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Peter Gibson Memorial Fund Report:

Peer Mentoring for Students with
Disabilities by Students with
Disabilities





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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Peer Mentoring

1. The peer mentoring relationship formalises the natural human instinct which is that the best people to learn from are those who have been through, or are going through, the experience themselves.

2. *Peers* are individuals who share some common characteristics, attributes or circumstances. These may relate to age, ability, interests, etc.

Mentors are individuals who have more experience within that common area and who are willing to share those experiences and the subsequent knowledge gained in a way that will help another person who is now in similar circumstances.

Mentees are individuals who are less experienced within a particular situation and who may benefit from hearing about the experiences of others who have made the journey through, and achieved success in, that environment.

Justification

3. Academic institutions in Scotland have to comply with particular legal requirements – the Equality Act (2010). This means that they have *an anticipatory duty* to provide *reasonable adjustments* for students with disabilities.

4. Students have very little personal involvement in putting in place the adjustments which are designed for them. It may be perceived that new university students with disabilities, at this earliest stage of their university education, adopt the role of passive recipients of the services provided. This in turn can lead to a culture whereby a student becomes dependent on the services offered and allows little room for self-advocacy

5. It could be hypothesized that students with disabilities who receive the services offered by the university, and who in doing so may not be able to properly develop their independence and self-advocacy, may be at risk of poor mental-wellbeing or mental health difficulties. It is therefore important to develop ideas and programs which encourage independence and autonomy for students with disabilities and which may in turn improve mental well-being.

Lehigh University

6. The philosophy of the disability service focuses on the concept of self-determination which begins with the ability to identify ones needs, interests, strengths, limitations and values. Closely connected to self-determination are self-advocacy, self-confidence, decision making and independent performance. Ultimately, the office of support services for students with disabilities at Lehigh aims to assist students to become as independent as possible.

7. Mentors are generally students who have previously been mentees themselves.

8. Students who are selected to become mentors are those who are academically successful, who are comfortable with themselves and their disability, are comfortable with self-advocating, have a good life/work balance and who are confident in talking to others.

9. Training is provided for mentors and focuses on team building. Mentors are also trained in their roles and responsibilities, confidentiality, services offered within the university, potential topics of conversation and take part in role-play and 'what if?' situations.

10. There is no pressure put on either mentors or mentees to become involved in the program. If they choose to do so, it is very informal and is steered entirely by them. Staff are generally uninvolved in the relationship unless either the mentor or mentee approaches them with an issue.

11. The most popular way for mentors and mentees to be in touch with one another is through email. Mentees will ask a wide range of questions. Mentors and mentees are only touch when they choose to be and this could be on a daily, weekly, monthly or yearly basis.

12. Students, both mentors and mentees, at Lehigh see a great number of benefits to being involved in the peer mentor program including (but not limited to):

- Improved social skills and in turn improved self-confidence.
- Improved comfort with disability.
- For mentees, feeling comforted at a time of nervousness and change as well as benefitting from the practical advice offered. Feeling motivated by being in touch with someone in a similar situation to their own who has been successful.
- For mentors, the opportunity to give back to a program that they have previously benefited from. They feel appreciated and grateful that they can put their own experiences to good use.
- Mentors benefit from being involved in a network of other mentors who are also peers.
- Some students describe feeling lucky that they have a learning disability because it grants them 'membership' to the peer mentor program and the support and experiences of a diverse group of students.

Barnard College

13. Barnard is an all female, liberal arts college which is affiliated with Columbia University and located in the heart of New York City. The philosophy in the disability service at Barnard centres on the fact that students should always be empowered and never rescued.

14. The program is extremely informal. Staff do not monitor the relationships between students nor whether or not these relationships ever begin in the first place.

15. New students are provided with the email address of a volunteer mentor and can choose to contact them if and when they wish.

16. Mentors are volunteers and self-selecting. If a volunteer mentor was deemed unsuitable, a staff member would explain why to them.

17. Mentors are not given any formal training.

18. Mentor/mentee matching is done by the director of the disability service and is mostly based on the type of disability a student has.

19. Mentors and mentees are in touch primarily through email.

20. Discussions between students are not at all monitored by staff.

21. The program at Barnard is extremely informal, to the point that it is difficult to compartmentalize and understand. However, this is also its greatest benefit. This flexibility is attractive to students at Barnard who are extremely busy and unable to commit to regular meetings or communication. It provides a framework for support whilst also encouraging independence and self-sufficiency.

