This chapter presents an overview of a new tiered mentoring program operating at Bellevue Community College in Washington. The program links students with peers, faculty, staff, and administrators via a tiered structure whereby first-year students are mentored by upper-level students, who in turn are mentored by professionals in the students’ field of study.

Tiered Mentoring to Leverage Student Body Expertise

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It is fair to say that community colleges have a unique challenge in reaching students in a deep, meaningful way from the first day that they set foot on campuses until the day that they graduate. Although most community colleges have variations of a new student orientation, freshman experience, or other types of welcoming and integrating programs, the fact remains that many new students do not make a connection from the start of their college experience. In addition, most colleges have variations of student retention programs and mentoring components; nevertheless, many students are left untouched by these programs.

Retention research shows that the earlier a student is connected to the social and academic systems of the college the greater their academic achievement and thus their commitment to graduating (Astin, 1993; Milem and Berger, 1997; Pascarella, Smart, and Ethington, 1986). Significant money and staffing are needed to operate such programs, but colleges are faced with reduced governmental resources, budget cuts, and unmet staffing needs. One solution is to establish a tiered mentoring program (TMP), which includes a peer-mentoring component. One of the earliest peer-mentoring programs was established at James Cook University (Queensland, Australia) in 1991. Treston (1999) reports supporting new students in a context of shrinking government resources and increased workloads for staff as a primary motivation for its introduction (Freeman and Kelton, 2004). The tiered peer-mentoring program (TMP) at Bellevue Community
College in Washington is outlined within this chapter. The TMP is designed to be sustainable and scalable to eventually reach all students at the college.

Background

Bellevue Community College (BCC) sits on the edge of Lake Washington, approximately twenty miles to the east of Seattle and near Microsoft's corporate headquarters. BCC is a single campus and serves thirty-five thousand students each year. The student population has diverse and varying needs. Many students work as well as attend school, and the challenge has been to retain students by making interactions meaningful and personalized.

First Days of a Term

Envision the first three days of a BCC quarter. New and continuing students fill every square foot of the grounds, corridors, and, in particular, the student services building. The building is a collision of registration, financial aid, cashiering, the bookstore, advising, counseling, career services, multicultural services, evaluation, high school programs, and international student programs.

To watch the first three days of a BCC quarter from the second floor of the student services building is something reminiscent of the New York Stock Exchange. It proves the point that there must be relevancy to the organizational chaos theory. People are moving through the narrow passages between the lines of people waiting to get into the bookstore or to be served at the student services counter. The din fills the air and wafts upward until the walls reverberate. Students may wait in one of these many lines to find out that the book that they need has not arrived or that they did not reach the student services counter in time to register for the class that they were next on the waitlist for. They may find they cannot register for their class because there is a block on their registration. Other students may not be able to find their classroom or the instructor who is supposed to be teaching the class. The situational list is never-ending and unpredictable. At BCC, it takes kind and helpful souls numerous hours to try to answer every question, help every lost student, process every class change and bookstore need, complete every monetary transaction, and solve every crisis. Are the first days of your quarter or semester similar?

Recognizing the challenges associated with the first week of class, BCC’s student programs office and a group of dedicated, seasoned students created the TMP. As a result, TMP student mentors decreased the amount of time students were standing in line, provided answers to many of the students’ questions, helped lost students find their classrooms and instructors, lent an empathetic ear to hear their frustrations, and shared these concerns with BCC leaders. They offered a friendly face to help make the first few days of school less alienating and overwhelming. Consequently, BCC has
been moving away from new student orientations as the sole forum for distributing information and moving towards more interactive social exchanges such as the TMP, where new students can begin to make connections to the college (Bennett and Jaswal, 2007a).

**Tiered Mentoring Program**

In the past, BCC has piloted new student mentoring programs and industry mentoring programs for smaller groups of students. These programs have been successful for the small percentages of the student population that they serve, but are difficult to sustain or expand without appropriate funding and dedicated staffing. The TMP strives to transition all new students during their first quarter at BCC by connecting them with academic and support services, while establishing a social connection with seasoned students. New students are provided with a campus tour and introduced to student programs; the library; the tutoring center; writing, reading, and math labs; educational planning; financial aid; the Center for Career Connections; the Women’s Center; and multicultural services. Likewise, TMP student mentors are connected with staff and faculty and increasingly are connected with industry professionals in their fields of study. The TMP goal is to serve every new student for fall, winter, and spring quarters.

