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“Learning with Peers: Lessons from Two Programs”
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San Jose State University, in California’s Silicon Valley, enrolls 29,000 students with the largest majors business and engineers. The student body is about 80% undergraduate and 85% commuters. There is no ethnic majority, and Asians are a plurality. Over half of undergraduates are not native speakers of English. Of the 1,500 faculty members, about half are regular and half are temporary. Transitions are especially challenging for the ethnically diverse student body, most of whom are second-language learners, older, and first-generation college students. Many also work at least part-time and require some remedial work. When studies revealed that only 35% of SJSU’s entering students were graduating in six years, the Provost’s Office looked at possible initiatives to improve the retention and graduation rates. In an effort to deal with social isolation and some of the other issues affecting student attrition, SJSU implemented a first-year experience program three years ago (Fall 2002). The Metropolitan University Scholar’s Experience (MUSE), housed in Undergraduate Studies, features small seminars comprised of 16 first-year students, workshops and a Peer Mentor Program. MUSE seminars are taught by full- and part-time faculty, have a disciplinary focus, and satisfy three general education units across eight general education areas. The Peer Mentor Program at SJSU is one of the few programs that has Peer Mentors (PMs) working in an academic FYE classroom (MUSE) and in a Peer Mentor Center.

The Peer Mentor Program began with 26 PMs in Fall 2002 and currently has 38 Peer Mentors scheduled to work this Fall 2005. PMs each have use of a wireless Apple laptop so that they can model scholarly use of computers in and out of the classroom. Whether in the MUSE classroom or at the Peer Mentor Center (PMC), mentors facilitate discussions on academic topics (e.g. how to approach assignments, talk to a professor, use technology, write a paper, choose classes) and other student concerns (e.g. stress and time management, living in the residence hall, dealing with parents, finding resources on campus, making friends). Peer Mentors can also address issues students might not feel comfortable talking about with a professor and usually email students who miss class. In addition, PMs also provide MUSE workshops, help with university functions (e.g. New Students Reading Project, Orientation), and serve on university committees. PMs have also been hired by departments outside the first-year program to mentor their students. For example, a Humanities Honors program designed specifically for “MUSE graduates” hired some PMs. As of Spring 05, one mentor works as an International Mentor in SJSU’s study-abroad program in Bath, England.

The demand for MUSE classroom-based PMs at SJSU is greater than the number of trained PMs. Subsequently, PMs provide support to instructors who do not have a PM

assigned to their class in a variety of ways. Typically, this involves introducing themselves and the services they can offer, showing one of the videos (e.g. “Peer Pressure”) or projects (e.g. Transition to SJSU booklet and PowerPoint) they made, or presenting a workshop on academic coping skills.

Students can seek help at the PMC, which is open to all SJSU students and is currently housed in a first-year residence hall lounge (The PMC will be moving in Fall 06 to the new and centrally located Student Success Center when it is completed.). The PMC has a scholarly and welcoming atmosphere – there are laptop computers with Internet access, writing and reference books, comfortable seating and study space, and even some light refreshments. Faculty members can elect to hold class sessions in the PMC where their students can meet mentors and familiarize themselves with the Center’s resources. MUSE workshops are held in the PMC.

The recruitment and application process for PMs is highly competitive. During the fall semester, students apply for the paid mentoring positions. Applicants tend to be academically excellent and very diverse in terms of their majors, ethnicity and experience. In spring semester, the students who were accepted into the Peer Mentor Program complete a three-unit, upper-division Peer Mentoring class taught by the Peer Mentor Director. The class teaches the students how to become the best scholar they can be with the communication skills to help new students succeed. Additionally, this is a designated Service-Learning class and the students work in the PMC under the tutelage of their “Peer Mentor Buddy.” Each PM creates a research-based project useful for new SJSU students. For example, videos on “Surviving the Residence Hall” at SJSU and PowerPoint presentations on stress and diversity were produced. PMs also get matched with the MUSE Seminar/professor they will be working with in the coming fall term. This allows enough time during the spring for the PMs and faculty to meet and discuss their roles in the design of the course and syllabus. The Peer Mentoring class is very scholarly, self-reflective and builds a close and trusting community among the PMs.

During the next fall semester, PMs work approximately eight hours/week (2 1/2 hours in the MUSE classroom, 3 hours in the PMC, 1 hour supervision, 1 1/2 hours consulting with their MUSE faculty and students outside of their class). All PMs must attend the weekly one-hour group supervision to consult about what is happening in their classes and in the PMC. Because PMs are encouraged to expand their knowledge and skills, they are required to participate in 10 hours of computer training. PMs are the only students invited to attend workshops in the Faculty Development Center and are the only students provided with their own SJSU websites. Some students also receive credits for their PM work by enrolling in an upper-division, three-unit general education service-learning course. Some leadership roles for individual PMs include being the PM in the Peer Mentoring Class, the Technology PM and the Service-Learning PM. Although MUSE seminars are only offered during the fall semester, most PMs continue to work in the PMC during the next spring semester and often into the next academic year.

SJSU is currently in the process of assessing the effects of the Peer Mentor Program on new student and Peer Mentor retention, academic success, time-to-degree, and overall

satisfaction. The Peer Mentor Advisory Board is involved in the overall development and effectiveness of the Program

Preliminary data from the “SJSU First Year Student Post-Course Survey” support the effectiveness of the Peer Mentor Program in terms of helping new students. 53% of the first year students report that they agree or strongly agree that “working with a Peer Mentor helped me succeed in my first semester.” (Only 2% reported that PMs did not help them succeed.) In response to “working with Peer Mentor supported me in the following ways,” 54% of students marked “academically” as well as many marked “socially, emotionally, with survival skills, communication with my professors and other.”

Several sources of data all support the effectiveness of the program in terms of benefiting the Peer Mentors’: e.g. Preliminary data tracking and comparing the PMs to the SJSU statistical average in terms of retention, GPA and time-to-degree; Faculty and Student Evaluations of the Peer Mentors, Peer Mentors’ reflection papers regarding being a PM and the use of their laptops; and early reflection and career data from PMs who have graduated from SJSU (e.g. Medical School at Stanford, Ph.D. programs at Brown University and UC, Irvine).