Conclusion

22. Ultimately peer mentoring facilitates empowering, as opposed to rescuing, students. It provides a framework for students to form mutually beneficial relationships and should:

- Meet student demand.
- Be directed and maintained by the students who are involved in it.
- Be informal.
- Put no pressure on students to become involved or to use the program to a particular degree.
- Be accessible and;
- Have as minimal a staff involvement as possible.

Peer Mentoring for Students with Disabilities by Students with Disabilities

BACKGROUND

Funding provided by the Peter Gibson Memorial Fund allowed me the opportunity to travel to the United States of America where I spent two weeks researching peer mentor programs within the disability services of two universities, Lehigh University and Barnard College. The overall aim of this research was to explore ways in which students with disabilities at Scottish universities could become more involved in the support services offered to them. Specifically, I was concerned with discovering how to set up and maintain a peer mentor program which could be run by, and for, these students.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

After graduating from the University of Glasgow with an honours degree in psychology, Leila Malone worked at the University of Strathclyde as a non-medical personal helper within the disability service. She worked closely with a number of students registered with the service on a one-to-one basis and it was during this time that she began to develop an understanding of the needs and wants of students with disabilities. Her main interests lie in education, special educational needs, disability rights and advocacy.



PEER MENTORING

Peer mentoring largely focuses on the fact that whilst we often function independently, sometimes we cannot do everything on our own and we need to learn from and be supported by others who have been in a similar situation and who can offer experience and guidance. The peer mentoring relationship formalises the natural human instinct which is that the best people to learn from are those who have been through, or are going through, the experience themselves.

Peers are individuals who share some common characteristics, attributes or circumstances. These may relate to age, ability, interests, etc.

Mentors are individuals who have more experience within that common area and who are willing to share those experiences and the subsequent knowledge gained in a way that will help another person who is now in similar circumstances.

Mentees are individuals who are less experienced within a particular situation and who may benefit from hearing about and learning from the experiences of others who have made the journey through, and achieved success in, that environment.



JUSTIFICATION

Academic institutions in Scotland have to comply with particular legal requirements – the Equality Act (2010). This means that they have an *anticipatory duty* to provide *reasonable adjustments* for students with disabilities. Reasonable adjustments are wide ranging and dependent on the student and the university. Generally, reasonable adjustments include (but are not limited to): teaching and assessment adjustments, assistive technology and the provision of non-medical personal helpers (personal assistants, note-takers, proof readers, study skills support and mental health mentors).

Having adjustments made is dependent upon a needs assessment which is conducted by staff within the university disability service. A recommendation is made to the student's department and Student Awards Agency for Scotland (SAAS) on what adjustments the student requires. These recommendations are honoured almost all of the time and the student then receives their adjusted measure.

Whilst there is no questioning the fact that students require these adjustments, they have very little involvement in the process of putting them in place. They rarely advocate on their own behalf and instead rely on the disability service. It may be perceived that new university students with disabilities, at this earliest stage of their university education, are unintentionally encouraged to adopt the role of passive recipients of the services provided to them.

This process happens at the very early stages of registering as a disabled student and continues throughout the student's time at university. This in turn can lead to a culture whereby a student becomes dependent on the services offered and allows little room for development of self-advocacy. This in turn may have a negative impact upon self-identity and self-confidence.

In contrast, at a number of American universities students with disabilities are expected to self-disclose their disability and self-advocate to a much greater extent. When a student enrolls at university it is up to them to disclose their disability. Initially, this disclosure is to the disability service. Afterwards, if the student requires adjustments, it is up to them to tell the disability service what these are and for the student themselves to then approach the relevant faculty and staff about putting these measures into place. Students are required to be much more in control of their experience and by being much more involved in putting their own adjustments in place tend to have not only an improved self-identity but are also much more successful self-advocates.

Each university in Scotland has its own policy and guidelines on student mental health and well-being. For example, The University of Strathclyde has a policy which highlights as important a

number of points including ways of reducing the risk factors which may exacerbate or trigger mental health difficulties and ways of improving the general climate of well-being.

It could be hypothesized that students with disabilities who receive the services offered by the university, and who in doing so may not be able to properly develop their independence and self-advocacy, may be at risk of poor mental-wellbeing or mental health difficulties. It is therefore important to develop ideas and programs which encourage independence and autonomy for students with disabilities and which may in turn improve mental well-being.



General Information Strathclyde University is located in the city centre of Glasgow, Scotland. It is Scotland's 3rd largest academic institution and delivers teaching to over 25,000 full and part-time students. As of 2011, 1,143 students were registered with the disability service.