By serving new students and modeling the behavior it takes to be an academically successful student, the TMP student mentors develop leadership skills. TMP student mentors provide guidance, support, friendship, and connection to the college that otherwise would be nonexistent to the majority of the new student population. This program is unique in that it is provided to every new student and encourages students to help other students, thus promoting a new campus culture that fosters collegiality and collaboration (Bennett and Jaswal, 2007a).

**Training.** Before they work with new students, TMP student mentors are provided with comprehensive training to gain the knowledge, skills, and abilities to become effective mentors. During their training, TMP student mentors develop leadership skills and competencies, learn about their role in the college community and in the matriculation and retention process, learn about the role of the mentee, and establish mentoring relationships with campus or community members. Within the training, specific learning objectives have been developed. Mentors are expected to explain the role of TMP student mentors, list several helping positions on the college campus that are staffed by TMP student mentors, understand and employ an active process model of learning, explain the importance of role modeling within the helping role, define the role of a mentor and a mentee, and assess their ability to serve in both the mentoring and mentee relationship. This training focuses on issues that are relevant to an understanding of the transitional needs of students entering or returning to the college setting. Key topics covered are BCC’s mission, vision, and values; servant leadership;
cross-cultural competency; effective communication; team building; strategies for academic success; and BCC's campus resources (Bennett and Jaswal, 2007b).

**Expectations.** Attendance, participation, and preparedness are essential to the success of the program. TMP student mentors are expected to attend trainings, keep scheduled mentoring hours, be prepared for meetings with mentees, and be available to participate in planned mentor program activities and recruitment initiatives. They assist with quarterly new student orientations, help new students during the first three days of school, complete quarterly phone calls to new students, and promote other program recruitment and outreach activities. In addition, TMP student mentors are required to be available, accountable, and authentic in each of their interactions, ensuring that new students have a positive experience (Bennett and Jaswal, 2007b).

The TMP is designed to work collaboratively with other student support services on-campus. The TMP student mentors act as a conduit, referring students to academic, financial, and social resources on campus. In addition, the TMP can support other departments by providing student mentors when their programming requires. For example, TMP student mentors assist educational planning advisors as part of their advising model. By working collaboratively with other departments, the TMP enables other departments to enhance their current programming without duplicity.

**Budget.** The TMP was piloted with funding from both the leadership institute and new student orientation budgets under the services and activities fees. All the aforementioned programs are located in and operated by the student programs office. Initially, TMP student mentors volunteered their time because they believed it was important to connect to new students and wished that they had received the same benefit when they were new students. However, BCC felt it important that the TMP student mentors be compensated and were able to secure a small amount of funding to cover the expense. Compensation is critical to the continued ability to recruit and retrain motivated, qualified TMP student mentors (Bennett and Jaswal, 2007a).

**Coordination.** The TMP requires two dedicated student coordinators who work a combined twenty-six hours per week and one permanent staff member who contributes a quarter of his or her time to provide oversight and training. There are over one-hundred fifty student mentors registered in the program. The TMP is self-perpetuating; students who were initially helped as new students often feel motivated and empowered to do the same. For example, two current TMP student mentors were contacted as new students during the first quarter phone calls. The two students were so grateful that someone had reached out to them that they wanted to be part of the program and help others. In addition, TMP student mentors are recruited through our Honor Society chapter, student government, other student organizations, and clubs. Diversity in student mentors and student leadership is extremely important to reflect the diversity of BCC's student popu-
The TMP student mentors and student program's staff especially reach out to diverse students to ask them to serve. These student leaders provide a steady pool of strong role models for newer students. Quarterly training and orientation of TMP student mentors, evaluation, and data collection are integral components of the TMP. TMP student mentor and new student concerns and issues are recorded and follow-up is conducted.

