

Promoting Inclusivity:

An Intercultural Peer Mentorship Program at a Community College

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Tags

Cross-Cultural Issues; International Student and Scholar Services; Internationalization and Global Learning; Program Design; Program Assessment; Student Learning and Development; University/Higher Education

Setting

Nestled in the heart of a Midwestern U.S. town, Springfield Community College has recently emerged as a hub for international students seeking quality education in a diverse setting. With an influx of students from various corners of the globe, the college has become a melting pot of different cultures, socioeconomic backgrounds, and academic pursuits. Recognizing the challenges and opportunities of diversity, Springfield Community College's International Office is committed to ensuring that international students transition smoothly into their new academic environment and that they feel integrated and valued within the larger community. The leadership is committed to fostering intercultural competence in international students and the entire student body.

The college's International Office introduced the Intercultural Peer Mentorship Program (IPMP) as a solution. Envisioned as a bridge between cultures, the IPMP aims to pair newly arrived international students with domestic students in their second semester or beyond. This pairing fosters a symbiotic relationship, benefiting both parties through cultural exchange, mutual learning, and friendship. The main goal of IPMP is to facilitate authentic interactions, nurture a space for open dialogue, enhance cultural awareness, and forge lasting bonds.

Case

With strong institutional backing, the International Office allocated resources to ensure a successful program roll-out. This investment was channeled into several areas: meticulous crafting of extensive training materials, enticing perks for peer mentors, and orchestrating vibrant events—each of these elements aimed to strengthen the bond between mentors and mentees. An intensive two-day training workshop was developed to equip mentors for their pivotal roles by diving deep into intercultural communication, conflict diffusion, and the creation of inclusive environments.

Yet, like many well-charted voyages, the initial journey of IPMP was not without its tumultuous waters. As weeks transitioned into months, the International Office found some concerning patterns. During the first semester, feedback was gathered monthly through face-to-face sessions and supplemented with bi-monthly anonymous online surveys. The once high-spirited rapport between mentors and mentees seemed to ebb each week. Digging deeper through candid feedback sessions, the mentees highlighted a pressing concern: their academic commitments, often relentless and unforgiving, were draining them of time and energy, leaving little room for the enriching experiences the IPMP promised. In this shifting dynamic, several mentors initially envisioned as cultural bridges inadvertently transitioned into roles resembling academic counselors.

By the academic year's midpoint, other challenges began to surface. Despite their training, mentors felt unequipped and sometimes overwhelmed by the profound emotional and cultural issues their mentees presented. The training design had underestimated the emotional depth and cultural chasms that needed bridging. Ongoing challenges faced by the international students included intense homesickness, the culture shock of being submerged in unfamiliar societal systems, and the uphill task of adapting to a different academic culture.

Navigating the intricate maze of cultural norms and etiquette posed challenges. An episode that stood out involved a mentor named Jennifer and her mentee, Ali, from Saudi Arabia. Jennifer confided to the program coordinator, "I thought Ali was disinterested because he never voiced any concerns." On the other hand, Ali revealed during a feedback session, "In my culture, we are taught not to challenge or question our elders directly. I did not want to seem disrespectful." This incident highlighted the depth of cultural values ingrained since childhood, emphasizing reverence towards elders and avoiding confrontations.

There were other areas of the program that required improvement. Although conceived with the laudable aim of facilitating organic bonds similar to naturally blossoming friendships, the reality painted a different picture. The rigid framework of tight schedules and prepared agendas gave the program an unintended bureaucratic atmosphere. This formal structure inhibited the spontaneity and heartfelt interactions the program was designed to inspire.

Toward the end of the first semester, staff recognized a need for a robust assessment framework. Using well-defined metrics and performance benchmarks, the International Office started working to measure the impacts of the IPMP, particularly its efficacy in smoothing academic transitions and fostering genuine intercultural dialogues.

As the academic year drew to a close and the pilot year of IPMP concluded, the International Office began a comprehensive introspection. The feedback and assessment reinforced the urgent need for a program facilitating

intercultural exchanges. Reflecting on the insights, the college envisions refining the mentor training sessions, introducing more fluidity in program structure, and fostering an environment where mentors and mentees feel empowered to share and learn without reservations. Several ideas for strategies emerged—like smaller group check-ins, more frequent feedback loops, and 'culture share' sessions where mentees can share about their native cultures. Now, the International Office must decide which strategies to implement to address the challenges and build upon the program's initial successes.

Discussion Questions

As you consider this case, discuss:

- What strategies could encourage consistent and genuine engagement between mentors and mentees throughout the academic year?
- Given the diverse cultural backgrounds of participants, how can the IPMP effectively address and bridge cultural misunderstandings and ensure a comfortable environment for open dialogue?
- How can the International Office support mentors so that they do not feel overwhelmed or unprepared?
- Considering the rapid technological advancements, how might digital platforms and tech tools be leveraged to enhance the IPMP experience?
- What formative feedback mechanisms would be most useful for the continued improvement of the IPMP?
- What metrics and methods could the International Office use to assess the impact of the IPMP? How should they define success?
- How does this program contribute to the institution's broader internationalization goals, including the development of all students' intercultural competence? How could it further expand its contribution?