The disability service at Strathclyde University is made of 1 disability service manager, 2 disability advisors, a 4 person assistive technology team, 3 reception staff, 1 disability assistant and 40+ non-medical personal helpers. Students who register with the disability service have a variety of disabilities including those with learning disabilities, Asperger syndrome, visual and hearing disabilities, those with mobility issues and mental health difficulties. The majority have a diagnosis of a learning disability (sometimes called a learning difference, learning disorder or learning difficulty). Learning disability is an umbrella term used to describe a wide range of learning problems. These include dyslexia, dyscalculia (math specific), dysgraphia (writing specific), dyspraxia (sensory integration disorder), dysphasia/aphasia (language specific), auditory processing disorder (difficulty hearing differences between sounds) and visual processing disorder (difficulty interpreting visual information).

Philosophy The philosophy adopted at Strathclyde is one that focuses on a positive student experience based on an inclusive ethos and the removal of barriers. The overall aim is to avoid as far as possible by reasonable means the disadvantage which a disabled student experiences because of their disability. The university works in line with the Equality Act (2010) in providing anticipatory reasonable adjustments as described above.



Strathclyde University Campus



Lehigh University Campus

General information: Lehigh University is a private, non-denominational university located in the Lehigh Valley of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. As of 2011, it had 4,766 undergraduate and 2,270 graduate students enrolled. During this year 231 students were registered with the office of support services for students with disabilities.

The disability service at Lehigh is a small office staffed by two full-time disability advisors and one secretary. Students who register with the office have a wide range of disabilities including learning disabilities (LD), attention deficit disorder (ADD), neurological impairment, hearing impairment, visual impairment, psychological issues, medical issues and autism spectrum disorder. The vast majority of these students have an LD/ADD diagnosis.

At Lehigh, 3 members of staff and 14 students (past and present) were interviewed. All students interviewed had either been or were currently peer mentors. The majority of these students had also previously been mentees.

Philosophy: The universities overall philosophy focuses on the concept of **self-determination** which begins with the ability to identify ones needs, interests, strengths, limitations and values. Closely connected to self-determination are self-advocacy, self-confidence, decision making, and independent performance. Ultimately, the office of support services for students with disabilities at Lehigh aims to assist students to become **as independent as possible**.

Peer Mentor Program



Leila Malone (left) and Lisa Ruebeck, member of staff at Lehigh University Office of Support Services for Students with Disabilities (right).

Background:

- The peer mentor program at Lehigh was founded in 1998 to assist first year students with the transition from high school to a competitive university. The program was initially founded by three students and Cheryl Ashcroft, director of the office of support services for students with disabilities (OSSSD).

Selection of Mentors:

- Mentors are generally students who have previously been mentees. After their first year if they want to remain involved in the program they can apply to become a mentor. They complete a short application form and are then invited to an interview. The interview is conducted by students who are already mentors and they have the final say in who is selected.
- Students who are selected to become mentors are those who are **academically successful**, who are **comfortable with their disability**, are **comfortable with self-advocating**, have a **good life/work balance** and who are **confident** in talking to others.
- It is seen as an honour and a privilege to be selected to become a peer mentor and so students who are selected are those who are genuinely committed to the program. They have to be **sincere in their desire to help** other students and this is the most important factor when selecting new mentors.

Training:

- First and foremost, the training is about **team building** for the new group of peer mentors. It is vital that the mentors get to know one another and bond as a group so that they are able to support and mentor one another. The students at Lehigh felt that this was the key

moment in which they were given a chance to get to know the other students involved in the peer mentor program on a more personal level and found this to be the biggest advantage of training.

- Mentors are educated about the role and responsibilities of a mentor.
- They are informed that a mentor should always be a **role model** to their mentee, be **open and honest** within their communications with their mentee and be **available** to their mentee as much as possible.
- Mentors also discuss **confidentiality** and respecting their mentee. It is important that a mentor takes any issue a mentee wants to discuss with them seriously and ensures that they do not discuss any of these conversations with other students. However, if a mentee approaches a mentor to discuss something particularly concerning the mentor is required to inform a member of staff and let the mentee know that they are obliged to do this.
- Mentors are taught about the types of things that mentees might want to discuss with them. Particularly helpful were **role play** and **'what if?'** scenarios. Being asked questions that a mentee might ask and being put on the spot was said to be helpful in teaching the mentors how to think on their feet whilst at the same time giving them ideas for appropriate and helpful answers.
- Mentors are educated in the various services offered within the university so that they can signpost these to their mentee if required.



Cheryl Ashcroft, director of Office of Student Services for Students with Disabilities (left) with Stephen Penske, one of the original Lehigh peer mentors (right).