**Results.** From summer quarter 2006 through winter quarter 2007, TMP student mentors volunteered over one thousand hours and assisted 12,670 students. During winter quarter 2007, seventeen TMP student mentors called over five hundred new students to welcome them, assist with questions, discuss online orientation, or schedule time to meet for a personal orientation and a campus tour (Bennett and Jaswal, 2007a). During fall quarter 2007 and winter quarter 2008, three groups of new students who enrolled in ten or more credits each quarter were compared: students who enrolled without advising and contact by TMP student mentors were retained at 69.6 percent, students who enrolled with advising, but without contact by TMP student mentors were retained at 72.6 percent; and students who enrolled with advising and with phone contact by TMP student mentors were retained at 81.4 percent. Although this initial data collection did not control for student background or other institutional factors, further data collection is being conducted to gather more conclusive results.

**Next Steps.** Electronic channels are increasingly the medium of choice for students to communicate and interact with the TMP student mentors and vice versa. In the near future, BCC will implement electronic social networking channels to better serve the millennial student population and non-traditional student populations who need the flexibility provided by online tools.

**Networking.** One of the final tiers of the TMP, which is to connect TMP student mentors to industry professionals in their fields of study, has been initiated. A collaborative pilot between the BCC student program’s office, the center for career connections, and the women’s center, will be conducted fall quarter 2008 with ten of the TMP student mentors. Industry mentors will be identified, trained, and matched to each of the ten TMP student mentors. It is anticipated that each mentor and mentee will meet in-person two to three times during the course of three months. Materials and resources will be used from BCC’s experiential learning class (EXPRL 230), including job shadowing and professional networking activities with brief manual and podcasts developed for both mentors and mentees to establish guidelines and help facilitate the process and interactions. In addition, e-portfolios and cocurricular transcripts will be created for TMP student mentors.

Lastly, the center for Career Connections and the Women’s Center plans to create and initiate an online mentoring system available to all students to virtually connect with industry professionals in their fields of interest. Industry professionals will be contacted and asked to volunteer their time.
to mentor students through BCC’s online career management system, CONNECT! Students will be able to self-select mentors and contact them via e-mail a controlled number of times. To date, there has been tremendous interest expressed by industry professionals at organizations such as Boeing, Microsoft, and the Bellevue Rotary.

**Conclusion**

There have been many lessons learned from initiating the tiered mentoring program at Bellevue College. First, TMP appears to foster success of new students, in itself a worthy accomplishment. In addition, because many new students confide concerns or issues to TMP student mentors that they might not feel comfortable sharing with faculty or staff, TMP offers a new and powerful perspective on students’ early campus experiences. In fact, TMP student mentors have become the eyes and ears of the campus, helping to highlight obstacles facing new students that might otherwise go unnoticed.

Furthermore, the TMP is a remarkably flexible structure that can be adapted to serve students with various levels of funding. For example, at BCC, it was important to start small and grow the program each year. Similarly, other colleges may find that starting with one tier or one portion of a tier can help make initiating a TMP seem less daunting and more feasible. New tiers or components can be added as the program grows and using technology tools can help reach larger numbers of students.

Funding may not be initially provided to the program, so beginning with TMP student mentor volunteers may be necessary until a small amount of funding can be secured. It is important to stay positive and be creative when exploring funding options. Funding could potentially come from services and activities fees, from benefiting departments each contributing a small portion of funding to the TMP, from the campus’ foundation, or from other sources. Most important, TMP student mentors are well intentioned, but they still have to factor in an amount of time that they can serve while balancing school and work demands. It is recommended that faculty or staff overseeing the student mentors provide guidance to help student mentors avoid overextension.

In conclusion, initiating and sustaining a TMP does take effort, but the benefits of creating more opportunities for students to succeed far outweigh the additional work. At BCC, the power of mentoring relationships has been glimpsed and experienced. By initiating the TMP, the college is working toward a more connected, vibrant campus. As more tiers of the TMP are added, a cultural shift is anticipated not only on the campus, but also in the greater community. By helping students connect with students, students connect with staff and faculty, and students connect with industry professionals, people are empowered and better able to succeed. A stronger
community is created. From a philosophical point of view, that is really the beauty of the community college system: community.

References

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