2) the focus group is conducted by a neutral party and 3) any identifiable information is removed from the transcript of the focus group so that remarks cannot be attributed to any one individual

### **Anonymity**

In terms of protecting your anonymity the transcripts of the focus groups will be coded and any identifying information will be removed

### **Confidentiality**

There are some limits to your confidentiality as you are present in a group. To mitigate this issue I want to remind you that this discussion is confidential and the issues that are discussed should remain within the confines of this group. Your confidentiality will be protected when a transcription is made of the focus group. At that time all identifying information will be removed and the data will be stored in password protected files.

### **Dissemination of Results**

It is anticipated that the results of this study will be shared with the AVP Students who in turn will share the results with the senior executive team of the University. There is the possibility that the results will become a conference presentation or perhaps a publication in a peer reviewed journal in the future.

### **Disposal of Data**

Data from this study will be disposed of in one years time. It will kept in password protected file on a secure server with UBC. It will be archived in 6 months and then discarded after the year.

**Contacts**

Individuals that may be contacted regarding this study include the researcher, the researchers supervisor and the client for whom the results are prepared. .

In addition, you may verify the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns you might have, by contacting the Human Research Ethics Office at the University of Victoria (250-472-4545 or ethics@uvic.ca).

Your signature below indicates that you understand the above conditions of participation in this study, that you have had the opportunity to have your questions answered by the researchers, and that you consent to participate in this research project.

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*Name of Participant*                      *Signature*                      *Date*

*A copy of this consent will be left with you, and a copy will be taken by the researcher.*

## **Appendix E: Invite Letter for Faculty**

Subject Line: Invitation to participate in interview for the Peer Mentor program

Dear Colleague:

I am writing to you today to request your assistance in evaluating the first year experience program. All of you have participated in the program this year and have made significant contributions. I am hoping that you would spend between 30-45 minutes with me to answer a few questions and give us some feedback on your experience with the program. I have already spoken with several groups of first-year students over the next two weeks. Your participation in the interview process is voluntary and will be arranged at your convenience. I've attached a copy of the consent form that outlines some of the limits to confidentiality for this study and your right to anonymity if you chose to participate. If you chose to participate we will review the consent form prior to beginning your interview.

Many of you are familiar with my role here at UBC Okanagan as the Director of Student Development but this evaluation research project is also fulfilling the requirements for my on-line Master's in Public Administration final project. Please let me know if you would be willing to meet and discuss what you know about the program and possible changes you might be able to suggest to mold and shape the program for next year. If you have questions or concerns about this project please contact me directly at the information provided below or my master's project supervisor Kimberly Speers at [kspeers@uvic.ca](mailto:kspeers@uvic.ca).

Mary DeMarinis  
Director, Student Development and Advising  
University of British Columbia, Okanagan Campus  
University Center UNC 325E  
250-807-8210  
[Mary.demarinis@ubc.ca](mailto:Mary.demarinis@ubc.ca)

## Appendix F: Faculty interview questions

*Script to start the interview:* Thank you for meeting with me to talk about the first-year Peer Mentor program. This is our third year of running the program and we'd like to take some time and get feedback on the program. As you aware, I am the supervisor of the program and in this case I am also the researcher using the evaluation as a way to fulfill my requirement for the MPA program. The whole interview will take one hour and you are welcome to stop me at any time or let me know that you are not prepared to answer one or more of the questions.

*Script to start the interview:* Thank you for meeting with me to talk about the first-year Peer Mentor program. This is our third year of running the program and we'd like to take some time and get feedback on the program. As you aware, I am the supervisor of the program and in this case I am also the researcher using the evaluation as a way to fulfill my requirement for the MPA program. The whole interview will take one hour and you are welcome to stop me at any time or let me know that you are not prepared to answer one or more of the questions.

1. What do you think are the greatest challenges for our first-year students?
2. Please describe some challenges you have in teaching first year courses.
3. Please describe what you know about services that are provided on campus for first-year students. Prompt: One of the targeted services we provide is called the Peer Mentor program. Tell me what you know about this program.
4. Have you had any experience working with student staff in the any programs that the student affairs division operates ie: Peer Mentor program, supplemental learning, writing centre, math centre, collegia spaces? Prompt: The student affairs division trains their student staff in leadership skills – have you had any experience with students where you might have witnessed leadership skill development?
5. Describe what you think are some tangible benefits of having services specifically designed for first-year students.
6. Which services on campus do you typically use as referrals sources for students in your courses?
7. Did you have opportunity to refer any first-year students to the Peer Mentor program: If No: Would you consider this as a service that benefits you and would make it easier to find appropriate services on campus?  
If yes: Were you satisfied with the outcome of the referrals that you made?
8. Do you think we should continue to customize programs for first-year students?
9. In your opinion, what could we do to improve the experience for first-year students?
10. Is there anything you would like to tell me about services to students that I have not already asked?