Selection of Mentees/The Matching Process:

- At the beginning of the new academic year the OSSSD holds an introductory session for new students who have interest in the peer mentor program. At this session the peer mentors give a short presentation on what the peer mentor program is, what students should expect

from being a part of it, why the mentors themselves originally decided to get involved and how it helped them when they were new to university.

- Mentors and new students then split off into subgroups dependent on their main subject studied and have an informal chat.
- Following these smaller group discussions, the new students sign a form indicating whether they are yes/no/maybe interested in becoming involved.
- The **mentors assign themselves** to a mentee.
- First and foremost, mentors assign themselves to the mentees who are studying the same or similar subjects as them.
- How well mentors and mentees seemed to connect during the smaller group discussions is important. Mentors match themselves up with the students they believe they are **most likely to be able to form a meaningful peer mentor relationship with**.
- Often genders will match up as will students with similar hobbies or hometowns. However, there are no hard and fast rules to this matching process other than subject studied and initial rapport being the two main deciding factors.

Beginning Relationship:

- Once matched, the mentors email their new mentees re-introduce themselves and inviting them out for lunch or a cup of coffee. The OSSSD pays for this lunch. This initial meeting is **very informal** and a chance for the students to spend a bit of time just getting to know one another.
- At this point, the mentor will ask the mentee what would be the best way to keep in touch with one another. That may be email, texting, phone calls or face to face meet ups.
- They might discuss how often one another will stay in touch and suggest even if the mentee does not feel that they need to talk to their mentor about anything, the mentor may send them a quick email every two weeks (for example) to check in.
- They also might discuss boundaries and the types of things that are good to talk about with a mentor.

Relationship Development:

- Mentors and mentees stay in touch in a number of different ways although **email and texting** are the most popular methods.
- The amount of times they are in touch can vary widely too and a mentee not being in touch with a mentor on a regular basis is not necessarily a bad thing.

- The conversations that mentors and mentees have are **entirely student lead** and staff do not have any say in or knowledge of conversation topics between students.
- Topics of conversation can vary widely but tend to centre around three central themes – social, academic and disability related.
- Conversations about **social/personal issues** may be about making friends, joining clubs, Greek life, homesickness, stress or campus life.
- **Academic** topics of conversation may centre around teaching styles, class choices, study skills, study locations.
- Students may sometimes ask about how to **handle having a learning disability at university**, attitudes towards disability, useful strategies and resources available to them. The most common topic of conversation between mentors and mentees is how to get by in classes, which classes are best to choose and which professors will be sympathetic to their needs.
- Mentees are often keen just to hear about the experiences of their mentors and this offers reassurance. Often mentees will ask their mentors questions that seem small. However, after talking to them about seemingly insignificant things for a while the mentees grow to trust their mentor and feel comfortable in talking to them about more significant matters.

I liked not having to explain my learning disability to my mentor. They already understood because they deal with the same things I do.

- Ex-mentee, current mentor at Lehigh.

Other Social Occasions:

- There are many events and activities organised throughout the year which gives students, both mentors and mentees, the chance to group together and chat about their experiences at Lehigh.
- One of the most popular group activities is the **Pre-registration Dinner** which occurs midway into the semester before students have finalised their subject choices the next semester. They all meet up, have a big (free) dinner together and have informal conversations about a multitude of things including how they are getting on, what classes they are thinking of choosing and clubs and societies they have joined. Staff provide helpful information like 'Cheryl's Best Bets' which gives students an idea of which are the most popular classes, etc.
- There are also a number of other activities such as careers talks, group lunches and cake and fondue nights which give the students **a chance to socialize** together and form new networks.

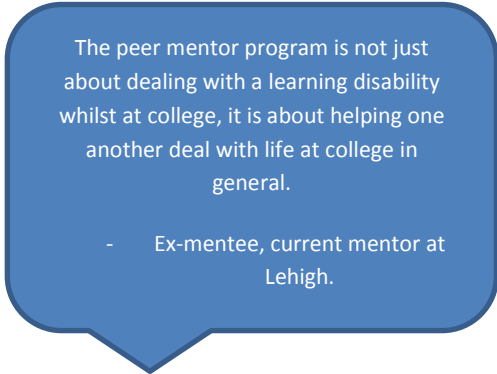
- This means that not only are students able to develop a mentor/mentee relationship but they can also **network with other students** involved in the program. This applies just as much to mentors as it does to mentees and leads to increased opportunities for all.

Benefits of the Program – What the Students Say:

- Students at Lehigh see a great number of benefits to being involved in the peer mentor program.
- Both mentors and mentees talk about how the major initial attraction to the program is its **flexibility** and lack of time commitment. Not having to fulfil a certain amount of hours or tasks means that students often adopt a ‘why not?’ approach when asked if they would like to become involved.
- Students also place a great deal of importance on the fact that being involved in the peer mentor program makes them **more comfortable with their disability** within a university environment. They improve their social skills and this in turn improves motivation and self-confidence.
- For mentees, at the initial stages of arriving in a new place and identifying themselves to the disability service, **having a mentor reduces isolation and provides comfort**. Mentees do not only benefit on a practical level from the first-hand experience that a mentor can offer, they benefit on an emotional level through being in contact with someone who has experienced a similar situation to the one that they are in. Often, new students find the experiences and opinions of other students more **believable and legitimate** than the advice provided by staff and for a new student, seeing someone who is in some ways similar to them become a success is a motivator to succeed in and of itself.
- Mentors have more often than not been a mentee themselves in the past and thus have received the benefits outlined above. Therefore, those who have been mentees and then go on to become mentors feel a **sense of gratuity** to the program and a **genuine desire to give back**. Becoming a mentor and supporting new students often reminds them of how nervous they were in first year and helps them **appreciate how much they have developed** and how far they have come. Mentors feel appreciated and flattered to be in a position to help others. One peer mentor describes this as *“putting my own experiences, mistakes and learning curves to good use”*.
- On top of this, mentors benefit from being involved in a **network** of other mentors who are also peers. The mentors are in touch with and support one another and it could be said that in some ways the mentors continue to mentor one another. For example, if a mentor was

having difficulty with a particular situation with their mentee, whilst keeping them anonymous, they might discuss ways in which to approach the situation with another mentor before approaching a member of staff.

- Both mentors and mentees mention the fact that being involved in the program is not just about helping one another deal with having a learning disability at university. Instead, it is about students supporting other students in dealing with college life in general. Some students describe feeling lucky that they have a learning disability because it grants them 'membership' to the peer mentor program and the support and experiences of a diverse group of students.



The peer mentor program is not just about dealing with a learning disability whilst at college, it is about helping one another deal with life at college in general.

- Ex-mentee, current mentor at Lehigh.

BARNARD COLLEGE



General Information: Barnard is a private, all female, liberal arts college which is affiliated with Columbia University and located in the heart of New York City. It is a college with approximately 2400 students. As of September 2011, 152 students had registered with the office of office of disability. This figure was expected to increase to approximately 175 students.

The office of disability services (ODS) is staffed by one full-time and one part-time disability advisor and a secretary. Students who register with ODS have a range of disabilities including visual impairment, hearing impairment, mobility impairment, learning disabilities, attention deficit disorder, traumatic brain injury, psychological disorders and chronic medical conditions.

Philosophy: The philosophy in the ODS at Barnard centres on the fact that students should **always be empowered and never rescued**. Most of the services for students within the university see a significant student involvement in their day to day running. This willingness of students to help out one another, valuing peer support and having services and programs as peer-lead as possible is referred to as a 'Barnard Belief'. Within the office of disability the e-mentor program is not the only peer lead program. Study abroad, WFIR (Writing Fellows in Residence) and BAID (Barnard Alumnae Involved with Disabilities) are all programs which offer advice for students with disabilities by students with disabilities who have been in similar specific situations.

E-Mentor Program

Background: The program began in 1998 following a student suggesting that it might be of benefit of them to be able to speak to a student who had been in a situation similar to their own. This suggestion helped the ODS stay in line with the overall philosophy and action of the rest of Barnard College.



The Office of Disability Services Team at Barnard (left to right): Susan Lynn, Okie Hycak, Susan Quinby

At the same time, staff within the ODS had a very high workload and did not feel that they were able to spend as much time with students as they would like. The e-mentor program provided part relief from this pressure by having the mentors act as an **'extra pair of hands'**. Mentors became the first point of contact for new students. If a mentor couldn't answer a question or a student did not want to ask a mentor then the next stage would be to approach an ODS member of staff.

Most importantly, the program was implemented because it was seen as being **developmentally appropriate**. It slots in nicely alongside Barnard's philosophy that students' best learn about being a student from other students. It is more suitable for a student to discuss their lives (academic, social, emotional) with another person who is of the same age, in the same situation and can offer advice that seems meaningful and legitimate. When this resource is readily available the rationale is that it is sensible to utilise this instead of looking to source this support externally.

The overall attitude towards starting up an e-mentor program was 'why not?'. The ODS felt that they had nothing to lose by piloting the program, would try it out and carry on with it as long as students wanted. The program is referred to as a **'5 year pilot project'**.