**Thank you for your time to answer these questions. Within the next two days I will be able to return a copy of your answers to you. This will allow you to check to ensure that I have captured your thoughts adequately.**

## Appendix G: Faculty Consent Form

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# [UBC LETTERHEAD]

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### Evaluation of the Peer Mentor Program

You are invited to participate in this evaluation study of the Peer Mentor program that is being conducted by Mary DeMarinis.

Mary DeMarinis is a graduate student in the department of Public Administration at the University of Victoria and you may contact her if you have further questions by email at [mary.demarinis@ubc.ca](mailto:mary.demarinis@ubc.ca).

As a graduate student, I am required to conduct research as part of the requirements for a degree in Public Administration. It is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Kimberly Speers. You may contact my supervisor at [kspeers@ubc.ca](mailto:kspeers@ubc.ca).

#### **Purpose and Objectives**

The purpose of this research project is to determine the impact that the Peer Mentor program has for both first-year students and faculty members teaching first-year students. Specifically, I am interested to know if the Peer Mentor program has provided any support or assistance to you as you have been involved with first-year students. I am interested to know if you referred any students to the first year experience coordinator and what your experience was with the peer mentors and/or with the first year experience coordinator.

#### **Importance of this Research**

Research of this type is important because it provides information to assist the staff of the program make improvements. In addition, it provides good information to the senior management team regarding priorities for the institution and it is good practice to understand the impact of the programming done for students.

#### **Participants Selection**

You are being asked to participate in this study because you have been identified as a faculty member who interacted with the program this past academic year.

#### **What is involved**

If you consent to voluntarily participate in this research, your participation will include a 30-45 minute interview at a time that is convenient for you. The interview will be held either in your office or in a boardroom in the University Center (UNC 325). Notes will be taken at the time of the interview and you will receive a copy of these notes to verify that your answers to the questions accurately reflect your thoughts.

#### **Inconvenience**

Participation in this study may cause some inconvenience to you, including the time that it takes to answer the questions and the time that it takes to organize a meeting time and place.

### **Risks**

There are no known or anticipated risks to you by participating in this research. Participation in the interview is not related to your position at the university and your participation is not known to anyone other than the researcher. Any statements that you make will not be attributable to you.

### **Benefits**

The potential benefits of your participation in this research include the opportunity to provide feedback that will help to improve the program for future students and for faculty teaching first year courses.

### **Compensation**

You will not be compensated for your participation

### **Voluntary Participation**

Your participation in this research must be completely voluntary. If you do decide to participate, you may withdraw at any time without any consequences or any explanation. If you do withdraw from the study your data will be destroyed and will not become part of the analysis.

### **Researcher's Relationship with Participants**

The researcher has a relationship to potential participants as supervisor/employee. To help prevent this relationship from influencing the outcome, the following steps to prevent coercion have been taken 1) the employee has been invited to participate as a partner in the process and 2) any identifiable information is removed from the notes so that remarks cannot be attributed to any one individual

### **Anonymity**

Your anonymity will be protected as the notes of the interview will be coded and any identifying information will be removed

### **Confidentiality**

There are some limits to your confidentiality as you are a member of a limited group of faculty members who teach first year students. To mitigate this issue I have invited all faculty members who teach first-year students to participate but participation will not be known to anyone other than the researcher. Your confidentiality will be protected once the notes are made and you have a chance to verify they represent you accurately. At that time any identifying information is removed and the notes are coded.

### **Dissemination of Results**

It is anticipated that the results of this study will be shared with the AVP Students who in turn will share the results with the senior executive team of the University. There is the possibility that the results will become a conference presentation or perhaps a publication in a peer reviewed journal in the future.

### **Disposal of Data**

Data from this study will be disposed of in one years time. It will kept in password protected file on a secure server with UBC. It will be archived in 6 months and then discarded after the year.

### **Contacts**

Individuals that may be contacted regarding this study include the researcher, the researcher's supervisor and the client for whom the results are prepared. .

In addition, you may verify the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns you might have, by contacting the Human Research Ethics Office at the University of Victoria (250-472-4545 or [ethics@uvic.ca](mailto:ethics@uvic.ca)).

Your signature below indicates that you understand the above conditions of participation in this study, that you have had the opportunity to have your questions answered by the researchers, and that you consent to participate in this research project.

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*Name of Participant*                      *Signature*                      *Date*

***A copy of this consent will be left with you, and a copy will be taken by the researcher.***