Students at Barnard tend to be extremely busy people. Not only are the courses demanding but students are often involved in many extra-curricular activities and are striving to be successful at all of these whilst juggling their academic work. The college is a competitive environment and that coupled with the fact that it is in the heart of New York City, an extremely busy place, means that students are very stretched for time. The e-mentor program has to **function as something that**

compliments a busy lifestyle and does not take up any extra time. Thus, it is extremely informal and is used by the students only as much as they want or need.

Students are largely left to their own devices when it comes to using their e-mentor aside from the initial partnering up of mentees and mentors. That the program is largely unmonitored throughout the year makes researching it difficult but is telling of how busy both staff and students at Barnard College are and how such a flexible program can be useful in this stretched environment.

Furthermore, the minimal monitoring of the program is revealing of the ways in which staff approach supporting students with disabilities at Barnard. They are seen as capable and independent young students. They are set up with a mentor at the beginning of their time at Barnard but if they choose not to use the resource, or use the resource ineffectively, that is their decision and if this hinders their success, ultimately that is the students responsibility. This attitude indicates that the provisions of support and guidance are there but that ultimately it is the students responsibility to use them properly. This action signifies the importance that is placed upon **student independence and autonomy**.

In the academic year 2011/12 there were 16 mentors and 71 mentees, with most mentors beginning the year with 6 mentees on average but with some going up to over 10 mentees.

Selection of mentors:

- Mentors are volunteers are **self-selecting** and are approved by staff in the ODS. They generally volunteer at the beginning of the first term but are able to join the program at any point throughout the year. To date, it has not been necessary to tell a student that they are not suitable to be a mentor but if this case were to arise staff would have no problem telling the would-be mentor to try again next year. Students who would be considered a suitable mentor would be **interested in working with others**, be **confident in both their own personality and their disability**, be a people person and have a **genuine empathy** for younger students. Mentors must be **performing to a high level academically**.

Training:

- Mentors at Barnard are **not given any formal training** but this is something that is being considered for the future. Currently, any issues that arise within the program are dealt with on a one on one, case by case basis with a member of staff from ODS and the student(s) involved.

Selection of mentees/The matching process:

- New mentees are **matched to their e-mentor by ODS staff** and this match is mostly based on the type of disability the student has.
- At the beginning of the new term, all students who have self-identified a disability receive a 'Welcome to Barnard' introductory letter from the ODS. This includes the email address of their e-mentor and encourages the new student to get in touch for informal support. The new student is then reintroduced to their e-mentor via an email of introduction in which the ODS email both the mentee and mentor within the same email providing each with the others email address.
- The only 'rule' within the peer mentor program is that students who do wish to be involved and to have a mentor must have one interaction with their mentor. This can be through email, text, face to face or another method but must occur at least once.

Relationship development:

- Students are in touch with one another **primarily through email**. Few would have enough time to arrange face to face meetings on a regular basis and email works well in that it allows the relationship to be utilized used as and when required. However, students are welcome to be in contact in any way they like. This includes texting, phone calls, face to face meetings and the use of social media.
- Currently, staff are unaware as to what students talk about with their e-mentor. The relationship and discussion between mentors and mentees is not followed or monitored at all to the extent that **it is not known whether or not mentees ever approach their e-mentor at all**.
- Whilst this aspect of the program made researching it difficult it is a good reflection of the trust and respect for independence that the ODS has for students. Staff do not believe that they should have any involvement or knowledge of what students choose to talk about with one another. What mentors and mentees discuss is seen as being none of the ODS's business nor is how often they choose to converse.

Benefits of he Program:

- The program at Barnard at is **extremely informal**, to the point that it is difficult to compartmentalize and understand. However, this is also its greatest benefit. Ultimately, a

peer mentor program should be something that complements the lifestyle of students and meets their needs. The style of program at Barnard is exactly **what the students require**. It provides a **framework for support** whilst also encouraging **independence** and **self-sufficiency**.



MAIN THEMES

Ultimately peer mentoring facilitates empowering, as opposed to rescuing, students. It should:

- Meet student demand.
- Be directed and maintained by the students who are involved in it.
- Be informal.
- Put no pressure on students .
- Be accessible.
- Have as minimal a staff involvement as possible.

The program should be entirely student-centred and run for students by students. The most important thing is that there needs to be a **demand** and be **student run**. How?

- Set up a peer mentor executive board made up exclusively of students involved in the program. Have these students come up with initial ideas and action plans for how to move the program forward.
- Put the responsibility for matching mentors to mentees on the students themselves.
- Put the responsibility for interviewing and selecting new mentors onto existing mentors.
- Encourage the developing of a network of mentors who can support one another as the first point of contact.

A large part of the draw of a peer mentor program is the reassurance that students are not the only ones facing particular challenges. Therefore, there have to be relatively **high numbers** involved. How?

- Have a strong initial group of mentors who are passionate and want to be involved in the program.
- Stress that how much or little a mentee uses their mentor is up to the student. No pressure.
- For any group situations work hard at making it something students will genuinely want to come to in order to keep numbers high. Visibility of numbers in scenarios like this.

The program has to be kept very **informal**. There should be no pressure on students to sign up and even when they have become involved, there should be no pressure on how much they use their mentor. How?

- At the initial information session put no pressure on students to sign up. On a sign-up sheet provide Yes/No/Not sure boxes to tick and only contact those who ticked Yes/Not Sure.
- Make sure that students know they can get involved at any point throughout the year.
- Encourage a 'why not?' attitude and explain that there is nothing to lose.
- Do not monitor the program too much or too obviously. A quick, chatty email to the mentors once a term checking in with whether or not they have been in touch with their mentee should suffice.

The program should be easy to be involved in and **accessible**. It should be up to the mentors and the mentees to decide how they want to develop their relationship. How?

- Give the student the choice of how they would like to be in touch with one another.
- Suggest email, text, phone calls, social networking sites or face to face meetings.



CONCLUSION

Peer mentoring is a way of providing a framework for students to form their own mutually beneficial relationships. It is a mechanism through which experienced students can pass on implicit knowledge, practical information and moral support to less experienced students. For mentors it provides experience and skills; for mentees it provides information and comfort. For all, it provides a mechanism for independence and self-sufficiency. It provides a framework in which students are in a position to be able to help one another and themselves.

Mentees appreciate having someone within the university who is a point of reference, a friendly face and someone who they can rely on and ask questions that they may not want to pose to lecturers or staff. Mentors gain satisfaction from helping others who are in a situation similar to one they have experienced themselves and put their valuable skills and experience to good use.

Furthermore, it is a good way to facilitate communication between year groups – cohorts who rarely have such an opportunity. Many companies now have their own mentor systems. Being involved in the program is valuable preparation for future employment. The self-development which takes place within the program is a positive thing to put on a students' CV as it indicates a valuable skill set for a prospective employee.

On top of the benefits for the students involved in the program there is also a benefit to faculty and staff. If students were to become more dependent on one another and less dependent on staff, valuable staff time would be freed up. Students could approach their mentor as their first point of contact when they have questions about university life.

Ultimately, by encouraging students with disabilities to develop their own network within which they depend upon the skills and experiences of their peers instead of university staff these students are taking ownership of their own service. Whilst this does not alleviate the problems associated with students being passive recipients of the adjustments made for them, by involving them more in the running of their own service the balance of power is shifted.

A student who is involved in the peer mentor program is less likely to feel passive and this in turn may lead to improved self-identity and self-confidence for students with disabilities, something that should be in the interest of all academic institutions.

Students with disabilities in Scotland have an equal amount of potential for self-development as students in America. Promoting independence is high on the priority list of disability services in Scotland yet there are few practical opportunities for development of this. Rather, current practice means that unintentionally student independence may be being hindered.

If independence is something that is genuinely sought after for students with disabilities in Scotland, a practical and manageable framework should be provided for this. Peer mentoring is a low cost, high benefit program which does not only benefit those who receive the mentoring but also staff and the mentors themselves on a multitude of levels. It is a self-recycling program which, once up and running, requires a low amount of staff time or involvement. Other students are the most valuable and available resource to universities. If universities in Scotland are genuinely looking to improve the independence, autonomy and self-confidence of students with disabilities then it is to the students themselves that they should look for understanding, informed and practical help.



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The Peter Gibson Memorial Fund is a small Scottish trust that supports activities which contribute to improving the quality of life for consumers in Scotland. Its travelling fellowships support individuals going abroad to research consumer issues, returning to use what they have learned and experienced to the benefit of Scottish consumers. The Fund's trustees are particularly interested in working with people with an interest in helping those who are disadvantaged through age, ill-health, disability, or financial hardship. More details are available from www.pgmf.co.uk



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APPENDIX: PEER MENTORING IN SCOTLAND

Based on my time at Lehigh and Barnard spent finding out about their own peer mentor programs I have compiled a guide on how to implement such a program at another institution. Please note: this guide refers to a peer mentor program for students with disabilities. It could be used, with very little adaption, for many other student groups.

1. Approach prospective mentors:

- Approach these students towards the end of the academic year 2011/2012.
- They could be students recommended by disability advisors.
- They should be students in 2nd or 3rd year with a disability.
- Possible initial groups: hearing impaired/visually impaired/mobility impaired/LD (this is very open to change).
- Students should be confident, comfortable making conversation and comfortable with their disability. They should be succeeding academically and have a good work/life balance.
- If possible, a mixture of male and female students with different types of disability would be optimal.
- Explain the benefits of being involved to the mentors and how these can all be used in the future when applying for jobs.
 - Self-improvement: development of self-identity and confidence.
 - Improved social skills.
 - Improved time management skills.
- Ask those approached to consider what sort of things they might have liked to have known when they first began university and how they felt during this time. Describe how they can help students who are in that exact position now.
- Use some flattery. These particular students have been asked for a reason and they should be made aware of this.
- However, most importantly, students should genuinely want to become involved and not have to be persuaded.
- Develop an easy to read, brief hand out to distribute to students to take away with them.
- Ask prospective mentors who are interested to complete a short application form.

2. Group the mentors:

- Try to make an even distribution of type of disability.
- Divide numbers appropriately and calculate mentee numbers e.g. 12 mentors could mean potentially up to 24 mentees.

3. Train the mentors:

- At the very beginning of the new term, as soon as possible.
- This should be done with all mentors together. Possibly decide on a date during the summer to make sure everyone can attend.
- At the training....
 - Introduce the mentors to one another and run through some icebreaker questions and exercises.
 - Provide a brief overview of the peer mentor program.
 - Explain mentor role and responsibilities.
 - Discuss effective ways to communicate with mentee's. Teach communication skills and provide example questions to ask.
 - Explain where staff responsibility begins and mentor responsibility ends.
 - Discuss confidentiality and boundaries.
 - Roleplay and 'what if' situations.
 - Educate mentors on the different services available within the university that they may want to refer their mentee to.

4. Approach prospective mentees:

- At their first meeting or needs assessment with the disability service.
- Have their disability advisor briefly run through what the program is all about.
- Explain the benefits.
- Enhance the fact that involvement will involve only as much commitment as the student chooses and that they have nothing to lose by signing up.

5. Information session:

- All mentors should be present and those who are interested in possibly becoming a mentee.
- Mentors all introduce themselves and explain a little bit about the program.
- The groups should then divide up based on faculty.

- In these smaller group the mentors could give a quick run through who each of them are and ask the mentees questions (have these pre-prepared and keep it relaxed).
- Generally break the ice. Get the group talking.
- Have mentors reiterate the fact that it is a small commitment and that students can only really benefit from becoming involved.
- At the end of these discussions distribute a sheet asking mentees to indicate whether they wish to be involved – yes/no/unsure.
- Once mentees have left the room the mentors decide between themselves the mentor/mentee matches.

6. Mentors email mentees:

- Introduce themselves again and double check that the student still wants to have a mentor.
- Arrange a time for the two to meet up face to face.
- Leave the manner in which this is done up to the student.

7. Face to face meeting:

- At this meeting the mentors and mentees can discuss anything they want.
- Perhaps ways in which they expect to use their mentor, things that a mentee might ask.
- Decide on the best way to stay in contact – email, text, face to face meets. Exchange details if required.
- At this stage the mentor should be very open and explain to the student that they are there to help them answer any questions they have but that it is up to the mentee to get in touch when they want. Again, explain there is no pressure to use their mentor a lot.
- Arrange that perhaps once a month the mentor will send a short email just to check in and make sure everything is going okay if they haven't already heard from them.

8. Relationship throughout the year:

- This is left entirely up to the students.
- In some cases the mentee might not contact the mentor at all after their first meeting.
- A designated staff member may check in once a term in an informal email just to check how things are going, how often they are corresponding. Not too probing.

- If they are not meeting up but there are no reported problems then this is fine, the mentee may simply not have any questions for the mentor.

9. Organise group events:

- E.g. a lunch, film showing, guest speakers.
- Send out a group email asking for students' ideas on things they might be interested in.

10. Gain feedback:

- Done through email or a hard copy given to students at a group meet up.
- Keep it short and easy to fill in.

11. At the end of the year, going into the next:

- Take on board student feedback.
- Ask for recommendations from mentors about which mentees might make a good mentor themselves.
- Mentors encourage mentees to apply to become new mentors.
- Prospective mentors fill out an application.
- Interviews conducted by pre-existing mentors who then decide on who is to become a mentor.